

Women Behind Bars: Dissecting Social Constructs Mediated by News and Reality TV

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which the watchdog role of the news media oftentimes collides with the bottom-line objective of entertainment media when it comes to stories of women behind bars, and notably their children left behind. These inmates' true stories are sometimes shadowed behind distorted notions of so-called reality entertainment; their real-life stories become skewed behind the storylines, confusing the viewer with a warped sense of reality. This paper gives an in-depth look at several past and current examples of how traditional and new media, including reality television, profile incarcerated women and their children, and debates the media's role in the social construction of reality. The author, a veteran journalist-turned-journalism professor, reveals insights on the "bottom line" and decision-making processes which impact news and entertainment coverage, and discusses the long-term impact of such stories on the incarcerated subjects and their children. Journalists, by trade, use observation and interviews as a means of ethnographic research, while both news and entertainment are driven by among others, novelty and controversy. This, coupled by pressure of deadlines and competition, often lead to incorrect or subjective assessments and stories of singular or exaggerated subjects that do not shed true light on the interviewee or topic, but instead in the skewed elucidation of the media professional. Finally, the author questions whether the worlds of news and entertainment can co-exist when it comes to such coverage, to conclude that though seemingly far-fetched, entertainment can intersect with news if those in decision-making positions in both industries make a commitment to utilize impactful media strategies.

Keywords: Incarcerated women, news media, reality television, social constructs