

Article

Beyond Digital Literacy in Australian Prisons: Theorizing “Network Literacy,” Intersectionality, and Female Incarcerated Students

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Abstract

Incarcerated students, especially women and Indigenous Australians in custody, are among the most marginalized, oppressed, and invisible identities in Australian society today. These prison-based university students experience not only multi-layered disadvantages that derive from intersecting experiences of oppression, including race, gender, and class, but they are also further disadvantaged by the experience of incarceration itself, despite their attempts to improve their life chances and social positioning through distance education. This is partly due to the challenges of learning within prison environments, including disruptions, disparities, and disconnections in terms of access to digital technologies, digital literacies, and digital channels. The majority of Australian prisoners have no direct access to the internet, smartphones, or internet-enabled devices which means they are disconnected from social media and other networked communication platforms. Although significant gains have been made in developing and delivering prison-based non-networked digital devices, digital learning platforms and digital education to Australian incarcerated students over the past decade, more work must be done to adequately prepare incarcerated students, with multi-faceted needs, to live and learn as empowered agents within the informational capitalism of the contemporary “network society.” The purpose of this article is to argue for a new form of “network literacy” education over and above “digital literacy” skills for female Australian incarcerated students, through an intersectional theoretical lens which addresses the multidimensional disadvantages experienced by women in custody within Australian prisons.

Keywords

Australia; digital literacy; incarcerated students; incarcerated women; intersectionality; network literacy; prison education

Issue

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1. Introduction

In the postmodern, *connected* world, made by social media and networked computers, one social group remains relatively isolated, invisible, and *disconnected*: prisoners (Bagaric et al., 2017; Jewkes & Johnston, 2009; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Pike & Hopkins, 2019). Despite the fact that the right of all prisoners to education is recognized under the UNESCO (1997) Hamburg Declaration, article 47, the multi-faceted educational needs of incarcerated women, in particular, are often overlooked (McVicar & Roy, 2022). Here in Australia, state and territory governments are responsible for providing education in prisons, yet there is a dearth of published

and accessible research into the educational needs of incarcerated women, especially in regard to their experiences with digital media and communication technologies. Indeed, there is a lack of research into the literacy needs of Australians in custody overall, further complicated by a lack of consistency in the identification of literacy education gaps across the state, territories, and jurisdictions (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 2022, p. 134). Corrections educators in Australia have acknowledged that after release, female ex-prisoners will need digital and other literacies not only to secure employment, welfare services, and housing but to “network with others” (House of Representatives Standing Committee on

Employment, Education and Training, 2022, p. 133). Yet, most Australian prisoners still have no access to *networked* computers, smartphones, or internet-enabled devices. Over the past decade, state corrective services have worked with Australian universities to improve incarcerated students' access to higher education including, in some centers, through non-networked, secure laptops, e-readers, and offline digital platforms (Farley & Hopkins, 2018, 2019; Hopkins & Farley, 2014). In particular, a regional Queensland university, in partnership with multiple correctional state jurisdictions has designed and delivered offline, adapted digital educational solutions using e-learning alternatives on preloaded, security-cleared offline laptops, thus working around the persistent lack of internet connectivity in Australian prisons (Farley & Hopkins, 2018, 2019; Hopkins & Farley, 2014). Such innovations have improved access and opportunities for digital literacy development within mainstream Australian prison populations (Farley & Hopkins, 2018, 2019; Hopkins & Farley, 2014). Further action research is needed, however, into improving the "*network literacy*" of Australian prison *sub*-populations, especially female and female Indigenous incarcerated distance education university students.

To further enhance the equity and empowerment of incarcerated students, it is necessary to move beyond basic digital literacy skills to facilitate the development of network literacies which will enable some of the most vulnerable and oppressed members of society to prepare for a post-release future in the rapidly evolving social media age. Where digital literacy has established a foothold in Australian prisons, it tends to focus on the mostly technical skills of typing and scrolling as well as reading uploaded texts and watching pre-recorded videos on stand-alone computers or tablets that are not connected to the internet. Yet, in a network society (Castells, 2000, 2004), wherein individuals, communities, and organizations are increasingly shaped by linked global and local information networks, a fully digitally literate person must also be prepared to navigate, evaluate, and influence the new forms of digital sociability, creativity, and (mis)representation circulated on social media platforms. If carceral citizens (the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated) are to reclaim voice and agency in a society wherein new media communication networks are increasingly superseding face-to-face communication networks and relationships, then they will need reliable access to networking sites such as Facebook as well as email, instant messaging, and other forms of networked communication before, during, and after incarceration. If, in the context of the network society, the "flow of power" is superseded by the "power of flows" (Castells, 2000, as cited in Stalder, 2006, p. 128), then the typical Australian prison may be comparable to those "black holes of informational capitalism" wherein powerless populations are effectively bypassed or treated as "redundant" (Castells, 2000, as cited in Stalder, 2006, p. 131). Following Castell's definition of power, which

operates more through informational exclusion rather than violent repression (Stalder, 2006), Australian prisoners and other populations effectively cut off from electronic information networks are perhaps the most socially excluded, marginalized, and powerless of all disadvantaged and low socio-economic communities (see also Jones & Guthrie, 2016, p. 1).

If, as Castells (2009, p. 125) has suggested, social media is more than an influential element of popular culture and an integral part of the "new public sphere," then it is also important to note that this digital place is not always a safe space, especially for women, Indigenous women, carceral citizens, and other vulnerable groups particularly exposed to intersectional disadvantage, discrimination, sexism, and racism both online and in the real world. Hence prison-based technology-focused teaching and learning must not only include resources and digital tools used for social networking but promote online safety and empowerment for vulnerable groups within education programs for the network society underpinned by intersectionality theory. Moreover, given that the inequitable operation of power is so central to today's new media ecology, and the data economy which underpins it, conceptual frameworks which acknowledge overlapping forms of discrimination are vitally important for understanding the educational needs of incarcerated students. Drawing on black feminist theory (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989, 1995), this article, therefore, argues for the application of intersectionality as a conceptual framework and practical tool within the field of Australian corrections education, where it now engages digital pedagogies, to improve outcomes for female and female Indigenous incarcerated students. Just as the experience and rate of imprisonment in Australia are highly classed, gendered, and racialized, contemporary corrections education must be more than digital, it must be networked and differentiated. Specifically, it must be differentiated according to the intersecting, multifaceted educational experiences and needs of female and especially female Indigenous incarcerated students in the new media network society. As Hopkins (2021) and Hopkins and Ostini (2015, 2016) have argued, digital literacy education for vulnerable and marginalized women will need to include a focus on networked communication, including the potential harms of the social media age such as intimate surveillance, digital predation, and technology-facilitated gendered violence. Indeed, technological advancement generally, within the carceral context, must be critically examined through an intersectional lens because, as Kaun and Stierstedt (2022) point out, it is typically the most vulnerable groups that tend to feel the most toxic and negative impacts of new technologies. As Kaun and Stierstedt (2022) rightly suggest, it is erroneous to assume that all technological advancement is inherently positive, even and especially for carceral citizens. Moreover, a myriad of sociocultural factors and intersecting axes of difference including gender, race, age, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and class must

be taken into account when designing and delivering culturally appropriate, differentiated, digital literacy corrections education appropriate for negotiating the unequal network society. Critical digital literacy is not just about providing access and exposure to stand-alone computers or digital devices, it must address the complexities and contradictions of our socially constructed relationships and experiences with new communication technologies (Knight & Van De Steene, 2017). As Engstrom and Tinto (2008) noted, in the context of transitional pedagogies for non-traditional university students, *access* to university, without adequate, specialized support is not necessarily the same as an *opportunity* for equity groups.

2. Theoretical Framework

Unlike the author's previous publications in the field of corrections education, this article is not based on data collected from serving prisoners engaged in digital literacy programs, but rather is a theoretical exploration of and argument for deploying the concept of intersectionality in designing new approaches to new media literacy education for the most marginalized of prison sub-populations, female and especially female Indigenous students. American civil rights attorney Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1995) developed the term "intersectionality" in her seminal article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color" in order to explore interconnections of race and gender within the experiences of women of color in the American legal system. Famously employing the analogy of traffic in an intersection, Crenshaw (1995) observed the compounding harms black women may experience from multiple directions across both sex discrimination and race discrimination due to the ways race, gender, and class intersect or interact (see also Collins & Bilge, 2016). Moreover, even well-intended programs and interventions which do not directly address these intersecting vulnerabilities and compounding experiences of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and other forms of systemic oppression may effectively continue to exclude and silence those positioned as different or disadvantaged (see also Crenshaw, 1989, 1995). Since emerging in the late 1980s, intersectionality as both a theoretical and methodological paradigm has continued to expand into different research disciplines and teaching approaches, effectively refocusing attention on how apparently neutral institutions and processes are often actually disproportionately harmful to women and women of color (Cho et al., 2013).

Although widely adopted in other feminist theorizations, especially by black feminist activists in the US, there has been relatively little attempt to apply this important concept to the digital literacy needs and new media experiences of Australian female and female Indigenous incarcerated students. Understanding overlapping vectors of oppression and discrimination is vitally important, however, to understanding the com-

pounding vulnerabilities of the most marginalized of student populations before, during, and after incarceration. As Batastini et al. (2022, p. 931) have observed in their assessment of American interventions that address criminogenic risks: "There are perhaps few other groups that exemplify the existence of intersectionality more than those who are involved in the criminal justice system." Hence, practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers must understand and address the compounding discrimination and "labeling barriers" experienced by such intersecting identities if they expect to improve the prosocial reintegration of prisoners and ex-prisoners (Batastini et al., 2022, p. 931). Similarly, in her exploration of prison violence in the US, Bell (2017) has applied intersectional criminology as an important tool for recognizing the differential impact of race/gender, including understanding why, for example, black women are disproportionately labeled as "disruptive" and placed in solitary confinement. An intersectional framework is also appropriate when assessing the educational needs of Australian prisoners because imprisonment in Australia is not only classed, gendered, and racialized but also intersects with axes of disability, sexualities, mental illness, ethnicity, and nationality. These disparities across multiple identities and social categorizations will also reflect and reproduce differences in terms of internet access, digital skills, and digital experiences. Moreover, as contemporary digital life is increasingly about building and maintaining social connections online, and supportive social relationships are also integral to teaching and learning, "digital literacy" inside (and outside) prisons must move beyond individualized, isolated study skill acquisition to include (safe) social networking experiences as part of a (connected) learning community.

As Bell (2017) has pointed out from the US, an intersectional approach to criminal justice which considers the impact of compound discriminations is vitally necessary in part because incarceration rates are increasing faster for women than for men and black women are incarcerated at rates three times higher than for white women. In Australia, Indigenous people account for 27% of the total prisoner population, with an incarceration rate more than 16 times higher than for non-Indigenous Australians (Jones & Guthrie, 2016, p. 1). Women in custody typically have poor employment histories, lower educational attainment, and lower literacy levels than the mainstream Australian population (Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland, 2019; see also Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012; Bedford, 2007). On top of this, a high proportion has experienced poverty, homelessness, and sexual and domestic violence as well as other forms of gender-based oppression (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015; Phelan et al., 2020). Across the last decade, women have been entering the Australian prison system at a higher rate than men, with the greatest increase amongst women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Bartels et al., 2020). Using an intersectional lens to consider women's incarceration in Australia involves attentiveness to gender-based violence, substance dependency, and mental illness so as to achieve holistic, trauma-focused correction practices (see also Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012; Bartels et al., 2020; Hopkins, 2015). Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait women, specific precipitating factors also include poverty, intergenerational trauma, and gender-based violence (Wilson, 2004; Wilson et al., 2017). If, as Crenshaw (1995) suggested, the concept of intersectionality is key to understanding black women's experiences of the American legal system, it is also essential to understanding the experiences of Indigenous women in the Australian criminal justice system and their educational needs. As Jones and Guthrie (2016, p. 1) pointed out, cultural support and culturally appropriate interventions are key to the successful reintegration of Indigenous Australian prisoners and to reducing the increasing over-representation of Indigenous people in Australian prisons.

Now more than ever, corrections educators must understand the multiple ways race/gender/class interact in Australia because such compounding socioeconomic disadvantage, racial bias, and indirect institutional racism mean Australia has one of the highest Indigenous or first people's incarceration rates in the world (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The imprisonment rate for Indigenous Australians has also risen 52% in the past decade (Jones & Guthrie, 2016, p. 1). Indigenous prisoners may also bear the legacy of the stolen generation, forcibly institutionalized and systematically removed from their parents and homelands (Blagg, 2008). In terms of producing different outcomes for different racial groups, the Australian criminal justice system, while not intended to discriminate, seems to reproduce a systemic bias against the Indigenous population (see Blagg, 2008; Harmes et al., 2019; Johnston, 1991; Weatherburn & Ramsey, 2016). In the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) for example, Aboriginal people are more likely to be charged for offenses, less likely to be released on bail, and more likely to serve prison sentences than non-Aboriginal offenders, resulting in a 40% increase in the imprisonment rate of Aboriginal people between 2001 and 2015, with a continued upward trend (Weatherburn & Ramsey, 2016). There has been a doubling of the Aboriginal jail population over the past 10 years in NSW, due in part to harsher sentencing and expanded police powers which have resulted in more Indigenous people jailed for public order offenses (Weatherburn & Ramsey, 2016). Similarly, in Western Australia, more than 40% of the prison population are Indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021) with one in six Indigenous inmates incarcerated in that state because they could not afford to pay parking penalties and other fine defaults ("More than 1,100 people a year jailed over unpaid fines in Western Australia,"

2014). The proportion of Western Australia prisoners incarcerated for fine defaults actually tripled from 2008 to 2013 (Pen, 2015, p. 133), suggesting it is minor offenders and fine defaulters causing prison overcrowding in these states, not dangerous criminals ("More than 1,100 people a year jailed over unpaid fines in Western Australia," 2014).

Moreover, the Australian-based Keeping Women Out of Prison Coalition recently reported that the over-representation of Indigenous women in prison further entrenches their vulnerability, leads to a loss of culture, family, community, and connections to the land and perpetuates the cycle of trauma (Phelan et al., 2020). Phelan et al. (2020) note that the over-representation of Indigenous women with disabilities in prison is particularly evident and unacceptable. As the Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland (2019) has observed, our correctional systems are too ill-equipped and under-resourced to meet the multi-faceted needs of the growing number of incarcerated Indigenous women with mental health issues and serious intellectual disabilities. Moreover, most Indigenous women in custody are mothers who also have significant health needs associated with physical and/or mental illness (Phelan et al., 2020). Gender-based discrimination and oppression in Australia's criminal justice system are also evident in the link between incarceration and domestic violence. Women who have experienced domestic and/or sexual violence are not only more likely to be imprisoned but the experience of incarceration itself increases the risk and effects of domestic and sexual violence upon release (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015; Phelan et al., 2020). As Jones and Guthrie (2016) have argued, family and domestic violence are at the core of much Indigenous incarceration and thus must be directly addressed in specific prison education programs to break the cycle of the most vulnerable, financially dependent, mentally ill, and physically unwell returning to prison. Moreover, as previously stated, technology-facilitated gendered violence is on the rise in Australia with domestic violence perpetrators increasingly using social media to track down and harass victim-survivors (Francis, 2015; Women's Legal Service NSW et al., 2015). Even Australia's former female Prime Minister Julia Gillard has pointed to the misogynistic abuse, threats, and sexism Australian women often encounter in the digital public sphere (Anderson, 2016). Currently, Australia's criminal justice system does not adequately take into account such intersectional considerations of gendered, racialized, and classed oppression and violence. Hence, this article argues for the application of intersectionality as a vital concept within the field of Australian corrections education, digital literacy, and digital pedagogies.

3. Discussion

Upon their release, many ex-prisoners will reenter a society and economy vastly different from what they

may have experienced 20, 10, or even five years ago; a world of ubiquitous social media and unprecedented surveillance wherein distinctions between public and private are blurred. As Jewkes and Reisdorf (2016, p. 534) have observed:

When prisoners come to the end of their sentences, they not only are faced with prejudice and poor job prospects due to their criminal record, but their digital exclusion during a period of incarceration may have compound effects and lead to long-term and deep social exclusion.

Moreover, the more social media is woven into the everyday lives of young people, in particular, the more profound the loss when they enter the effectively disconnected prison (Knight & Van De Steene, 2017, p. 30) and in Australia the prison population is predominantly young with over two-thirds aged under 40 years (Jones & Guthrie, 2016, p. 1). Indeed, the digital divide between those who are “inside” and “outside” the prison may mirror other cultural and economic, local, and global digital disparities (Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Knight & Van De Steene, 2017). Vulnerable groups, such as incarcerated women, are also not adequately prepared to deal with the discriminatory “dark side” of new networked communication technologies (see also Knight & Van De Steene, 2017). Even incarcerated students who have enjoyed some access to offline digital literacy development through non-networked devices may not be adequately prepared for a “real” digital sociocultural environment of disinformation, fake news, technology-facilitated gendered violence, and the potentially exploitative nature of digital capitalism. They may not be adequately prepared to survive and thrive in a post-release society and economy increasingly dominated by big tech companies such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube. As Seo et al. (2022) have demonstrated in the US, women transitioning from incarceration will have particular gendered experiences and attitudes to digital technologies which will often include online privacy concerns and issues with ex-partners. Hence, female incarcerated students will need new media privacy education specifically developed for their needs and desires (Seo et al., 2022). In a postmodern society still divided by multi-faceted forms of discrimination, the stigma of incarceration may follow students throughout their private and working lives, exacerbated by information sharing new media platforms where distinctions between fact and fiction, public and private are often blurred.

Indeed, for the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated, personal privacy and its opposite (public humiliation) are becoming an increasingly pressing issue, thanks to media (mis)representation and sophisticated and constantly evolving surveillance technologies available to both state and private agents (see also Hopkins, 2021, 2022). As Hayes and Luther (2018, p. 49) have pointed out, social media is increasingly used by law enforcement

to both solve and anticipate crime today: “The impact on law enforcement is that they can track our activities more easily in the name of public safety.” Moreover, the use of camera phones, social media sites, and the rise of what Hayes and Luther (2018, p. 52) refer to as “citizen journalism” means sometimes unqualified but very active new media users and members of the public may post or repost information about crimes or criminals without due attention and respect to the rights and reputations of the accused and often vulnerable persons involved. Online and in the “real world,” black women, working-class women, and other marginalized groups are often disproportionately demonized and blamed for the very socio-cultural conditions that lead to violence and incarceration, conditions which they did not necessarily choose but are forced to survive and adapt to (Bell, 2017; Hopkins, 2022; see also Wacquant, 2005, 2009).

Thus, the interconnecting web of both public and private surveillance of vulnerable citizens continues to collapse into what Gurusami (2019) calls a “carceral web,” weaved around incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and yet-to-be-incarcerated disadvantaged persons. While explaining the characteristics of the carceral web, Gurusami (2019) refers to its “stickiness” as the internet’s habit and function of rendering criminal histories “inescapable” or impossible to shed, thus making the formerly incarcerated susceptible to further humiliation, pain, exploitation, and ultimately (re)incarceration. Benjamin (2019, as cited in Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2022, p. 71) also demonstrates how the “sticky web of carcerality” in turn extends beyond the prison gates and through new surveillance technologies into the everyday lives of vulnerable people, who are typically targeted as either risky or at-risk individuals. Hence, as Gurusami (2019, p. 435) points out, carceral citizens need critical digital literacies as a matter of “self-defense” against the digital reach and privacy invasions of predatory capitalism and state-corporate convergence. As we are learning here in Australia, beneath the shiny sales pitch of American big tech companies, like Facebook (and their rhetorical promises of freedom, devolution, democracy, and global connections), there is another reality of potential misinformation, surveillance, and information monopolies which may leave the vulnerable even more exposed, exploited, and disadvantaged (see also Gurusami, 2019). Hence, digital education within custodial settings will need to be equally fast-moving and responsive to the social media world, as well as delivered by suitably qualified educators informed by feminist intersectional theory applicable to the new media ecology. Such new media literacy would enable isolated and vulnerable learners to understand the uses and abuses of networked technologies as critical thinkers and empowered agents. For living in the age of evolving social media and the networked society requires a more agile, holistic, and intersectional approach to female prisoners’ digital literacy and technology needs. It also requires prisoners’ access to the internet.

It could be argued that the digital disconnection experienced by Australian prisoners is itself another additional layer of disadvantage within the myriad axes of oppression experienced by female incarcerated students, who may rely on Facebook and other networked communication platforms to maintain family, friendship, and social connections. Certainly, the experience of incarceration overall may “represent an identity (self-ascribed or not) that interplays with other demographic and systemic variables, making it more difficult for these clients to disconnect from the system” (Batastini et al., 2022, p. 930). As Phelan et al. (2020) pointed out, incarceration leads to a loss of culture, family, and community, especially for Indigenous women and this unnecessarily increases the pains and vulnerability of marginalized women. Disconnection from the network society may also frustrate full reintegration into the digital economy upon release, a disadvantage compounded further by factors such as prisoner age and length of sentence (see also Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). Due to the intersecting axes of difference discussed above, female and especially female Indigenous incarcerated students will need more specialized, personalized information and support than the mainstream prison population in order to ensure they are not further harmed by the experience of isolation and incarceration itself. As Bagaric et al. (2017, p. 321) have argued, internet-enabled devices have fundamentally altered Australian society over the past two decades, yet Australian prisoners are effectively “frozen in time to a pre-internet age.” Near-total internet prohibition in Australian prisons increases the pains of imprisonment by increasing the stress and anxiety of prisoners and it also inadvertently punishes the families of prisoners who are deprived of online connections with their loved ones (Bagaric et al., 2017). Most significantly, the prohibition of the internet undermines the kind of networked education prisoners need for the best chance of successful social reintegration post-release (Bagaric et al., 2017). Despite public perceptions that prisoners would use internet access to intimidate former victims or access violent pornography, this is statistically less likely in the case of female prisoners. Moreover, as Bagaric et al. (2017, p. 322) point out, through monitored access, modern technology can provide “a near failsafe solution to this risk.” While the benefits of networked communication may not be equally accessible for all social groups, the first step is to increase internet connectivity so incarcerated women can fully engage with the network society, sustain relationships, and emerge better equipped to deal with its potential harms and opportunities.

Intersectional exposures to online racism and misogyny, compounded by discriminatory stereotypes and misinformation circulated around carceral citizens in the still largely unregulated public space of social media, suggest critical digital literacy for incarcerated students must address the negative effects of new networked spaces as discussed above. It is equally important, however, to acknowledge social media’s capacity to also

facilitate prosocial behaviors, generate more positive self-concepts for some users, and afford opportunities to explore new identities beyond marginalized “outsider” status. Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022, p. 208), for example, have suggested that while vulnerable groups continue to be “marginalized by sociotechnical configurations that perpetuate structures of dominance in the digital sphere and on social media platforms,” immigrant influencers on TikTok have also built pathways toward visibility, creativity, activism, and agency. Similarly, influencers with intellectual disabilities have also found on social media platforms opportunities to advance social inclusion while reclaiming voice and visibility: “These results indicate that social networks allow them to make their interests visible, take part in the digital environment and interact with their audience, being a positive influence that promotes respect for diversity” (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022, p. 222). Presenting a case study of digital literacies and learning disabilities through an intersectional lens, Pandya et al. (2018, p. 387) explore how “digital video composing can be an act of redistributive social justice for students with learning disabilities.” A convincing case is made to explore intersections of race, language, gender, and class among students with disabilities in schools while placing the power of productive communication technologies in the hands of those more typically isolated and denied such access and chances for self-expression and self-representation. Such previous theoretical and empirical studies suggest a new network literacy for incarcerated students, which includes opportunities to produce as well as critically analyze new media texts, might also be a pathway toward the empowerment of a marginalized “outsider” group, which facilitates their reintegration into the digital public sphere. It is important to acknowledge, however, the limitations of this article’s exploration of network literacy, intersectionality, and incarcerated students, which is thus far essentially theoretical as most Australian prisoners still have no direct access to the internet or social media networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. Unfortunately, currently, instead of mastering new networked technologies, our most vulnerable carceral citizens are much more likely to be manipulated or managed by it. As Knight and Van De Steene (2017, p. 25) have observed, while the digitalization of prisons has accelerated over the past decade, when technology is introduced into the unique environment of the prison and its context of punishment it is more typically focused on enhancing security, surveillance, and the threat to privacy, rather than on enabling oppressed groups to join the digital public sphere.

4. Conclusions

New network literacy education has the potential to facilitate vulnerable women developing and maintaining the social relationships and communication skills so central to full participation in the digital public sphere. Such programs, I have argued, should also include

differentiated, critical *network* literacy education on using social media safely and responsibly as empowered informed digital citizens. As Reisdorf and DeCook (2022) suggest from the US, emphasizing the concepts of digital rehabilitation as well as digital inclusion, digital literacy must be part of the reentry processes before and after release. In Australia, university-based educators of incarcerated students have worked in partnership with committed prison-based corrections educators to deliver such digital tools and digital skills training across multiple jurisdictions, as previously mentioned. My own personal experiences, however, of teaching academic and digital literacies to Australian incarcerated students for almost 10 years, both face-to-face and through distance education informs my argument here: The way forward is to move beyond these isolated digital literacy skills to advance a new network literacy education built upon feminist, intersectional theoretical frameworks. As a researcher, I situate myself as a white woman from a working-class background and a first-in-family university graduate with prior experience teaching marginalized groups in schools, not-for-profit organizations, universities, and prisons. Moreover, my prior studies and research expertise in the sociology of education also inform my understanding that social structures and systemic oppression are at least as influential as agency and life choices in shaping personal histories and experiences of incarceration. Certainly, as the number of incarcerated women in the Australian criminal justice system continues to increase, new approaches are necessary to reduce recidivism and address the underlying, compounding issues which lead to female incarceration in the first place such as poverty, homelessness, and sexual and domestic violence. Moreover, while offline digital devices represent a significant step forward in Australian corrections education, incarcerated students are still relatively disadvantaged by the internet prohibition, with no direct internet access to email their lecturers or tutors or engage in other networked socialization and enculturation such as online peer learning forums.

The classed, gendered, and racialized realities of Australia's criminal justice system are evident in the dramatically disproportionate rate of imprisonment of Indigenous women, and in Australia's increasingly punitive approach to crime and sentencing which typically captures already excluded and marginalized populations. Overall, incarceration rates increased in Australia across 2020–2021, but especially amongst women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Consequently, overcrowding in Australian women's prisons is compromising not only privacy and hygiene but the effective delivery and timeliness of specialized education, health, and rehabilitation programs (Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland, 2019). This article has documented these unacceptable, discriminatory realities of imprisonment patterns in Australia. Just as in the US, black women in Australia are disproportionately imprisoned and harmed at the

intersection of institutionalized sex discrimination and institutionalized race discrimination which does not take adequate account of the role of domestic and sexual violence in the real and digital lives of women. Instead of retraumatizing marginalized and vulnerable women through imprisonment and increasing their risks of violence, homelessness, and unemployment upon release, more holistic and intersectional approaches to Australian criminal justice and digitalized corrections education must account for the harms and opportunities of the new media age. While digital literacy is indeed important to ensure the employability of carceral citizens, it is equally important to facilitate *network literacy* skills and knowledge to empower vulnerable women to protect their well-being, rights, and privacy online. As much, if not more, than any other marginalized group, Australian incarcerated women need internet connectivity and the benefits of a new digital literacy education appropriate for a rapidly evolving network society. Moreover, correctional staff across all Australian states and territories need consistent professional development opportunities in the field of network literacy education for marginalized groups informed by a feminist, intersectional lens, and an understanding of the multiple, compounding forms of oppression typically experienced by incarcerated women. This article, therefore, has argued for the application of intersectionality as a conceptual framework underpinning new network literacy education for female and female Indigenous incarcerated students and their teachers in the new media age.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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