

## Are Payphones Obsolete?

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In prisons, commonsense assumptions about obsolescence, time, media, and lifecycles collapse. Media technologies wholly or partially committed to the grave on the outside are alive and life-sustaining on the inside. Payphones, typewriters, and paper mail, which might be dug up as objects of media archaeology in “the free world,” constitute vital and rhythmic circuits of mediation for imprisoned people who are violently separated from their families, friends, and communities. Attention to the circuits of media that help to constitute prisons—which are themselves technologies of time management as much as they are technologies of spatial enclosure—reveals deep connections between a powerful mode of designed obsolescence, criminalization, and human disposability. In this essay, I look at the obsolescence of payphones, its glaring exception in jails and prisons, and how that contradiction structures a repressive temporal regime of dis/communication and disappearance. The prison payphone is a perfectly contemporary technology of disaggregation, breaking up and dissolving the social relationships of prisoners, even when ostensibly mediating and connecting people across the wall.

### **Prison Payphones, Social Death, & Carceral Media Archaeology**

Jussi Parikka has given shape to media archaeology as “a way to investigate the new media cultures through insights from past new media, often an emphasis on the forgotten, quirky, the non-obvious apparatuses, practices, and inventions.”<sup>1</sup> The obsolescence of forgotten and non-obvious technologies assumes a remembering subject and a present from which to

relate to dead media and outmoded machines. When we look at the media apparatuses that help constitute prisons, the temporality of those positions is destabilized—if media do in fact, or even in part, “determine our situation” as Freidrich A. Kittler writes, and that situation is necessarily temporal, then prisoners are held captive in a fundamentally different present(s).<sup>2</sup> Where the walls, locks, and razor-wire enforce spatial captivity, it is the media technology that produces this captive temporality, which is more than just duration (the latter being a function of yet another, juridical technology: the sentence).

When applied to prison media systems and their users, both inside and outside, the reanimating gesture of what Parikka calls “zombie media” is useful, but must be temporally and sequentially reoriented: technologies that are pronounced dead outside the prison live on inside, and those that are nurtured outside are forbidden, starved, and, in Dylan Rodriguez’s term, “liquidated” inside. The title of Heather Anderson’s 2012 book on prisoners’ radio, *Raising the Civil Dead*, invokes this contradiction in its civil-social form. Joshua Price, drawing on Orlando Patterson, argues that “to be sentenced to prison is to be sentenced to social death. Social death is a permanent condition.”<sup>3</sup> Price shows that incarceration satisfies the three aspects of Patterson’s formation of social death: violence, humiliation, and natal alienation.<sup>4</sup> Prison payphones are one of the central technologies through which the prison negotiates and enacts this latter aspect of social death. But to say, as Price argues, that social death is permanent—that it does not neatly map onto the length of a sentence, but rather persists after release through trauma, stigmatization, and continued re/criminalization—is not to say that it is complete. Carceral social death is a process, an active disaggregation of social relations that must constantly be reproduced against social life, which manages to survive the unimaginably hostile conditions of the prison. Price turns fully toward this contradiction in his last chapter, “Social Life against Social Death.” Avery Gordon, upon whose work Price draws, brilliantly frames the problem like this:

Orlando Patterson was correct, in my view, to describe social death as an externally imposed process of negation. But he was wrong in suggesting that the negation is ever complete. We know it never was for slaves, his focus, and it is not for prisoners either. Prisoners, in all their variety and contradictions, have a social life and the knowledge of that social life constitutes an important body of subjugated

knowledge. It must be part of the keywords that describe what and who a prisoner is.<sup>5</sup>

Prison media in general, and prison payphones in particular, serve the carceral state as technologies of disaggregation and agents of incomplete negation and social death, but they also facilitate and mediate this resistant social life, inextinguishable even under such extreme duress. Carceral media archaeology must attend to the state-produced, always-ongoing, and never-complete obsolescence of people, as well as the technologies that mediate their weakened connections. It must therefore be an archaeology of the present—or of separate, contemporaneous but not co-temporaneous presents. Payphones, rendered obsolete on street corners by a combination of moral panic and mobile phones, still constitute a cornerstone of the carceral social architecture, its temporal regime, and the contradictions imperfectly contained within the prison.

### **Payphones: Criminalized Obsolete Technology**

Payphones, having largely vanished from US cities over the past twenty years, remain foundational to prison media architecture. Payphones operate as capital whose commodity is the time-limited call. They are different from home phones, business phones, and smartphones, where devices are either owned, leased, or financed and which confer “ownership” of a personal telephone number. This primarily social difference was historically transacted by coin drop mechanisms and their locations in “public” and commercial areas, but US communications law has explicitly held payphones to include “the provision of inmate telephone service in correctional institutions, and any ancillary services.”<sup>6</sup>

The development of the original extraction scheme has been attributed to William Gray, who “set up the Gray Telephone Pay Station Company and began installing phones on posts and in cabinets across America” in 1891.<sup>7</sup> By 1911, AT&T mass-produced their Model A and installed over 25,000 in New York within a year, and by the mid-1990s there were over 2.6 million payphones in the US. Since the peak, that number has fallen to as low as 100,000.<sup>8</sup> The obvious explanation for the payphone’s obsolescence is the introduction of mobile phones, marked by AT&T and Verizon’s retreat from the payphone business in 2007 and 2011, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

Renée Reizman has argued that payphones were already under attack in the 1990s, not from emerging wireless technologies, but from politicians and "communities" caught up in a moral panic over payphones and their users, who had been criminalized in the white and petty bourgeois imaginary as drug dealers, vagrants, and sex workers.<sup>10</sup> Reizman points to an early-1990s push to ban payphones in Chicago, which was popular enough to receive a rebuttal in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled "Don't Blame the Phone for Crime," written by the president of the "Independent Coin Payphone Association."<sup>11</sup> The article assures the reader that measures had been taken to enable more robust surveillance over public area payphones by logging basic call data and moving to a card-based system instead of coin operation. This overcomes the payphone's main privacy appeal—that it doesn't belong to any one user and can be operated by any appropriately abled person with a quarter—by individualizing payphone use.

This identification of payphones with criminality (dramatized by David Simon's *The Wire* (US, 2002–08) coincides with the rise of broken windows policing, a policing philosophy that further criminalizes and punishes disorder. Accordingly, payphones were feared as sites of disorder, and their use was criminalized. Because payphones offered anonymized entry into the telephonic and social infrastructure, individually contracted and traceable mobile phones and eventually GPS-locating and data-oozing smartphones were perfect resolutions to the peculiar surveillance problems posed by public payphones. In the so-called free world, the contradiction between the drive for communications profit, the right to consumer privacy, and the carceral state's expanding appetite for total surveillance are almost perfectly resolved in the iPhone and its regime of hyper-individuation and terms of service agreements.

### **Payphones: Carceral Time-Space Technology**

The situation is inverted by the particular conditions inside US prisons and jails, where any notion of a right to privacy is utterly exterminated, and the repressive project of individuation is fundamentally different from the outside. In prisons, cell phones pose the threat and payphones maintain order. Cell phones—drifting, hidden, networked—disrupt what Nicole Fleetwood calls the "penal space, time, and matter" of the prison, while payphones regulate that space and time as carceral media technology and wired penal matter.<sup>12</sup>

As ports to the outside, bolted to the walls of common areas and dayrooms, payphones spatialize the prison call. Prisoners must often wait for phones, schedule calls in advance, or deal with being suddenly called upon to use them, sometimes under conditions of administratively produced social tension.<sup>13</sup> On the outside, this manifests as what Casey Goonan calls the prisoner's "'absent' presence, or rather their present absence, in the moments when we are not communicating. When the phone hangs up."<sup>14</sup> For people on the outside, a missed call from prison hurts. Calls from prisoners cannot be returned. On the inside, unanswered calls can be devastating—no text follow-up, no voice message. Missed calls hit at a breakdown between the mobile phone present and the wired telephone past, as the return of an otherwise obsolete machine operated under the austere regimes of penal space and time. Payphones are one technology ensuring that in prison, as Indigenous political prisoner Leonard Peltier puts it, "time does you."<sup>15</sup>

Surveillance is constant on prison payphones, inseparable from the enforced temporality of the machines, announced at intervals by voiced interruptions: "This is a call from an inmate at . . ." This reminder of surveillance continually marks the caller as prisoner, substituting the recorded voice of the GTL and Securus Corporations for the cold cinderblock and plastic bench aesthetic of the visiting room. But the prison payphone is also about disappearance. Dylan Rodriguez argues that "the sweeping presence of the prison regime as a juridical, political, and narrative structure begets silences, absences, and disappearances over space and time."<sup>16</sup> When the average person incarcerated in the US is 100 miles from home, the ever-surveilling payphone plays an important role in replacing the family visit, often completing state-administered disappearance and weakening the community ties that delegitimize the state's dehumanizing claims about (Black) criminality.<sup>17</sup> The prison payphone, though ostensibly a channel of mediation, helps administer what Rodriguez calls "social liquidation."

Incarcerated poet Shannon Dukes gives shape to this disappearance, which is even further advanced by the strict rhythm of scheduled calling times: "Been going so long/ they disconnect like I'm gone/ I'm use to the dial tone."<sup>18</sup> The contradiction between an outside world driven and connected by smartphones and the carceral telecommunications regime of short, expensive calls with one shot to make connection is a temporal effect of technological difference and obsolescence planned in the interest of carceral security. The wired telephone and its singular function, the call, made obsolete by smartphones and their hyper-connective world, augments the

obsolescence of prisoners themselves, whose outside connections are systematically coerced into legally and media-technologically designed atrophy. As the primary channel for connection across the prison wall, the payphone is also, in its inevitable moments of failure and disconnection, an instrument of the produced invisibility that Angela Y. Davis attributes to the prison system: "The dangerous and indeed fascistic trend toward progressively greater numbers of hidden, incarcerated human populations is itself rendered invisible," to which we might add inaudible.<sup>19</sup> But due to the costly distance between home and the prison and the constant threat and practice of transfer, payphones stand-in and offer meager comfort for the disappeared and those who suffer their absence, either between visits or in their stead.

Prison payphones, being intimately tangled up with this logistics of visitation, transfer, and captive shipping within a vast network of cages, cops, and courts established to maintain white supremacist colonial order, constitute a tool and an infrastructure for the production of both (necessarily anti-Black) carceral and Black feminist geographies. The contradiction between the prison payphone as simultaneously a point of access for care and connection, as well as a piece of extractive capital within the prison's own surveillance machine, emerges from this dialectic of carceral space and the places of the incarcerated and the people who miss them. Katherine McKittrick's sense of geography encompasses both of these united opposites: "Geography, then, materially and discursively extends to cover three dimensional spaces and places, the physical landscape and infrastructures, geographic imaginations, the practice of mapping, exploring, and seeing, and social relations in and across space."<sup>20</sup>

McKittrick argues that "black lives are necessarily geographic, but also struggle with discourses that erase and despatialize their sense of place."<sup>21</sup> The distance of incarceration is closed and interrupted only by passing through the raw hostility of the visitation ritual where, among other aggressions, it is not uncommon for both visitor and prisoner to be sexually assaulted during "searches."<sup>22</sup> When telecommunications technology is built into this prison system, it becomes an engine for the production of penal space and time. In its carceral context, the telephone is no longer simply compressing time and space, as it has been shown to do on the outside.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it maintains the distance of incarceration, the distance that is incarceration, and helps keep penal time. Ruth Wilson Gilmore has argued that "prison is not a building 'over there' but a set of relationships that

undermine rather than stabilize everyday lives everywhere.”<sup>24</sup> The prison payphone, as a technology of both connection across the prison’s vast distances and community disaggregation, is integral in producing, conditioning, and maintaining that set of relationships. Along with visits, sentences, parole denial, mail, the hole, and yard-time, the prison payphone is an essential gear in the prison’s painfully slow-ticking clock, measuring the everyday and the lifetimes of the imprisoned.

Between time, energy, and money lost, a significant aspect of the constant (logistical) reconfiguration of what Gilmore calls the “social reproductive landscape” for people whose loved ones are incarcerated is the new labor and expense of maintaining contact across the wall through visits, mail, and phone calls.<sup>25</sup> In “Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families,” a report published by Oakland’s Ella Baker Center, the authors observe: “When we lock people up, we separate them from their family, ripping this foundation apart at the seams. When we lock someone up, we often sentence the whole family—not just emotionally, but also financially.”<sup>26</sup> For the Ella Baker Center, the use of the word “family” points well beyond the normative Euro-American nuclear family to indicate “families built across generations and borders and within and beyond blood relations,” a conception of family rooted in community, not genetics.<sup>27</sup> The report found that more than a third of families with someone inside took on debt “to pay for phone calls and visits alone.”<sup>28</sup> This financial burden of briefly hearing the voice of a partner, parent, child, or friend is added to the financial burden of court and legal costs, imposed fines, and the detrimental health effects of surviving incarceration from the outside. According to “Who Pays?” half of all formerly incarcerated people and half of all family members of incarcerated people “experienced negative health impacts related to their own or a loved one’s incarceration,” running the range of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, anxiety, and nightmares.<sup>29</sup>

Payphones further structure time by extracting enormous sums of money. In 2016, the prison phone industry siphoned \$1.3 billion out of incarcerated people and their friends and family—more than four times what free-world payphones made in 2015.<sup>30</sup> The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) levied some milquetoast regulations on interstate call rates from federal and state prisons (not jails) in 2015, but those have since been vacated in court and disavowed by the Trump FCC.<sup>31</sup> The extreme rate of extraction by prison payphones also determines penal time by burying families in debt, limiting frequency of calls for some and totally excluding others from contact through

unaffordable fees. The Ella Baker Center estimates that over a third of families with someone inside take on debt just to cover their new phone bills and visit costs. They also found that long-term negative health effects were more common in families who were unable to maintain regular contact, sometimes extending beyond the incarcerated member's release date.<sup>32</sup>

It is unsurprising that the loved ones and families of incarcerated people, especially Black women, often lead the fight against the prison system generally and the extractive prison payphone industry. Writing about the New York Campaign for Telephone Justice that led to New York State's passage of the Family Connections bill in 2007, Lauren Melodia and Annette Warren Dickerson report that "families have always been the driving force and primary spokespeople of the campaign."<sup>33</sup> Melodia and Dickerson show that family connection, even the minimal connection permitted by prison payphones, has to be fiercely defended by people directly impacted by imprisonment. They recall that the members of the campaign collectively knew that "if people had to rely on the phone to keep their families together, they had to fight to change the system and demand fair treatment and prices."<sup>34</sup> In the face of carceral state-administered social liquidation through technologies of disaggregation, maintaining connection with incarcerated loved ones requires active struggle against prison and the corporations who operate prison payphones.

Though obsolete on the outside, the payphone remains a vital media technology in US prisons and jails. Its vitality is double: on the one hand, it provides much-needed connection between families separated by the state, razor-wire fences, and hundreds of miles; on the other hand, the prison payphone siphons money out of people most directly impacted by carceral violence, especially poor and working class, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, LGBTQ, and disabled people; it surveils and records their every conversation. It structures a brutal regime of penal time and penal space, inside and out. Close attention to the media technological conditions inside and across prison walls helps us to better understand how prisons—understood as a set of relationships, following Gilmore—reproduce themselves and what kinds of practices are used to maintain penal space and penal time. Carceral media archaeology, if always conscious that prison conditions are in large part the result of struggle, can contribute important insight to the fight to abolish prisons, and the social disaggregation that holds their world together by keeping people apart.



## Notes

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- 2 Freidrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), xxxix.
- 3 Joshua M. Price, *Prison and Social Death* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 5.
- 4 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 5 Avery Gordon, *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 39.
- 6 Telecommunications Act of 1996, 47 U.S.C. § 276(d) (1996).
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- 16 Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the US Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 185.
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- 28 Ibid., 9.
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