

The
PERILS
of

**PRISON MAIL
DIGITIZATION**

**THE FINAL STRAW
RADIO SHOW**

12.12.21

Leigh Lassiter from prison books collective in Durham, North Carolina, a nonprofit project that sends zines and books to prisoners in Alabama in North Carolina prisons and jails comes on this week to tell us about recent changes by the NCDPS to use the private company TextBehind to scan all incoming and outgoing mail track, their contents surveil the outside users and mailers, and to make a profit on an already indigent population. We also talk about the work of sending literature, to incarcerated folks privatization and digitization of other services, and what literature gets rejected. More about the press books collective at PrisonBooks.Info or check out their linktr.ee

You can also check out local books to prisoners projects in your area that you could get involved with by visiting **PrisonBooks.Org/PrisonBooksNetwork**. There're also a couple of really good articles from The Intercept about this and related surveillance services topics within you as prisons and jails.

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Cover art and design by Alan Giberson.

TFSR: Could you please introduce yourself with whatever name, pronoun, and affiliations you want to share?

Leigh Lassiter: Yeah, my name is Leigh Lassiter. I am fine with any pronouns. I work with Prison Books Collective publishing distribution, based out of Durham and North Carolina. However, I speak on my own behalf as an activist and an individual rather than a representative of Prison Books.

TFSR: Cool. And could you talk a little bit about Prison Books? How long has it been around and what y'all do?

LL: Yeah, we started in 2006. I was not there then. But we have gotten in touch with some of the people who were involved in the original starting of it. It started in someone's garage. And it has grown, although we're kind of in the equivalent of a garage still. But as I said, in 2006, it wasn't recognized as a nonprofit until about a decade later. But we have been able to keep it going. We've just been sending books to North Carolina and Alabama, and zines across the country for all that time. We meet every week to answer the letter requests and send packages out to people and talk to each other. It's not as anarchist as it once was at its roots, more service-based space now, there is a variety of political opinions. But as a group, we still share the vision of alleviating the tremendous cruel pressures of the prison industrial complex on the incarcerated people that we serve, and generally feel that incarceration in this country is done poorly and has overkill. If we weren't needed, if our mission was served either by prisons or there weren't prisons to incarcerate people, we would prefer that. But while people are locked up, we get them all the books that we can.

TFSR: And what kind of requests do you get? Is it for technical manuals, dictionaries, religious texts? There's a lot of religious groups, for instance, that do outreach into prisons and send in materials that tend to have their specific religious bent and view on the world, because they're missionizing? What does the normal packaging party or packaging event look like for Prison Books?

LL: In regards to what the event looks like, we just pick up the individual letters and start reading for what they request. Sometimes we do get

requests for specific books and specific authors that we have in donated stocks. So it's rare that we can answer someone's specific request with the exact book that they want. Sometimes it happens, though. We just look around to find something usually, under 2 pounds, two books that we send, print off some zines and staple them. Fill in an invoice, send our information, write a little note, and pack it up neatly and tape it up to be taken to the post office later on.

People request all sorts of books. The most common being a dictionary or legal dictionary, and DIY sort of things and career books are often very frequently requested. A lot of people want to start food trucks or build their own houses, or learn to weld or repair cars, do plumbing and carpentry, that sort of thing. Which is extremely understandable for both jobs inside of prison and outside for whenever they get out. Those, of course, are very hard to find. We often get a lot of requests for coloring books and drawing books, lots of thrillers, biographies, and autobiographies of, particularly, African-American activists. We have everything. So we try to send everything from classics, to how to start your own business, or histories about things, rock stars' biographies. It's whatever we can get. As I said, this specificity of requests can vary from "please send me some books" or people misunderstanding our mission and just saying, "I'd like to sign up for your book club, just send me books every month". Then we have to say, "Oh, you have to write it every time, we have a limit of how many books we can send, but you can request them". We have some publishers that we dealt with who would occasionally give us a whole box of books that they want to donate for a cause. Usually, because the subject matter has to do with prison or social justice. We'll try to send those to the people who seem interested. But a lot of it is volunteers trying to read what fits their needs most. Because we can only send so many so quickly to people. And of course, usually prisons only allow them to have so many at a time. So there's a little bit of art to figuring out how to get them what they want. I believe in the questions you sent over, you also asked what wasn't allowed, if you want me to talk about that?

TFSR: Yeah, that'd be super helpful.

LL: We mostly send to North Carolina state prisons. And this is true for Alabama prisons, too. However, for the state prisons, anything that can do with tattooing is not allowed. Nudity is not allowed. They say "artful" nudity like Michelangelo or something would be allowed in, but in my

experience, any nudity is not allowed, because that line is gray enough that they just err on the side of “No, we’re not going to let that in”. Things that are gang-related or could enable crime in whatever way they interpret are not allowed in. Hardcover books are occasionally allowed in, but it depends on the prison, so we just don’t carry them because trying to keep track of where we can send certain books is just a real time-drain. Spiral-bound books usually aren’t because they could take the spirals out and use them for whatever. Those are the main restrictions, but we still get occasionally weird bannings and rejections very often from jails more so than state prisons. Federal prisons are at the level of state prisons in terms of what they allow. Jails have the worst policies, generally speaking, it’s just sort of determined by the warden in charge there. If you want to talk later about some of the rejections that we’ve gotten over the last couple of years, I can speak to that, because I usually handle the appeals process as it exists.

TFSR: Yeah, I would like to hear about that.

I’d also like to hear though, you’re filling a need. I get a picture that at a certain point, maybe in the 1950s or 60s or 70s, that prisons maybe didn’t always have – it is dependent on the prison – but prisons had a more robust legal library for people to research their cases, or for writing appeals, or more literature, that at some point, education as a part of the “rehabilitation” part of prisons was a bit more funded and a bit more focused. And so a project like yours may be – unless a group had a specific ideological mission of like, “we want to get more Muslim books in the prison, or we don’t want to get more pagan books in the prison” – maybe there wouldn’t be as much of a demand. But that’s changed. And I wonder if you could give a sense, as you understand it, of what prisons libraries look like, and what prisoners’ access to educational resources or reading for pleasure looks like in North Carolina prisons.

LL: I will try to the best of my abilities. I have not seen a prison library, but we hear about them pretty frequently. I should mention that during the COVID pandemic, which is still ongoing, libraries have often been shut down. We’ve heard that across the state many state prisons have shut down their libraries, or that sometimes they shut down visiting the libraries and then had a cart they took around, but maybe the person who took the cart around died of COVID. And then no one is there to take the cart around. So some people told us we are the only access point for getting

new literature right now. So right now it is in a particularly dire state in North Carolina.

However, in general prison libraries, I can't speak to the 1950s. But given the boom of the incarcerated population, I'm not surprised by the amount of need that is not being addressed by libraries in prisons, particularly legal needs. We get a lot of requests where people are either suing the state or trying to appeal their own case or going through other cases, and they have access to almost no legal help. They can't communicate effectively or to their satisfaction with their attorneys, if they even have one yet, they don't understand all the terminology or what they have to do. We have an extremely limited stock, as you might imagine, and paperback up-to-date specific accessible law books are not widely provided and easily accessible by us. We try our best and the number one thing on our wish list is always the intro to criminal law and defending yourself. If anyone looks at the Prison Books wishlist that we have up, but we go through those extremely quickly. People are very poorly informed by the system about their rights and the ways that they can appeal or sue and try to protect themselves. So that's, unfortunately, something we see a lot of, but that we, as just a small group of volunteers sending books for education, entertainment don't really have to resources for, and there's a huge need for legal help within the prisons.

It's something that you mentioned before that I had forgotten, the religious outreach. I'll say that we do get not a huge amount of requests for spiritual and religious literature. As you said, there are lots of organizations willing to provide that, and no other kinds of books but literature about that. We do get requests often for religions that do not have as many groups, who are less represented inside of prison, like Rastafarianism, paganism, satanism, that sort of thing. There's often a pastor inside of a jail or prison, and you're not going to have that for Rastafarianism or something.

TFSR: Can you talk a little bit about the stuff that that gets rejected? I've spoken with other folks that do books to prisoners and hear about books by Franz Fanon, or George Jackson, or Angela Davis getting denied because the content relates to prison and is critical of prisons. What stuff gets kicked back to you and why?

LL: I wanted to add a little bit of perspective on rejections that we had gotten. Firstly, zines, because we send zines all across the country, just

as a glimpse into the reasons that institutions all over the country might reject things. One of the most recent rejections that we got was of a literary magazine Words of Fire which has publications of art and literature from incarcerated people across the country. And therefore, we think it's very important that they also have access to read it all across the country, whether they are authors or might want to be authors. We had a rejection in Connecticut of it, because it was on printed paper and was not considered a real publication. And we've been doing several weeks of phone calls and some letter-writing to try to appeal this. Because they are worried that "having anything beyond what looks to be easily printed or copied paper will have inmates calling their families to send them copied paper, or printed paper, straight out of books". And the mail then will be flooded, and they won't be able to deal with all of the rejections and appeals of rejections. We've had it also rejected before, from Florida when I was trying to get it to an author we'd published because it supposedly contained commercial content, which is incorrect. Because we don't get paid for any of our services. And they also supposedly continue to quote "disallowed content" with no description of what that would mean. That was in 2019.

Some of the other things that we've gotten rejected across the country include the GURPS, the General Universal Role Playing System, which we sent out, it was rejected from Texas for having fighting styles in it, which, by the pages given, was referring to rolling dice for hitting another character or doing damage or having a bomb go off as an example for this role-playing system's damage. We've also had rejections for supposedly promoting insurrection or posing a threat to safety and security for things like The Lectures On Liberation by Angela Davis. Florida is definitely one state where it's very bad to try to get things in. And we've had things like Tai Chi being lumped into martial arts, for example, over this. Some of the other bannings: The Art of War has been consistently requested and consistently banned in North Carolina. It's not currently on the banned list, but we've still had so much trouble sending in the past that we haven't challenged it this year, because of the number of rejections we've gotten over the years in the past. The New Jim Crow was banned but that was overturned in 2018 because it was a national outcry about it. And that being overturned actually got them to redo their system of how they banned books. So they looked at that list again every year, and it actually overturned, a lot of other things being banned. Although you can tell from the banned list, including Twelve Years of Slave and Malcolm X books and things like that, that they have not fully fixed the system, which

some might argue shouldn't exist.

A lot of our rejections, as I said, aren't bannings, they are actually just blanket blocks that do not care about the content that you are trying to send. For example, we had a jail recently write that we do not accept books on a package, despite having talked to them within a month about them accepting our books, and having word given to us that they did still. Sometimes it just depends on who's in the mailroom. There was a federal institution in the state that just rejected something and then I called them, I was just told that was probably the other post and "I understand what your packages are, we'll take them in". One instance, in particular, it's really been an odyssey over something like three or four months this summer and the fall was that there was a state institution that was allegedly having issues with drugs being smuggled in in packages. So they cut off all outside packages and then re-approved vendors and distributors like ourselves on a case by case basis. And we had not yet been re-approved, so I called the captain and we had a few discussions. And he said, he went up the chain and got us re-approved after a little less than a month. And then when we sent books to the people who had written to us from there, half of them were rejected, because those inmates, in particular, hadn't filled out a form and been approved to receive books. So we had to set up a system where every time we got a request, I called them after that person was approved to receive books or not, and sent them. Except for the two packages that we initially got in to people, every time I called the person was not on the approved list. And I asked whether maybe, since they heard from us that we have requested them and they want to receive books, maybe they could get that form to the people that I was calling about, but they told me that's their initiative and they should know.

So that's been a pretty frustrating time. I've just had a lot of detention centers and jails in particular not consider us to be legitimate or not know what zines are, or give us differing statements about whether we can get things in or not. As I mentioned, Durham jail hasn't given us issues about us as a publisher but was just blocking books for several months because of the amount of, apparently, extra material that was built up and was a fire hazard in the cell. So there's a lot of obstacles to face in bannings and rejections that can't really be predicted and can apparently only be solved by weeks of phone calls. I hope this helps. Thank you.

TFSR: Do facilities ever have an approved book list that's the inversion of the banned list?

LL: No, I have not seen an approved books list except in the case of one jail that went back and forth on a policy where I was initially told that they were going to have reading tablets and not allowing any books, any books besides the Bible or Quran, but then they said that was incorrect. And they would be allowing in certain books, but only new books, no used books, and also have e-readers. The E-Reader thing is a thing that we are extremely worried about, I say we, in this case, for all Books to Prisons groups across the country, because that is an approved list of books, that is what that is functionally because they have a catalog of books that they said, “No, these are okay for them to read. And they will pay per minute to use these expensive, breakable e-readers and not have access to any other literature”. So you can imagine people looking for specific legal help or niche interests, for example, someone looking for Rastafarianism, there’s probably not going to be a book about that listed inside of this e-tablet that they also have to pay to use.

So that’s very concerning to us because usually, in the case of prisons, digitization and technological advancements, which can look like progress in the outside world, is not progress inside of the prison. For example, changing from having in-person visitation to having a digital video visitation is not an improvement. Changing from having books sent in for free, that you can request on any topic, and having that be disallowed in favor of e-readers, is not an improvement. Or as we’ll talk about in a second, having your letters be scanned and reprinted is not an improvement of what we’re seeing with the letter. So a lot of times people will think, “Oh, things are going more digital, they’re going more virtual and online, this is advancement, this is progress.” And in the case of prisons, it isn’t.

TFSR: Yeah, and each of these steps basically shifts the whatever it be: **the medical treatment, or the books, or the mail, or the phone calls, or the commissary, it shifts them into monopolies by specific corporations, that are prison industry corporations, that not only are they siphoning money out of the prisoners and of whatever supporters they have on the outside... In North Carolina, they changed the law about three years ago where people can only get money added, at least on their Jpay accounts, for spending inside of prison, they can only have people on their visiting list. Therefore people who have not, for instance, been convicted in some cases of felonies in the past. A bunch of limitations. Anyway, back on topic, as you say, you and I got in touch to talk about the changes to the North Carolina prison system that we’re snuck in a**

couple of months ago, we got a letter from a prisoner in the middle of the state, just sort of being like “Heads up. I can’t hear your radio but I have heard of your project and this change is coming”. Can you talk a little bit more about the privatization and digitization of prison mail in North Carolina and how it’ll affect prisoners’ communication with loved ones on the outside?

LL: Yes. On October 18, North Carolina state prisons switched for all personal mail – that’s letters, photos, and art and cards – they switched to having those be sent to the people who intended for incarcerated in state prisons, to having to send them to Maryland to be scanned by a company called TextBehind and then have copies reprinted by the prisons and re-delivered. The announcement of this was subtle, I only found it because that was on the state prisons homepage looking for something else and notice the little pop-up that said: “Mail policy changing on October 18” and I happened to click on it. Otherwise, we would not have known. I should admit this doesn’t affect prison books operations so far. Although we are worried about the possible ban on physical books being sent in. Now it affects the loved ones of incarcerated people who are trying to communicate to them.

TextBehind is not alone in this. There are a couple of companies who are trying to exploit this very captive market of people who are trying to sustain relationships across the miles and across the bars and charging their money to either get their physical letters back if they send physical mail hundreds of miles away because otherwise, they’ll just be shredded. So you have to pay to get that back. Or if you want to do it easier, of course, they have an app. For using their app on TextBehind, letters are 99 cents, you can add photos to 25 cents each, greeting cards are 99 cents, and Doodle for kids. So you can draw on your computer and send that at 99 cents. And that’s only for partner facilities, it’s more expensive if the facility is not partnered with them. And you may not think that sounds like a lot but if you are trying to keep up a relationship with someone or start a relationship with someone inside, then 99 cents a letter, 99 cents a card, 25 cents for a photo – that’s very expensive. If you are sending physical mail, it’s a flat rate to get it back, I believe at around \$3 or higher to get that sent back to you. So this could add up really quickly, even if you just sent one letter a week or a couple of letters a month or something like that. People don’t really have a choice in the matter if they want something that feels personal to be sent behind bars. And we just find this immensely

worrying and honestly also unjustified. Because there's really almost no data provided for why this switch is being made. But we can talk about that in a second with drug policies.

As a prison book volunteer, I have received countless letters telling us how important it is to have a lifeline to the outside where they can hold on to that letter that someone else wrote and see the signature and look at this and say it someone out there wrote this for me and intended it for me. Not to mention if it's a kid's drawing or something like that, it's going to mean so much more if you're holding the crayon drawing that your son or your daughter, your child drew for you. And it's one of the things that sort of keep them sane in there. If correctional facilities, as they're titled, were truly invested in making people more connected to humanity, kinder and more willing to invest in society, they would absolutely not be supporting this cut off from the people who are trying to keep relationships going across the bars, because it's incredibly dehumanizing. Not to mention probably riddled with errors. Wisconsin also just announced that they are using TextBehind as of December 1. They put in their announcement that they've experimented a lot with TextBehind and there have been errors, they admitted cut-off letters where you can't read the whole thing.

I know from my own experience of keeping records in prison books, that a lot of things don't scan so great if someone wrote in blue pen, or on white paper with pencil, it just doesn't scan correctly. The number of letters that TextBehind must be handling, I don't think that it's going to be 100% accuracy rate, which looks fine on their numbers, but for the person who gets a messed up, cut off or barely scanned letter or drawing, it's going to be devastating because that matters so much. The people who wait for the mail, there's a huge emotional investment in it. And it's just really saddening to think about that being taken away from them. Not surprising, but extremely saddening. And unfortunately, it looks like North Carolina is going to be continuing that policy for the foreseeable future, despite so many people protesting it.

TFSR: TextBehind is a new project to me, but for the last few years, I've noticed that Pennsylvania prisons use a company in Florida called Smart Communications to scan and email their letters to print on-site at the facility. The Federal Bureau of Prisons, according to an article recently by Lauren Gill of The Intercept, appears to be moving forward from just scanning mail in-house to having a company called

Mailed Guard do the same service for them. We've already mentioned this trend generally in the proliferation of private companies that are profiting from incarceration. This seems to be a rather frightening and growing pattern to capture that data and increase the costs.

LL: Smart communications is another one. And I just want to mention that the Pennsylvania ban initially also banned physical books, but there were enough protests that they changed that. So it's only mail right now. And so there was some worry from Books to Prisoners groups that the ban on mail is going to continue to try to ban books as well.

TFSR: That's quite frightening. I have to admit that I'm not very knowledgeable about drugs in prisons. I've heard that you can get many things if you have money and resources inside of prisons, especially depending on what state you're in. But most illicit items I've heard about prisoners getting a hold of have come through corrupt guards and other staff as they shore up their personal accounts because they don't get as much scrutiny as generally incoming mail or visitors and loved ones who are coming in. When PA started using Smart Communications, it was after mail staff, screws on the inside, basically, were supposedly dosed by letters containing the drug K2 in the paper. But then again, this other Intercept article about the privatization of prison mail references talking to a director of toxicology at a major medical institution in Pennsylvania. And that person saying basically, you can't get high off of that, it's not like Angel Dust where it's going to just go into your skin by touching it, you have to increase the temperature, and you have to inhale smoke, basically, for that K2 to get into your system. So it seems like an unrealistic expectation that was a major source of drugs coming in.

LL: Yes. North Carolina, in their announcement about TextBehind included a couple of sentences saying "the new mail process will also prevent drugs from entering the prisons in the form of paper coated in Fentanyl, K2, Suboxone or other dangerous drugs, these are harmful to breathe or even touch. This is something you would expect to have a citation. It doesn't. The only spot of data that is mentioned in the announcement of this switch to TextBehind is the sentence "In the year following use of TextBehind in North Carolina's four women's facilities infractions for drug use, and possession dropped by 50%. Now, 50% is a pretty round

and impressive number but there's a lot of missing context here. They say the number of infractions for drug use and possession dropped. They don't mention actual numbers, for example. This was also taking place during the pandemic for most of that year. Because most of that was 2020, so the number of people in prisons across North Carolina went down by a lot, you might think that would potentially affect the numbers of infractions, not to mention the staff being able to investigate that sort of thing. And they also did not provide any numbers for cases of drugs causing any hazards to the people inspecting the mail. There was no citation for that. And as you said, there's been medical pushback from people saying that K2 and Fentanyl don't come into the skin. I looked this up a little before the interview, and the American College of Medical Toxicology and American Academy of Clinical Toxicology agreed in a 2017 statement that you can't inhale and get high from Fentanyl without really high, really long exposure to it, and that you can't just absorb it through small unintentional skin exposure, it would not affect people. So I am almost impressed by the boldness of NCDPS just stating that flat out as a reason without citations in the announcement.

We have a Freedom of Information request that is making its way through the bureaucracy right now in trying to get any information about the hazards to people in the mail-room and how many drugs have come in through the mail. But, like you, I am skeptical about that being the way that most drugs make their way in. Texas saw a ban on mail for the same reasons, but their drug infractions didn't go down because, as it turned out, they were mostly coming in through guards still. Some people say there's a connection between that and guards having lower pay and they can make a lot on the side by carrying in drugs. When I went to a prison in person and got the tour when I was in college, I was told by a Captain that they mostly have to be careful about the guards bringing in contraband, that was just stated outright to the group. So this policy seems to be not only dehumanizing, but also not based on fact, and to make this huge of a change, there's a burden of proof that they should make. But this wasn't a law. This was simply a new departmental policy. People started commenting on our social media posts, when they put this out, like let's call the lawmakers or something, but this was just something that was handed down and decided. The fact that privatizing prisons and prison services is just getting more and more popular, is very concerning to me. Because they can't negotiate. And also the poverty of incarcerated people and their loved ones on the outside is statistically much higher than the

general population. So they don't really have alternatives other than to go to these services.

That's my thoughts on that, but there are plenty of things to read about, particularly, the drug claims, investigating whether Fentanyl can actually give you an overdose just from touching it, or where drugs come through. There are lots you can read online, I suggest at least starting with the Prison Policy Initiative because they're a good resource to keep track of the different policies going on around the country and their factual bases.

TFSR: That's super helpful. Thank you. I do have another question about the implications of the privatization and tracking of mail coming in and out. But you did mention that when people started commenting on your social media page saying, "Hey, call politicians chant, challenge it," the NCDPS is a part of the executive branch. So I guess you could put pressure on the Governor and Lieutenant Governor, but how do you suggest that people try to apply pressure, whether they're in North Carolina or in any of these other states that are being affected by similar policies and some of the same corporations across the country?

LL: Well, we haven't had success yet, it is my addendum. But I would find at least one phone number, one email, and one physical address to call or to write to to express your opinion, I've usually heard that phone calls are the best political weapon out of those three. But I know from personal experience that trying to get through the phone trees and the various extensions you have to press and voicemails you have to leave can be extremely confusing. So an email or a letter could also work.

Prison Books is not as an organization calling for people to do this push because we have to keep our services separate from this. However, I can say as an activist, that I would love it if people started writing to, for example, the Commissioner of Prisons, Todd Ishee, who is quoted in a lot of articles about the digitization policy change, to express your opinion, or writing to the general NCDPS mailbox, the address of which is at the bottom of every page of the NCDPS website, in Raleigh. What you basically want to do is make it obvious that it's a lie to say people don't care about this or that this is fine, this doesn't affect people. You want to get the voices that are shouting out individually to be able to unify and be heard together. And we're still working on that. But anyone

who wants to be involved in the Free the Mail movement that has started forming between Wisconsin and North Carolina activists, because we're both being affected by TextBehind in these most recent months, then they should, first of all, start looking through the hashtag of #FreeTheMail, and second of all, potentially email just to get the information where to go prisonbooks@gmail.com. Prison Books is not organizing this, but has information of people that you can get connected with to try to organize something against this,

TFSR: I have to say that a hashtag is confusing and also very catchy, since a lot of us use the #FreeThemAll. And those two look very similar.

LL: Yeah, I would suggest even for screen readers, you should be capitalizing letters for hashtags because otherwise, it's gonna be a jumble of letters. It does look like that, but I looked it up on Twitter to do a little research about it, it was used for the Pennsylvania issue as well. There were some ideas thrown around of "don't jail the mail", but it's prisons, not jails, that's incorrect. Hashtags are going to leave some meanings out, unfortunately.

TFSR: We've been talking about the limitations that people on the inside experience with their mail getting scanned and sent to them and not being able to physically touch a picture that your child or that your sibling or whatever drew, getting an actual picture, these sorts of things, very sentimental, very charged with emotional energy and feeling, smelling a piece of paper that someone else has touched... Prisons are all about cutting people off from the outside and making money off of them.

The other side of this, as you say, the majority of people that are inside of prisons, or that are inside of a part of the carceral system, tend to be poor. And whether that's because of survival crime, or because people have less access to lawyers or bail to be able to get themselves out, to be able to make a better argument to avoid charges, or because police tend to hang out in poor people's neighborhoods – all sorts of reasons. And these industries, like Smart Communications or TextBehind are literally siphoning money out of poor people's families when they're trying to keep those connections.

And surveillance inside of prison, the panopticon idea, that's a pretty common idea. But when you download an app on your phone that you're paying for, and there's the chance in this Lauren Gill ar-

ticle on the Federal Bureau of Prisons talking about them switching over to this privatized scanning and emailing of letters, talks about the amount of metadata that gets also put into the database of that private corporations so that they can market more stuff or sell that information if they want to to another third party that provides other “services to prisoners”, or that information is also available to the BOP or to whatever prison administration there is for tracking and surveilling the person on the outside that’s keeping track. Suddenly, there’s a permanent digital copy of this letter that somebody wrote to someone that could be used in some case in the future or to build a case or something like that. Can you talk a bit about the concerns of surveillance when people aren’t even necessarily committing crimes, but just trying to stay in communication with friends behind bars?

LL: Well, I think the article writers are probably more informed about that than I am, but I do know that TextBehind on their Services page does advertise a variety of their investigative tools and that includes communications, monitoring and looking for gang connections, and they keep the records. Not just the pictures, but the scanned text and the addresses and names of those who sent mail in their system for years, to possibly give away to other prison systems, the federal system, things like that. Yeah, they are using the people that they already have under their thumb and can watch with this panopticon set up to extend surveillance outside and try to make connections and look for patterns in a way that they probably think is very efficient, but which is frightening to any of us who are concerned about our right to privacy. But because it’s a human connection to people who are incarcerated being held hostage, people are going to have to make the choice about do I want to be able to talk to this person or do I not want to be put on a list of possible contacts to a third or fourth party to something that they think exists within the prison system. Having to choose between those two, that’s our choice that should exist, that should not be something that writing a letter to someone starts for you. That’s very concerning.

I’m always concerned about the privacy of people incarcerated as well. But I think a lot of people maybe aren’t aware of this extension of surveillance to those who were just in contact with and care about the people who are incarcerated. As you mentioned, Jpay’s changes, now you can’t send money unless you’re in the visitation approval. That requires getting approved, but also giving them information about you. This data

harvesting and surveillance is really getting hooked on people on the outside as well.

TFSR: Well, is there anything that I didn't ask about that you want to mention, or that you want to broach as a subject, Leigh?

LL: I would like to mention, for people who are looking for what they can do, that jails are often where a lot of bad policies will be implemented first because they have far less oversight. They are county institutions, so they don't even have the state looking out at them. So if you're concerned about privacy, education, cruel and unusual punishment, pay attention to a local jail, the sheriff, the warden, their policies, and if they make changes like "no one can send books here anymore," or a lot of jails in North Carolina now have to send your letters to Texas to get scanned, call them, and deluge them because they have even fewer resources to dedicate to supporting what I suspect to be a lie of the danger that letters and books pose. In your elections, vote for a sheriff who has concern to incarcerated people, if that's possible. And keep an eye on your local jail. And then also keep an eye on state policies. But if you want to start somewhere local, that's where to start.

TFSR: And if you're not much of a voter, you can still apply pressure during the period when there's more scrutiny on what sheriff is running for office. Or if they're working with ICE are just a couple of the potential...

LL: Yeah, that's a big one. Everyone who's closer is easier to reach. Make some noise when you can, when these policies get implemented near you.

TFSR: In my understanding, a lot of the Books to Prisoners projects are pretty independent and they keep in touch with each other and share news and resources from time to time. The project that you're involved with covers North Carolina and Alabama, the prison books here actually, I can't even speak to what APBP covers... But for the most part, don't cover national stuff. And they pass off things in other states to people that are closer to them. Transmission Prison Project covers a lot of the US but mostly is in the southeast, as I understand. How can people find a prison books project where they're at if they want to start getting involved in this sort of way?

LL: People can find local Books to Prisoners groups by looking at <https://prisonbookprogram.org/prisonbooknetwork/> and searching for their state. If there isn't one serving their state, then perhaps they can start their own. It's not that difficult. Contacting really any of those listed on the directory will get you some advice on how to start up. Luckily, books are something that a lot of people want to donate. It takes not as much effort as you might think, I would say particularly X Books in Georgia started up about a year ago and have been doing very well and probably have a lot of advice for newcomers. For supporting us and particularly for Prison Books Collective, I have to say probably what a lot of nonprofits say, which is that money is our first need. Postage, in particular, is what costs us money, sending those packages out and every year the rate goes up. So if you have money to donate, donate it. If you don't have money, then give us your time, if you can. We just started accepting volunteers again, as long as everyone is vaccinated and masked and we are still limiting the number of people that can come in.

And if you can't do either of those, there's probably online work that you could do if you got involved, whether it's social media, applying for grants, reaching out to bookstores for partnership, helping with email. There is a lot of activism that you can do remotely, that isn't just discourse on Twitter, necessarily, but actively working behind an organization to help them enhance their capabilities and do reaching out and things like that for them. Of course, we also take books for Prison Books Collective. You can email us if you have books to donate. However, I have to say we're doing pretty well in terms of books right now. And we have most genres pretty well stocked. But as usual, law and DIY stuff is always in demand. If you have any books on homesteading, farming, fishing, or trying to appeal your case in court, then send them our way.

We have a PO Box:

Prison Books
PO Box 625
Carrboro, NC 27510

You're welcome to reach out to us on our Facebook or Instagram or Twitter, or through our email prisonbooks@gmail.com to ask us for more things you can do. A lot of people have come in with new ideas that have been very exciting to us. We hope that people can engage remotely or in person again, because we are an organization that works as a collective

and we're only as strong as the collective is. So we're excited to have new people join us. And of course, I personally would advocate for everyone to just keep their ears and eyes to the news and look for a variety of news sources, not just the mainstream news sources about what's going on, and to advocate for the destruction of the prison industrial complex as we know it. Thank you.

THE *Final* Straw

A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW



The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

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