

## PART I A Primer on Prison



# 1 Overview

## PRISON, PUBLIC OPINION, AND THE PRESS

“How many people are imprisoned, and how they are treated, has always been affected by much more than just recorded crime rates. Economics, political, legal and philosophical ideas and public opinion have all played roles,” wrote Professor Alyson Brown of Edge Hill University in the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Journalism, too, is a big factor in the treatment of incarcerated people because journalism ultimately shapes public opinion, which makes its way into politics and policy. Eventually, journalism affects the way the agencies of the state apply the rules of humanity to the people in prison. What you see on the prison yard is a reflection of what is going on in society. How closely does the truth of the media story reflect the lived experience of those behind bars who traveled through the criminal justice system? In the pages that follow, I will provide some answers to this question.

The book gives the reader a look inside a prison from a unique vantage point. Instead of seeing incarceration through a guard’s eyes, it looks at imprisonment from within a newsroom that happens to be located inside a legendary prison.

California's oldest prison underwent dramatic change over the past three decades, and how those changes were witnessed and reported upon by inmate journalists is the subject of this book. San Quentin used to be a violent, dangerous human warehouse. It became instead a beacon for rehabilitation within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR).<sup>2</sup> I want to convince you that the *San Quentin News* played an important role in paving the way for that change because it helped shape public perception. I intend to lay out the history and context of the newspaper's rise to prominence since its founding in 1940, its struggle during the turmoil and shutdown in the 1980s, and its revival in 2008. Along the way I will explain the contributions of the core group who made the transformation happen. The pioneering 2008 inmates were a colorful and diverse collection. They consisted of a Los Angeles music mogul-cum-drug lord and some Three Strikes lifers, including a charismatic Chicano/Latino burglar, a bank robber, and a couple of men with murder convictions, all of whom were determined to become better men, and to do so through the unlikely medium of journalism!

The book also encompasses my own redemption, personally and professionally. After fifty years in journalism, I woke up one morning to discover that the news business had lost its way. Not only were newspapers collapsing financially, but the values that had attracted me to becoming a reporter were vanishing as well. Singer Gil Scott-Heron said his grandmother once told him, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." Edward R. Murrow issued a warning years ago about television, a warning equally relevant today about our beloved digital devices: without values and a commitment to illumination and enlightenment, these gadgets are only "lights and wires in a box," and in the wrong hands they have proved to be pernicious.

The *San Quentin News* restored my faith in the craft of journalism by allowing me to work with writers who knowingly exposed themselves to losing privileges, being sent to the Hole, or risking ostracism by other inmates in order to tell their personal prison truth in a difficult, conflicted environment.

As a lifelong journalist, I had never noticed that my newsroom colleagues were transformed as human beings as a result of the job. Indeed, the many examples of alcohol abuse and divorce would indicate the oppo-

site. Not so with the prisoners who became newsmen. For them journalism turned out to be something different, a path to personal redemption. Many prison newsmen found that the act of writing and reporting on the world around them opened the way to constructing a narrative about their own lives and making sense of the personal flaws that brought them to prison. There is social science research backing up my observation. In 2001 criminologist Shadd Maruna wrote that the construction of a new life story was the pathway for an offender to turn away from a life of crime. Maruna's observation illuminates one of the discoveries I made when researching this book: that journalism has proved to be a rehabilitation tool.<sup>3</sup> It is not just journalism. Writing in general has been widely accepted as a useful tool in rehabilitation. Just how this works will be explored in a later chapter. For now, I will just point out that the prison journalism model proved to be effective, so much so that, following the San Quentin success, half a dozen other California prisons explored ways to start their own inmate-run publications. But they discovered it was not so easy because San Quentin is unique, and the singularity is what the book is about.

#### RECALLED TO LIFE

The stars happened to align in 2008 at Point San Quentin overlooking San Francisco Bay. A group of inmates with no journalism training were given the opportunity to revive a newspaper that had been defunct since the 1980s. The offer came from a self-described maverick of a warden who was sure that his superiors would roll their eyes; later, despite budget cuts, an exceptional public information officer, who won the trust of the newspaper staff, kept the project afloat. They were aided and abetted by a handful of retired Marin County journalists who couldn't stay away from the allure of a newsroom. The secret of the success of the *San Quentin News* was that, beginning in 2008, a succession of wardens, the public information officer, and the newspaper staff and its supporters put together a pragmatic governance model based on mutual respect and trust. "This isn't your grandfather's prison," as one inmate remarked.<sup>4</sup>

And then, beginning in 2012, there was me. This calls for full disclosure. Early on in my career, I was taught to visualize professional journalism as a theater where I occupied a front-row seat. The action was to take place on the stage in front of me, and a transparent curtain would separate me from the actors on the stage. I had to sit front-row center: if I sat too far to the right or the left, my perspective might be biased. And I was not to go on stage and become a participant in the drama. But as you will see in the pages that follow, the story of San Quentin can be told fully only with reference to events beginning more than forty years ago, and I happened to be present for crucial parts of that evolving story. The drama plays out against the backdrop of racial conflict and a political backlash, not just in prison but in American society in general. I was a pioneering black man in the newsroom of the *Los Angeles Times*, the most influential newspaper in the state, and I seized on the prison unrest story from its beginnings. At that time the gap between prison truth and the truth that made its way to the printed page was huge, and I intend to explore the reasons why. On some occasions in these pages, I mount the stage and become a participant as I tell the saga of the *San Quentin News*. Prison, public opinion, and the press are engaged in a continuing dance, and I have waltzed with all three. That's why parts of this book unavoidably read like a memoir.

## PERSONAL JOURNALISM

When I visited San Quentin in 2012, I came to teach fifteen weeks of an introductory journalism class to eighteen inmates and four auditors. My class was taught under the auspices of the Prison University Project, a nonprofit that offers college-level classes to San Quentin inmates free of charge. At that time, it was clear that American journalism was in deep trouble. Newsrooms were shrinking. Experienced journalists were taking buyouts, and to make rent many of them wound up in PR or tech jobs. The audience was turning to aggregators like Facebook and Google for their news. "Professionalism" was vanishing as journalism school graduates were absorbed into the "gig economy" instead of careers and the industry was "pivoting to video." I asked myself if there was any room left for old-fashioned journalism, beyond the content farming that had overwhelmed

the media. My question was answered by the prison journalists with whom I worked. They replenished my enthusiasm. It was back to basics for all of us.

This book is meant to illuminate and supplement the many scholarly studies of incarceration. Because of my journalism training, I use a broad brush to paint a picture of many social and political trends converging over time. Personal journalism relies heavily on impressions, experiences, and judgments (much to the chagrin of many social scientists as well as “big data” journalists who like to rely on statistics). Even though I will rarely rely on numbers, I don’t intend to make sweeping, unsubstantiated declarations. This study relies mostly on observation in true fly-on-the-wall fashion. Rarely have I engaged in formal interviews with subjects. I never distributed any questionnaires. Much of the material came from overheard, informal conversations over a seven-year period. The book also relies on writings by the prisoners themselves in the prison newspaper, their personal journals, or their correspondence, as well as essays by my students from the University of California, Berkeley, who are a large part of this story. I also reference email correspondence with civilian advisers and others.

## THE ROCK AND THE HARD PLACE

Another purely journalistic issue emerges in recounting the story of the *San Quentin News*. Ever since it resumed publication in 2008, its editors stated that the newspaper’s mission was to inspire prisoners and give them hope, pointing the way for them to become “*desisters*” instead of recidivists.<sup>5</sup> In other words, its mission would be redemption. It would not be a traditional journalistic watchdog. “*San Quentin News* reports on rehabilitative efforts to increase public safety and achieve social justice.” That’s the newspaper’s stated motto. It’s even printed on the business cards.

A recent editor in chief, Richard (Bonaru) Richardson, summed up the editorial philosophy this way: “Many people believe the administration censors the content that goes in our newspaper, but that is not true. The *San Quentin News* staff makes the final decision on what goes on our website and the content that goes into the newspaper, and without our

advisers, *San Quentin News* could not produce a quality newspaper every month. However, part of our goal is to build a better relationship with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation because we both have a common goal: we all want to make it home safe and in one piece.”<sup>6</sup>

Some journalism purists will argue that what the prisoners are writing is not really journalism at all but boosterism. That criticism deserves a thorough response. Every edition of the paper is submitted to officials of the CDCR for review before publication. Nevertheless, these officials would engage in censorship only at their peril legally. The courts in California have consistently held that inmate-written publications have some protections under the First Amendment so long as their content does not interfere with the lawful administration of the institution. Nevertheless, *San Quentin News* writers work under a regime of de facto self-censorship. Every story represents a judgment by the editors of the costs and benefits of the story. Stories that might reflect negatively on the San Quentin management or staff might have devastating consequences for the paper’s relationship with the warden. That is a fact. The prisoners on the newspaper staff are reminded often enough. While the warden may not in the strictest sense censor the newspaper, he or she could shut it down, as has been done in the past. Conflicts have occurred. Nevertheless, in the last ten years, the leading editors, while pressing for a freer hand, have steered clear of investigative exposé pieces. Their pragmatism has been rewarded by gaining the support of the warden and the CDCR officials in Sacramento.

Former editor in chief Richardson wrote about the delicate balancing act of staying authentic in the eyes of the inmates while not antagonizing the warden. It could mean occasionally disappointing both sides. “Some inmates would call the *San Quentin News* a snitch paper, and some still do,” he noted, but he also described being “told to ‘piss off’ when I tried to hand a newspaper to a correctional officer.”<sup>7</sup>

All of this still begs the question of whether journalism can achieve meaningful reform without exposés that reveal shocking facts. Richard Hofstadter, the historian, once commented that “to an extraordinary degree the work of the Progressive movement rested upon its journalism. The fundamental cultural achievement of American Progressivism was the business of exposure, and journalism was the chief occupational source of its creative writers.”<sup>8</sup> Exposure has been and still is nearly an



article of faith among journalists. Certainly, since the Watergate revelations of the 1970s, exposé investigations have become the sine qua non of modern journalism. The *San Quentin News* took a different path, one that emphasized healing, reconciliation, and personal responsibility. I want to pose the question: Is the audience better off or worse off for that decision? What is the nature of prison truth?