

Digital Capital in Prison?

- ICT's and mobile phones behind bars

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The development of digital information and communications technology (ICT) has during a remarkably short time span changed our societies and the way we live in important ways that have far reaching consequences, many of which we do not yet fully comprehend. Mobile phones and internet access have become core elements in our communication culture and most of us would have difficulties imagining how we could get by a single day without them. However, not everyone are included or feel comfortable in this internet age and some are even forcibly excluded. Prisoners typically have none or very limited access to mobile phones or the internet during their incarceration. However, things have begun to change. For example, our public administrations now often require citizens to communicate digitally and hence we cannot simply exclude entire groups of people by denying them such access. In this project we will focus on how ICT's have affected the use of imprisonment primarily in Norway and Denmark, but also in other parts of the western world. We will, for example, look at how in-cell mobile phones on the one hand have been introduced into all open prisons in Denmark, while new legislation has struck down hard on mobile phones in closed prisons. One result of the latter has been a virtual explosion in the use of punitive solitary confinement in the Danish prison system. We will also describe and discuss the current experiment with mobile phones in Bastøy prison in Norway, which in interesting ways reveal both the individually empowering qualities of digital communication as well as the surveillance potential inherent in these technologies. Taken together, these developments require that we pose some fundamental questions to the purpose of imprisonment. On the one hand, the digital revolution can theoretically transform the prison experience, increase the level of social contact manifold, and decrease the barriers between prison and free society to a degree where the deprivation of liberty takes on a completely new meaning. At the other end of the scale we have an Orwellian future where digital technology is used to minimize face-to-face contact, increase surveillance of prisoners, and produce social isolation in a hitherto unseen degree.