

# **PRISONERS' RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN THE NEW INFORMATION AGE**

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	12
LIST OF FIGURES .....	13
COMMON ABBREVIATIONS .....	14
ABSTRACT.....	15
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .....	16
1.1 New ICTs and the NPRC .....	16
1.2 What is the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition? .....	18
1.3 NPRC Origins and Tactics .....	23
1.4 What Are New ICTs? .....	24
1.5 New ICTs and Social Movements .....	25
1.6 Why Study the NPRC and New ICTs?.....	28
1.7 Lessons from Comparable Movements .....	31
1.8 The Significance of the NPRC .....	33
CHAPTER 2. STUDYING THE NPRC.....	36
2.1 Primary Research Questions and Research Framework.....	36
2.2 Guiding Ideas.....	41
2.3 Subject Selection .....	45
2.4 Data Selection.....	46
2.5 Approach to Data Collection .....	48
2.6 Data Analysis and Coding Scheme .....	51
2.7 Ethical Considerations.....	53
CHAPTER 3. NPRC BEGINNINGS (DECEMBER 2013 - MAY 2014) .....	57
3.1 The SPFC Goes Online .....	57
3.2 Late 2013 on Corrections Worker Pages.....	61
3.3 ICT Use during the SPFC's Formation .....	62
3.3.1 SPFC Expressive Composition and Production .....	65
3.3.2 CO Talk: Dangerous Prisoners.....	65
3.3.3 The Spokesperson's Verbal Appeals.....	66
3.3.4 SPFC Prisoner Interviews and Problem Documentation .....	66

3.3.5	Attention Competition on YouTube.....	67
3.3.6	Dehumanizing Comments on YouTube .....	67
3.4	The SPFC Calls a Work Strike .....	68
3.5	The SPFC Strike Reaches Corrections Forums .....	70
3.6	ICT Use during SPFC First Actions .....	74
3.6.1	SPFC January Strike.....	76
3.6.2	Spokesperson Moved to Segregation .....	76
3.6.3	Disciplinary Sanctions.....	76
3.6.4	ADOC Information Control and Contradiction .....	77
3.6.5	“John’s” Radio Call-In .....	79
3.6.6	SPFC Free Activist Press Conference .....	79
3.6.7	Economic Stress of Striking.....	80
3.6.8	CO Talk: Hug-A-Thug Culture .....	80
3.7	The SPFC Regroups and Plans a “Big Event” .....	81
3.8	Corrections Worker Forums Focus on Workplace Issues .....	83
3.9	The PLM Joins the Cause.....	85
3.10	ICT Use as the SPFC Regroups.....	88
3.10.1	SPFC Twitter Migration.....	90
3.10.2	CO Talk: On-the-Job Trauma .....	90
3.10.3	SPFC Prison Reform Bill Draft.....	90
3.10.4	PLM Facebook Page .....	91
3.10.5	<i>Salon</i> and Alabama Newspaper Interviews.....	91
3.11	“A Movement is Brewing” .....	92
3.12	Correctional Officers Reflect on Prisoners’ Rights .....	94
3.13	The Strike Withers under Repression.....	95
3.14	ICT Use after the SPFC/PLM Alliance .....	96
3.14.1	April Strike Participation Disincentives.....	98
3.14.2	STG Labeling .....	98
3.14.3	SPFC and PLM April Strike.....	99
3.14.4	Prisoner Welfare Call-In .....	99
3.14.5	Economic Stress and Fundraising .....	100

3.14.6	SPFC Free Activist Rally .....	100
3.14.7	Appeasement by Prison Administrators .....	101
3.15	Social Processes of Resistance and Repression during the NPRC's Beginnings.....	101
CHAPTER 4. NPRC ACTIVISM IN THE FERGUSON MOMENT (LATE MAY 2014 - EARLY-FEBRUARY 2015) .....		104
4.1	The SPFC Starts a Radio Series and the PLM Shares Letters.....	104
4.2	CO Heroes, Crybaby Prisoners, and Soft America .....	105
4.3	The SPFC Marches in Alabama .....	107
4.4	The Alabama DOC Changes Its Disciplinary Code .....	108
4.5	ICT Use as Free SPFC Activists Mobilize (Mid-May to August 2014) .....	109
4.5.1	SPFC Radio Show Launch .....	111
4.5.2	CO Talk: Soft America .....	112
4.5.3	PLM Letter Sharing.....	113
4.5.4	SPFC Free Activist Marches .....	113
4.5.5	ADOC Disciplinary Code Changes.....	114
4.6	The SPFC Stands with Ferguson .....	114
4.7	COs Discuss Hypervigilance .....	116
4.8	A Cell Phone Riot? .....	117
4.9	The Alabama DOC Considers Managed Access Systems .....	119
4.10	ICT Use during the Ferguson Unrest.....	120
4.10.1	Ferguson Information Chain .....	122
4.10.2	Ferguson Solidarity and "Real Activist" Discourses .....	122
4.10.3	"Hypervigilance" Discourses .....	122
4.10.4	Prison Drugs, Searches, and the Cell Phone Riot .....	123
4.10.5	Cell Phone Crackdown.....	123
4.11	Prisoner Activists Find Support.....	124
4.12	Blue Lives Matter and CO Bashings .....	125
4.13	A Newsletter and a Bloody Winter .....	126
4.14	ICT Use as the Nonprofit Intervenes.....	129
4.14.1	PLM Dues Waiver.....	131
4.14.2	Nonprofit Civil Suit.....	131

4.14.3	COs Identify with Police Officers .....	132
4.14.4	The PLM Newsletter .....	133
4.14.5	Prison Violence and Anti-Violence Activism .....	133
4.15	Social Processes of Resistance and Repression around the Ferguson Moment .....	134
CHAPTER 5. NPRC ACTIVISM IN A JUSTICE REFORM CLIMATE (MID-FEBRUARY 2015 - JUNE 2015) .....		137
5.1	“Let the Crops Rot in the Field” .....	137
5.2	Prison Reform Becomes a State Legislative Priority .....	139
5.3	“Smoke and Mirrors” and Health Lockdowns .....	140
5.4	Executions, Contraband, and CO Attacks .....	141
5.5	ICT Use after the Texas Uprising .....	143
5.5.1	SPFC Work Strike Announcement .....	145
5.5.2	Pre-Strike Repression of Prisoner Activists .....	145
5.5.3	SPFC Work Strike and Underfeeding .....	146
5.5.4	Alabama Prison Reform Task Force Bill .....	146
5.5.5	Journalists Borrow SPFC Videos .....	147
5.5.6	CO Talk: Prison Management Issues .....	148
5.6	Alabama Pushes Reform Forward and COs Discuss Outsider Interference .....	148
5.7	“A Slow Tortuous Death Sentence” .....	151
5.8	COs Discuss the Riot Team Deployment and Alabama Passes Prison Reform .....	153
5.9	ICT Use as Alabama Passes Prison Reform .....	154
5.9.1	Disease Outbreaks in Alabama Prisons .....	156
5.9.2	CO Talk: Fake Sick Prisoners .....	156
5.9.3	Prison Stabbings and Riot Team Deployment .....	156
5.9.4	Riot Team Photos, Videos, and Comments .....	157
5.10	The SPFC’s Six Step Plan .....	158
5.11	PLM Members Rebel .....	159
5.12	Rebellion and the Blue Line .....	160
5.13	The SPFC Protests McDonalds .....	163
5.14	The SPFC and PLM Notice Change .....	164
5.15	ICT Use as the NPRC Protests McDonalds 2015 .....	165

5.15.1	SPFC Phone Interviews and the Six Step Plan .....	167
5.15.2	Nebraska Rebellion .....	167
5.15.3	Spokesperson Concern Campaign.....	168
5.15.4	McDonald's Protest.....	169
5.15.5	CO Talk: Complaining Activists.....	169
5.16	Social Processes of Resistance and Repression in a Climate of Justice Reform.....	170
CHAPTER 6. NPRC ACTIVISM AS ACTIVIST REPRESSION INTENSIFIES (JULY 2015 - MARCH 2016).....		173
6.1	The PLM Gets Organized.....	173
6.2	COs Discuss Public Narratives and Alabama Prison Conditions.....	175
6.3	Prisoners as Lawyers Goes Online and the SPFC Goes Quiet .....	177
6.4	COs Confront the War on Law Enforcement .....	178
6.5	Handguns, Cell Phones, and a Stabbing in Alabama .....	180
6.6	ICT Use as the PLM Grows Online and Offline .....	181
6.6.1	PLM Blog and Second Newsletter .....	183
6.6.2	PLM Mini-Conference and Headquarters Events .....	184
6.6.3	PAL Facebook Page .....	184
6.6.4	An Anonymous CO Comments on Alabama Prison Conditions .....	185
6.6.5	The Spokesperson's Transfer .....	185
6.6.6	CO Talk: The War on Law Enforcement .....	186
6.6.7	Alabama Contraband Bust and CO Stabbing.....	186
6.7	The Chief Political Spokesperson Becomes Ill .....	187
6.8	Corrections Officers Talk about Prison Order Problems .....	188
6.9	PLM and SPFC Leaders Experience Repression .....	190
6.10	SPFC Voices Reemerge Online.....	191
6.11	ICT Use as NPRC Leaders Face Repression.....	192
6.11.1	The Strategist's Care Campaign.....	194
6.11.2	CO Talk: Prison Order Problems .....	194
6.11.3	PLM Card Writing .....	195
6.11.4	PLM Leader Arrest.....	195
6.11.5	SPFC Radio Re-Launch .....	196



6.12	The PLM Releases a Third Newsletter and Plans a Trans Prisoner Solidarity Day.....	196
6.13	COs Again Consider Transgender Prisoner Healthcare .....	198
6.14	“The Show Must Go On” and PAL Discovers the SPFC.....	200
6.15	Corrections Officers Worry about Attacks, Drones, and Beyoncé .....	201
6.16	ICT Use as the NPRC Builds Solidarity.....	203
6.16.1	The PLM’s Third Newsletter .....	205
6.16.2	The Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity .....	205
6.16.3	SPFC Radio Shows .....	206
6.16.4	PAL Cross-Posting.....	207
6.16.5	CO Talk: Work Worries .....	207
6.17	Alabama Mega-Prison Plan .....	208
6.18	A Drone and Two Riots.....	209
6.19	The Aftermath of the Riots.....	212
6.20	SPFC Free Activists Meet for Saturday Prison Protests .....	214
6.21	ICT Use during the Alabama Riots .....	215
6.21.1	Alabama Mega-Prison Proposal.....	217
6.21.2	Alabama Prison Riot #1 .....	217
6.21.3	Alabama Prison Riot #2 .....	218
6.21.4	Media Coverage of the Riots.....	219
6.21.5	The NPRC Grows.....	219
6.21.6	Saturday Prison Protests .....	220
6.22	Social Processes of Resistance and Repression in a Climate of Justice Reform.....	220
CHAPTER 7. THE NPRC PRISONER STRIKE (APRIL 2016 - SEPTEMBER 2016) .....		225
7.1	The PLM Organizes a Prisoner Strike in Texas .....	225
7.2	The PLM, the TPAN, and the SPFC Make Announcements .....	227
7.3	The SPFC Plans a May Day Strike.....	227
7.4	Corrections Forums Respond to the April and May Prisoner Strikes .....	230
7.5	ICT Use during the Texas and Alabama Strikes .....	232
7.5.1	The Texas Prison Strike .....	234
7.5.2	Texas Facility Lockdowns and News Blackout .....	234
7.5.3	NPRC Wave of Announcements .....	235

7.5.4	The Alabama Prison Strike .....	235
7.5.5	Bird Feeding and Facility Neglect .....	236
7.5.6	Media Contact through Contraband Cell Phones .....	236
7.6	Planning for a Prisoner Freedom Summer .....	237
7.7	“Amateur Hour is Over” .....	238
7.8	A Weekend of Action in DC .....	240
7.9	SPFC Incarcerated Lives Matter Rally and PLM Strike Endorsements .....	241
7.10	ICT Use during Freedom Summer 2016 .....	243
7.10.1	The NPRC Makes Plans .....	245
7.10.2	Corrections Technologies .....	246
7.10.3	TPAN Weekend of Action .....	246
7.10.4	Incarcerated Lives Matter Rally .....	247
7.10.5	PLM Strike Endorsements .....	247
7.11	Planning the September 9 <sup>th</sup> Strike .....	248
7.12	Pre-Strike Disturbances in Alabama .....	250
7.13	Pre-Strike Actions across the U.S. ....	253
7.14	ICT Use Leading up to the Nationwide Prisoner Strike .....	254
7.14.1	Pre-Strike Planning and Organization .....	256
7.14.2	Pre-Strike Legal Advising .....	256
7.14.3	Alabama CO Stabbing .....	257
7.14.4	Corrections Talk: Cell Phone Fears .....	257
7.14.5	Free World Pre-Strike Solidarity Actions .....	258
7.15	The September 9 Prison Strike in Prisons .....	258
7.16	The September 9 Strike Outside of Prisons .....	262
7.17	Where is the Media? .....	263
7.18	COs Respond to the Strike .....	265
7.19	ICT Use during the Nationwide Prisoner Strike .....	267
7.19.1	The Prisoner Work Strike .....	269
7.19.2	Free World Non-Tech Resistance .....	269
7.19.3	Free World Tech Resistance .....	270
7.19.4	Mainstream Media Silence on the Strike .....	270

7.19.5	CO Talk: The Prisoner Strike.....	271
7.20	Social Processes of Resistance and Repression during the September 9 <sup>th</sup> Prisoner Strike .....	271
CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION.....		274
8.1	NPRC' Use of New ICTs .....	274
8.2	NPRC's Use of New ICTs over Time .....	276
8.3	NPRC's Use of New ICTs in Response to Repression .....	278
8.4	Lessons from Studying the NPRC.....	280
8.5	Future Directions for Research.....	288
REFERENCES .....		289

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Sample of News Coverage of the September 9th Strike.....	16
Table 1.2 Research Overview .....	18
Table 1.3 Core Organizations of the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition .....	19
Table 1.4 Background on NPRC's Core Organizations .....	19
Table 1.5 Top Concerns of the NPRC's Core Organizations .....	20
Table 2.1 Core Organization Identification Criteria .....	46
Table 2.2 Data Types .....	47
Table 2.3 Resistance and Repression Indicators .....	48
Table 7.1 Types of In-Prison Resistance Actions on September 9 .....	259
Table 7.2 Forms of Prisoner Repression on September 9 .....	260
Table 7.3 Types of Outside Prison Resistance Actions on September 9 .....	263
Table 8.1 NPRC Non-Tech and ICT-Assisted Organization and Resistance .....	275
Table 8.2 NPRC Repression Experiences.....	279

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 Dynamic Model of Resistance and Repression .....	39
Figure 3.1 ICT Use during SPFC's Formation (Late 2013) .....	64
Figure 3.2 ICT Use during the SPFC's First Actions (Early 2014).....	75
Figure 3.3 ICT Use as the SPFC Regroups (February to Early-April 2014).....	89
Figure 3.4 ICT Use after the SPFC/PLM Alliance (Mid-April to Mid-May 2014) .....	97
Figure 4.1 ICT Use as Free SPFC Activists Mobilize (Mid-May to Early-August 2014) .....	110
Figure 4.2 ICT Use during the Ferguson Unrest (Fall 2014).....	121
Figure 4.3 ICT Use as the Nonprofit Intervenes (Late 2014/Early 2015) .....	130
Figure 5.1 ICT Use as Alabama Considers Prison Reform (February and March 2015).....	144
Figure 5.2 ICT Use as Alabama Passes Prison Reform (April to Early-May 2015) .....	155
Figure 5.3 ICT Use as the NPRC Protests McDonalds (May to June 2015).....	166
Figure 6.1 ICT Use as the PLM Grows Online and Offline (Summer/Fall 2015).....	182
Figure 6.2 ICT Use as NPRC Leaders Face Repression (November to Early-January 2015)....	193
Figure 6.3 ICT Use as the NPRC Builds Solidarity (January - February 2016).....	204
Figure 6.4 ICT Use during the Alabama Riots (March 2016) .....	216
Figure 6.5 The Prisoner's Digital Dilemma .....	223
Figure 7.1 ICT Use during the Texas and Alabama Strikes (April to May 2016).....	233
Figure 7.2 ICT Use during Freedom Summer 2016 (June to July 2016) .....	244
Figure 7.3 ICT Use before the Prisoner Strike (August and Early-September 2016) .....	255
Figure 7.4 ICT Use during the Nationwide Prisoner Strike (September 2016).....	268

## COMMON ABBREVIATIONS

<b>BOP</b>	Bureau of Prisons
<b>CMU</b>	Communication management unit
<b>CO</b>	Corrections officer
<b>ADOC</b>	Alabama Department of Corrections
<b>FBI</b>	Federal Bureau of Investigation
<b>ICT</b>	Information and communication technology
<b>IRB</b>	Institutional review board
<b>NPRC</b>	New Prisoners' Rights Coalition
<b>NDCS</b>	Nebraska Department of Correctional Services
<b>PAL</b>	Prisoners as Lawyers
<b>PLM</b>	Prisoner Labor Movement
<b>PTSD</b>	Post-traumatic stress disorder
<b>SPFC</b>	Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee
<b>SPFB</b>	Southern Prisoner Family Brigade
<b>STG</b>	Security threat group
<b>TDCJ</b>	Texas Department of Corrections
<b>TPAN</b>	Toxic Prison Alert Network

## ABSTRACT

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New information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as cell phones, email, and social media, have been transforming how social movements recruit, organize, participate in collective action, and experience repression. Yet, limited scholarship has addressed the uses of these technologies by social movements organizing within American prisons. Using a dialectical interpretive approach, I examine how a coalition of prisoners' rights organizations uses ICTs to plan and participate in collective resistance across prison walls. The coalition, referred to here as the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition (NPRC), organizes against low and no-wage prison labor, unhealthy and unsafe prison conditions, and inhumane prisoner treatment. The NPRC has a multi-platform public digital presence and mobilizes prisoner activists and free activists. Through narrative description, I summarize the ways NPRC activists use ICTs from December 2013 through September 2016, noting changes in ICT use over time and in response to movement repression. I find that new ICTs offer innovative ways for NPRC activists to record and document their environments, communicate privately, and communicate publicly. ICTs, however, do not remove all barriers to activism or ensure that activists' concerns are resolved or even taken seriously. NPRC activists struggle to overcome stigma and mischaracterization online. They face physical repression, interpersonal hostilities, institutional sanctions, economic repression, legal sanctions, interpretive repression, surveillance, and monitoring. In different circumstances, the NPRC responds to repression by increasing ICT use, decreasing ICT use, going dark, migrating from one online platform to another, and shifting digital responsibilities from prisoner activists to free activists. I explain how, most of the time, the digital unreachability of the prison environment makes it difficult for NPRC activists to substantiate their claims of mistreatment, abuse, and injustice. Moreover, I consider how current prison technology policies may be inadvertently pushing NPRC activists into difficult-to-monitor online spaces and exacerbating safety concerns of corrections workers.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 New ICTs and the NPRC

On September 9, 2016 (the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Attica Prison Uprising), the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition (NPRC) and their allies staged one of the largest prison and jail work strikes in United States history. Prisoners in dozens of U.S. prisons and jails refused to show up to work programs. In solidarity, free activists participated in rallies, marches, banner drops, noise demonstrations, and phone campaigns. Mainstream media coverage of the strike was limited and focused largely on the strike's logistics rather than the strikers' demands. News article after news article asked the same question: "How did they do it? How did prisoners coordinate such a large-scale strike from within prison and jail walls?"

Table 1.1 Sample of News Coverage of the September 9th Strike

News Quotes	Source
"Leaders in each prison have used contraband smartphones to coordinate work stoppages and broadcast their complaints and demands through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and blogs."	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
"...getting the word out that these strikes are happening, using social media and smuggled mobile phones."	<i>Al Jazeera</i>
"The strike, which has now grown to constitute the single largest prison strike in American history, was organized through a network of smuggled cell phones..."	<i>The Politic</i>
"Inmates are able to use cellphones to amplify their message."	<i>Business Insider</i>
"...was coordinated using prison visits by family members and advocates and on illicit calls between inmates at different prisons on smuggled cellphones."	<i>The Guardian</i>
"Using smuggled cell phones, social media, and the help of outside groups..."	<i>Buzzfeed</i>
"...coordinated strikes planned through social media on cell phones and snail mail..."	<i>CNN</i>
"...prisoners have used contraband cell phones and social media, in combination with print media, to communicate across different facilities."	<i>Jacobin Magazine</i>
"Using a system of contraband cell phones, and with help from family members and organizers on the outside..."	<i>The Marshall Project</i>



For the most part, journalists pointed to contraband cellphones and social media, renewing public anxieties of technologically-empowered criminals and provoking new calls for stricter technology contraband policies for U.S. prisons (Christie 2010; Jewkes and Reisdorf 2016). Yet, on the NPRC's websites and social media pages, activists insisted that cell phones and social media were only part of movement's mobilization strategy – that the strike's organization was much more complex.

In many ways, the NPRC resembles prisoners' rights movements and prison union initiatives from decades past (Esposito and Wood 1982; Evans and Goldberg 2009; Haslam 1994; Jacobs 1980). The NPRC opposes low and no wage compensation for Prisoner Labor, organizes work strikes in prisons and jails, and includes both free and incarcerated activists. Yet, unlike past movements, the NPRC is situated within a new age of "information and communications technologies" or ICTs (Garrett 2006). The NPRC exists in a world which knows cell phones, email, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and online crowd-funding. Moreover, the NPRC is organizing against an institutional power which has benefited from recent advancements in surveillance technologies such as visual surveillance devices, call and email monitoring, person tracking systems, technology-assisted searches, and extensive digital recordkeeping.

Since before the turn of the century, social movement scholars from across the globe have been documenting the profound ways in which new ICTs have been transforming how movements engage in resistance and experience repression (Bonchek 1995; Earl and Kimport 2011; Hampton 2003; Leizerov 2000; Lim 2002; Resnick 2004; Wasserman 2007; Van Laer and Alest 2010). Yet, limited scholarship has addressed the roles of these technologies in social movements organizing in U.S. prisons.

In this dissertation project, I utilize a dialectical interpretive approach to describe the uses

of new ICTs by the NPRC. I analyze how the NPRC's use of new ICTs changes over time and in response to movement repression.

Table 1.2 Research Overview

<b>Primary Research Question</b>	How has the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition used new ICTs to organize and participate in collective action?
<b>Secondary Research Questions</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How has the NPRC's use of new ICTs changed over time?</li> <li>2. How has the NPRC's use of new ICTs changed in response to repression?</li> </ol>
<b>Analytical Approach</b>	Dialectical interpretivism, dynamic model of resistance and repression
<b>Broader Project Goals</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Nuance existing literature on ICT use by social movements</li> <li>2. Describe how new ICTs have shaped NPRC activists' resistance efforts (noting changes over time and in response to repression)</li> <li>3. Consider what the NPRC's use of new ICTs could mean for other prison movements</li> </ol>

I aim to nuance the existing literature on ICT use by social movements as well as provide a descriptive landscape for reflecting on how new ICTs are shaping the resistance efforts and communication of prisoners and prisoner advocates.

## 1.2 What is the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition?

Throughout this dissertation project, I've chosen to use pseudonyms to refer to the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition (NPRC), NPRC organizations, and activists. The New Prisoners' Rights Coalition is a pseudonym for a US-based, collaborative prisoners' rights advocacy group. Between 2013 and 2016, the NPRC included four core advocacy organizations: the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee, the Prisoner Labor Movement, Prisoners as Lawyers, the Toxic Prison Alert Network (also pseudonyms here). The four organizations worked together closely to

plan and carry out collective resistance actions – including work strikes, hunger strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, legal actions, and education efforts – inside and outside of prisons in the United States.

Table 1.3 Core Organizations of the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition

<b>The New Prisoners' Rights Coalition (NPRC)</b>			
Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee (SPFC)	Prisoner Labor Movement (PLM)	Prisoners as Lawyers (PAL)	Toxic Prison Alert Network (TPAN)

The NPRC's four core organizations were formed between December 2013 and March 2016. The Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee began organizing in U.S. prisons in December 2013. In April 2014, free activists established the Prisoner Labor Movement to support the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee. Prisoners as Lawyers was created in September 2015, followed by the Toxic Prison Alert Network in March 2016.

Table 1.4 Background on NPRC's Core Organizations

<b>Core Organization</b>	<b>Establishment Date</b>	<b>Online Presence</b>	<b>Facebook following (as of October 15, 2017)</b>
Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee	December 2013	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, website	2,903 followers
Prisoner Labor Movement	April 2014	Facebook, Twitter, website	13,818 followers
Prisoners as Lawyers	September 2015	Facebook, Twitter	1,307 followers
Toxic Prison Alert Network	March 2016	Facebook, Twitter, website	1,413 followers

The NPRC's primary concerns include low and no wage prison labor, the exception clause of the 13th Amendment to U.S. Constitution; the mistreatment of prisoners; violence against prisoners; legal violations of prisoners' rights; unhealthy and unsafe prison conditions; mass

incarceration; institutional racism and racial disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system; and the prison industrial complex. In their statements of purpose, each of NPRC's core organizations prioritizes these concerns differently.

Table 1.5 Top Concerns of the NPRC's Core Organizations

Organization	Top Concerns
Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Low and no wage prison labor</li> <li>2. Prison conditions and overcrowding</li> <li>3. Abuse of prisoners</li> <li>4. Inadequate prison programming</li> <li>5. Unfair sentencing and parole practices</li> <li>6. The prison industrial complex</li> </ol>
Prisoner Labor Movement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Low and no wage prison labor</li> <li>2. The prison industrial complex</li> <li>3. Abuse of prisoners</li> <li>4. Institutional racism and racial disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system</li> </ol>
Prisoners as Lawyers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Violations of prisoners' rights</li> <li>2. Mass incarceration</li> <li>3. The prison industrial complex</li> <li>4. Institutional racism and racial disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system</li> <li>5. Low and no wage prison labor</li> <li>6. Unfair sentencing and parole practices</li> </ol>
Toxic Prison Alert Network	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prison conditions and overcrowding</li> <li>2. Institutional racism and racial disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system</li> <li>3. Abuse of prisoners</li> <li>4. Mass incarceration</li> <li>5. Environmental justice political prisoners</li> </ol>

The Southern Freedom Committee was founded to raise prisoner wages and improve prison conditions. The Prisoner Labor Movement is especially interested in ending low and no wage prison work and dismantling the prison industrial complex. Prisoners as Lawyers mobilizes against a wide range of prisoners' rights violations. The Toxic Prison Alert Network foremost seeks to draw attention to dangerous and unhealthy prison conditions.

The objectives of NPRC's core organizations are somewhat varied. From December 2013 through September 2016, the core organizations of the NPRC issued a range of demands, including:

- Amend the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution (“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”).
- End no-wage and low-wage prison labor.
- Hold a congressional hearing on the human rights violations of United States prisons.
- End the criminalization and exploitation of the working class, people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ people, young people, dissidents, and people with mental illness.
- Address unhealthy, unsafe, unsanitary, and inhumane prison living conditions.
- Address prison overcrowding.
- Close private prisons.
- Fund and improve prison programming and reentry services.
- Reform parole guidelines and policies.
- Reform habitual and repeat offender laws.
- End prison rape and sexual violence.
- End solitary confinement and indefinite segregation.
- Abolish the death penalty and life without parole sentences.
- Amend racist, discriminatory, and arbitrarily applied laws.
- Abolish prison fee and legal debt systems.
- Mass release prisoners who have been wrongly convicted or unjustly remain in prison.
- Compensate prisoners who have suffered mental and physical abuse in custody.

From this list, the most common demands were to amend the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment and end no-wage and prison labor. Many of the NPRC's collective actions have focused on abolishing low and no wage work in U.S. prisons and jails. In the NPRC's print and social media, the word “exploitation” is frequently used to describe this labor, oftentimes alongside “oppression,” “neo-slavery,” “modern involuntary servitude,” or “prison slavery.”

Leaders of the NPRC see parallels between the oppression of prisoners in the U.S. prison system and the historical oppression of slaves under the U.S. slave system. In both systems, large numbers of black people (as well as other specific groups of people) have been held captive and forced, coerced, or threatened to work without compensation (or with minimal compensation). The idea that prison labor resembles slavery or is an extension of slavery is not new. Historically, many

prominent prisoners' rights movements have organized against forced prison labor as prison slavery (Esposito and Wood 1982). The NPRC's concept of prison slavery, however, has been shaped by relatively recent interpretations of the legacy of slavery and the role of the criminal justice system in the United States.

Leaders of the NPRC often quote or cite *The New Jim Crow* by legal scholar Michelle Alexander – published in 2010. In her book, Alexander argues that white supremacy is enduring and it permeates American society and its institutions. According to Alexander, the United States has maintained a caste system, which has oppressed and controlled people of color for centuries. This caste system was underpinned by slavery and then, after the collapse of slavery, Jim Crow laws. Today, it is upheld by the criminal justice system and legitimated by veiled racist rhetoric of justice policies. Under the “new Jim Crow,” law-and-order rhetoric and mass incarceration vilifies, criminalizes, and punishes people of color. People of color are arrested, sentenced, and incarcerated at disproportionately higher rates than their white counterparts (Alexander 2010).

While incarcerated, prisoners are required to labor to earn good time, demonstrate their ongoing rehabilitation, afford basic care items, and, sometimes, pay towards their incarceration costs (Eisen 2013; Henson 2018). Across the United States, hundreds of different work programs operate in federal prisons, state prisons, jails, and detention facilities. Prisoners are not protected by federal minimum wage laws. In some of these programs, prisoner workers do have the opportunity to earn minimum wage (Blume et al. 1993; Pryor 2005). In most work programs, however, prisoners earn no wages or very low wages. Interestingly, the NPRC has been organizing at a time when the value of wages for the largest prisoner work program (the UNICOR program) has reached historic lows. From 1991 through 2017, the UNICOR federal prison industrial work program paid prisoner workers between 23 cents per hour (at the lowest pay grade) and \$1.15 per

hour (at the highest pay grade) (UNICOR 2009). This means that wages for Prisoner Labor in the UNICOR program had not been adjusted for inflation for over two and a half decades.

The NPRC has struggled to problematize low wage and no wage prisoner work. Movement opponents and members of the general public often view prisoner labor through lenses of punishment, rehabilitation, or debt (Reiman and Leighton 2015; Waquant 2002). Through the first lens, prisoners are people who broke the law. As people who violated society's rules, they should be punished. No wage or low wage labor is that punishment. Through the second lens, prisoners are people who require rehabilitation to someday reenter society. As people who need to learn the value of work, job skills, and/or the character traits necessary to be a good worker and citizen, they should be required to work (Cowen 1993). No wage and low wage work is the best way to financial sustain such a large-scale rehabilitation program. Through the third lens, prisoners owe a debt to the prison system. Incarceration is expensive. While in prisons, prisoners are housed, fed, and watched after. If prisoners are not paying for these services, they should be contributing in some form (Wozniak 2014). No wage or low wage labor is the best way for prisoners to contribute.

These dominating lenses of interpretation have necessitated that the NPRC challenge cultural discourses as well as prison system policies and procedures. Through activism, the NPRC has attempted to demonstrate that no and low wage labor, violations of prisoners' rights, discriminatory and unfair treatment of prisoners, and unhealthy prison conditions are serious problems and prisoners are people worthy of humane treatment, justice, and care.

### 1.3 NPRC Origins and Tactics

The NPRC appears to be a computer-supported social movement (Juris 2005:191), though not accurately an e-movement (Earl and Kimport 2011:12). Activists in the NPRC engage in both online and offline actions. The coalition has Facebook pages, Twitter pages, blogs, websites,

YouTube channels, an online newsletter, crowd-funding pages, and an activist email listserv. The NPRC's most popular Facebook and Twitter pages are updated almost daily. There are over 100 videos on the coalition's YouTube channels. The most-watched video has exceeded 26,000 views. From the online activity of the NPRC, it is apparent that both free and prisoner activists use new ICTs, such as cell phones, email, blogs, and social media.

The NPRC's resistance efforts began in 2013, with a series of camera phone recordings and a multi-prison work strike. During the month of December, activists from the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee created social media pages and uploaded videos recorded on contraband prison cell phones. The videos showed and described the living and working conditions of prisoners in a maximum-security men's prison in Alabama. Just after posting the videos, the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee called its first work strike at several prisons in the American South.

Other organizations have since joined the SPFC's cause, spreading the geographic reach and growing the membership of the NPRC. Between 2013 and late 2016, the NPRC organized hundreds of actions around the United States, inside and outside of prisons and jails. Prisoner activists have participated in work strikes, hunger strikes, and demonstrations. Free activists have disseminated petitions, organized letter-writing and calling campaigns, held protest events, and developed coalition websites, social media pages, and print material.

#### 1.4 What Are New ICTs?

An ICT (information and communication technology) is a tool that can be used for recording, communicating, and disseminating information. ICTs connect information senders with information receivers through an information-sharing process. Signal lights, newspapers, postal service, fliers, books and other publications, telegrams, radio, microphones, amplifiers, telephones,



cellular phones, cellular networks, email, computers, computer software, the internet, social media and virtual reality are all types of ICTs.

Since the early 2000s, scholars from communication studies, the sociology of technology, and policy studies have used the term “new ICTs” to describe primarily digital technologies that began to reach public markets in the mid-1990s or early 2000s (Garrett 2006; Lievrouw and Livingstone 2003; Steinmueller 2000). Cellphones, personal computers, email, the internet, social media, blogs, video streaming, and virtual reality are commonly categorized as new ICTs. These technologies have created new ways to capture, store, share, send, and receive information.

Technologies with other roles in the communication process, however, can also be considered new ICTs (Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes 2012). For example, image and video manipulation software have reshaped how information can be crafted and produced for sending. So too, new encryption and information security techniques and processes offer ways to restrict the flow of certain types of information.

### 1.5 New ICTs and Social Movements

In “Protest in an Information Society,” R. Kelly Garrett writes, “New information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as cell phones, email, and the World Wide Web, are changing the ways in which activists communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate... Examples of changes in the social movement landscape abound.” Indeed, scholars in the social sciences have empirically observed the impact of ICTs across a variety of social movements (Bonchek 1995; Earl and Kimport 2011; Hampton 2003; Leizerov 2000; Lim 2002; Resnick 2004; Tsou 2011; Wasserman 2007; Van Laer and Alest 2010; Yusuf 2011). The introduction of new ICTs has influenced social movement mobilization and organization in several important ways.

First, new ICTs have increased the availability of movement information; reduced the time

and resource demands of some forms of movement participation; and produced “new low-cost forms of participation” (Garrett 2006; Hampton 2003; Leizerov 2000; Wasserman 2007). The internet and social media sites have created centralized digital spaces for social movement organizations to widely communicate movement information and tactical plans. Webpages and social media have allowed social movement organizations to share their goals and strategies with potential activists, while email and other messaging technologies have enabled potential activists to more easily make contact with movements. Cell phones and messaging technologies have allowed movements to communicate strategy, logistics, and changing situations to activists at a rapid speed. Relatedly, online spaces for activism and organization have created opportunities for activists to electronically participate in social movements without expending the time, money, or effort necessary to travel to offline movement meeting spaces (Garrett 2006).

Second, new ICTs have allowed movements to carve out digital spaces to engage in active meaning construction or “framing” (Benford and Snow 2000). These spaces have enabled activists to share create shared narratives, contest culturally hegemonic meanings, and exchange discursive resources (Wasserman 2007). In effect, new ICTs have generated new arenas (supplementing more traditional arenas, such as meetings, town halls, and in-person events) for activists to co-create a common understanding of what and who the movement represents, what change the movement seeks, and why the movement is important.

Third, new ICTs have served to reinforce within-movement networks ties among activists and bolster extra-movement ties to potential allies and resource holders (Garrett 2006; Juris 2005; Leizerov 2002; Lim 2002; Resnick 2004). Blogs, forums, and social media have allowed activists to share their experiences among one another and forge a shared collective identity across geographic dispersion. Additionally, information pages, funding sites, and social media have

connected movements with sympathizers who are able to contribute knowledge, funding, and/or other forms of support.

Fourth, new ICTs have created new forms of collective actions and “expanded and complemented” the modern repertoire of contentious action (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2009). New ICTs have enabled e-tactics – tactics that are executed wholly online (Earl and Kimport 2011). Many of these tactics allow for activists to engage in asynchronous action or the pooling of “micro-contributions” (Bonchek 1995; Garrett 2006; Hampton 2003; Resnick 2004). This means that activists are able to schedule participation around obligations and time constraints.

Fifth, new technologies have allowed social movement organizations to respond to repression in new ways. Recording technologies, the internet, and video-sharing platforms have enabled activists to document and share their experiences of repression publicly (Youmans and York 2012). Activist groups have utilized video evidence to bring attention to repressive regimes, human rights abuses, and activists’ sacrifices for the cause (Bhuiyan 2011). Yet, social media websites have sometimes suppressed the reporting of violent repression by censoring “offensive” content. Some media-sharing websites have removed documentation of repression that was too violent or did not meet content standards (Youmans and York 2012).

Advances in ICTs have not been wholly empowering for social movement organizations. The digital spaces that new ICTs create can, at times, produce fertile environments for rumors and misinformation to take root (Ayers 1999). Likewise, the increasing abundance of available information on the internet has not directly resulted in increased political participation. Human ability to absorb and process available information remains limited (Bimber 2001). New ICTs appear to be most effective at stimulating weak social ties, rather than deep, affective ties (Hampton 2003). Also, many new forms of digital activism rely on automated tools which

constrain the actions of movement participation and fail to appeal to certain tactical tastes (Garrett 2006).

Relatedly, new ICTs have created new means for social movement repression. ICTs have facilitated more efficient record-keeping, visual surveillance, communications surveillance, personal and organizational data collection, location tracking, and digital subversion. These new technologies have been used by both government and non-government organizations to monitor activists, social movement groups, and social movement resistance efforts (Earl 2011; Neumayer and Stald 2014; Starr et al. 2008).

Additionally, these technologies have become increasingly panopticon-like, allowing a surveillant to “see without being seen” (Foucault 1977; Lim 2002; Simon 2005). Consequentially, ICTs have produced numerous negative effects within social movements, including paranoia, suspicion of new activists, mistrust among the activist community, reluctance to participate in actions, reluctance to contribute resources, “fear of leaking,” and activist silencing (Agre 2002; Starr et al. 2008).

Yet, the impact of new ICTs on social movements is highly varied. The roles of new ICTs are heavily dependent on their availability and usability for social movement activists and movement opponents. The influence of new ICTs is not universal across all contemporary movements.

## 1.6 Why Study the NPRC and New ICTs?

Social movement and communication scholars have studied the influence of new ICTs on social movements in a variety of contexts. Yet, there are at least two reasons to believe that the influence of ICTs on the NPRC (a movement led by free and prisoner activists) is unique. First, free activists and prisoner activists have starkly different levels of access to ICTs. Second, free

and prisoner activists face distinctive, but not unrelated, repercussions of ICT use.

To start, free activists are more likely than prisoner activists to be “digital haves” (Lim 2002; Murthy 2008:845). Free activists, foremost, have greater access to the physical technologies, such as cell phones, cameras, computers, and other internet devices. In most American prisons, cell phones and cameras are considered contraband (Christie 2010; Fitzgerald 2011). This is not to say, however, that prisoner activists do not have some legal access to ICTs. Services like JPay and Global Tel Link provide phone, email, and video communication to some prisoners at a fee (Johnson 2016). Additionally, some prison and jail libraries allow limited computer access.

Also, there is evidence to suggest that illicit cell phones have become increasingly available in prisons (Christie 2010; Fitzgerald 2011). In “Disconnected,” Jane Christie compiles reports of illicit prison cell phone smuggling from around the country. Christie recounts that cell phones have entered prisons in packages, jars of peanut butter, Bibles, body cavities, remote control helicopters, kites, and even carrier pigeons (Christie 2010: 31). Similarly, Erin Fitzgerald’s “Cell ‘Block’ Silence” finds that hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of cell phones are confiscated every year in individual state prison systems. In 2009, prison officials reported 6,995 illicit cell phone confiscations in California state prisons (Fitzgerald 2011:1275).

Beyond physical technology, though, prisoner activists are less likely to have the necessary infrastructure for using ICTs. By in large, cell phones need batteries and batteries need charging. Social media and internet communications technology require internet connection and/or cellular data (Conradie 2003; Lim 2002). While incarcerated, prisoner activists are severely limited in their access to electrical and internet connections. As well, technological knowledge, to some degree, factors into the ability of prisoner activists to utilize ICTs (Conradie

2003). Depending on the length of their incarceration, prisoner activists may have less familiarity with technological devices, social networks, and internet navigation (Jewkes and Johnston 2009).

Prisoner activists also face much higher risks than free activists for possessing and utilizing ICTs. In U.S. prison and jail systems, possession of an illicit cell phone or recording device can result in loss of privileges, segregation, marks on disciplinary records, parole denial, or even additional prison or jail time (Christie 2010:31). Furthermore, prisoner activists are subject to more intensive and immediate surveillance measures, such as physical and visual supervision, random sweeps, body scanning, monitoring of calls and emails, and intensive record keeping (Christie 2010; Vachiradath 2013). Some prisons also use cell phone sniffing dogs and have considered cell phone jamming and signal interception technologies (Christie 2010:42). For prisoner activists, even mundane interactions with ICTs are threatened by surveillance. Any public record of social media communications or information sharing could readily confirm prisoner activists' illicit use of technology.

Free activists are not subjected to the same disciplinary measures as incarcerated activists; however, free activists face particular risks and challenges associated with communicating with and aiding prisoner activists. Free activists can be banned from prison visiting for spreading information about planned in-prison resistance efforts, if resistance efforts involve prison rule violations (Boudin, Stutz, and Littman 2013). It is a criminal offense to smuggle contraband into an American prison or jail (Fitzgerald 2011). Free activists who smuggle illicit cell phones and other devices face the possibility of criminal charges and incarceration. Additionally, free activists who do not engage in ICT smuggling must still consider how to engage with prisoner activists using the legal ICTs and offline communications.

## 1.7 Lessons from Comparable Movements

The NPRC belongs to a class of social movement organizations that are bridging stark conditions of “digital inequality” (DiMaggio and Hargittai 2001). These movements are mobilizing and organizing across disparate environments of technology access, technological abilities, and technological inclusion (DiMaggio et al. 2004; Gunkle 2003; van Dijk 2006). This means that some activists in a movement do not have access to the physical technology to allow them to use new ICTs, do not have the abilities to use new ICTs, or are not included in the digital spaces created by new ICTs.

Issues of technology access can be manifested in several ways including lack of access to physical devices, software, services, content, or infrastructure (Selwyn 2004). For instance, individuals may not be able to obtain a computer, may not be able to attain anti-virus software to keep that computer functioning, or may not be able to connect to the internet or social media sites. The reasons for technology inaccessibility can be persistent (such as limited rural or national infrastructure) or temporary (such as power outages or natural disasters), structural (such as government restrictions, stage of national digital adoption, or gendered societal ICT use norms) or personal (such as income, rurality, hospitalization, incarceration, or detention) (Selwyn 2004; Jewkes and Johnston 2009; Ono and Zavodny 2007).

Issues of technological abilities can include the underdevelopment of operational skills, information skills, or strategic skills. Operational skills are individuals’ abilities to operate ICT hardware and software (van Dijk 2005). Information skills are individuals’ abilities to “search, select, and process information” (van Dijk 2006:228). Strategic skills are individuals’ abilities to utilize ICTs for their informational, communicative, or interactional goals (van Dijk 2005). The underdevelopment of these skills can result from lack of motivation, opportunity, or accommodation. In other words, individuals were not compelled to learn these skills, were not able

to learn these skills, or were not afforded the necessary accommodations to learn these skills (Crump and McIlroy 2003; Dobransky and Hargittai 2006).

Issues of technological inclusion can stem from intentional or inadvertent marginalization of individuals in digital spaces. Individuals can be marginalized by codified rules and policies for digital spaces (such as minimum age requirements) or social exclusionary practices (such as making certain groups feel unwelcome or unsafe or communicating in another language) (Livingstone and Helsper 2007).

Many contemporary social movements are organizing across digital inequality to some degree. Yet, the NPRC is among a particular group of movements in which digital inequality is especially salient. Other movements with this level of digital inequality are organizing partially within controlling institutions (prisons, jails, detention centers, punitive treatment centers); under regimes with restricted technology access; in rural or remote areas; in areas of limited technological infrastructure; in areas of limited digital literacy or accessibility; or in especially hostile digital spaces.

Studies of ICT use in these movements speak to three important considerations. First, they demonstrate the limits of new ICTs as a tool to empower social movements. Late 1990s “cyber-enthusiasm” brought the notion that computers, phones, and the internet would revolutionize social movements, connect diverse publics, and stimulate democratic participation (Rheingold 1995; Heeks and Seo-Zindy 2013; Tsou 2011; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2009). Yet, digital inequality remains persistent and democratic revolution elusive (Sarkar 2011; Stepanova 2011). Moreover, many digital technologies are “localizing” (rather than geographically broadening) activists’ interactions, “promoting immediate, local causes, relaying information and mobilising for action through their immediate social networks” (Ben-David 2011). Activists who seek to make



connections beyond local networks must navigate the “contemporary culture of consumption” by simplifying movement messages, producing attention-grabbing content, and finding space in popular consumption channels (Lim 2013).

Second, these studies illustrate the necessity of “cross-platform strategies” and diverse mediascapes (Costanza-Chock 2011; Costanza-Chock 2012; Lim 2013; Nielsen 2013). Social movements that organize across limited access to technology must adapt their information dissemination strategies to reach activists who do not have access to new ICTs (Jolley 2011; Lim 2013). For instance, a social movement organization may need to disseminate plans for collective actions in digital and non-digital spaces.

Third, these movements emphasize the importance of digitally-capable allies. Digitally-capable movement allies can provide instrumental support for activists lacking technological access. They can advocate for, coordinate, or enable activists (Toft 2010; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). In essence, digitally-capable allies can engage in actions on behalf of activists without technological access or can provide information or resources to empower activists without technological access.

## 1.8 The Significance of the NPRC

The NPRC is significant for two reasons: its potential contribution to the literature on ICT use by prison and jail movements and its potential to inform communications policymaking for prisons and jails. First, the NPRC is a social movement that is organizing and acting collectively across stark digital inequality. Free activists in the movement have much greater technological access compared to incarcerated activists. Free activists also face less immediate and severe legal consequences for ICT use than incarcerated activists. Still, the purposes and consequences of free and incarcerated activists’ ICTs use are interconnected and cannot be understood in isolation. Free

activists experience particular risks and challenges related to acting collectively with incarcerated activists and incarcerated activists experience particular risks and challenges related to acting collectively with free activists.

Some literature has addressed how new ICTs are used by activists organizing in these split but interrelated environments, including literature on activists organizing in countries with restricted technology access, areas of limited technological infrastructure, and under repressive local or national regimes. This remains, however, an area of limited scholarship. As Amoshaun Toft writes in “Contextualizing Technology Use,” participants without ICT access “have been systematically excluded from analysis in the rush to understand how a narrow technological elite think, feel, and act in relation to ICTs” (Toft 2010:704).

It is possible that insights on other social movements organizing across stark digital inequality could be helpful for understanding the NPRC. Yet, it’s also possible that the NPRC (and prisoners’ rights movements) differs from these movements in nontrivial ways. For instance, prisoner activists may be more likely to have affective bonds with digitally capable allies than activists living under country-wide repressive regimes. This difference could occur if prisoners have more friends and family members outside of prison than activists in more repressive countries have in less repressive countries. Prior research suggests that the ability of social movements to engage with digitally capable allies is impactful (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). These allies can provide important types of movement support.

Very little has been written about how prison movements, specifically, utilize ICTs. The bulk of today’s prison movements research is historical, involves secondary data analysis, or does not address the roles of new ICTs (Wright, Moore, and Kazmierski 2016; Wacquant 2002; Waldram 2009). It is unclear how prison movements use ICTs to mobilize activists, coordinate

collective actions, and engage in collective resistance.

A second reason for studying the NPRC is that the movement's use of and experiences with ICTs could inform prison communication policy-making. The landscape of communication laws, policies, and practices of the U.S. criminal justice system is rapidly changing. In a landmark decision in 2015, the FCC limited rates for payphones placed in U.S. prisons and jails, halting a trend of calling rate inflation since the 1990s (FCC 2016). Video visitation appears to be, in some prisons, replacing in-person visitation (Digard et al. 2016). Laws and policies on prison and jail technology smuggling are becoming increasingly more severe across the country (Christie 2010). More and more prisons and jails are implementing policies that revoke chances for early release or add time to the sentence of incarcerated people caught in possession of illicit technologies (Fitzgerald 2010). So too, some state governments have criminalized the web presence of prisoners. These laws have made it illegal for prisoners to have active social media accounts, even if they are managed by friends or family members (Mekelburg 2016). Likewise, correctional officials are implementing new ways to catch and monitor technology use of incarcerated people (Bittner 2010).

Many of these policies are being implemented in response to a widespread concern that new ICTs will enable the disruption of prison order. Politicians, prison authorities, and journalists have raised public alarm over contraband technology use without much systematic research on how and why prisoners are using phones and social media. The NPRC offers a site for examining how new ICTs are used by one subset of prisoners. Analyzing how the NPRC communicates legally and illegally can provide a descriptive landscape for reflecting on how broader communication policies are shaping the political expression and communications of incarcerated people.

## **CHAPTER 2.     STUDYING THE NPRC**

### **2.1    Primary Research Questions and Research Framework**

During this dissertation project, I focused on how the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition (NPRC) utilized new information and communication technologies to plan and engage in collective resistance. I evaluated how the NPRC's ICT use changed over time and in response to repression. Correspondingly, I concentrated on three primary research questions:

RQ1: How does the NPRC use new ICTs to organize and participate in collective action?

RQ 2: How does the NPRC's use of new ICTs change over time?

RQ 3: How does the NPRC's use of new ICTs change in response to repression?

I analyzed primarily public, online data to describe the ways NPRC activists used ICTs between December 2013 and September 2016. I considered how activists' ICT use shifted as the NPRC matured and before/after critical movement events. I also assessed how activists' ICT use changed in response to overt, subtle, and perceived movement repression.

I designed my research framework to acknowledge the contextual nature of the NPRC's use of ICTs. I wanted to describe the types of circumstances in which NPRC activists began using certain ICTs, changed their ICT use, and stopped using certain ICTs. To this end, I chose to collect and analyze data that illustrated the NPRC's collective actions, repression experiences, and sociopolitical environments generally. I looked for situations in which NPRC activists used ICTs and situations in which they chose not to use ICTs.

I drew extensively from dialectical interpretive social science methodology to guide my analysis (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991; Dreher 2016; Dello Buono 2013; Friedman 2016; Maines 2000). Dialectical interpretivists understand reality as a dynamic, collective process:

people define, construct, co-create, and negotiate what is “real” from their perceptions of their surroundings. What is “real,” then, shapes human behavior and attitudes. People make choices, experience their world, and act in response to these reified conditions.

Dialectical interpretivists emphasize that reality is produced through a cycle of “objective facticity” perception and “subjective meaning” assignment (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991). They argue that both components of reality are significant and consequential. Sometimes the objective and subjective components of reality resemble one another. Individuals and groups of people correctly assess their “real,” objective circumstances. Other times, the objective and subjective components of reality vary in important ways. Individuals and groups create realities from suspicions, falsehoods, misunderstandings, or lack of knowledge.

In his 2015 address to the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Ricardo Dello Buono argued that scholars studying social problems, social change, and social movements must consider the interactions between objective conditions and subjective meanings. He proposed “a reconstituted dialectical approach to social problems that is politically sensitive to addressing both the objectivistic and subjectivistic elements of social change” (Dello Buono 2015:335). This approach requires that researchers acknowledge that social environments are dynamic; social actors are continuously interpreting, perceiving, and making sense of objective conditions; and those perceptions are influencing actors’ choices and feelings (regardless of if those perceptions are “correct”).

In the study of social movements, dialectical interpretivism involves evaluating how activists and movement opponents make sense of their actions and identities within structural realities. Researchers must examine how social movement activists assign meaning to their leaders, fellow activists, shared struggle, and resistance efforts, within their social environments. Moreover,

they must assess how those meanings are received, ignored, challenged, and/or responded to by other social actors, including social actors in power.

This approach is valuable for technology studies because it allows researchers to conceptualize ICTs as social objects (which are assigned meanings and utilized in accordance with those meanings), tools (for challenging structural conditions and disseminating counterhegemonic discourses), and things with physical realities (devices that often require electricity, can be broken, and can be disconnected). I wanted to recognize ICTs as devices that can be given social meanings, such as “dangerous,” “illegal,” “liberating,” or “powerful.” I also wanted to acknowledge that ICTs can be used to co-create and disseminate collective understandings of activists’ identities, collective struggle, and repression experiences. I further wanted to remain aware that ICTs are devices with physical presences and limitations.

Dello Buono argued that researchers should examine the relationship between meaning-making and “structurally-defined moments” of importance (2015:338). Unlike strict interpretivism (or strict constructionism), dialectical interpretivism requires researchers to exercise reflexivity about “reality,” instead of wholly bracketing off reality as unknowable. I chose to consider certain events (major protests, mainstream media coverage, legal changes, and culturally significant events) as moments of importance with real consequences.

In defining these moments of importance, I looked for credible evidence of objective phenomena. I examined how claims about objective facticity from certain sources relate to claims about objective facticity from other sources. I assessed how they claims aligned with, diverged from, or contradicted each other. I considered how particular claims could relate to power, identity, and vested interests (Archer 2015; Thibodeaux 2014). I assumed that certain political-structural changes and cultural changes impacted the resistance efforts and repression experiences of NPRC

activists (and potentially the NPRC's ICT use). Moreover, I used these observable changes to mark critical movement events and points for observing fluctuations in ICT use.

I analyzed the NPRC's use of ICTs using a dynamic model of resistance and repression. Broadly, this model positions resistance and repression as related, through collective perception and shared sense-making. This model posits that NPRC's resistance efforts emerge from activists' shared subjective meanings, sense-making, and knowledge construction. Similarly, the repression techniques of NPRC opponents stem from opponents' collective constructions. Additionally, this model suggests that the ways NPRC activists perceive opponent repression influence how activists craft their resistance efforts. Likewise, the way NPRC opponents interpret NPRC resistance actions impacts how those opponents exact repression.

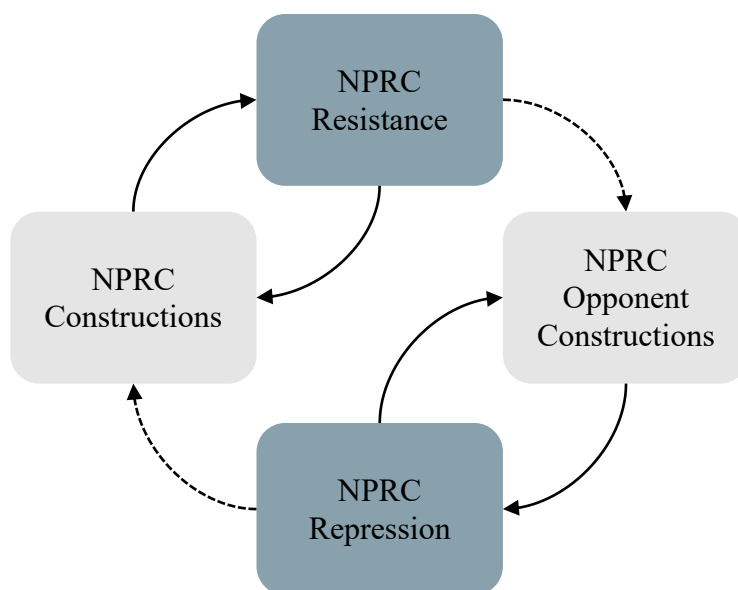


Figure 2.1 Dynamic Model of Resistance and Repression

This model is a simplified understanding of the social movement resistance-repression nexus, designed to answer my specific research questions. The effect of repression on social movement mobilization is complex. Under some circumstances repression appears to impede social movement mobilization. Under other circumstances, repression seems to facilitate

mobilization. Other scholars have detailed the complex relationship between social movement resistance, repression, and other variables (Brockett 1993; Earl 2011; Earl and Soule 2010; Einwohner 2003; Goodwin and Jasper 1999; McAdam 1983; Tilly 1978). It is possible to conceive of an alternative model that considers the effects of movement repression alongside movement facilitation, activist' perceptions of threat, and relevant political outcomes. I did not assume that repression was the only variable shaping NPRC constructions or NPRC resistance was the only variable influencing NPRC opponent constructions. I expected, however, that NPRC resistance and repression were, in some ways, related and NPRC and NPRC opponent constructions affected this relationship.

In practice, this means that I viewed the NPRC as a group engaged in cooperative reality construction and collective action, situated within an evolving objective structural reality. I used narrative description (Maines 1993) to trace how NPRC activists challenged their structural realities; how NPRC opponents made sense of these challenges; how NPRC opponents exacted repression; and how NPRC activists interpreted and responded to this repression over time. Within this narrative description, I noted the presence and absence of ICTs. I described how the NPRC used ICTs to engage in collective resistance. I detailed how ICTs factored into how NPRC opponents constructed and responded to resistance actions. I explained how ICTs functioned as sites of meaning-making as well as objects that were assigned meanings.

I chose a dialectical interpretive approach and a dynamic model of resistance and repression for two reasons. First, these ways of understanding the social world resemble ideas expressed by the NPRC. Online and in-person, activists have detailed the ways their resistance efforts have changed in response to repression. In the early stages of my dissertation research, I was able to speak with some free activists in the NPRC. They conveyed that the NPRC encountered



new forms of repression fairly frequently. Prisoner activists and free activists were struggling to overcome repression related to new, more punitive policies and laws around prisoner communication and prisoners' rights organizing. Moreover, activists felt targeted by law enforcement and corrections officials. They'd seen old laws and rules reinterpreted to punish prisoner activists and their supporters. This perception – that repression was expanding and evolving and, therefore, resistance needed to evolve too – seemed important and worthy of analysis.

Second, I aimed to evaluate the NPRC's use of ICTs across social and structural contexts. I entered this dissertation project with some awareness that the NPRC's use of ICTs was dynamic, changing, and responsive to repression. By selecting a dialectical interpretive approach, I was able to describe how activists were using ICTs within repressive structural realities; how those structural realities were changing; how activists were interpreting those structural changes; and how those interpretations are, in turn, altering their ICT use choices.

## 2.2 Guiding Ideas

My research plan was guided by five general ideas. These ideas relate to the variation of, visibility of, and link between social movement resistance and repression.

**The repression techniques of social movement opponents can be more visible or less visible, more official or less official, and more overt or less overt.** Repression can include a wide range of actions which raise the potential costs of participating in collective resistance (Tilly 1978:100). Repression can be more or less observable to movement groups, more or less coercive and forceful, and more or less connected with the state and political elites (Barkan 1984; Earl 2003). Repression can include actions such as political arrests, state violence, movement obstruction and subversion efforts, imposition of targeted disciplinary codes, or threatening phone calls. Repression can also include less violent or less "hard" actions, such as ridicule, stigma, and

silencing (Ferree 2005). Activists can be mocked and caricatured; social movement activism can be stigmatized, derided, and or trivialized; and social movements may be excluded or unacknowledged in mass media.

I knew that the NPRC could experience repression from the Bureau of Prisons and state Departments of Corrections. These agencies have the power to expand disciplinary codes, revise standard operating procedures, and issue memos on rule interpretation (including codes, procedures, and rules related to ICTs). Likewise, corrections workers within these agencies have the most direct contact with prisoner activists and are tasked with maintaining order within prisons. I also suspected that the NPRC would experience repression from non-corrections actors. Audiences could trivialize their cause in online spaces; journalists could refuse to print their stories; and counter-movements could attempt to undermine their resistance efforts.

**The resistance efforts of social movement activists are related to the repression experiences of social movement activists.** The resistance efforts of movement activists are, at least in part, influenced by the repression techniques (or anticipated/perceived repression techniques) of social movement opponents (McAdam 1983). Likewise, the repression techniques of social movement opponents are, at least in part, responsive to the resistance efforts (or anticipated/perceived resistance efforts) of movement activists (Carry 2006; Earl 2011; Titarenko et al. 2001).

I expected to find that the resistance efforts of NPRC activists (and how NPRC activists use ICTs) were, in some ways, shaped by the overt, perceived, and/or anticipated repression techniques of NPRC opponents. Likewise, I expected that the repression techniques of NPRC opponents were related to the overt, perceived, and/or anticipated resistance efforts by the NPRC (and how NPRC activists use ICTs).

**Social constructions, collective sense-making, and public discourses impact the resistance efforts and repression experiences of social movement activists.** The way social movement activists understand their identities, shared struggle, collective goals, and repression experiences matters. The way social movement opponents and audiences understand activists' identities, shared struggle, collective goals, and repression experiences matters (Benford 1993; Benford and Snow 2000; Einwohner and Spencer 2005; Oliver and Johnson 2000).

In different arenas, social movement activists, resistance efforts, and repression experiences can be framed differently. Activists can be constructed as deserving or undeserving of sympathy (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Resistance efforts can be constructed as righteous or immoral (Vanderford 1989). Repression can be constructed as legitimate or illegitimate (Barkan 1984; Roscigno et al. 2015). Furthermore, these constructions impact the behavior of movement activists, audiences, and opponents.

I assumed that the ways social movement organizers and activists, corrections workers, journalists, and public audiences perceived the NPRC's resistance efforts (right/wrong, effective/ineffective) and collective identities (change-makers/troublemakers, humans, prisoners, deviants, dangerous others) were important and consequential. I anticipated that ICTs would serve as tools for co-creating and sharing resistance and identity constructions. I also anticipated that NPRC activists, opponents, and audiences would assign moral, social, and political meanings to activists' ICT use.

**The resistance and repression experiences of social movements activists can vary widely (even within the same social movement).** Social movements adapt, change, and abandon certain resistance tactics as well as adopt new tactics (McAdam 1983; McCarthy 1996; McCammon 2012; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004). It's rare for all activists to participate (and partake

equally) in all resistance efforts. The physical, social, and personal situatedness of each activist influences their availability to participate and their level of participation in resistance efforts (Beyerlein and Bergstrand 2013; Klandermans 1984; McAdam 1986; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Likewise, movement opponents adapt, intensify, or abandon repression techniques. Activists within the same social movement experience repression differently. Some activists are more vulnerable to particular repression techniques than others (Terriquez, Tizoc, and Lopez 2018; Wood 2007). Some activists are more directly impacted by particular repression techniques than others.

I entered this dissertation project assuming that the resistance efforts and repression experiences of NPRC activists would vary (to some degree) across time, geographic location, ICT access, justice involvement (free, justice-involved, incarcerated in minimum/medium/maximum security, and incarcerated in federal/state/local facilities), and other conditions. I suspected that some activists would utilize ICTs more than others; some activists would experience repression related to ICT use more than others; and the meanings associated with prisoner activists' ICT use would be different than the meaning associated with free activists' ICT use.

**Resistance and repression environments can change even when official policies remain the same.** Policy change is not the only form of socio-political change. Socio-political environments can shift while policies remain the same (Streeck and Thelen 2005). For example, political leaders may choose not to amend or replace an aging policy, even as the policy's funding dwindles, the policy's oversight becomes neglected, or the policy becomes obsolete.

Socio-political change can be active (new legislation) or passive (not renewing government programs or not supporting legislation enforcement) as well as official (written and approved by the state) or cultural (tacit or unofficial understandings). More importantly, policies can be

differentially interpreted and enforced over time (Hacker 2004; Hacker, Pierson, and Thelen 2015). The way a policy is translated to on-the-ground action can vary across time, actors, or settings.

I suspected that the NPRC might experience repression resulting from policy change and repression in the absence of policy change. Prisoner activists and free activists in the NPRC could both be impacted by new repressive prison policies (especially if those policies relate to limiting prisoner activist/free activist communication). Additionally, sudden shifts in corrections worker culture (e.g. new interpretations of policies, standards of prisoner treatment, or prisoners' rights) could create new repression techniques or alter existing repression techniques used against NPRC activists. Prisoner activists and free activists could both be affected by new interpretations of visiting policies, ICT-related disciplinary sanctions, or prison safety threat definitions.

These five ideas provided structure to my research plan and informed my data collection, data analysis, and findings interpretations.

### 2.3 Subject Selection

I focused on four core groups of the NPRC: the Prisoner Labor Movement (PLM), Prisoners as Lawyers (PAL), Toxic Prison Alert Network (TPAN), and Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee (SPFC). These groups worked together to organize actions; they shared each other's posts online; and they had many members belonging to multiple groups of the coalition.

The NPRC intermittently worked with and offered solidarity to other prisoners' rights organizations. In this study, I distinguished these more peripheral organizations from the NPRC's core organizations based on five criteria. These criteria included: frequency, duration, and visibility of online dialogues, mentions, and tags; frequency and visibility of overlapping membership, frequency and visibility of coordinated events and actions; similarity/dissimilarity of issue framing and language use; and similarity/dissimilarity of geographies and geographic scope.

Table 2.1 Core Organization Identification Criteria

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Core Organizations</b>	<b>Peripheral Organizations</b>
<i>Online dialogues, mentions, and tags</i>	Core organizations frequently, repeatedly, and visibly tag, mention, and respond to other core organizations on social media and in blog posts.	Core organizations briefly or sporadically tag, mention, or respond to peripheral organizations on social media and in blog posts.
<i>Overlapping membership /participation</i>	Members of core organizations repeatedly and clearly acknowledge membership or sustained participation in other core organizations.	Members of core organizations rarely or vaguely acknowledge membership or participation in peripheral organizations.
<i>Coordinated actions</i>	Core organizations repeatedly and visibly organize coordinated actions with other core organizations.	Core organizations occasionally organize coordinated actions with peripheral organizations.
<i>Issue framing and language</i>	Core organizations use highly similar terms, phrases, and discourses to describe prisoners' rights issues.	Peripheral organizations terms, phrases, and discourses that are somewhat similar to the terms, phrases, and discourses of core organizations.
<i>Geographies and geographic scope</i>	Core organizations are based in the United States and are primarily concerned with U.S. prisoners' rights issues.	Peripheral organizations are based outside the United States and/or are concerned primarily with community/local or global/world prisoners' rights issues.

## 2.4 Data Selection

I collected and analyzed four categories of data: NPRC data, U.S. Bureau of Prisons data, state Department of Corrections' data, and correctional officer data. I examined these varied data types in order to capture important indicators of the resistance and repression dynamic. I was interested in tracing how NPRC resistance efforts were interpreted by the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, state Departments of Corrections, and correctional officers (in professional forums); how these groups officially and unofficially enacted repression; how the NPRC perceived that repression and responded; and how these shifting repression environments affected activists' ICT use. Most of

the data that I analyzed was public social media data and digital document data.

Table 2.2 Data Types

Data Type	Organizations
<i>NPRC Facebook Pages</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prisoner Labor Movement</li> <li>• Prisoners as Lawyers</li> <li>• Toxic Prison Alert Network</li> <li>• Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee</li> </ul>
<i>NPRC Twitter Pages</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prisoner Labor Movement</li> <li>• Prisoners as Lawyers</li> <li>• Toxic Prison Alert Network</li> <li>• Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee</li> </ul>
<i>NPRC Blog Posts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prisoner Labor Movement</li> <li>• Toxic Prison Alert Network</li> <li>• Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee</li> </ul>
<i>Policies, Operations Memoranda, and Regulatory Revisions related to Prisoners' Rights Activism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• US Bureau of Prisons</li> <li>• Selected state Departments of Corrections</li> </ul>
<i>Corrections Press Releases related to Prisoners' Rights Activism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• US Bureau of Prisons</li> <li>• Selected state Departments of Corrections</li> </ul>
<i>Public Corrections Officers Discussion Facebook Pages</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Corrections Talk</li> <li>• America's Invisible Warriors</li> <li>• Corrections Officers Together</li> </ul>

I manually downloaded and ran web-scraping scripts to collect NPRC Facebook, Twitter, and blog posts; BOP and DOC policy updates, regulatory revision, operations memoranda, and press releases; and Facebook posts to three pages for corrections workers (also given pseudonyms). I specified my data collection range as December 2013 (the NPRC's first month of organizing) to September 2016 (the month of the nationwide prison strike).

Each data type offered different possible analytical insights. NPRC Facebook pages, Twitter pages, and blog posts included information about NPRC actions, strategies, resistance efforts, and constructions of BOP and DOC repression. BOP and DOC policies, operating memos

and directives, and press releases on prisoners' rights activism summarized official repression policy, repression directives and enforcement decisions, and BOP and formal constructions of NPRC and prisoners' rights activism. Correctional officer Facebook discussion pages provided less official constructions of NPRC and prisoners' rights activism, interpretations of policies and rules, and organizational cultural shifts.

Table 2.3 Resistance and Repression Indicators

<b>Context Conceptualization</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
<i>NPRC Resistance</i>	NPRC actions, strategies, and resistance efforts
<i>NPRC Constructions</i>	Narratives on NPRC Facebook pages
<i>NPRC Opponent Repression</i>	BOP and DOC policies, rules, directives, incident updates, and training updates
<i>NPRC Opponent Constructions</i>	1. Narratives in BOP and DOC press releases 2. Narratives on CO Facebook pages

Within these varying forms of data, I noted how NPRC activists organized and participated in collective actions. Moreover, I considered how NPRC activists used, did not use, and/or avoided ICTs for organization and collective resistance. I observed how the U.S. Bureau of Prisons and state Departments of Correction (agencies with the most direct contact with NPRC prison activists) enacted repression and how that repression was linked and/or not linked to ICTs. I looked for ways the BOP, DOCs, the NPRC, and correctional officers constructed NPRC resistance (and prisoners' rights resistance more generally) and NPRC repression (as well as prisoners' rights repression more generally). I reflected on how these shared narratives affected ICT use and how ICT use appeared in these shared narratives.

## 2.5 Approach to Data Collection

My approach to data collection and data analysis evolved throughout this dissertation project.



Before I began formally collecting data, I was “following” the PLM and SPFC Facebook and Twitter pages. I discovered both groups in 2014 while working on a research project related to prisoner work programs. I had a vague idea of how the PLM and SPFC were using cell phones and internet technologies.

In November 2016, I received approval from Purdue’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to begin downloading and analyzing NPRC online data. I started with a limited content analysis of a subset of NPRC social media data. I decided to focus on the Prisoner Labor Movement. I downloaded all of the PLM’s Facebook posts, Twitter posts, blog posts, newsletters, website text, and captioned photos. I coded these sources for references of ICTs. I used NVivo (a coding software) to assign broad codes for ICTs mentions. Then, I returned to these ICT mention codes to assign subcodes for different types of ICT use (information sharing, organizing protest events, e-tactics) and ICT-related repression (disciplinary violations for cell phone use, legal labeling for social media posts).

I chose to start with a content analysis for two reasons. First, websites, blogs, and social media pages, depending on their level of use, can provide a rich and textured data sources (Berg and Lune 2012; Murthy 2008). The public digital presence of the Prisoner Labor Movement included written content, videos, photos, drawings, and real-time communication. Second, content analysis is an unobtrusive method. This method allows researchers to “lurk” in digital spaces, developing an understanding of the digital community without interfering (Berg and Lune 2012; Murthy 2008). This preliminary analysis provided me with a deeper understanding of how the PLM was recruiting, organizing, participating in collective actions, experiencing repression, and using new ICTs.

In January 2018, I reached out to free activists of the Prisoner Labor Movement. I had IRB

approval to contact only non-incarcerated NPRC activists. I was allowed to observe free world NPRC activities as long as NPRC leaders were aware of my presence; I informed NPRC leaders about my project; and I made sure NPRC activists knew that they could request to be excluded from the project. I spent several months in a large city in Minnesota (home to the PLM's free activist headquarters) establishing contact with PLM activists. During this time, I met free activists who were planning resistance efforts, organizing support for prisoner activists, and leading legal efforts to challenge prisoner activist repression. I primarily learned about some of the PLM's experiences with repression. I also learned about PLM action planning, recruitment, newsletter distribution, solidarity efforts, and leadership. I met several of the PLM's organizers; but the majority of my interactions were conversations with more casual and peripheral members. Our conversations were always informal. I took notes but made no recordings. I wrote research memos to keep track of new information I learned and note recurring themes. This experience was useful for orienting me and helping me make sense of PLM's organizational structure, issues/concerns, language, acronyms, and community.

The insights from my initial content analysis and my conversations with PLM free activists helped shape my final data collection and analysis plan. I decided to collect online social media data for all of the core groups of the NPRC. I also decided to seek out data from the NPRC's most direct opponents. I re-collected data from social media and government websites in October 2017. I used web-scraping codes (from open-source scraping libraries, using my personal developer credentials) to download all of the public posts (all posts not deleted or removed before October 2017) from NPRC Facebook pages, Twitter pages, and blogs. I scraped all of the public posts from three popular corrections worker pages (public pages for corrections workers to discuss workplace topics and issues). I manually downloaded documents from the Bureau of Prisons' and selected

state Departments of Corrections’ (states where the NPRC was most active) websites that mentioned prisoners’ rights activism or described policy updates, procedure changes, or regulatory revisions related to prisoner activism, communication, or discipline.

## 2.6 Data Analysis and Coding Scheme

My final dataset included 8,954 Facebook and Twitter posts from NPRC pages; 604 NPRC blog posts; 3,711 Facebook posts from corrections worker pages; 132 press releases from the BOP and state DOCs; and 74 policy or regulatory documents from the BOP and state DOCs.

I analyzed these data in NVivo using a “directed content analysis” (Berg and Lune 2010), focused on the use of (and nonuse of) ICTs. This approach involved identifying themes within data related to a particular concept or phenomenon of interest. I followed the five steps for analyses of online content outlined by Sally McMillan. McMillan writes that researchers utilizing online content analysis should (1) begin with specific research questions or hypotheses to set the scope and direction of the analysis; (2) select their sample intentionally and systematically; (3) define coding and context units; (4) check the reliability of the data; and (5) interpret the data (McMillan 2000).

I purposively limited my “criteria of selection” (Berg and Lune 2012) by time, accessibility, and centrality. I specified December 1, 2013 as my data collection start date. This is when the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee (the first NPRC organization formed) begins organizing. I specified the end of September 31, 2016 as my data collection end date. This is approximately three weeks after the NPRC launches its national prison strike. I only downloaded publicly-accessible text from NPRC social media pages and blogs, corrections worker Facebook pages, and BOP and DOC websites. I did not include more private (and less central) text and media from the personal websites or social media pages of individual activists, corrections workers, or prison

administrators.

To explore these data, I began by applying a primary code: explicit mentions of ICTs. I applied this code at the contributor-item level (data units are posts/documents or sections of posts/documents if there are multiple perceivable contributors). This means that I applied an ICT mention code to each Facebook, Twitter, blog post, press release, regulatory document, and policy document with overt references to ICT use by the NPRC, prisoner activists, or prisoners (unless the post or document has multiple identified contributors – then I applied the code by contributor sections). As I coded, I wrote research memos to describe and update my preliminary findings, impressions, and plans for future codes and subcodes (Berg and Lune 2012; Creswell 2012).

In a second round of data analysis, I applied two additional codes for resistance and repression. I coded explicit mentions of NPRC resistance efforts, prisoner activist resistance efforts, and prison disruptions as “resistance.” I coded mentions of NPRC repression experiences, prisoner activist repression techniques, and prisoner restrictions and disciplinary events as “repression.” I chose to utilize these codes as wide-ranging codes. I recognized that resistance efforts by the NPRC could be described as “prison disturbances” by prison administrators. I also recognized that corrections press releases sometimes did not include the names of prisoner activist groups or recognize the coordination of prisoner activists.

In a final round of coding, I applied subcodes to my broader codes. I analyzed first- and second-round coded text and assign more specific codes for NPRC resistance efforts, NPRC repression events, types of ICT use by the NPRC, unspecified prisoners’ rights or prisoner resistance actions, unspecified prisoners’ rights or prisoner repression techniques, and types of ICT use by unspecified prisoners’ rights groups and prisoners. Some examples of these subcodes included “NPRC YouTube campaign,” “NPRC work strike,” “NPRC leaders in segregation,” “US

prison strike,” “new disciplinary procedures,” “contraband enforcement initiative,” “ICTs for crowd-funding,” and “ICTs for direct messaging.”

After all three rounds of coding, I began synthesizing my findings through narrative description. I described how resistance efforts and repression activities took place over time. I summarized how NPRC activists utilized ICTs alongside non-technological forms of resistance. I evaluated how NPRC activists experienced repression related to ICTs and resistance efforts more generally. I noted how ICTs entered NPRC activist discussions and corrections worker discussions.

To provide interpretive context, I revisited my subcoded text in its original online space. I read post comments and navigated to weblinks embedded within posts. I watched YouTube videos posted by the NPRC, listened to podcasts featuring NPRC activists, and read news articles with NPRC activists and corrections administrators describing NPRC resistance efforts. I examined how corrections workers discussed their work and the prisoners they supervised.

To supplement the narrative reporting, I crafted thematic summaries of NPRC resistance, repression experiences, and uses of new ICTs. These summaries highlighted the major ways the NPRC engaged in resistance; the major repression issues they faced; and the primary ways they used ICTs.

## 2.7 Ethical Considerations

The NPRC has overtly engaged in illegal actions: protest-related law-breaking and unlawful technology contraband use. There are at least two potential ethical issues related to studying illegal activities: exposing who is conducting illegal activities and exposing how illegal activities are conducted (Feenan 2002; Fitzgerald and Hamilton 1996). To manage the first ethical issue, I worked with IRB to develop a research protocol involving careful data collection, data storage, and data analysis. In my research, I did not record names or identifying details in my notes,

memos, or final manuscript. I used pseudonyms, kept my downloaded content on an encrypted hard drive, and kept my physical notes in a locked box.

The second type of ethical issue, exposing how illegal activities are conducted, required careful consideration. It is possible that describing illegal activities could embolden future illegal activities. For instance, a potential criminal could read this dissertation and its findings and get ideas about how to smuggle technologies into prisons or mobilize prisoners to challenge prison authorities. This is worrisome because many U.S. prisons are already struggling to manage contraband technology entry (Christie 2010). It is also possible that this dissertation could enable prison authorities to further repress NPRC activists and thwart prisoners' communication activities. This is also worrisome because prisoner activists are, in many ways, limited in their available means of communication and political freedoms.

With these concerns in mind, I decided to use only public data in my final analysis. By relying on public data, this dissertation, does not drastically affect the accessibility of information for potential criminals or prison officials. Activists in the NPRC have publicly described engaging in technology smuggling and uploaded video evidence of themselves using contraband devices. Essentially, a motivated potential criminal or a corrections officer with internet access or time to attend a public NPRC meeting could track down all (or almost all) of this information.

My hope is that this dissertation will provide context on prisoner ICT use. At present, the de-contextualization of prisoner ICT use has created a culture of mistrust and fear around prison cell phones and prisoner social media use. Policymakers, journalists, and corrections personnel have issued grave warnings about how ICTs will threaten prison safety. State and federal legislators have undertaken elaborate and costly efforts to curb prison technology smuggling and develop technology blocking devices (Christie 2010). According to the Director of Security

Products at a corporation producing corrections cellphone blocking technology, “Today, the deadliest weapon a prisoner can possess, by far, is a cell phone” (Bittner 2009).

The intense regulation of prisoner ICT use appears linked to ideas that cell phones and the internet automatically empower prisoners. This anxiety resembles early notions of “cyber-enthusiasm” (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2009). Prison officials worry that the presence of ICTs is causing (or will cause) misbehavior, disruption, resistance, and/or revolt.

Yet, a large body of research suggests that new ICTs are not as empowering as governments feared and activists hoped (Rheingold 1995; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2009). Prisoners (including prisoner activists) must still find ways to charge their phones, connect to the internet, learn technology skills, navigate potentially hostile digital spaces, meet online content standards, and mitigate the stigma around their incarcerated status while crafting their digital identities. Furthermore, in order to make their causes known and gain support, prisoner activists must navigate online cultures of consumption, produce interesting and appealing content, transcend localizing features of social media, and compete for attention in existing digital spaces.

Moreover, many U.S. prisoner activists are navigating an environment which is intensely, and sometimes arbitrarily, repressive of communication. It seems possible that prisoners’ rights activists could be choosing illegal forms of communication, despite their risk, because legal forms of communication and grievance filing processes are inadequate or limited (Fitzgerald 2010). At the same time, corrections officers are facing serious on-the-job dangers. Many prison systems are experiencing overcrowding, underfunding, and understaffing. Workplace stress and workplace trauma is exceptionally high for corrections workers (Martin et al. 2012). The real human fears, thoughts, and experiences of prison staff as well as prisoners require acknowledgement and consideration.

The promise of a dialectical interpretive approach is that social phenomena (including ICT use) can be contextualized, allowing for critical assessment (Best 1993; Thibodeaux 2014). Drawing from a dialectical interpretive approach, this dissertation describes the circumstances around NPRC activists' ICT-related resistance choices and repression experiences. In the least, this dissertation gives nuance to understandings of the powers and limits of new ICTs for prisoners and prisoners' rights movements. So too, it provides a starting point for developing hypotheses about social movement ICT use that include prisoners' rights activists; reflecting on ICT-related public discourses; and reexamining prison ICT policies.



## **CHAPTER 3.     NPRC BEGINNINGS (DECEMBER 2013 - MAY 2014)**

### **3.1    The SPFC Goes Online**

On December 20, 2013, the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee launches a website. The website has a basic setup: a home page, a page for video content, and a contact page. On the homepage, there are photos of free activists wearing matching SPFC shirts, photos of prisoner activists wearing white prison uniforms, several drawings (including one depicting a raised fist clenching barbed wire), and a red SPFC logo. The website's homepage has a list of conditions that the committee is concerned about: "bacteria, mold, mildew in closet, broken fire exits, dust in vents, exposed electrical wires, broken showers... and more." A hyperlink on the page, captioned "listen to spoken words," directs web visitors an mp3 recording of a male voice rhyming about the SPFC's purpose and goals.

In the middle of the homepage, a paragraph of text outlines the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee's philosophy, objectives, and strategies. The paragraph emphasizes that the SPFC is committed to a nonviolent strategy: "Because we can't expect to show that we are ready to return to society if we can't prove that we are capable of resolving our issues and conducting ourselves as men without resorting to violence." According to the text, the committee's primary goal is to empower prisoner activists to improve their conditions. Activists plan to use cell phones, video cameras, the internet, and all available technologies in order to unify and organize the "inside people."

At the bottom of the homepage, a bright orange box with blue writing encourages web visitors to "download the book." Authored by the SPFC's "Spokesperson," the book is a 100-page pdf document with sections about the committee's background, reasons for protesting, objectives, and planned tactics. The Spokesperson identifies himself by name. So too, he identifies the committee's Chief Political Strategist by name. The Spokesperson urges readers to take the SPFC

pledge of allegiance and support to the committee. He asks prisoners reading the book to participate in a yearlong work strike beginning January 1, 2014.

Eight days after creating the website, the SPFC begins building a YouTube channel. Within hours, the committee has uploaded 11 video clips with footage recorded inside a men's maximum-security prison in Alabama. The clips range from two minutes to 24 minutes long. The committee's first video opens with text declaring that the SPFC is a nonviolent movement advocating for human rights. Then, a grainy recording of a prisoner working with a garden hoe appears on the screen. An unseen narrator explains that the prisoner's name is unknown, but his condition is familiar. The prisoner is a man without a choice, forced to labor for the state, with little opportunity for education or personal development. The video's narrator proclaims:

“The state Department of Corrections don't care. But they not gonna make the same man go to school if he needs a GED. They not gonna make him get a skill or trade. They not gonna make him do the things that will help him be successful when they get back to the street. They gonna make him work for them and provide free labor. And that's where [the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee] comes in.”

The remaining 10 videos show unsanitary and undercooked prison food, uncleanly and unsafe prison living conditions, interviews with incarcerated men, and secret recordings of prison staff. A prisoner wearing an all-white uniform, who identifies himself as the Spokesperson, explains that the videos are intended to document prison conditions: “We continue with our documentary as we profile the inhumane living conditions and overcrowding inside the Department of Corrections.”

The most popular video from this series, receiving the thousands of views and dozens of comments, shows the Spokesperson dissecting meat patties from the prison kitchen. Some patties are burnt; some are discolored; some are raw inside; and others contain small and unidentifiable white chunks. A series of three other videos follow the Spokesperson approaching correctional officers, prison maintenance staff, and the prison warden about roach, spider, and rodent

infestation problems. The correctional officer promises that a particular spider and bug problem will be addressed “next week.” When prison maintenance comes to the Spokesperson’s unit, maintenance workers claim that fixing the spider and bug problem is not their responsibility. Later the Spokesperson explains the issue to the prison warden: “We trying to get it cleaned up. What can we do about that?” The warden dismissively replies, “Aint nothing we can do about it.”

Other videos show interviews with prisoners discussing prison programming, prison disciplinary procedures, reentry support, anti-black racism, the criminalization of poverty, capital punishment, use of force by correctional officers, the culture of violence in prisons, parole denial, prison overcrowding, and retaliation against prisoners for grievance and litigation filing. A particularly poignant video documents a prisoner requesting legal help to convince prison administrators to acknowledge and treat his mental illness.

Shortly after posting the first series of videos, the SPFC uploads 18 more videos to its YouTube channel. The new series of videos is titled “Unconditional Living Conditions.” Similar to the first 11 YouTube videos, the 18 new videos include recordings of prison conditions and interviews with incarcerated men. Roughly half of these videos depict unsanitary and unsafe living conditions, including leaking pipes, broken light switches, exposed electrical wires, standing water, rust, trash, rats, and moldy air vents. In the remaining videos, prisoner activists discuss their experiences in prison and hopes for what the SPFC can achieve. In talking of hopes, the Spokesperson concludes: “We want to put an end to the system... Enough is enough. We want to provide opportunities for education, for rehabilitation... That’s what [the SPFC] is all about.”

Most of the prisoners who appear in the videos introduce themselves and give their full legal names. These men appear unconcerned about the ramifications of making their identities known. The videos are shaky and blurry. They have extremely poor audio quality. Yet, they are

powerfully emotive. These recordings depict the profound anguish, fear, frustration, hopelessness, and despair of some prisoners. The videos implore viewers to recognize the humanity of the prisoners and acknowledge the injustice and unfairness of their treatment. One prisoner pleads to viewers to recognize his personhood and the personhood of his fellow prisoners: “Not only are we human, we’re somebody’s people.”

Following the creation of the YouTube channel, the SPFC launches a public Facebook page. On this page, the committee adds several of the same images that are on the SPFC website – the raised fist, the logo, and the photos of free and prisoner activists. A new image shows a computer-edited photo roster with 14 small, blurry photos of prisoners wearing uniforms. The image is captioned “The Vanguard.” Another new image shows a lengthy photo roster – this one with 22 prisoners wearing uniforms. This image’s caption indicates that the 22 prisoners are incarcerated in two Alabama men’s prisons. In response to the Vanguard image, a commenter writes “NEVER FORGET THE POWER OF UNITY.” The men in the photo rosters appear serious and posed, aware that their photos are being taken.

By January 1, 2014, the SPFC has a basic website, a YouTube channel with over five hours of video footage, and a Facebook page with a small collection of photos. There’s some indication that the SPFC’s Facebook page is being shared. On several of the SPFC’s early posts, there are comments from other prisoners and supporters. One commenter explains that he is a prisoner who wants to connect with the group and find out how to get involved. A second commenter writes, “This is so heartening to see.”

The SPFC’s YouTube channel is reaching new audiences as well. These audiences, however, are less supportive of SPFC’s messages and goals. “If these people were innocent, I might be more sympathetic,” writes one YouTube commenter. Another commenter proclaims,

“Heres a thought for you, DON’T BREAK THE LAW!# no one is gonna have pity on you if you break the law.” The meat patties video receives mixed reactions. Some commenters are concerned: “Your food should be fit to eat. You are still human being.” Other commenters are unmoved: “The quality they deserve... If they wanted filet mignon they shouldn’t have committed crimes.”

### 3.2 Late 2013 on Corrections Worker Pages

As SPFC is building its web presence, corrections workers online communities are discussing the dangers of the prison environment. During December 2013, two popular Facebook pages for corrections professionals – Corrections Talk and Correctional Officers Together – post about the deaths of corrections officers Susan Canfield and Eric Williams.

Susan Canfield was killed by a prisoner at the Wynne Unit prison facility in September 2007. Canfield’s killer escaped from custody, stole a vehicle, and fatally struck Canfield. Correctional Officers Together reports that Canfield’s killer is scheduled to be executed December 3, 2013. Corrections Talk shares plans for a vigil for Canfield on the night of the execution.

Corrections Talk also shares information about the killing of Eric Williams. Williams was fatally stabbed by a prisoner in February 2013 while working at the United States Penitentiary in Canaan. According to the Corrections Talk, an investigatory report indicates that the Canaan prison administration repeatedly failed to discipline Williams’ killer for serious disciplinary infractions, putting Williams and his fellow workers at risk.

The posts about Canfield and Williams are somber and serious. They convey that being a correctional officer is dangerous; prisoners are dangerous; and prison administrators routinely neglect to keep correctional officers safe. This theme of workplace danger recurs in other stories posted by Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together in December 2013. Additional posts describe prisoner assaults on correctional officers, a prisoner “attempting to bite off a CO’s thumb,”

a prisoner playing “the knockout game” with a correctional officer, and a physical altercation between a prisoner and a correctional officer that requires a facility to lock down for three days.

The SPFC’s videos and planned strike are not mentioned on these pages. There are just two posts which reference prisoner resistance. One post on Corrections Talk mentions that the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lucasville Prison Uprising was earlier in the 2013. It explains that prisoners involved in the uprising have been prohibited from telling their story to the press. According to the article, the ACLU is suing the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections to reverse the prohibition. The post elicits a strong response from page commenters. These commenters ask, “Since when did talking to the media become a right?” and “How about talking to the officers that were there?” One commenter writes “if you want freedoms, don’t go to prison.” Another commenter expresses that he hopes everyone at the ACLU dies of AIDS: “And not the Magic Johnson AIDS, I mean the Freddy Mercury AIDS.”

A second post on Corrections Talk describes a prisoner who recorded videos of himself proclaiming his innocence and asking for support. He, then, uploaded the videos to YouTube. Commenters respond:

“Sounds like this guy is a weirdo for sure. The fact that this guy is still able to further victimize his victim through social media from behind prison walls is even more sickening.”

“Why is he allowed to use social media while hes incarcerated?”

“stop his internet usage DAMN IT”

“Inmates shouldn’t have rights.”

### 3.3 ICT Use during the SPFC’s Formation

In their first few weeks of activism, the SPFC primarily uses ICTs to create expressive works, document their living and working conditions, record their appeals to prison authorities,

and share information through movement channels. The SPFC is developing its online presence, venturing into new digital spaces, and preparing to organize collective resistance actions.

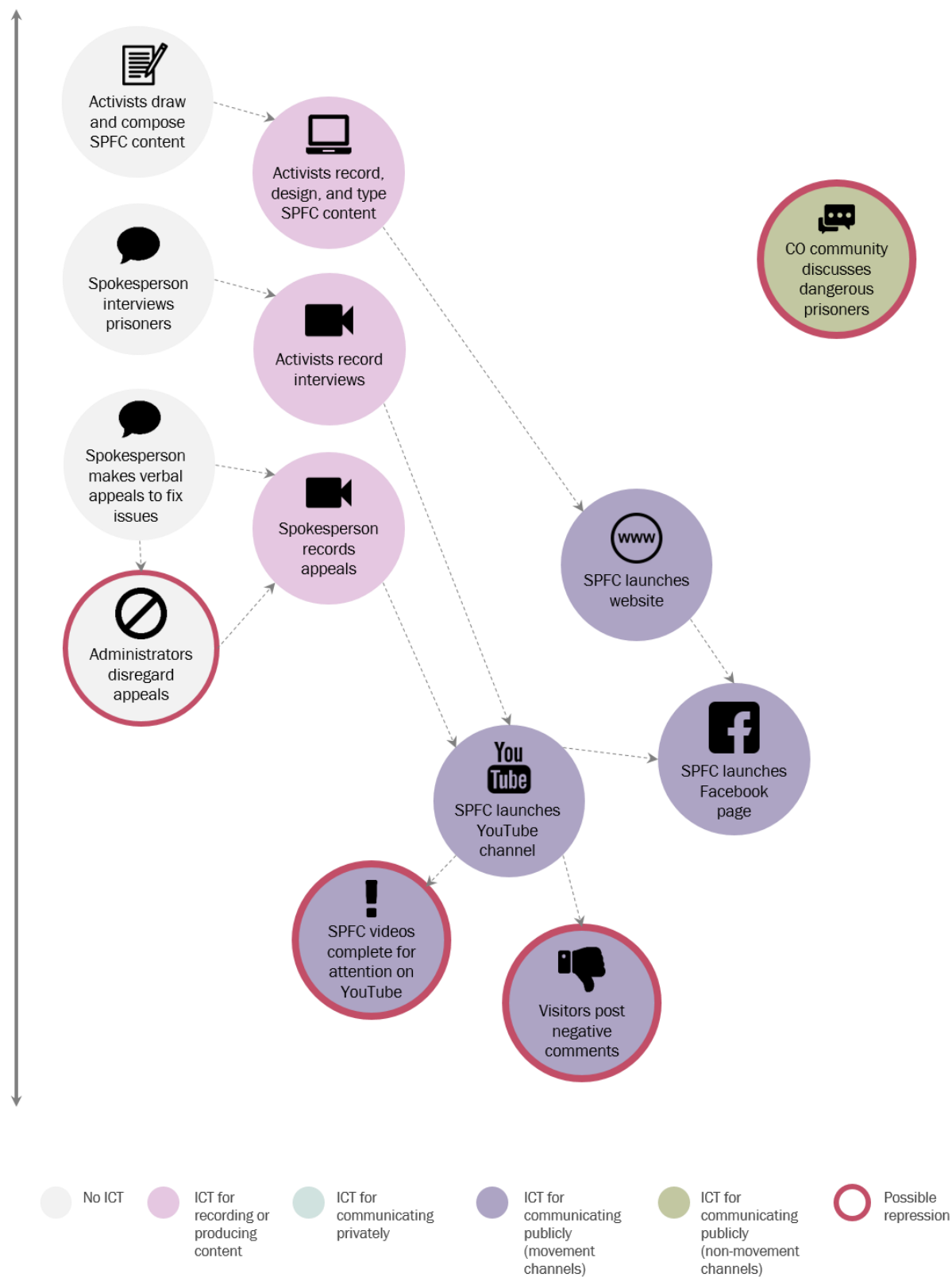


Figure 3.1 ICT Use during SPFC's Formation (Late 2013)



### 3.3.1 SPFC Expressive Composition and Production

Before the SPFC goes online, activists produce expressive art and writings. Prisoner activists take photographs, perform spoken word, make drawings, and write about their experiences. These pieces of art and composition are recorded, sent, typed, and/or digitized for internet uploading. When the SPFC launches its website and Facebook page, activists post these expressive productions. These pieces of art and composition serve multiple purposes.

First, they legitimate the SPFC as a social movement. They demonstrate that prisoners are willing to devote their time and thought into creative production for the SPFC.

Second, the SPFC's writings and documents give words to prisoner experiences. They provide documentation, discursive resources, and textual evidence of prisoner mistreatment. So too, they put words to a possible future in which prisoners do not experience inhumane living conditions, are treated fairly, and are reasonably paid for their labor.

Third, these pieces depict activists' preferred "identity constructions" (Pearson 2009). The photographs show SPFC prisoner activists as teachers; rebels; survivors; and people with families, friends, and lives. There are photos of activists pointing at chalkboards, as if giving lectures. There are photos of activists looking serious, tough, and unafraid. The SPFC book even includes one smiling photo of the Spokesperson. In the photo, the Spokesperson looks happy. He's well-dressed and surrounded by three other smiling people. The photo looks like a family picture.

### 3.3.2 CO Talk: Dangerous Prisoners

The SPFC begins organizing in a moment when prisoner dangerousness is especially salient in CO online communities. In online professional spaces, corrections officers are coping with the aftermaths of two tragic and very public CO deaths. They express fear for their safety, sadness for their fallen colleagues, and anger towards the prisoners responsible for perpetrating

harm. Some page commenters individualize dangerous prisoners. They refer to CO Canfield's killer as a "piece of shit" and "lowlife." Other commenters discuss prisoners as a class of people who are dangerous. They refer to prisoners as "scum," "thugs," "fucktards," and "degenerates."

### 3.3.3 The Spokesperson's Verbal Appeals

The SPFC adds a series of videos to YouTube which show the Spokesperson attempting to bring prisoner grievances to the attention of prison staff and the prison warden. These verbal appeals do not appear successful. Prison staff and the prison warden appear unconcerned with the Spokesperson's suggestions to improve prison cleanliness and living conditions. The videos, however, show that SPFC activists are attempting to advocate for themselves through direct appeals to authority. They validate that prisoner grievances are being ignored and are not being taken seriously.

### 3.3.4 SPFC Prisoner Interviews and Problem Documentation

Members of the SPFC collect hours of video footage to illustrate the conditions of their incarceration. They film the physical environment of the prison, prison food, prison cells, prisoners describing their treatment in prison, and interactions with prison staff. The videos are very low quality. As a result, the videos also appear genuine and unaltered. The videos have a feeling of rough, uncut prison reality.

In later interviews, the Spokesperson will explain that digital evidence gathering is an essential component of the SPFC's strategy:

I knew that society had no real idea of what conditions were like in prison, because I see the commentary about us having 'air conditioning and eating steaks.' So initially, the videos were designed to show people how inhumane conditions in prison were.

The videos, published on YouTube, provide prisoner activists with a way to explain their treatment

to people who had never spent time in prison.

So too, the videos offer an opportunity for activists to challenge the stigma of incarceration. In these videos, SPFC prisoner activists continually reassert the humanity of prisoners. Activists remind outsiders that prisoners are humans with human emotions, fears, and dreams. Prisoners talk about family, friends, children, and other loved ones. They give thanks to the people who support and love them. Prisoners talk about depression, pain, resilience, and spiritual healing. They speak, with sincere emotion, about the fear and sorrow they've experienced in prison. This humanization of prisoners challenges broader cultural discourses (and discourses that are appearing in corrections officer page comments) that prisoners are animalistic, monstrous, or devoid of human emotion (Vasiljevic and Viki 2013).

### 3.3.5 Attention Competition on YouTube

On the web, the SPFC attempts to attract the limited attention of potential activists and sympathizers. Their videos, filmed by prisoner activists, are poor quality. They are low resolution; they have poor sound quality; and they are oftentimes visually uninteresting. At least two videos appear to be shot from within a shirt. Most of the videos lack visually striking content.

The videos with the most views either a) show shocking living conditions or gross food, b) involve high risk recording situations, or c) have been shared by outside news organizations. On YouTube, the SPFC is forced to compete for the attention of potential sympathizers and supporters. Their recordings are buried in the sheer number of videos available on the site. With rough video quality, no apparent video naming strategy, and limited virtual reach, the SPFC struggles to make their videos seen.

### 3.3.6 Dehumanizing Comments on YouTube

The SPFC's YouTube videos are fairly effective in providing visual proof of prison

conditions. They are less effective, however, in attributing problematized meanings to these conditions. Online, these videos receive comments which normalize and de-problematize prisoners' poor treatment. Commenters invoke constructions of prisoner activists as hard criminals deserving of punishment.

The committee's YouTube videos receive comments which demean prisoners and question the legitimacy of the SPFC's grievances. Commenters write:

"You are all damned lucky none of us are running the show or you'd be eating grits and drinking water, period. Shut up, get back in your cage and reflect on what you have done to end up where you are."

"Oh please... None of that is a big deal..."

"[This prison] is a maximum security prison that holds murderers, rapists, and child molesters. So if anything they should be living like that."

"Isn't prison supposed to be uncomfortable?"

"boo hoo...keep your ass out of trouble, and do the RIGHT thing, then you will not be in those 'kinds of conditions'!"

"Perhaps if these habitual offenders didn't commit such crimes, they wouldn't be in prison 'suffering' under these conditions."

Additionally, videos that lack visual evidence and rely on prisoner testimony are met with disbelief. Commenters suggest that prisoners are manipulative and scheming or could be lying.

### 3.4 The SPFC Calls a Work Strike

At the start of the new year, the SPFC begins its first major collective resistance action – an in-prison work strike. The Spokesperson details the work strike plan in the first three chapters of his online book. Citing passages from Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, the Spokesperson argues that prison work programs are akin to slavery. The prison system, he explains, is a manifestation of unjust power structures (like slavery and Jim Crow) which exploits and

oppresses black people. The Spokesperson reasons:

Okay, currently there are appx 32,000 prisoners in the ADOC, with about 1/3 of them working everyday for FREE. That's about 10,000 people working on farm squads, kitchens, road squads, runners, maintenance, dorm cleaners, and all of the other workers, while the ADOC is selling chemicals, bleach, meat, recycling paper and plastic, selling tags, fixing furniture and cars, getting grass cut, getting food cooked and served, dorms cleaned, libraries ran, and on and on and on... Free Labor serves no purpose towards rehabilitation, and is only a slave-system disguised as retribution and punishment for crime...

He adds that prisoners who are paid for their work receive just “pennies” after deductions and fees from the prison system.

The Spokesperson writes that work strike participants should refuse to perform their prison work assignments for one year:

We are going to protest, non-violently and peacefully, and put pressure on the finances of the Alabama Department of Corrections through a work stoppage for one (1) full year, or until our demands for more civilized and humane treatment are reached.

He expects that prisoners who participate in the strike will be subjected to harassment, threats, verbal abuse, disciplinary charges, transfers, segregation, and loss of privileges. He hopes, however, that the strike will draw attention to the SPFC's three primary concerns: inhumane conditions and overcrowding, exploitative prison labor programs, and unfair sentencing and parole practices.

On January 1, 2013, the strike begins. The SPFC's Facebook public page is quiet. There are no new posts on January 1, no posts on January 2, and no posts for the remainder of January. The SPFC's Facebook page will remain inactive for over eight months. The Associated Press publishes a story about the prison strike on January 4. In the story, an AP journalist explains that he learned about the strike through an SPFC activist. The activist reached out, in an effort to draw more attention to the resistance effort. The AP journalist contacted the Alabama Department of

Corrections for an official statement. A representative from the ADOC confirmed that a work strike was taking place, but asserted that number of strikers was “small.”

According the SPFC’s estimates (reported months later), almost 3,000 prisoners are participating in the strike across three Alabama prisons. Prisoners are refusing to show up for kitchen assignments, maintenance assignments, and work programs. The Spokesperson has been identified as the strike’s leader and rehoused in a segregation unit. Strike participants have been advised to return to work or face disciplinary consequences.

On January 6, an anonymous prisoner activist calls in to a Birmingham radio station. The activist reports that prisoners are still peacefully refusing to work at several prisons. The anonymous activist calls himself “John” and states that he is calling from his prison cell. “John” explains that prisoners are demanding better living conditions, fair pay, educational opportunities, sentencing and parole reform, and better prison food. “John” also fields a question about his criminal background, admitting that he has been convicted of theft and receiving stolen goods.

A day later, free SPFC activists hold a press conference to bring attention to the strike and the strikers’ demands. Free activists report that the resistance is persisting, with thousands of prisoners still actively participating in the strike. Officials with the ADOC counter this claim. An ADOC representative reports that less than 15 prisoners are refusing to show up for work. In the weeks following, strike participation wanes. According to the SPFC, some prisoners need income to purchase items from the prison store; some prisoners become worried about the consequences of their participation; other prisoners begin to believe that the strike has succeeded and the ADOC will address their grievances. By the third week of January, the strike is over.

### 3.5 The SPFC Strike Reaches Corrections Forums

At the start of the 2014, one online corrections community, Corrections Talk, is inviting

discussions on prison security. The pages posts about updating prison security systems, implementing new security policies, and reducing contraband smuggling. Page administrators share an article which concludes that prisons do not have the funds or resources to stop cell phone smuggling and cell phone use by prisoners. Several commenters are incredulous that prisons need more money to address cell phone smuggling. One of the commenters writes, “Um, you already pay the officers to do their job. It shouldn’t cost any more for them to simply do a proper search.” Another commenter disbelieves that prisoners could find cell reception in prisons. “I can’t get a freaking signal inside Wal-Mart,” the commenter remarks. Other commenters, however, believe that prison cell phones are already an issue: “We have found over 200 .....level 5 maximum security.”

On January 8, word of the SPFC’s work strike reaches CO Facebook pages. Corrections Talk posts a news article which explains that prisoners are protesting low wages and unsanitary conditions. In response to the article, commenters relay anger and frustration. “Why do these people think they are going to get better treatment then law abiding citizens? I bet you the homeless vets would take what it is they are complaining about,” one commenter opines. “A bunch of whining low-lives’ P.O.S. !!!,” another commenter writes. Additional commenters offer advice on how to handle the strike:

“Don’t feed.their asses they’ll come around.”

“We can Solve this problem n at the Same time save Taxpayers n States millions of dollars each year by Congress enacting a Law that if you don’t want to do time you voluntarily enlist in the Military.”

“gas them all!”

A lone commenter expresses sympathy for the strikers. She explains, “Everyone deserves to have decent living conditions no matter what they did.” Her assessment is challenged by later

commenters:

“inmates are not human, their animals,,,,, SO NO>>>>> they don’t deserve any RIGHTS at all.”

“Every one also deserves the right to not be victimized by these dirtbags but they didn’t get to have that!”

Corrections Talk follows up the post about the prison strike with a post of a cartoon depicting two men in prison. The cartoon shows two white men wearing orange jumpsuits. One of the men is relaxing on a towel (as if he is sunning on a beach). He says to the other man, “I prefer to think of it as a staycation.” Commenters commiserate that American prisons are vacation-like and more closely resemble hotels and spas than facilities of punishment. One commenter states, “In California the prison is a long vacation everything paid for even if you wanna become transgender. The state will pick up the bill.” Several commenters, though, feel that the cartoon is a wild exaggeration. One commenter acknowledges that, while prisoners might have some privileges, prison still “sucks.”

Throughout January and February, CO Facebook pages feature numerous articles about shocking contraband finds and new ways to combat contraband smuggling. One post details how a visitor attempted to sneak in a loaded gun in a large belt buckle. Another post recounts how prisoners obtained almost \$1,000 in cash, photographed themselves holding the money using a contraband cell phone, and posted the photo on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Several posts describe contraband control efforts involving metal detectors, cell phone signal blocking, drug-sniffing dogs, intelligence gathering from prisoner sources, and security for private food contractors.

Commenters lament that contraband control efforts are not always effective. “My Facility has [metal detectors] and they stop nothing,” writes one commenter. Another commenter adds that



searching visitors and staff does not address the real problem: “Complete waste of time. Its been said before but most of the metal weapons come from something inside the facility.”

The contraband-related posts are interspersed with posts about the deaths and serious injuries of correctional officers. Similar to the posts from late 2013, these posts remind page visitors that working as a correctional officer is dangerous. There’s a story of a CO being attacked while escorting a prisoner to medical treatment. There’s another story of a CO being slashed with a broken piece of glass. Two more stories recount CO stabbings – one involving pliers and another involving a pen.

Several posts name corrections officers recently slain on-duty. Responses to these posts are emotional:

“He looks way too young to be killed and he also looks like a really nice guy. I pray justice is served.”

“Rip brother I shame u died like this just trying to support your family like the rest of us are doing.”

“Society has no idea what goes on in a prison. ... I lost a good friend... to another piece of shit.”

“Never met you... But I went to your funeral and I miss you. I saw your girl say ‘there’s my daddy’ when your picture came up on the power point.... You are loved. You are missed and I will think of you until the day die....”

Commenters share feelings that prisons are becoming less safe for correction officers for various reasons. Prisons are understaffed. Prison administrators are putting correctional officers in unsafe situations with dangerous prisoners. Prisons, overall, are becoming “soft” in their treatment of prisoners. Some commenters refer to this trend as the emergent “hug-a-thug” culture in corrections.

The news and comments on Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together depict a solemn reality. Despite having many privileges, prisoners are rebelling; contraband smuggling remains a dire issue; contraband control efforts are improving, but remain inadequate; and

correctional officers are regularly put in harm's way.

### 3.6 ICT Use during SPFC First Actions

By January 2014, the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee is using ICTs to disseminate information to activists. The SPFC uses its website and Facebook page to share plans for its first major offline protest event. Activists contact journalists in an effort to spread news of the SPFC strike.

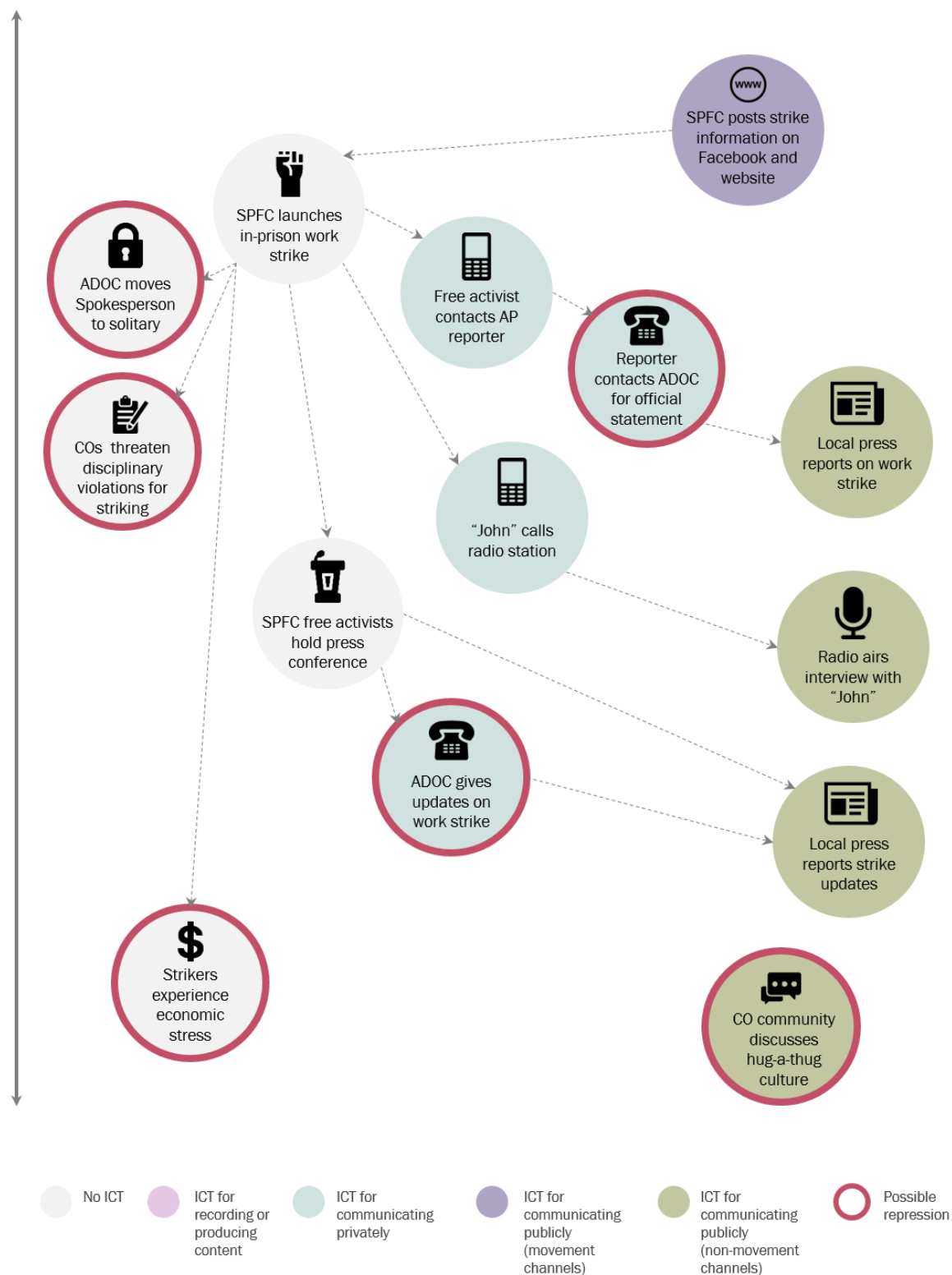


Figure 3.2 ICT Use during the SPFC's First Actions (Early 2014)

### 3.6.1 SPFC January Strike

On their webpage and Facebook page, the SPFC shares plans for their upcoming work strike. The committee gives a rationale for the strike and information about how to get involved. The work strike is the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee's first major resistance effort. It is a no-tech, offline action at several Alabama men's prisons. The Spokesperson explains that the purpose of the work strike is twofold. The strike, first, allows prisoners to withdraw from a system that is exploiting their bodies, minds, and labor. "We will no longer participate in this system of FREE LABOR," the Spokesperson writes in his book. The strike, second, disrupts the prison order and forces prison administrators to manage the disruption or address prisoner demands. According to the SPFC, the January work strike disrupts normal prison functions in several facilities. The committee proclaims that the strike "was so effective that guards were forced to take over cleaning and cooking duties."

### 3.6.2 Spokesperson Moved to Segregation

Within days of the January strike's start, the Spokesperson is moved to disciplinary segregation, a type of solitary confinement. In disciplinary segregation in Alabama, prisoners' privileges are restricted. They can be denied calling privileges. They are not permitted to have visitors without written approval. They are not permitted to receive "incentive packages" – gift packages that can include hygiene items, clothes, food, and music players. They can be denied recreation, hobby craft, and prison store privileges. They do not earn good time. The Spokesperson reports that, in disciplinary segregation, he isn't allow access to reading materials and his property is confiscated.

### 3.6.3 Disciplinary Sanctions

According to the Alabama Department of Corrections monthly reports, corrections officers

do not respond to the strike by writing disciplinary violations for strikers en masse. During the strike, however, prisoner activists are concerned that this could happen. Prisoners who participate in work strikes can be written up for varying levels of rule violations. They can be given a low-level violation for “disorderly conduct” or “violation of institutional rules.” They can be given a medium-level violation for “insubordination” or “creating a security hazard.” They could also be given a high-level violation for “failing to obey a direct order” or “encouraging others to stop work.” High-level violations carry possible sanctions that include:

1. “Loss of a portion of, or all, good time the inmate has earned. (Mandatory loss of one (1) day good time is required).
2. Confinement to Disciplinary Segregation for up to 45 days.
3. Recommend custody review.
4. Loss of any and all privileges/incentives for up to 60 days.
5. Extra duty for up to 60 days.
6. Recommend job change.
7. Financial compensation for property damage.
8. Possession of a cellular telephone shall result in the loss of six (6) months of visitation privileges and a \$25.00 processing fee per offense. The fee shall increase by \$25.00 per offense.”

Medium level violations carry similar penalties. For these violations, though, prisoners can only lose up to two years of good time and be confined in segregation for up to 30 days. Low-level violation sanctions do not include segregation time; but prisoners can still lose up to three months of good time, all privileges for up to 30 days, current job assignments, hobby craft, and incentive package eligibility. These consequences are serious potential costs for participating in the SPFC work strike. So too, some of these consequences involve limiting activists’ legal means of communication (calling privileges, visiting privileges).

### 3.6.4 ADOC Information Control and Contradiction

Even with full privileges, SPFC activists have few options for communicating with outside people (Boudin, Stutz, and Littman 2013; Frank 2018). Some prisoners, in U.S. prisons and jails,

have access to communication services through JPay or similar communication services. JPay offers email messaging, videograms, video visitation, limited use tablet computing, and money transfer services at select correctional facilities. The Alabama Department of Corrections, however, does not contract with JPay.

Prisoners in ADOC custody are allowed in-person visits, letters, and phone calls (a small number of prisons also have paid video visitation services). These forms of communications are, or can be, monitored and restricted. For security purposes, prison administrators can restrict who prisoners are permitted to contact; what mail, what calls, and which visitors that prisoners can receive; and when prisoners are allowed visiting and calling privileges.

It's common for prison administrators to limit the number of people that prisoners can add to their visiting lists. Many prisons also restrict the number of people who are not immediate family that can be added to visiting lists. The Alabama Department of Corrections limits the number of non-family visitors to two for unmarried prisoners and one for married prisoners:

Visitors may include your immediate family such as mother, father, stepparents, foster parents, husband, wife, children, stepchildren, grandchildren, brother, sister, grandmother, grandfather, half-siblings, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, and father-in-law. If you are married, you may not have a friend of the opposite sex. If you are unmarried, you may have one friend of the opposite sex and one friend of the same sex.

ADOC prisoners are permitted to update their visiting lists only once every six months. At most, a prisoner's visiting list can include eight adults and eight children. Visitors cannot be added to multiple visiting prisoner visiting lists (unless they are prisoners' immediate family). All visitors must fill out an application, provide identification, and be approved by prison administrators. Ex-felons, people on probation, and people on parole are not considered for visitation until two years after their release from supervision.

Similarly, prisoners in ADOC custody must have their phone contacts approved by prison

administrators. Prisoners are not permitted to contact anyone who is not listed on their calling list. So too, prisoners can only update this list once every six months. Prisoners cannot participate in three-way calls. Prisoners cannot accept phone interviews from members of the press. Calls may be recorded and used as evidence in court. Prisoners in disciplinary segregation are not afforded calling privileges. Prisoners in administrative segregation are permitted one call per month.

Additionally, prisoners have very few options for recording their surroundings. Camcorders, audio recording devices, and cameras are considered contraband. Prisoners in ADOC custody may not send letters which include words, drawings, maps, or symbols that could pose a threat to prison security. These regulations severely limit prisoner activists' legal means of communicating with free activists. They also affect the speed, length, and quality of prisoner activist to free activist communication. When SPFC prisoner activists are able to get news out, they are contradicted by officials from the Alabama Department of Corrections. The SPFC claims that thousands of prisoners are on strike; the ADOC estimates that number is less than 20.

### 3.6.5 "John's" Radio Call-In

On the sixth day of the strike, an anonymous prisoner activist phones-in to an Alabama daytime talk radio show. The call pushes news about the strike to radio audiences. This news, however, comes from an unnamed source. Moreover, that unnamed source is an admitted felon. On the air, the prisoner activist is prompted to divulge a stigmatized identity (convicted criminal) in order to verify his knowledge claims. The prompt reminds audiences that the information source has been convicted of a serious crime.

### 3.6.6 SPFC Free Activist Press Conference

Free activists later call a press conference. The press conference affords activists a space to share updates about the strike with multiple media outlets at once. It also allows activists to

carefully stage their information sharing and publicly present their free activist base. Unlike the prisoner radio call-in, the free activist press conference is fronted by non-prisoners. Free people reinforce the information provided by the anonymous prisoner caller. Still, neither the caller nor the free activists are able to present additional proof of the strike or the number of strikers beyond their verbal claims.

### 3.6.7 Economic Stress of Striking

Ultimately, the strike withers under disciplinary threats and economic stress. By not working, prisoners with paid labor work assignments lose their only source of personal income. They become dependent on loved ones and outside supporters to transfer money to their spending accounts. That transferred money, too, can be partially or wholly withheld if prisoners have outstanding legal debts, fines, or fees (Wagner and Rabuy 2017). In addition, strike participants gamble reassignment to lower paying or less desirable jobs if they receive disciplinary violations. The financial challenge of maintaining in a work strike, in an environment where income opportunities are sparse and intensely controlled, proves to be a major obstacle for the SPFC.

### 3.6.8 CO Talk: Hug-A-Thug Culture

When news of the SPFC's strike reaches corrections worker forums, commenters remark that the strike is a consequence of prison softness. Prison administrators are being too nice and too accommodating to prisoners. Prisoners, as a result, are forgetting that prison is supposed to be uncomfortable. Some commenters call this the emerging "hug-a-thug" culture of corrections. This interpretation of prisoners and prison life undermines prisoner grievances. It depicts prisoners as overly sensitive and whiny. Moreover, it uses racially-coded language ("thug"), to invoke racist stereotypes about the striking prisoners.



### 3.7 The SPFC Regroups and Plans a “Big Event”

For weeks after the strike’s end, it seems like the SPFC’s campaign has been stifled. The Spokesperson was moved to a segregation unit at start of the strike. The Chief Political Strategist is moved to segregation just after the strike ends. It’s unclear if or when the Spokesperson and Strategist will be allowed to return to their units. There are no new updates to the SPFC’s website regarding the strike. The SPFC’s Facebook page is dark.

The SPFC’s YouTube channel offers the only visible glimmer of continued resistance. At the end of January, the SPFC uploads dozens of new videos to the channel. The new videos, however, do not appear to be newly recorded. References in the video indicate that the recordings were made in December, before the strike began. There are so many videos that the SPFC doesn’t attempt to name them all. Most of the videos involve the Spokesperson filming and describing the prison environment. He takes viewers on a tour of the showers, noting the broken showerheads and crumbling, mildew-covered walls. He shows viewers broken windows, broken lights, broken tables, broken stools, and rat carcasses. Gesturing to the broken stools, the Spokesperson explains, “Guys use that metal to make knives with.”

The newly uploaded videos provide new insights into how the Spokesperson and other prisoner activists were constructing their collective identity and their struggle in December (when the SPFC was forming). The Spokesperson repeatedly declares that the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee is a movement for “all prisoners.” It seems evident, though, that the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee began as a group to address the ill-treatment of incarcerated poor, nonimmigrant, straight, cisgender black men in Alabama prisons. In conversations, the Spokesperson and prisoner activists use “men” and “prisoners” interchangeably and discuss prisoners in the abstract using he/him pronouns:

“We’re educating guys, educating families on the economic policies of prison.”

“How you gonna rehabilitate a guy and when he goes to work and he works for eight hours and he gets off and and he’s not getting anything? He’s going to be tempted to steal.”

“When you deny a man of his rights...we have no choice but to act like that.”

Incarcerated women are rarely mentioned. Women, in general, are seldom discussed apart from their roles as movement supporters, wives, and sexual partners. One prisoner activist points out that the SPFC needs “women to help us help ourselves.” The Spokesperson has several discussions about the repercussions of not allowing incarcerated men to have sex with women. “We doing 10, 15, 20 years in prison and we can’t even have conjugal visits and sexual relations with women... It’s unnatural,” he argues.

In another discussion about conjugal visits and men’s reproductive rights, the Spokesperson and another prisoner activist discuss how prison prevents men from conceiving children. “We sterilized in a way... that we can’t reproduce ourselves,” the prisoner activist concludes. The Spokesperson and the other prisoner agree that their struggle is not the struggle of gay, lesbian, and queer prisoners. “There are homosexuals... they in hog heaven,” the Spokesperson explains. “Yeah,” the prisoner activist agrees. The Spokesperson continues, “We being punished more simply because of our nature... Because I’m a man, I have to be punished more severely than if I was a homosexual.”

Some of the new videos address differences in prisoner treatment across race. A collection of videos is devoted to highlighting the stark differences in the treatment, facilities, and privileges of prisoners a majority white cell block compared to prisoners a majority black cell block. The Spokesperson covertly films the day room of the mostly white block. Viewers see a well-maintained library with walls of books, a shelf of neatly organized National Geographic magazines, a collection of encyclopedias, several flat screen televisions, a DVD player, a chalkboard, and

dozens of white plastic chairs arranged around white plastic tables. The Spokesperson then enters the common room of the mostly black block. Viewers see splintered wood benches with exposed nails, damaged metal tables with sharp edges, and a single, small television. “This is how they treat us when we live in the predominately black block. You all saw the contrast to the way they livin’ [in the predominately white block],” the Spokesperson explains. This collection of videos attracts very few YouTube views. The Spokesperson’s video of the dead rat receives more views than the whole series of white block/black block comparison videos (13 total videos).

Apart from the videos, the SPFC’s public digital presence is motionless following the strike. Then, in late-February, SPFC leaders reappear on the internet public. A new Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee Twitter account reports “we are still going strong” and announces that the committee has “big news.” The committee shares that prisoner activists have been drafting a bill for prisoner education, rehabilitation, and reentry. They will send the bill, which proposes major reforms to Alabama prison programming, to the Alabama state legislature. The SPFC also reports that activists are planning a “grand event.” To bring attention to their yet-to-be-announced event and their cause, SPFC leaders tweet at news organizations (NBC news, a local morning TV show, *Mother Jones*) and public figures (Rev. Al Sharpton, Michelle Alexander, the director of the ACLU, a radio personality). These accounts do not publicly respond. The “grand event” is a second work strike.

### 3.8 Corrections Worker Forums Focus on Workplace Issues

In the corrections worker community, the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee’s January strike represents just another example of unrealistic prisoner expectations and the coddling of prisoners by the prison system. On a post about the strike, one commenter describes a sense of entitlement he witnessed from prisoners while working as a corrections professional:

[I]nmates have it damn good compared to people trying to make a living. The 8<sup>th</sup> amendment concerns cruel and unusual punishment. They expect a holiday inn. They have a roof over their heads, clean clothes, food, running water, free healthcare and exercise equipment, access to law library, and don't have to do anything but wake up. No responsibilities.

In the weeks after the strike, Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together share stories about prisoner requests that, in the opinion of many commenters, go too far. Some examples include prisoners asking that COs stop using “threatening” drug sniffing dogs, proposing that prisons make condoms freely available, and suggesting every prisoner have access to kosher meals (even if many prisoners do not require the meals for religious reasons).

The theme of prisoner entitlement intermixes with familiar posts about workplace dangers in late January, February, and March of 2014. Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together are still regularly sharing news of the deaths and injuries of corrections professionals. At the same time, these pages are sharing posts about serious corrections workplace issues. Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together post about low CO wages, job-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), CO suicide, pay shorting, workplace harassment, workplace health hazards, understaffing, and prisoner-focused policies (devised by politicians and prison administrators) which put COs at risk. On Corrections Officers Together, one post asks COs to describe how working in corrections has changed them. Commenters write that working as corrections officer has made them more cynical, mistrusting, anxious, on-edge, irritable, and stressed. One commenter explains:

Three simple words ‘loss of innocence’ seeing what society is capable of and it can never be taken back I I regret it but most people I begin to understand and that is why we have all of the traits described above.

Another commenter writes:

Knowing what people are capable of doing is a double edged sword. On the good side, we know what to watch for and are able to protect our families and friends.

But, we are highly suspicious of people. When someone strange extends a friendly gesture, I find myself wondering if it is genuine or manipulative. What do they want from me? Are they looking for a weakness in me?

Some commenters report that working in corrections has made them feel unappreciated and underpaid. Other commenters add that CO work has made them angry at prisoner administrators who don't respect or care for them. One commenter writes:

I'm glad it's not only me who feels this way. At my place of work, it's more of a prison for us than it is for the inmates. I loved my job when I first started, but they (upper management) took care of that! It has made me mean and raised my stress level and my faith in humanity is just about gone.

A few weeks later, Corrections Officers Together creates a post asking, "Correctional officers, what's the best part about your job?" The most common answers are "going home," "leaving work," and "retiring." One commenter rejects these answers: "For all of you that are posting negative remarks about our job then get the fu\*k out!" Another commenter responds, "Well when you get assaulted [first commenter]. Your attitude changes." The comments on these posts convey that a feeling that working as a correctional officer is hard and lonely. Prisoners are possibly dangerous and warrant suspicion; people outside of corrections can't comprehend corrections work; and prison administrators don't understand or value the work of COs.

### 3.9 The PLM Joins the Cause

By April 2014, the SPFC is absorbed in planning their next resistance effort. The action will have two parts: a prisoner work strike (set for April 21) and a free activist rally (set for April 26). For this effort, the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee will have assistance. On Twitter, SPFC leaders announce: "[PLM] joins [SPFC] and lends it labor organizing expertise to Alabama strikes."

The PLM is the Prisoner Labor Movement – a newly-founded group established by

members of a large labor rights organization. The PLM is partnering with the SPFC to form a prisoners' rights coalition. These two organizations will constitute the NPRC, until Prisons as Lawyers and the Toxic Prison Network join in 2016. PLM leaders first create a Facebook page to announce the group and explain the partnership. On the page, the PLM recounts that a large labor rights organization was contacted by members of the SPFC. The labor organization felt compelled to support the SPFC because the two groups are engaged in a shared struggle:

While unique in some ways, the struggle of these brave human beings is the same as the millions of black, brown, and working class men, women, and youth struggling to survive a system they are not meant to succeed within. We advance their struggle by building our own, and working together for an end to this 'system that crushes people and penalizes them for not being able to stand the weight'.

The PLM's Facebook page shares information about the SPFC and a hyperlink to the SPFC Facebook page.

As the planned actions approach, the SPFC and the PLM circulate information about event logistics. The strike will be a non-violent protest. Beginning on April 21, Prisoner Labor will refuse to appear for their work assignments. They will demand that the ADOC compensate prisoners for their work, end prison slavery, address prison overcrowding, improve living conditions, and repurpose the prison system for "genuine rehabilitation." They will also stand with the prisoners from a nearby women's prison calling for an investigation of guard-perpetrated sexual assault.

On April 16, the Spokesperson gives an interview to *Salon* (an online news and culture site known for its progressive reporting) about the upcoming strike. The Spokesperson explains that the strike must be peaceful:

You have rapists, you have all the broad spectrum of criminal conduct and so we can't incorporate violence, because you know, we're already behind the eight ball as far as, you know, our image.

The author of the *Salon* article recounts that the Spokesperson was "reached in his cell." During

the interview, the Spokesperson acknowledges that the interview is taking place on a contraband cell phone. When asked about how he obtained the cell phone, however, he declines to answer.

The article gets mixed reactions in the comments on the *Salon* page. Some commenters voice their support for the Spokesperson and take issue with prison labor:

“I support the strike in Alabama! Their prison system is a ‘slave empire!’ Above all, these Alabama prisoners are human beings and so my brothers and sisters!”

“Racism and capitalism in our prisons. :(“

“The prison system in the south is a carry over from slavery.”

Other commenters assert that the Spokesperson is a criminal and he, like other prisoners, owe debt to society:

“Get over yourselves!!”

“Here’s a thought, stay out of jail!”

“Can’t do the time, don’t do the crime.”

“They are incarcerating people for breaking the law. Feel privileges you live in the U.S. and not in a foreign prison. We the tax payers pay for feeding you happy ass. Consider yourselves lucky you even have a job. You owe us, not the other way around... get over it.”

One commenter adds that she is worried for the Spokesperson’s safety: “Oh dear.....he’ll be found dead in his cell for speaking out!”

The day after the *Salon* interview, the Spokesperson speaks with a reporter from a local Alabama newspaper. The reporter explains that the Spokesperson’s mother sets up the contact. The Spokesperson’s mother arranges a three-way call with the reporter and the Spokesperson, who uses a contraband cell phone. The Spokesperson again explains the SPFC’ rationale and plans for the strike.

This newspaper article attracts the attention of two Alabama State Senators. One senator

posts his disapproval of the strike and the Spokesperson on Twitter: “So murderer demands better wages using his illegal phone- Ah no.” Another senator provides his comments to the newspaper. He claims that the strike is misguided and the Spokesperson is not fit to speak on criminal justice reform:

My real issue comes with [the Spokesperson’s] statements. He’s circumventing the fact that he committed murder, and no one in the general public is going to buy into the argument that corrections was created as a means to destroy people. I’m not disagreeing with the circumstances and poor conditions in our facilities, but I take huge exception to him as a victim.

The senator further accuses the Spokesperson of unnecessarily “turning it into a race issue.” He denies claims that black prisoners are treated worse in prison than white prisoners.

### 3.10 ICT Use as the SPFC Regroups

In the months after their first work strike, the SPFC uses ICTs to grow their YouTube channel content and create activist resources. When the Prisoner Labor Movement forms an alliance with the SPFC, activists work together to announce, plan, and publicize the April work strike.



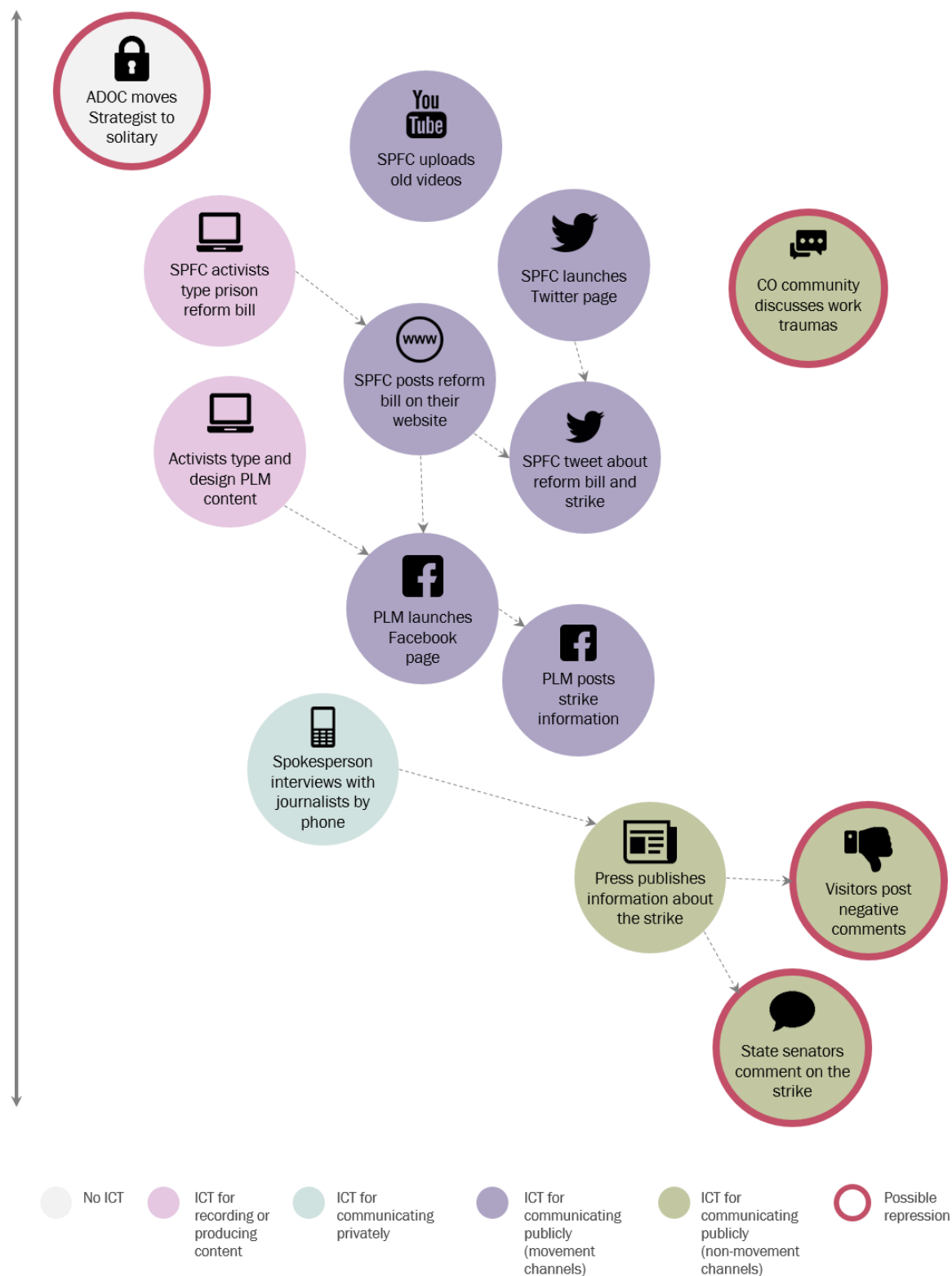


Figure 3.3 ICT Use as the SPFC Regroups (February to Early-April 2014)

### 3.10.1 SPFC Twitter Migration

After the first work strike, the SPFC migrates from its public Facebook page to a public Twitter page. The SPFC's Facebook page remains active, but SPFC leaders stop writing posts on the page. The shift from Facebook to Twitter is not publicly announced or explained on Facebook. It's unclear whether the migration was prompted by repression or proactively adopted as a strategy to reach new audiences. Yet, the willingness of the SPFC to switch their public information dissemination from Facebook to Twitter suggests that SPFC leaders believe that activists and supporters can and will migrate for information.

### 3.10.2 CO Talk: On-the-Job Trauma

As the SPFC is regrouping, page admins and commenters in CO online communities are having serious conversations about CO depression, suicides, and PTSD. Some commenters are connecting these issues to prisoner maliciousness, espousing anti-prisoner rhetoric. Other commenters are blaming poor workplace conditions, management, and staffing practices, highlighting workplace morale and safety issues. CO commenters report feeling fearful, suspicious, distrustful of people, not interested in their jobs, and eager to go home at the end of the day. The dialogue suggests that many COs are experiencing trauma at work and not receiving adequate resources to process that trauma. Moreover, that trauma is affecting their mental state, job performance, and personal wellbeing. It is possible, but not certain, that some corrections officers with this trauma history are working in prisons where the SPFC and PLM are organizing.

### 3.10.3 SPFC Prison Reform Bill Draft

In mid-February, the SPFC uploads a document entitled the "Alabama Freedom Bill" to their website. The document, created with a word processing program, is a draft of a state bill which would enact reforms within the Alabama prison system. These reforms relate to prison

conditions, prison programming, prison work assignments, justice-related fines, criminal sentencing, mental health care in prisons, prison overcrowding, prisoner rehabilitation, prisoner privileges, voting rights for convicted felons, and media access to prisons. On the whole, it does not seem like Alabama state representatives are receptive to the bill. The bill does not find a sponsor and is not introduced for legislative consideration. Yet, the bill's text has an important role. It provides a concise outline of concrete legislative changes that the SPFC is seeking.

#### 3.10.4 PLM Facebook Page

The Prisoner Labor Movement joins the cause in mid-April. The PLM's alliance with the SPFC is significant for two reasons. First, the PLM is already quite tech-savvy. The group was created by labor organizers with existing ties to a large labor union. These organizers have experience using the internet and cell phones for political resistance. PLM activists quickly set up a Facebook page. They share content from the SPFC's Facebook page, YouTube channel, and website. Second, the PLM is aligned with a large free activist base. PLM leaders issue a solidarity statement, proclaiming that the struggles of the prison worker are the struggles of the free world worker. They call on free workers to defend prisoner labor and support the SPFC's efforts.

#### 3.10.5 *Salon* and Alabama Newspaper Interviews

The SPFC's first bit of national media attention comes after a risky prison phone interview. The SPFC's spokesperson uses a contraband cell phone connect with a journalist from *Salon*. Like the radio-call in from "John" during the first strike, this interview centers the caller's prisoner/criminal identity. The journalist refers to the Spokesperson as a leader of "inmates." Moreover, the Spokesperson's description of prison conditions is afforded only limited weight in the journalist's write-up. The *Salon* journalist refers to the Spokesperson's claims as "alleged." In the article, the Spokesperson explains that the January strike involved thousands of protesters. The

journalist points out that the ADOC officially recognized only a “handful” of strikers. So too, the *Salon* article includes a quote from the Alabama governor which states that the Alabama Department of Corrections is “making improvements.”

In the article from the local Alabama newspaper, the reporter also refers to the Spokesperson’s claims as “alleged.” The reporter writes that the Spokesperson is serving a life sentence for murder. The article title refers to the Spokesperson as “Alabama prison inmate.” Moreover, the public responses from Alabama state senators further debase the Spokesperson and the SPFC. The senators’ comments craft a reality in which prisoner activists are misguided or overly sensitive; prison conditions are acceptable; and prisoners are not deserving of sympathy.

### 3.11 “A Movement is Brewing”

On April 19, the SPFC and the Prisoner Labor Movement release a joint statement declaring “a movement is brewing in Alabama that could change America.” The statement proclaims that the upcoming prison strike has broad support among prisoners in several facilities. Prison administrators, however, are attempting to dissuade prisoners from participating. The SPFC and PLM report that a warden (the warden of the prison where the Strategist is incarcerated) is allowing non-striking prisoners to carry knives. The knives can be used by non-strikers to defend themselves on their way to work. According to prisoner activists, the warden has promised “they can bring knives to work with them, and that if they stab anyone trying to stop them from working, he will make sure they won’t get locked up for long.” The PLM and SPFC accuse prison administrators of also trying to undermine the strike by invoking religious biases. The joint statement explains:

[Prison officials] have sought to sow division and stir up prejudices by spreading an untrue rumor that the strike is being organized by Muslims, a calculated ploy to turn Christians in the prison against the movement.

Moreover, SPFC members claim that administrators are trying to convince prisoners to opt out of the strike by serving barbecue to prisoners who agree to show up to their work assignments.

Just before the strike, the Alabama Prison Commissioner officially labels the SPFC a security threat group (STG). Under this label, prisoner activists can be held in segregation and denied privileges indefinitely. Six prominent SPFC prisoner activists are labeled active STG members and moved to cells in segregation.

On April 20, the day of the strike, the ADOC releases a statement that prison administrators “have yet to gather any intelligence about a work stoppage.” An Alabama newspaper publishes the statement. On the PLM’s Facebook page and the SPFC Twitter page, activists counter the ADOC’s claims. They report that the strike is in motion; prisoners are participating. Additionally, these prisoners are experiencing repression. Prison administrators are locking down units with SPFC activists. Moreover, they are threatening activists with disciplinary violations for speaking about the strike.

As the strike progresses, the Prisoner Labor Movement and SPFC request support on social media. The Prisoner Labor Movement asks free activists to make welfare calls about the Spokesperson. Leaders of the PLM worry that the Spokesperson is being abused and confined to a dry cell without clothes, blankets, and running water. They share the phone number for the warden of the prison where the Spokesperson is incarcerated. The PLM instructs supporters to call the number, ask for the warden, and demand that the prison cease its retaliation against the Spokesperson. The PLM also creates a crowd-funding page for the strikers. The funds, PLM leaders explain, will be used to ensure that prisoner activists can purchase food and basic care items. Meanwhile, the SPFC requests tactical support. One SPFC tweet asks free activists to come to Alabama to protest, march, and support the cause. Additional tweets encourage supporters and

sympathizers to attend the upcoming rally and learn about the movement to end prison slavery.

On April 26, free activists gather at Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, Alabama. Members of the PLM; members of the SPFC; former prisoners; and mothers, fathers, wives, and children of SPFC activists make speeches. Following the rally, attendees gather together to light candles in honor of those mistreated by the prison system. “I light this candle for all political prisoners who have felled victim to a very corrupt system,” one rally attendee proclaims. “I light this candle for [the Spokesperson] – my father – and my cousin,” another explains. SPFC leaders film the speeches and candle-lighting ceremony and add the videos to the SPFC YouTube channel.

### 3.12 Correctional Officers Reflect on Prisoners’ Rights

On Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together, there are no posts about the second prisoner strike in Alabama. Around mid-April, these pages are increasingly posting memes about the dangers and frustrations of corrections work. One meme reads, “OUTNUMBERED 200 TO 1, NO GUN, NO BATON, AND THEY ALL HATE ME. HOW WAS YOUR DAY?” Another meme says, “Corrections officer. Sworn to guard your ass, not kiss it.” Corrections Talk is sharing Someecards (e-cards that often include messages with off-color or offensive humor) with corrections-related content. One of these cards shows a drawing of a smiling man carrying a large saw and text stating, “Correctional officers are cops without guns and a hell of a lot more criminals at once. We work in a place you’d call a nightmare.”

Both Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together are still sharing articles and writing posts about the deaths and injuries of corrections officers. There’s a story about a CO being assaulted by prisoners, a story of CO being beaten by a prisoner with a lunch tray, a story about a CO being held hostage by prisoners, and a story about a CO dying from a heart attack (at age 23). On April 18, Corrections Talk asks page viewers to weigh in about the prevalence of CO injuries

and fatalities: “We want your opinion; what do you think is the reason for increasing CO injuries and deaths on the job? What are some ways they could be fixed?” The question is posted with an image of a white male prison guard escorting a black male prisoner down a prison corridor. Some commenters write that the injuries and death are related to understaffing, long shifts, lack of training opportunities, and hiring “young kids.”

The most common answer, however, is that prisons are becoming too soft on prisoners. One commenter jokes, “Everyone’s so soft. D.o.c should be department of Charmin because how soft the officers are becoming.” Another commenter adds, “The hug a thug environment is unsafe.” According to commenters, prisoner administrators are accommodating prisoners too much. They are giving prisoners too many rights, providing prisoners with too many luxuries, and not holding prisoner responsible for their crimes. Commenters explain:

“Treatment has become the priority, not security.”

“Under staffed and no punishment. Prison is like wealfair on steroids. FREE FREE FREE. Satilight TV, Xbox, basketball, softball, free medical, dental, and it’s where their friends are.”

“The Offenders have more rights than the Officers. Give them different consequences when they commit crimes in prison. Stop, just don’t add more time. Give them the death penalty or something similar and actually carry it out.”

“The ‘kinder, gentler’ attitude accompanied by more rights for prisoners than officers is a big part of the problem.”

### 3.13 The Strike Withers under Repression

Now officially listed as a security threat group by the ADOC, the SPFC is facing new forms of repression. The Spokesperson tweets that his mail is monitored and censored. Every piece of his mail is opened and searched. Mail that is deemed “threatening” is destroyed without notice to the sender or intended recipient. The Spokesperson tweets that media inquiries about the SPFC are not reaching him. He engages with a CNN reporter on Twitter, explaining that the reporter’s

interview request (sent by mail) was rejected by prison administrators. The Spokesperson suggests that the reporter can contact him in other ways.

Weeks after the strike's start, the Spokesperson, Political Strategist, and five other SPFC activists remain in segregation. As members of a STG, the length of their stay in segregation is uncertain. U.S. prisons, typically, limit the amount of time prisoners can be housed in segregation unit for disciplinary infractions. This limit is sometimes referred to as a "cap" on "disciplinary segregation." STG members, however, can be held in segregation beyond this cap in "administrative segregation." This type of segregation is intended to separate specific prisoners from the general population to ensure the safety and security of the prison. The SPFC writes that, in segregation, prisoner activists are denied readings materials, writing materials, visits, phone calls, and other privileges.

According to SPFC leaders, the strike persists for over a month before it is undermined by prison administrators. The warden of one prison reportedly agrees to tolerate some drug use and violence if prisoners abandon the protests. The Spokesperson recounts that the warden tells prisoners:

I don't have a problem with y'all using and selling drugs, this is prison and that's going to happen. Just as there will be occasional fights. But I need y'all to help me keep the violence down. And NO [Southern Prisoner Freedom] talk.

Some striking prisoners regard this offer as acceptable compromise. Other prisoners, unconvinced that the strike can achieve further gains, abandon the effort.

### 3.14 ICT Use after the SPFC/PLM Alliance

As the SPF and PLM launch their strike, the two groups use ICTs to share repression information, organize a prisoner welfare check, and record their free activist rally.



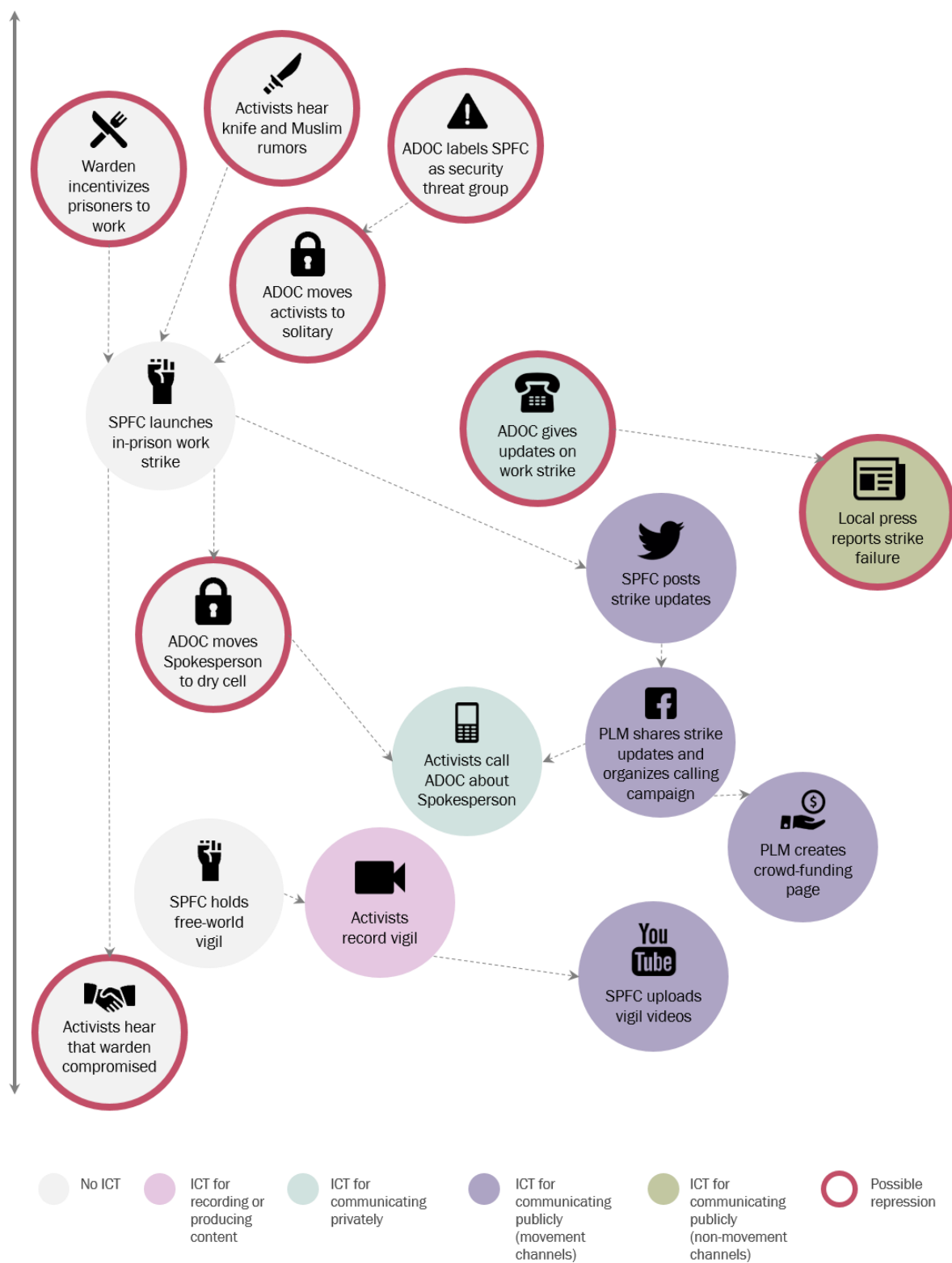


Figure 3.4 ICT Use after the SPFC/PLM Alliance (Mid-April to Mid-May 2014)

### 3.14.1 April Strike Participation Disincentives

Before the strike begins, prison activists face efforts from prison administrators to discourage strike participation. In a joint statement, the SPFC and PLM allege that prison staff are attempting to bribe and scare prisoners into nonparticipation. The forms of bribery (barbecue) and coercion (permission for knives, Muslim rumor) highlight some specific challenges of organizing in Alabama prison environments. To start, prisoners are experiencing so much baseline deprivation that quality food is powerful enticement. Moreover, the threat of knife assault feels credible to prisoners. It's not beyond the imagination of prisoner activists that fellow prisoners would be willing and able to stab or attack them with knives. So too, religious biases are so prevalent at some facilities that even being associated with Muslims is enough to dissuade some prisoners from self-advocating.

In addition to the wider strike disincentives, a group of prison activists are moved to segregation confinement. The rehousing of activists is a severe punishment. In segregation, prisoners are uprooted from their prison communities, isolated from their social worlds, and forced to live in an exceptionally austere environment. The rehousing of some prisoner activists sends two important messages. The first message is that administrators are taking this form of disruption seriously. The consequences of participating in SPFC actions can be severe. The second message is prisoners are taking their activism seriously. Even with the very real threat of segregation, prisoners are still aligning themselves with the SPFC.

### 3.14.2 STG Labeling

Leading up to the strike, the SPFC and PLM discover that prison administrators can legally “mark” activists for engaging in resistance actions. Prisoners who participate in actions are labeled as Security Threat Group (STG) members. The STG label has severe consequences. Prisoners with

the STG label can be kept in segregation indefinitely, reclassified into a higher security level, denied mail, denied visitors, denied phone calls, denied privileges, or even charged with new criminal offenses (depending on the alleged STG activity).

The STG label was created to identify gangs and criminal groups. The label's use, however, has expanded to include any group which poses a possible threat to the security, safety, or order of a prison (Hanser 2018). Perceived STG activity can result in disciplinary consequences and loss of good time for prisoners. Moreover, active STG membership indicates that a prisoner is still engaged in dangerous or criminal behavior, not fully rehabilitated, and not ready for parole. Free activists, too, can be identified as STG members. If assigned this label, they can be barred from visiting, prohibited from sending mail or packages, and removed from approved calling lists.

After the SPFC's STG labeling, Twitter becomes uniquely important for SPFC leaders to connect with journalists. The SPFC uses Twitter to communicate that media requests are not reaching their in-prison leaders and coordinate other means of establishing contact.

### 3.14.3 SPFC and PLM April Strike

The strike is able to gain coverage from an Alabama newspaper. This coverage, however, asserts that the strike is a failure. The SPFC and PLM are unable to carry out their plans; no prisoners are participating. Together, the SPFC and PLM challenge this narrative. They post on social media affirming that prisoners are on strike and experiencing repression. Yet, activists are unable to provide concrete evidence that the strike is taking place. Apart from their statements, the SPFC and PLM do not have photos, videos, or additional corroboration of the strike.

### 3.14.4 Prisoner Welfare Call-In

The PLM hears that the Spokesperson is moved to a dry cell as the strike begins. In the dry cell, he is denied clothes, blankets, a bed, a toilet, and running water. Subsequently, PLM shares a

post which asks activists to “call [the prison’s warden] at [phone number] to demand end to retaliations. Let’s flood the phone lines. Show ‘em that we’re watching!” The PLM encourages supporters to dial-in, request to speak to the warden, and inquire about the Spokesperson’s health and safety. The group’s logic is that, if enough people call-in and ask as the Spokesperson, this will send a message that the free world cares what happens to him and will act if his ill-treatment continues.

#### 3.14.5 Economic Stress and Fundraising

The PLM creates a donation page to address the economic toll of striking. The donations are intended to help offset the financial costs for prisoners participating in collective actions. Prisoner activists, by refusing to work, lose their only way to earn income to purchase items at the prison store (food, over-the-counter medicines, hygiene items, personal care items) and pay legal debts (disciplinary fines, court-imposed financial sanctions). The PLM creates a Fundly.com page to encourage donations, track donation progress, and give public credit to individual donors. PLM leaders urge supporters to chip in. It is unclear, however, how the Fundly contributions are being distributed and if/how the contributions are being transferred to prisoner activists.

#### 3.14.6 SPFC Free Activist Rally

The SPFC and PLM hold their first major free activist resistance effort in April 2014. Free activists, family members of incarcerated activists, and allies gather to give speeches, tell stories, share song and prayer, and discuss future plans. SPFC leaders upload videos of the rally to YouTube. The rally demonstrates that prisoner activists have support from free people. It proves that prisoner activists’ concerns are shared by free people. It also provides an opportunity for free activists to meet other free activists in person. Several activists report that they’ve driven hours to attend the rally, connect with other free activists, and show their support.

### 3.14.7 Appeasement by Prison Administrators

On social media, SPFC activists assert the strike is broken by the stress of collective and individual punishment and minimal appeasement by prison authorities. Activists contend that the warden of one prison promises to overlook drug use and minor violence if prisoners abandon the strike. Enough prisoners are tired of striking or are willing to accept this modest compromise.

### 3.15 Social Processes of Resistance and Repression during the NPRC's Beginnings

The first months of NPRC activism reveal four important processes of ICT use in prisoners' rights resistance and repression: digital authenticity crafting, information sidelining, platform migration, and virtual land exploration.

First, the SPFC's video series demonstrates how ICTs can humanize people and authenticate circumstances. The SPFC videos are shot on cell phones and uploaded in low resolution. The raw quality of the videos works as a tool for digital authenticity crafting. The videos appear believable because they are unpolished. The poor image quality suggests that it's unlikely the videos were edited, enhanced, or altered. The haphazard framing of shots suggests that it's unlikely that the videos were staged or preplanned. The small pauses, interruptions, and messiness of dialogue suggests that it is unlikely that the videos were scripted. These low-quality videos, for this movement, bolster their appeals for help. They substantiate the genuineness of prisoners' claims. They allow prisoners to craft digital authenticity by excluding signifiers of manufactured, crafted, or modified digital content.

Second, the SPFC's videos show how activists can be digitally sidelined, even if they are able to access ICTs and publish digital content. The SPFC publishes hours of video content shot from within a prison on YouTube. Yet, their videos don't result in an immediate public reaction. The videos don't instantly attract hype. In fact, many videos earn less than 20 total views in the

years after they are published. While the videos are findable to outside audiences on the web, they are not necessary appealing to those audiences. The SPFC uploads the videos to their own channel, a channel that, before December 2013, did not have video content and did not have an existing following. Moreover, the videos are also not particularly searchable. Most of the videos are given brief titles: “SPFC 1,” “SPFC 2,” “UNCONDITIONAL LIVING CONDITIONS 1,” AND “UNCONDITIONAL LIVING CONDITIONS 2.” Effectively, their content is sidelined on YouTube. The videos do not gain the views or reactions to be featured on YouTube’s homepage; they aren’t given tags to increase their ranking in search results; and they remain in an isolated, unlinked corner of the YouTube platform.

Third, the SPFC’s move from Facebook to Twitter for public information sharing illustrates how social movements can deploy platform migration in response to movement repression. After the first strike, the SPFC allows its public Facebook page to go dark. SPFC leaders move their public information dissemination efforts to Twitter. This move has two noteworthy implications. First, it means that the movement opponents must find the new platform to stay informed with SPFC plans. In order to anticipate future resistance efforts organized on social media, prison administrators must trace the migration. Moreover, they must realize that a migration, not a movement cessation, is happening. Second, connected SPFC activists and movement allies must also make the move to the new platform. Presumably, the SPFC’s platform switch was possible because activists and allies were readily able to make the Facebook to Twitter migration. This group was already comfortable using Twitter or open to learning how to use Twitter. Leaders were connected enough to securely communicate to other activists how to find the SPFC on the new platform.

Fourth, the interactions between the SPFC and public audiences confirm the risks of virtual

land exploration. In their first few months of activism, the SPFC enters many types of online public spaces. They enter Facebook public, YouTube public, Twitter public, and online news arenas. In these spaces, they are repeatedly met with disbelief, dismissal, aggression, and dehumanization. While new ICTs offer prisoners a way to transcend their physical geographies; they do not promise that the digital geographies they enter will be welcoming, civil, or even safe. Indeed, many spaces seem overtly hostile to prisoners as a category of people. The cultures of these digital lands are deeply connected to the offline cultures of their digital visitors. Many visitors bring anti-prisoner sentiments from their offline cultures and subcultures into these digital spaces.

## **CHAPTER 4. NPRC ACTIVISM IN THE FERGUSON MOMENT (LATE MAY 2014 - EARLY-FEBRUARY 2015)**

### **4.1 The SPFC Starts a Radio Series and the PLM Shares Letters**

Several weeks after the end of the second work strike, the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee launches an online radio show. Prisoner activists and free activists call in to the show to discuss prison issues and their experiences fighting against prison injustices. In the first episode, entitled “Protesting and Why We Must Free Alabama,” the Spokesperson talks about the origins of the SPFC. Then, the Spokesperson’s mother and wife speak about their experiences. The Spokesperson’s wife explains that her husband’s struggle has become her struggle: “A lot of people don’t understand that when your loved one goes to prison, you really go to prison with them.” The show closes with comments from other activists, including a prisoner who is incarcerated in California and a free activist who served time in an Alabama women’s prison.

Three days after recording the first show, the SPFC records another radio show. Four days later, there’s another show. The SPFC begins producing one- to two-hour online radio episodes every few days. On these shows, the Spokesperson, the Spokesperson’s family members, the Chief Political Strategist, and other SPFC activists host conversations with prisoners organizing in Alabama, prisoners organizing in other states, activists fighting for racial equality, a former Black Panther, anarchists, faith leaders, health professionals, and union organizers.

The shows typically open with a spoken word performance or a song. Then, the Spokesperson or Chief Political Strategist introduces the topics for the episode. The Spokesperson’s mother often assumes the role of managing callers on the line. She reads out the last four digits each caller’s phone number when it is their turn to speak.

One episode focuses on staying healthy while in prison and recognizing health risks and



medical neglect. A free activist who works as a nurse discusses a recent outbreak of tuberculosis in an Alabama men's prison. Another episode focuses on the sexual abuse of women prisoners. During the episode, an SPFC activist who recently joined the committee calls in to thank SPFC leaders for acknowledging rape and sexual assault in women's prisons. She gets emotional as she explains, "This is something that has been on my heart for a while and I'm glad to be involved."

As the SPFC is giving voice to its leaders and supporters, the Prisoner Labor Movement is amplifying pleas of prisoners across the United States. The PLM is typing and sharing letters they receive in the mail. The PLM posts a letter on their Facebook page from a group of prisoners in Missouri. The prisoners state that they are being subjected to unbearable heat in their cells and are worried for their health and wellbeing. They ask free people to call into the Missouri Department of Corrections to request that the air conditioning be turned on. The PLM shares a letter from a diabetic prisoner. The prisoner writes that he was recently denied insulin by prison nurses and had to be hospitalized. He filed a grievance and protested his treatment. As a result, he was rehoused in a segregation unit. He asks for moral support and newspapers to read while in segregation. The PLM shares another letter which describes the rape of a transgender woman by her male cellmate in an ICE detention center. The letter writer asks free people to call the ICE Office of Professional Responsibility and demand the prisoner's immediate release.

#### 4.2 CO Heroes, Crybaby Prisoners, and Soft America

In late May, page administrators for Corrections Officers Together and Corrections Talk are posting about acts of heroism by corrections officers with increased frequency. Dozens of posts share stories of corrections officers making personal sacrifices or confronting exceedingly dangerous situations to keep coworkers, free people, and even prisoners safe. One story describes how a CO wrestled away a gun from "an inmate that was far superior in size, strength, motivation

and intention.” Another story details how a CO spotted a burning house on his way to work and ran inside to rescue a family. A third story recounts how a corrections officer saved an inmate who was choking on an orange.

Corrections Talk posts a series of memes thanking corrections officers, former military corrections officers, CO wives (and later CO spouses, following comments like “Hey husbands too”), and parents of COs. The page also shares a CO statement of appreciation from an unknown author. The statement begins, “We are Correctional Officers. Not Guards. (Guards are people who watch school crossings.)” It explains that COs are “policemen” working a beat that is “totally inhabited by convicted felons.” Their job is law enforcement; they must be brave and willing to confront danger at any moment; and their work is thankless. The statement concludes with a hope that someday corrections officers will “receive the respect and appreciation from the public whom ‘we silently serve.’” These CO heroism posts, for the most part, cluster around two U.S. holidays – Memorial Day and the Fourth of July.

In early summer, page administrators are also sharing posts which belittle and infantilize prisoners. One post includes a picture with a series of six images. The images represent how the government views prisoners, how the public views prisoners, how prisoners view themselves, how COs view prisoners, how prisoners act sometimes, and how prisoner act most of the time. The image for how prisoners act most of the time is a sobbing baby boy. Commenters relate to the image:

“All our offenders are big cry babies.....it's like working at a daycare!!!”

“Very true. Especially when they cry about missing a half a cookie.”

“yep, they sure are crybabies about anything and everything”

A later post includes a meme with a young black boy giving a skeptical facial expression. The boy

is saying, “You mean to tell me that there is a way for me to be good and not go back to jail?” Another post equates prisoners to undisciplined children, implying that prisoners never learned to be well-behaved adults. Commenters, too, compare prisoners to children and babies. A commenter who identifies himself as a corrections worker shares a meme showing two babies. One baby is laughing and one baby is crying. The crying baby is yelling, “LT, the CO is picking on Us!”

A portion of commenters lament how the childish behavior of prisoners is tolerated by “soft” America. Political leaders and prison administrators are too lenient with prisoners. One commenter explains that in America, prisoners get “anything they want... its like a summer camp.” Other commenters add that the only political leader holding prisoners accountable is Joe Arpaio, the Arizona sheriff who created a “tent city” jail and reinstituted prison chain gangs. According to a commenter who identifies himself as a Corrections Corporal, America is too reluctant to carry out the death penalty:

America is weak! Execute the ones who deserve it including rapists! Oh wait my bad.. Let's close the prisons and jails and just begin the hug a thug program even when they kill our families we can just hug the thug.

Additional commenters express agreement:

“Firing squad”

“Line em up”

“Need to have more death penalties”

#### 4.3 The SPFC Marches in Alabama

As the summer progresses, the SPFC begins planning more actions for their free activist base. SPFC leaders organize a series of free world marches. They create events on Facebook to coordinate march plans and logistics. The PLM Facebook page and the SPFC Twitter page share

the event information. For one march, free activists meet at a Walmart and walk to the prison where the Spokesperson is being held. They hold signs which say:

“[The warden] must go. Killer. Murderer. No more slavery.”

“Alabama Department of Slavery, Exploitation, and Rape.”

“[Southern Prison Freedom Committee]. Let our people go.”

Officers from the local police department and the sheriff’s office drive to the prison to monitor the protest. Activists take photos of the officers and their vehicles.

A few weeks later, free activists march outside of a women’s prison. They call for justice for a woman who was raped while incarcerated and gave birth while in prison. They demand that the ADOC address the rapes, sexual assaults, and exploitation of women within the prison. The free activists aim to “let the women know that they are not alone, and that they don't have to be afraid.”

The group marches also on the Alabama state capitol. They appeal to the governor of Alabama to end prison slavery and stop prison sexual assault. One activist holds a sign which refers to the governor’s prolife political platform. The sign reads, “Why don’t you care about AL DOC mentally ill they have skin, hair, and nails?” The Spokesperson’s mother documents the marches and shares photos of free activists on Facebook.

#### 4.4 The Alabama DOC Changes Its Disciplinary Code

While SPFC activists are marching on state prisons and the state capitol, the Alabama Department of Corrections is working to expand its prisoner disciplinary code. State corrections officials are reviewing two new rules for prisoners: Rule #340 and Rule #529. Rule #340 states that prisoners refusing to work or failing to check-in for work will be in violation of a low-level rule. Prisoners who commit this violation will forfeit up to three months of good time, lose

privileges for up to 30 days, and receive 30 days of “extra duty.” Rule #529 states that prisoners who participate in online social networking (including webpages, social media, email, and online messaging) will be in violation of a medium-level rule. Prisoners who engage in online social networking could forfeit two years of good time, lose 45 days of privileges, be placed in segregation for 30 days, and be considered for a higher custody status.

In Alabama, participating in social networking as a prisoner is already illegal. In 2012, the Alabama state legislature unanimously passed House Bill 258, prohibiting prisoners from creating, maintaining, or communicating with social media profiles. It is a misdemeanor offense for prisoners to use social media or for individuals to use social media on behalf of prisoners. To be charged with this crime, however, a prisoner (or someone aiding a prisoner) must be brought to court.

The Alabama Department of Corrections formally adopts Rule #340 and Rule #529 on August 1, 2014. The ADOC Commissioner requests that Alabama wardens inform all personnel that the rules have taken effect. Under the new disciplinary code, participating in social networking carries the same punishments as fighting, destroying state property, and intentionally creating a safety hazard. Refusing to work has similar penalties to lying to a corrections officer, disorderly conduct, and possessing contraband.

#### 4.5 ICT Use as Free SPFC Activists Mobilize (Mid-May to August 2014)

In the summer of 2014, the SPFC and PLM are using ICTs to develop platforms for sharing information and coordinate and report on collective actions. The SPFC is building hours of radio content on an online radio site. The PLM is using its Facebook page to share prisoner letters and ask for support.

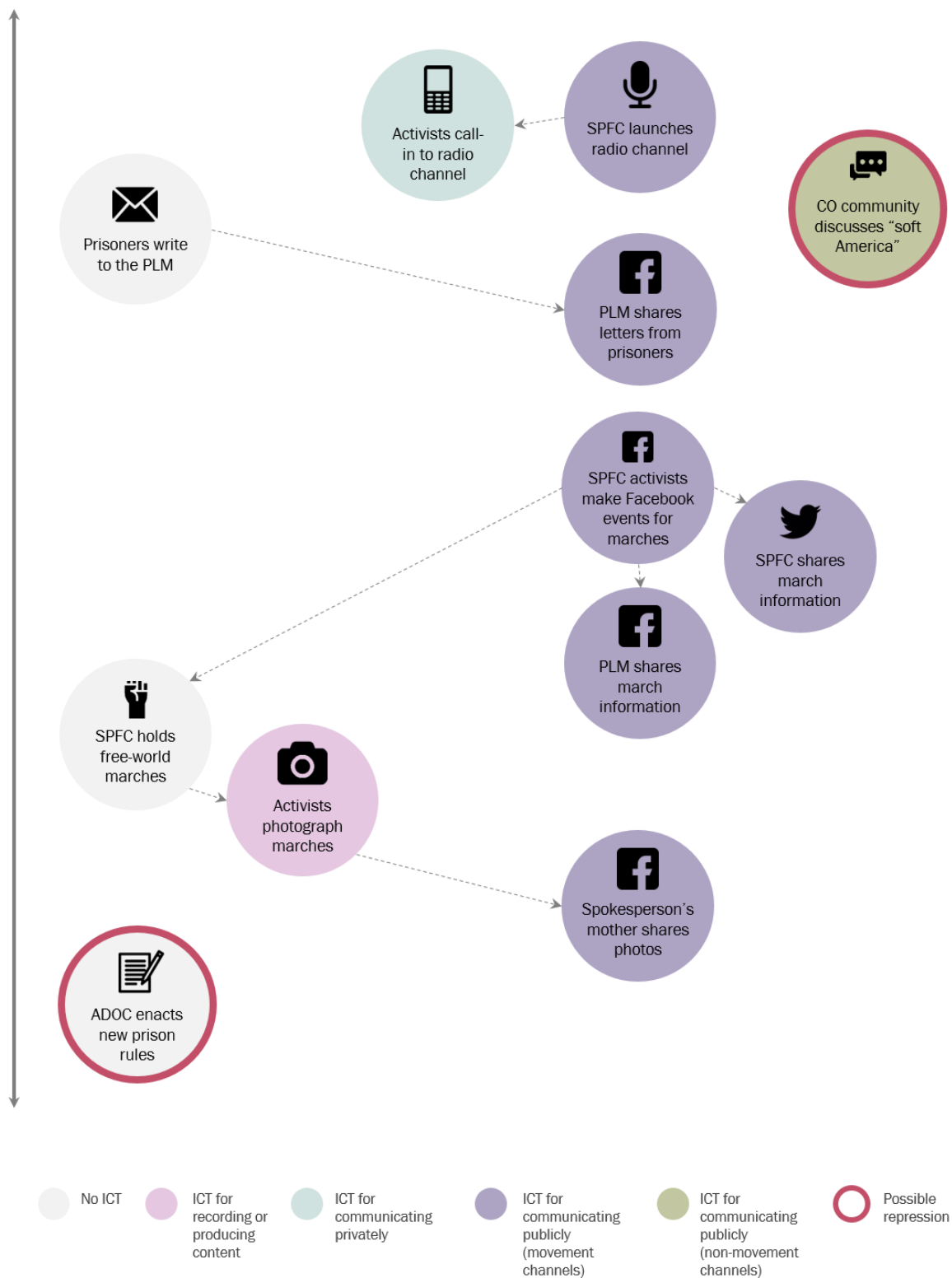


Figure 4.1 ICT Use as Free SPFC Activists Mobilize (Mid-May to Early-August 2014)

#### 4.5.1 SPFC Radio Show Launch

The SPFC's radio show launch creates a new way for activists to inform and teach supporters about prison issues. The Spokesperson, the Chief Political Strategist, and their guests talk in-depth about a variety of topics. In these shows, activists contest hegemonic discourses about the prison system and prisoners (Wozniak 2014). They challenge the notion that prisons are sites of rehabilitation. They contest ideas that the courts and prisons are fair and just. They allege that prison officials are intentionally perpetrating or allowing the perpetration of violence against prisoners, particularly prisoners of color.

The radio shows involve a major time investment from the Spokesperson's mother. As a free activist with access to a computer, she starts the shows' recordings, alerts discussants when callers are on the line, and handles technical issues. Many of the shows are recorded at night. The Spokesperson's mother remarks that, before the radio show, she'd be in bed before 8pm. Since becoming involved in the show, she often stays awake into the early hours of the morning.

The radio show is a major step towards engaging supporters who aren't interested in reading or able to read lengthy pieces of movement writing. The show provides audio that supporters can listen to on their cell phones or computers. Since the show is archived and shared online, supporters can listen to live conversations or stream archived recordings.

The SPFC radio show also allows prisoner activists to share their voices and talk at length in a way that is less risky than recording YouTube videos. Prisoner activists can dial in and speak when they feel safe. They can also hang up and hide their cell phones if they fear detection. The audio is automatically captured in the radio show's recorder. There's no need to save the recordings and upload them later to the internet. Moreover, prisoner activists can engage in real-time verbal conversations with free activists and supporters calling-in.

#### 4.5.2 CO Talk: Soft America

At the start of the summer, corrections worker pages are sharing accounts of COs making incredible sacrifices and confronting extraordinarily difficult situations. These stories have two important consequences. First, they forefront the heroic actions of members of the CO community. The stories convey a message that corrections workers are courageous, tough, and able to confront danger. Second, they reinforce the moral value of individual willpower and bravery. Many of these accounts involve a lone hero, prepared to suffer in order to keep others safe. The hero does not wait for someone else to help. The hero disregards their own safety and comfort. The hero accepts the possible costs and springs to action.

Prisoners offer a symbolic contrast to CO heroes. In some stories, prisoners explicitly represent the possible source of danger in hero stories. A prisoner is holding a gun, assaulting a CO, or planning to attack a CO. On a subtler level, prisoners are caricatured as the antithesis of heroism. They need to be taken care of; they complain about things like not getting a cookie; and they expect certain comforts.

The “America is soft” and “America is weak” discourse draws from this caricature. The discourse juxtaposes the struggles and strength of corrections workers with the neediness and dependence of prisoners. Corrections officers sacrifice while, according to one commenter, “carebear convict loving toolbags” coddle and indulge prisoners. By this logic, the U.S. prison system is soft, unable to carry out the punishment that these people lacking moral character deserve. On Facebook, comments that American is weak and suggestions to execute more lawbreakers receive likes. It is difficult to gauge if these comments earn likes because others view them as accurate, provocative, or humorous (Pozzi et al. 2017).



#### 4.5.3 PLM Letter Sharing

The PLM's letter sharing initiative seems to be a response to an influx of prisoner pleas for help. The group is receiving letters from prisoners and on behalf of prisoners in serious and sometimes dire situations. Unlike the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee, the Prisoner Labor Movement is based outside of prison. The PLM can mobilize large numbers of free activists who have easy access to computers, cell phones, and social media. These activists can easily put information on the internet, contact prison administrators, and reach free people who could be willing to offer assistance.

Moreover, many PLM activists have experience organizing large-scale resistance efforts. Leaders of the PLM are able to identify prison administrators who might be pressured into addressing particular prison problems. They have connections to journalists who write about human rights issues. The PLM, through its affiliation with the labor union, has some resources and notoriety. By sharing letters and asking free people to help, the PLM positions itself as a prisoner support organization. The group largely responds to prison injustices by spreading information and proposing low-risk, low-commitment resistance efforts by free activists, such as scripted call-in campaigns and letter writing campaigns.

#### 4.5.4 SPFC Free Activist Marches

Contrastingly, the SPFC is asking free activists to get in the streets, go to the prisons, and make noise. The committee calls for a series of marches over the summer. The marches require that activists meet at a prearranged location and walk as a group to a prison or government building. The marches serve several important functions. First, photos of the marches demonstrate to prisoner activists that free activists are willing to spend time and money driving to a location to raise awareness about prison issues. Second, they show that free activists are willing to confront

risks and discomfort. During the marches, free activists are monitored by law enforcement. So too, most marches take place in unfavorable weather. Free activists must plan and prepare to walk in the Alabama summer heat. Third, the marches allow free activists to connect offline and spend time together. The Spokesperson's mother meets radio show listeners; new activists meet veteran activists; and the families of prisoner activists connect with one another.

#### 4.5.5 ADOC Disciplinary Code Changes

The late summer change to the Alabama Department of Corrections' disciplinary code directly impacts prisoner activists. Two new rules assign swift, ADOC-level punishments for prisoners participating in social networking and refusing to work. The new rules allow corrections administrators to address prisoner resistance without court involvement. Disciplinary code violations can be handled within the prison by prison staff. They are heard by a prison disciplinary hearing officer, who assigns guilt and punishment. There is no need to file a complaint with the district attorney, put the case on a judicial calendar, or try the offense in a courtroom. No judge or jury is needed to decide whether the prisoner is guilty of the violation or what sanctions the prisoner should receive.

#### 4.6 The SPFC Stands with Ferguson

In early August, the SPFC is primarily hosting radio conversations and organizing free activist marches. Then, on August 9, activists learn of the shooting of Michael Brown Jr. in Ferguson, Missouri. In the days following the shooting, the SPFC Twitter page retweets information about Brown's death, protests at the Ferguson police department, and Ferguson activist repression. Prisoner activists stay informed about Ferguson protest activity through a live-tweet information chain. The Spokesperson and other prisoner activists with internet access copy

tweets from on-the-ground Ferguson activists. Then, they forward the texts' tweets to other activists using text messaging.

The Spokesperson reaches out to Ferguson activist leaders on Twitter. He tweets photos of himself in segregation. In one photo, he's standing in his cell with a white paper taped to his chest. He's holding his hands in the air. The white paper has a handwritten message: “#MikeBrown #HandsUpDon'tShoot #Ferguson [Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee].” In other photos, he's shirtless or wearing a prison uniform and holding his hands up. The Spokesperson makes connections between the movement in Ferguson and SPFC activism. He writes in a Twitter post, “Mass incarceration, prisons slavery, and long term incarceration kills too!! Police brutality and mass incarceration reflects how U.S. feels about black people.”

The Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee hosts a radio show episode in which activists reflect on Brown's death, police violence, racialized state violence, and mass incarceration. The radio show participants have a moment of silence for Michael Brown Jr. They discuss the criminalization and demonization of black men in American. “We can refer to Mike Brown because it is a microcosm of what is going on in America,” the Spokesperson explains, “They made him a gang member. But they didn't want to use him in his cap and gown from his graduation ceremony... They wanted to put an image out there that was negative.”

Initially, SPFC and PLM activists identify with the Ferguson activists. They engage with activist group leaders in Ferguson on Twitter and tweet support. Over time, however, SPFC and PLM leaders notice that not all Ferguson activist groups are interested in allying with, associating with, or acknowledging prisoners. The PLM urges Ferguson activists not to forget about state violence in prison: “To those engaging in the uprising in Ferguson, please do not forget the victims of mass imprisonment of people of color who are being brutalized in jails and prisons in the state

of Missouri and around the country.” So too, the Spokesperson writes a post asking, “Do all black lives matter?” He explains:

I am asking because it seems rather strange to me that we have all of this activity going on right under [our] noses, and yet we haven't saw a single organization put on a protest at a single prison in the country.  
We see demonstrations and protests at police stations to protest police brutality. We seem people organizing the # SHUTITDOWNdemonstration on highways and busy intersections. We see all of this political activity, but we see no one organizing any rally, protest, or anything else for our cause.

In the post, the Spokesperson questions whether the lives of black people who “have a history” are really being valued.

The Spokesperson also discovers that some Ferguson leaders calling for lawful protests on Twitter and condemning protesters who break the law. He responds by challenging the idea that breaking the law isn't the “right” way to seek justice. According to the Spokesperson, movements need activists who are committed and “prepared to go to jail.” He accuses these leaders of splintering their base and appeasing “the slave masters.” Likewise, the Spokesperson encounters Twitter posts from Ferguson leaders declaring that people who aren't physically in the streets of Ferguson and people who support the movement online are not real activists. He writes that some people are internet activists: “Too many Internet Activist, which are distinguishable from those using social media to promote Movements/Revolutions.” He and his fellow prisoner activists, however, are the realest of activists. They've sacrificed in the realest ways for their cause. “I eat, sleep and life in the worst conditions in u.s.a. prison. Solitary Confinement,” he proclaims, “Does your bed have a hitching post on it ? That ain't a Serta mattress.”

#### 4.7 COs Discuss Hypervigilance

Page administrators for corrections officer online communities are not inviting conversations about the shooting of Michael Brown. Instead, these pages are hosting conversations about

workplace fear, preparedness, and the idea of hypervigilance. Corrections Talks posts a series of memes about CO safety. The page shares a picture of a white man's hand resting on a cell door. The picture is accompanied by bolded text which warns, "Always watch the hands. They conceal weapons that will kill you." Commenters respond:

"Constant vigilance!"

"Watch the hands, eyes, and body language!!"

"Any inmate attacking an officer should be executed. That'll take the wind out of their 'who's the baddest in the yard' games."

Then, there's a picture of a group of heavily-tattooed nonwhite prisoners working out in a prison yard. The picture is surrounded by text that reads, "Remember, every day you don't work out, they do." Commenters agree: "This is why you have to work out!!!!!!"

On Corrections Officers Together, corrections workers are discussing feelings of paranoia. The page shares a post in which a former warden writes about the benefits of embracing paranoia. "Paranoia helps us prevent compromising our organizational and personal security. It is a tool of the trade unofficially kept close to prevent an attack or breach of security," the former warden argues. A corrections worker responds in the comments:

I wouldn't call it paranoia, I think the term 'hypervigilance' is more accurate. Anyone who has walked the yard, surrounded by 1500 of the most dangerous, hateful, violent individuals, knows what 'hypervigilance' is. Paranoia is when you suffer an illness, hypervigilance keeps Officers alive.

In these posts, there's a general consensus that corrections workers should treat prisoners with suspicion and remain constantly alert to signs of danger. Mistrust is an essential professional skill.

#### 4.8 A Cell Phone Riot?

On September 5<sup>th</sup>, the PLM and SPFC Facebook accounts announce that a "full scale riot" is taking place at an Alabama men's prison. It is a prison where the Southern Prisoner Freedom

Committee “has people.” On the SPFC’s Twitter, prisoner activists give updates about the riot:

“Multiple riot teams.”

“It’s a full scale riot. Set a block on fire and got police hostage.”

“They got guns.”

The SPFC writes that the riot started after the deaths of two prisoners at the facility.

Prisoner activists and free activists talk about the deaths in an online radio episode. They recall that two prisoners died after using synthetic marijuana. After the deaths, the Alabama Department of Corrections brought in riot teams to search the facility for drugs and other dangerous contraband. Many prisoners had their property disturbed, destroyed, and confiscated during the searches. Tensions in the prison were high. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, a prisoner resisted a search of his belongings. The resistance resulted in a physical altercation between the prisoner and a correctional officer, which escalated into a multiple prisoner/officer fight, which escalated into a riot.

Prisoner activists accuse corrections workers of introducing the drugs. The Chief Political strategist explains:

When brothers are on drugs, they’re lethargic, they’re lazy, and they’re not focused and they get distracted easy. And since January this year, when we started the movement, we’ve noticed that there’s been a larger influx and availability of drugs throughout these institutions.

According to prisoner activists, corrections officers brought in drugs or allowed drugs to enter the facility in order to thwart prisoner resistance and justify expensive and disruptive mass searches. To these activists, the idea seems highly plausible. They argue that the U.S. government has engaged in unethical practices to subvert civil rights movement in the past, including COINTELPRO.

Officially, the Alabama Department of Corrections blames the riot on a contraband cell

phone. A correctional officer was conducting a contraband search when he was attacked by a prisoner who didn't want to surrender an illegal cell phone. "Contraband cell phones present a number of security issues. Today's incident being just one example," an ADOC representative explains. Yet, prisoner activists question this framing of the event. They allege that the ADOC is trying to stoke fear around prison cell phones to repress prison activists. "This 'they had a cellphone' line is the same one that the ADOC always uses. They used it for the last confrontation in 2011," the SPFC tweets.

On their radio show, SPFC activists note that the Alabama Department of Corrections claims that cell phones are dangerous but rarely explains why. The Spokesperson contends, "They never say anything illegal is being done with the phones. They don't say that the phones are being used to try to help people escape. Or any of that." According to activists, the ADOC hasn't publicized any events in which cell phones were used in the commission of a crime by a prisoner. "It's because the cell phones are being used to expose the violations, the civil human rights violations that take place inside of the prisons," the Spokesperson argues. One activist wonders why the ADOC identifies a SPFC prisoner activist as the riot ringleader, even though the activist was not involved in the initial officer assault.

#### 4.9 The Alabama DOC Considers Managed Access Systems

Following the riot, the Alabama Department of Corrections announces that it plans to install cell signal managed access systems in prisons across the state. These managed access systems would allow prison officials to identify and block cell phone calls from within prisons. Officials could also approve certain types of calls, such as emergency calls or calls from official cell numbers. The system they intend to implement would recognize calls, texts, and internet messaging (including social media). According to the ADOC, prison administrators hope to turn

prison cellphones “into paperweights.”

An Alabama Department of Corrections representative contends that prison cells phones have become an urgent issue in Alabama. “We’ve got people throwing bags of contraband over the fence line at every prison every day. We’ve got some officers who are willing to bring them in,” the representative explains. He asserts that prisoners are using the phones to conduct scams, extort free people for money, and coordinate prison drug smuggling.

In total, the ADOC plans to ask for \$6 million dollars from the state legislature to install these systems at seven prisons. The ADOC representative acknowledges that there are cheaper ways to deal with electronic contraband, including tools that allow officers to locate and detect contraband cell phones. According to the representative, though, cell phone locators will not be as effective as limited access systems.

#### 4.10 ICT Use during the Ferguson Unrest

During the Ferguson unrest, the SPFC and PLM use ICTs to share news of Ferguson actions. The two groups rely on cell phones and social media to engage with activist groups in Ferguson. Additionally, the fall 2014 riot spotlights Alabama corrections administrators’ concerns about prison cellular contraband use. The SPFC uses new ICTs to challenge ADOC characterizations of the riot.



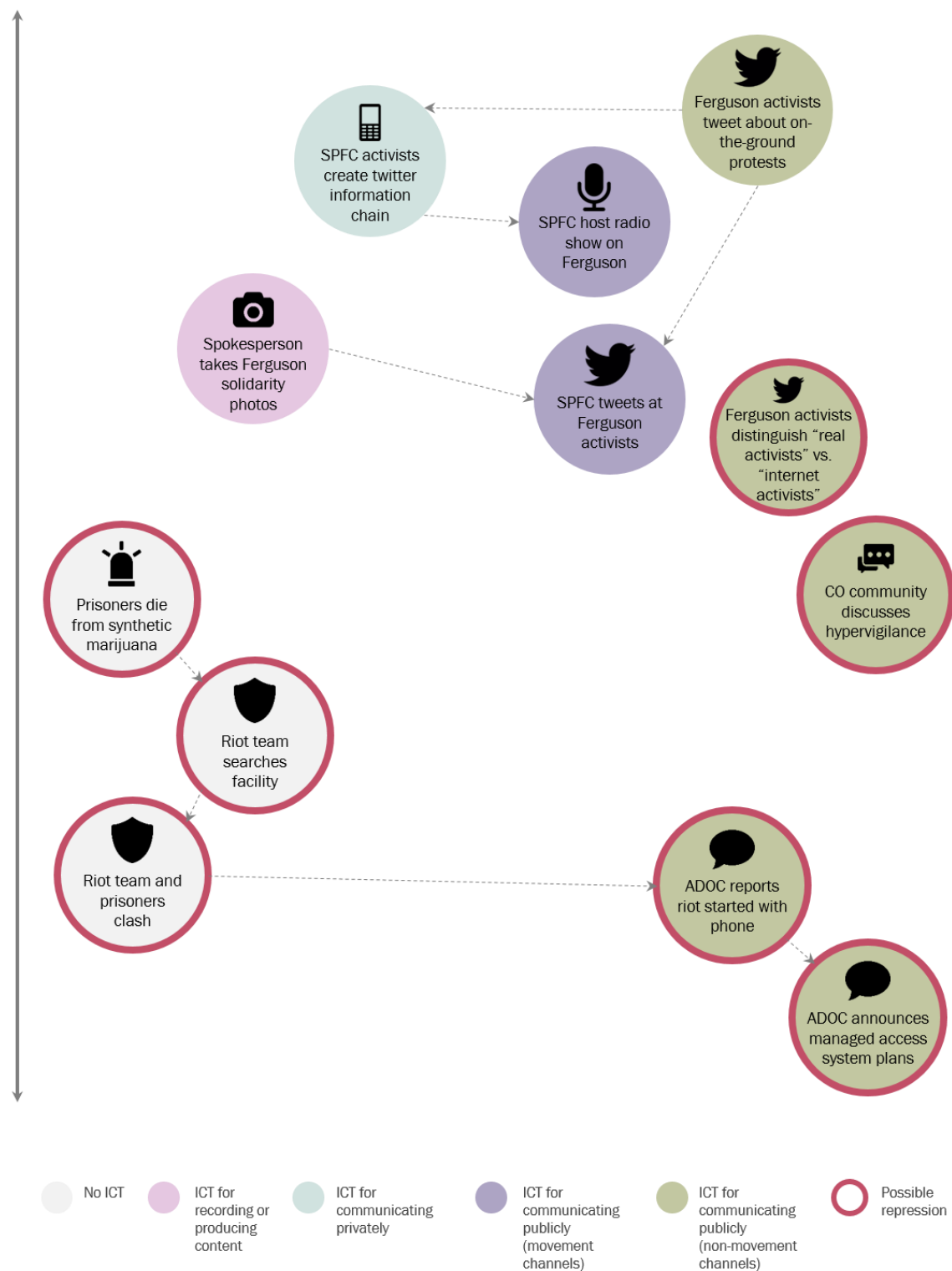


Figure 4.2 ICT Use during the Ferguson Unrest (Fall 2014)

#### 4.10.1 Ferguson Information Chain

In the wake of the shooting of Michael Brown Jr., SPFC prisoner activists are drawn to social media. The Spokesperson and other prisoner activists set up a text chain to keep everyone updated with news from Twitter. The text chain helps to spread information that might not be included in media reports to a wide net of prison activists. It is, however, a highly reductive communication method.

In effect, prisoner activists with the most high-tech cell phones become beacons of internet information. Prisoner activists with low-tech cell phones can only read the messages that are sent to them. Prisoner activists with low-tech cell phones have no way to check the information's sources and trustworthiness. Downstream prisoner activists lose the context and credibility signals that internet access affords.

#### 4.10.2 Ferguson Solidarity and “Real Activist” Discourses

At first, the SPFC is eager to express its solidarity with activists in Ferguson. They use internet-capable cell phones, cell phone photography, and Twitter to connect with Ferguson activists. Over time, though, SPFC leaders become critical of Ferguson activist groups. Some of these groups fail to mention prisoners as victims of law enforcement violence. Moreover, they overtly or subtly marginalize prisoners who are only able to participate through the internet (as opposed to in-person). These rebuffs are important. They highlight the social processes (in this case, grievance and victim construction and “real activist” definitions) that must supplement technological connection for movements to use ICTs to form alliances.

#### 4.10.3 “Hypervigilance” Discourses

While prisoner activists are engaging with Ferguson protesters, corrections officers are expressing concerns about on-the-job safety. On corrections worker Facebook pages, COs tell each

other to “be safe,” “stay safe,” and “watch each other’s backs.” Two corrections worker pages post information about how to stay safe with hypervigilance. The notion of hypervigilance is not new; however, these page administrators are revisiting the topic. This dialogue suggests that corrections workers should be ever-suspicious, ever-ready to recognize signs of danger, and ever-ready to react.

#### 4.10.4 Prison Drugs, Searches, and the Cell Phone Riot

In the fall of 2014, SPFC prisoner activists assert that prison administrators are allowing drugs to be brought into the facility. The SPFC’s Chief Political Strategist argues that prison administrators don’t mind drugs in the facility. The drugs give prison administrators a reason to mass search prisoners’ cells and belongings. These searches, regardless of their true motive, make prisoner activism more difficult. The presence of the riot team that conducts the searches means more eyes on prisoners, prisoner behavior, and prisoner belongings.

During the searches, an altercation occurs between a prisoner and a corrections worker and the situation escalates to a riot. Prison officials place blame for the riot on a contraband cell phone. SPFC prisoner activists resist this characterization of the riot.

On their radio show, on their Twitter page, and on their Facebook page, prisoner activists argue that the riot would not have happened without the drug deaths, searches, and facility-wide tension. The ADOC and SPFC framings of the riot point to different causes: 1) prisoners wanting to use cell phones to commit more crimes and 2) prison officials introducing or allowing drugs to be smuggled into prisons. Likewise, the framings point to different solutions: 1) get rid of dangerous cell phones and 2) get rid of prison drugs.

#### 4.10.5 Cell Phone Crackdown

The riot proves to be effective in stimulating anti-phone action from the ADOC. The ADOC

announces plans to implement a managed access systems in state prisons. The managed access systems, if funded, will cut prisoners off from cell communications – no texting, no messaging, no social media. Prisoner activists understand this response as a covert method of suppressing SPFC activism.

#### 4.11 Prisoner Activists Find Support

After the “cell phone riot,” the SPFC finds two new important types of support. First, the PLM convinces its associated labor union to waive member dues for prisoners. Free members of the labor union are required to pay dues to receive union support. PLM leaders assert that prisoners should be included in the union, but dues will impose too much of a financial burden for prisoners. They announce, “due the exploitative nature of the prison system, prisoners are granted free [labor union] membership, and will not be required to pay dues while in prison.” PLM leaders explain that this strategy of inclusion will enable the union to “build solid bridges between prisoners on the inside and fellow workers on the outside.”

Second, after months of pleading for legal help, the SPFC receives news that a large civil rights nonprofit will be filing a class action lawsuit against the prison where the Spokesperson is incarcerated. The suit accuses the Alabama Department of Corrections of promoting a culture of violence at the prison. The suit’s complaint reads:

Plaintiffs are men presently confined in the custody [at the facility], where mismanagement, poor leadership, overcrowding, inadequate security, and unsafe conditions, including broken and nonfunctioning locks on the majority of cell doors, have lead to an extraordinarily high homicide rate, weekly stabbings and assaults, and a culture where violence is tolerated, creating conditions of confinement that violate the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. Because of poor management, drugs and other contraband – in many cases contraband that is brought into the Facility and sold to prisoners by officers or DOC staff – are prevalent. Furthermore, correctional staff fail to follow policies and procedures and sometimes ignore urgent pleas for assistance that then results in serious violence. The potential for violence is exacerbated by the dearth

of basic hygiene supplies, including soap, toilet paper, and underclothing, that can only be obtained by purchase or favor.

Initially, prisoner activists are excited by the news. They believe that the lawsuit will result in the removal of dangerous prison officials, including the warden of the prison. “Progress is being made,” the Chief Political Officer announces.

Soon after the lawsuit is filed, the ADOC settles in court. They agree to implement new incident management software, fix broken cell door locks, install security cameras, and create a transitional unit for prisoners leaving segregation. The nonprofit calls the settlement “a huge victory for the men and their families.”

Yet, SPFC members are not content with the agreement and don’t feel that it will bring about real change. Moreover, after the lawsuit is settled, prisoner activists begin to notice a trend. The SPFC tweets, “The Alabama Department of Corrections seems to be implementing some type of covert operation where they are isolating everyone who has filed any type of litigation against [the prison] into the maximum segregation unit.” Prisoners named in the nonprofit’s suit are being reassigned to segregation. SPFC activists allege that the nonprofit appears unconcerned about this retaliation now that the suit is settled.

#### 4.12 Blue Lives Matter and CO Bashings

As 2014 comes to a close, corrections workers are reacting to the news of two police murders. On December 21, 2014, two New York City police officers, Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, are ambushed and shot to death in Brooklyn. Media sources report that the killer was seeking revenge for the deaths of Michael Brown Jr. (killed by a police officer in Ferguson) and Eric Garner (killed by police officers in Staten Island). Many corrections workers are shaken. They identify with the officers; they see themselves as members of the same “blue brotherhood.” One

corrections worker page, America's Invisible Warriors, posts "We the Administrator 's of [this page] Support Our Brothers and Sisters of the NYPD! #bluelivesmatter !" The page warns that everyone in law enforcement should think about their own safety:

\* \* \* Attention All Law Enforcement Officer's !!! \* \* \*  
Please take all threats as serious threats! Let's All be safe and watch each others backs!

In later posts, page administrators explain that law enforcement officers include corrections workers.

The administrators of Corrections Officers Together also express concern for the safety of corrections workers. The page shares an article which reports an uptick in correctional officer bashings and assaults. The article is written by a former warden (the same former warden that wrote the paranoia article). The former warden explains:

Cops on the streets are becoming vivid targets of those anti-government movement people and as they are arrested, incarcerated for their crimes they re-focus their deadly energies on correctional officers who represent the same line of authority as the cops do on the streets.

The former warden argues that violence inside jails and prisons is on the rise. Moreover, "resistance to authority is growing" among prisoners. To respond to this threat, he proposes "unannounced mass searches of all areas as well as staff, visitors, and prisoners." The searches, the former warden says, will help reduce the amount of dangerous contraband in prisons, including weapons, drugs, and cell phones.

#### 4.13 A Newsletter and a Bloody Winter

In the new year, the PLM publishes its first official piece of literature – a newsletter. The newsletter includes profiles of prisoner activists, information about prison resistance efforts, drawings, and essays. One article discusses the progress of the SPFC. Another article considers

how corrections professionals and corporations “benefit financially from the prison boom.” The newsletter is edited by a prisoner activist and two free activists. Another free activist manages the design and layout. The prisoner editor expresses that the newsletter is meant to “inspire people and move people and contribute to a goal.” He explains that the PLM receives lots of material from activists and supports and the organization doesn’t have the resources to publish it all. PLM activists plan to send physical copies of the newsletter to prisoner activists. They expect, however, that the newsletters may be rejected by prison officials. Free activists can purchase newsletter subscriptions for \$20 per year.

The PLM continues to share letters on their Facebook page from prisoners experiencing injustices. There’s a letter from a prisoner in segregation. The prisoner writes that correctional officers are using lights as punishment. The lights in his unit are “left on 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.” He asks free people to call the prison warden and ask him to stop this light torture. There’s another letter from prisoners accusing correctional officers of staging prisoner fights in a Missouri prison. The letter writers ask that free people to call the warden to demand that “gladiator fights are not being conducted for guards amusement.” There are other letters and other requests. One prisoner needs urgent dental work; another prisoner requests a formal investigation of an officer who is “bullying” prisoners; a third prisoner wants to be told why he is in segregation. The PLM posts these letters along with phone numbers of prison officials that free people can call.

The PLM is also amplifying news of SPFC activist struggles. The SPFC, according to prisoner activists, is experiencing a bloody winter. Since the legal settlement (brought about by the civil rights nonprofit’s class action lawsuit), prisoner activists have not observed any new safety measures at the named facility (the prison where the Spokesperson is incarcerated). Most cell doors still do not lock; the prison is operating well-above its intended capacity; and the warden

has ended a nonviolence and conflict resolution program. Moreover, assaults on prisoners by officers and prisoner-on-prisoner stabbings seem to be happening more frequently.

On their radio show, SPFC prisoner activists explain that they are surrounded by violence – violence from other prisoners, violence from correctional officers. On January 20, the SPFC and PLM report that the prison is on lockdown. The prison’s warden has called in a riot team to manage the unrest:

The Riot Team is at [the prison] in Alabama right now. Appx. 8 people have been stabbed this week, two are in the hospital fighting for their life, and appx. 3 incidents where officer either beat or tried to beat someone. One man is on the walk right now with blood all over him.

Prisoner activists wonder why the nonprofit hasn’t intervened. Where are the lawyers who promised to make the prison safer?

SPFC activists assert that violence in this facility is becoming normalized. The prison warden is intentionally putting their safety at risk. They point out that the warden has a history of violence towards prisoners. Just two years before his promotion, he served a two-day suspension for beating a handcuffed and shackled prisoner. “The sad thing about the violence [at this facility] is that it can be stopped,” the SPFC writes. The warden, however, doesn’t seem interested in addressing the stabbings and assaults. The Prisoner Labor Movement asks supporters to contact the ADOC with this message:

[The warden] has created a toxic and hopeless environment where violence rules and where there is no accountability and no respect for administrative regulations and no resources allocated to education and rehabilitation. He has overseen an administration that has repeatedly violated the civil and human rights of the men incarcerated under his authority.

PLM leaders share information about how to get in touch with the Alabama Department of Corrections’ Incoming Commissioner. They call the campaign “Stop the Reign of Terror.”

In addition to the ADOC commissioner contact campaign, PLM and SPFC leaders start a



petition and hold a vigil. The petition calls for the immediate firing of the warden of the prisoner where the Spokesperson is incarcerated. It explains that the facility is experiencing “historic levels of violence.” They implore the ADOC to end the warden’s “abuse of power and state-engineered violence.” They refer to the ADOC as the “Department of Death.”

The petition gets almost 60 signatures. Signees comment on their reasons for supporting the petition:

“Because [the warden] is not a very good warden. He really needs to be in prison.”

“Because it's the right thing to do. If you've ever had family or friends behind bars, you'll realize that they are still human (and some actually innocent) and do not deserve to be abused or killed at the hands of bullies.”

“Prisoners should not be killed at the hands of guards and warden. Justice needs to be done, and you need someone running the prison the way it suppose to run , not corrupt by the workers.”

Some of these signees mention family members in the facility and in prison. The Spokesperson’s mother is listed as the petition’s contact person.

A week and a half after the lockdown, the Spokesperson’s mother coordinates a free activist vigil outside of the facility. The “Stop the Violence” vigil intends to draw attention to the prisoner stabbings, assaults, and murders under the warden’s leadership. A flier for the vigil encourages prisoners’ “wives, mothers, grandmothers, and anyone with loved ones at [the facility]” to attend.

#### 4.14 ICT Use as the Nonprofit Intervenes

In late 2014 and early 2015, the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee and Prisoner Labor Movement primarily use ICTs to synthesize and circulate information about prisoner abuses and prisoner activism. Activists navigate a tense sociopolitical environment where prisoners and corrections workers alike are concerned for their physical safeties.

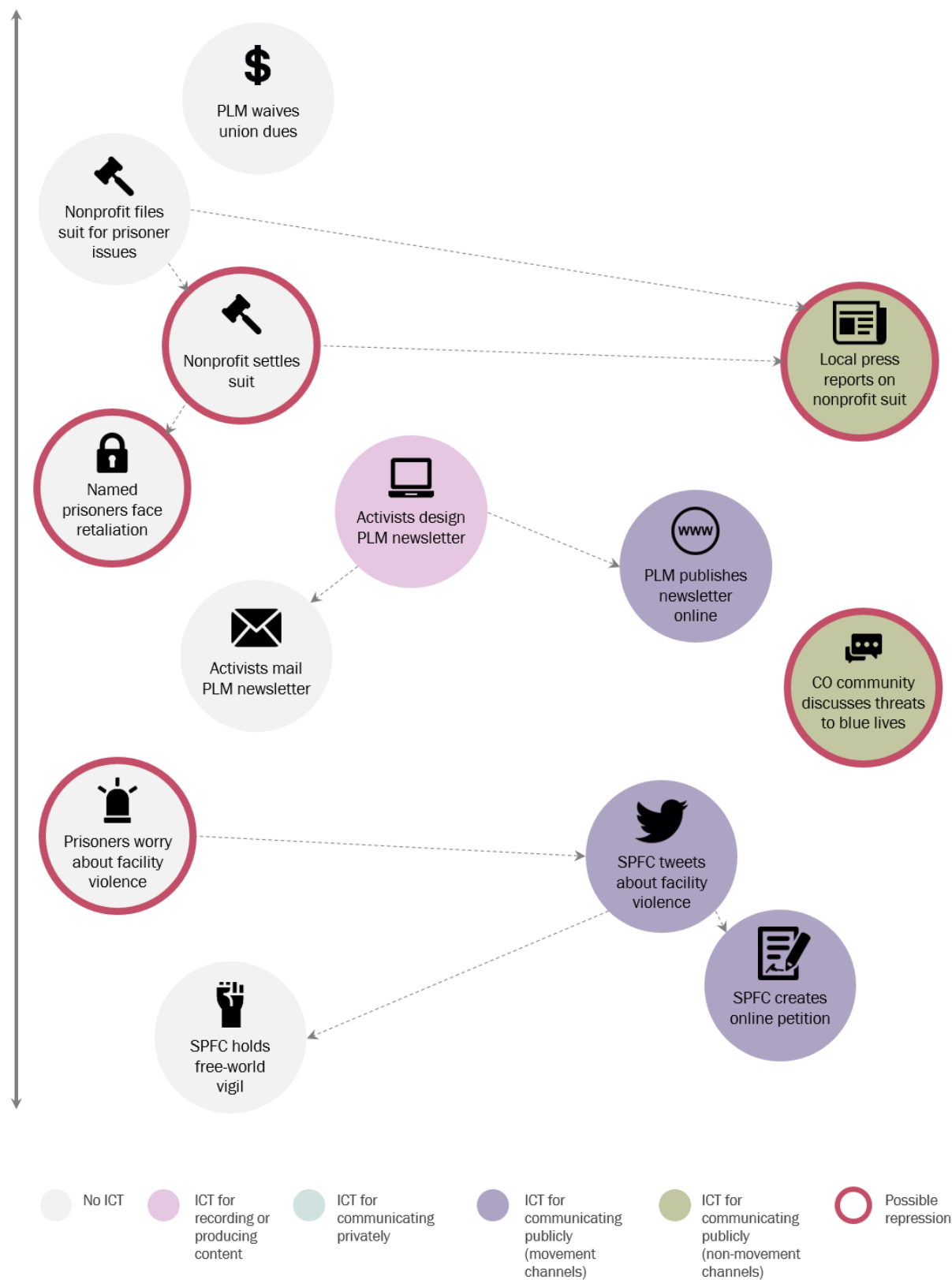


Figure 4.3 ICT Use as the Nonprofit Intervenes (Late 2014/Early 2015)

#### 4.14.1 PLM Dues Waiver

In October 2014, the PLM announces that prisoner activists will be allowed to join a large labor union without paying dues. The recognition of prisoners as union members has material consequences. It means that prisoners can mobilize a new type of support – support from free world union workers. These are members who are paying dues and raising funds. The recognition of prisoners as union members also has important symbolic consequences. It acknowledges that prisoners are people who work, people who can be exploited and mistreated at work, and people who deserve fair working conditions. So too, the recognition signals a preliminary acceptance of prisoner worker issues as collective labor issues. It indicates that the struggle of free world workers is connected to the struggle of workers in prison and that free world and in-prison workers mutually benefit from solidarity.

The PLM Facebook page uploads a scan of a letter from a prisoner who joins the union after the dues are waived. The prisoner writes that being a member “is an honor in which I will I will do my best to be an asset worthy of this position.” The upload receives supportive feedback. Commenters write “Welcome, fellow worker!” and “All against oppression. Thanks for helping us carry the fight along.”

#### 4.14.2 Nonprofit Civil Suit

Prisoner activists also seem to be gaining support from outside organizations. One civil rights nonprofit takes prison grievances seriously. This nonprofit is, in fact, a nonprofit that the SPFC appealed to for help in YouTube videos. Neither the SPFC nor the nonprofit confirm if members of the nonprofit watched or knew about the videos. The nonprofit files a class action lawsuit accusing the Alabama Department of Corrections of violating prisoners’ rights to be free of “cruel and unusual punishment.” The suit gains some media attention. Journalists praise the

nonprofit for taking up the cause and fighting for justice.

Ultimately, the nonprofit settles the suit with the ADOC. Named prisoners will not be financially compensated for their pain. The prison, however, will see safety improvements. The ADOC will not fire the prison's warden. The prison, however, will get security cameras and functional cell door locks. Prisoner activists are disappointed. They hoped that the lawsuit would achieve bigger changes, more systemic changes. Moreover, prisoners named in the lawsuit face retaliation. Over time, the ADOC moves these named prisoners into segregation cells. The SPFC's collaboration with the nonprofit makes SPFC leaders distrustful of nonprofit legal organizations. The Spokesperson questions whose interests these nonprofits have in mind.

#### 4.14.3 COs Identify with Police Officers

After the shooting of Michael Brown Jr., prisoner activists see themselves in Brown. They too feel like victims of law enforcement violence. They call for justice for Michael Brown Jr. and all victims of state violence. Many correctional officers, however, identify with Brown's killer, Officer Darren Wilson. On corrections worker pages, commenters emphasize that police officers and correctional officers are on the same team. After two police officers are shot in New York City (by a man who was allegedly seeking revenge for police violence), correctional officers again see themselves in the fallen police officers. Page administrators for one corrections worker page, America's Invisible Warriors, use the hashtag "BlueLivesMatter." They emphasize that corrections workers are also part of the blue community.

This identification with police officers is noteworthy. Earlier in the year, Corrections Talk was sharing posts comparing corrections officers to police officers. Corrections Talk shared the "NO GUNS JUST GUTS" meme which many commenters interpreted as a contrast between police officers (who typically have guns in the U.S.) and corrections officers (who typically don't). So

too, the page shared an illustration of a hulk-like man called “Yard Monster.” In the illustration, Yard Monster is saying, “I am a Corrections Officer. If you can’t walk my beat unarmed, maybe you should consider being a Policeman.”

#### 4.14.4 The PLM Newsletter

The PLM continues to share letters on their Facebook page from prisoners asking for assistance. These letters begin to take a common form: plea, information about a person in charge who can intervene, and contact information for the person in charge. At the start of 2015, though, the Prisoner Labor Movement creates a new outlet for prisoner expression. The PLM publishes a newsletter.

The newsletter is polished. Its layout and design indicate that the document was carefully put together using computer software. Headings, subheadings, and sections have distinct fonts. Pictures are seamlessly integrated into the newsletter’s layout. In the newsletter, there are stories of prisoner mistreatment and calls to action. Yet, there are also stories of hope and encouragement. The newsletter profiles prisoners who are fighting valiantly against harsh repression. This new piece of literature offers a way for prisoners to be recognized, outside of pleas for assistance.

#### 4.14.5 Prison Violence and Anti-Violence Activism

The SPFC begins 2015 with a renewed concern for facility violence. The Spokesperson takes to Twitter to announce that the nonprofit that sued that ADOC did not succeed. Prisoners fear abuse from COs and violence from fellow prisoners. The SPFC has not seen concrete safety improvements. Things feel more dangerous for Alabama prisoners. This announcement starkly contrasts earlier news that the nonprofit effectively pressured the ADOC to make safety-related changes. Yet, the nonprofit does not acknowledge the new incidents of violence in its online spaces, with affected prisoners, or publicly. From the outside, it doesn’t appear that the nonprofit is willing

to recognize the continuing and seemingly worsening safety issues.

The reports of violence in the facility where the Spokesperson is incarcerated are able to simulate free activist concern and action. This action is largely led by the Spokesperson's mother. The Spokesperson's mother publishes an online petition and leads free activists to the prison for a vigil. The actions, however, have limited effects. They do not gain media attention. They do not appear to change public narratives about the nonprofit or the success of its lawsuit.

#### 4.15 Social Processes of Resistance and Repression around the Ferguson Moment

The SPFC's and PLM's activism in late 2014 and early 2015 highlight four noteworthy processes of ICT use in prisoners' rights resistance and repression: tech resistance by-proxy, information beacon networking, "show up" marginalization, and mainstream information privileging.

First, the Spokesperson's free family members (particularly his mother) demonstrate the power of tech-capable information proxies. The Spokesperson's family members are hugely influential in supporting and maintaining the SPFC digital presence. The Spokesperson's mother has access to a computer and the internet and knows how to broadcast online. She utilizes these resources and skills to host the SPFC's radio show. Her coordination of the internet radio channel allows prisoner activists to record, store, and share hours of radio-style conversations and spoken word performances. Similarly, PLM free activists use social media, word processing programs, and digital design software to compile, organize, and share prisoners' requests, writings, and drawings. They write posts and produce a newsletter with the words of prisoner activists. Effectively, free activists deploy their tech abilities and tech access to allow prisoner activists to send information to the internet.

Second, the SPFC's response to the movement in Ferguson shows the value and potential

dangers of information beacon networking. In the days and weeks after the shooting of Michael Brown Jr., the SPFC shares information about the protest in Ferguson through a texting phone tree. Prisoner activists with internet-capable phones send text-only copies of Twitter posts and internet news stories to prisoner activists without internet-capable phones. Prisoner activists without illegal phones learn about Ferguson protest activities from the prisoner activists with phones. Ultimately, the most tech-connected prisoners serve as information beacons to the less tech-connected prisoners which serve as beacons to non-tech connected prisoners. This process is significant for several reasons. This method of communication introduces multiple opportunities for information miscommunication and manipulation. Along the text phone tree, prisoners lose the validity markers and context that full-access to the internet provides. Additionally, the primary beacons in this network are the prisoner activists willing to take the biggest risks. They are the prisoners investing in expensive contraband, despite the ever-present threat of contraband confiscation. Likewise, they are the prisoners jeopardizing their good time, housing assignments, and privileges.

Third, the interaction between SPFC activists and Ferguson activists reveals a type of ICT-related marginalization. Some Ferguson activists criticize other activists who fail to show up for in-person events. They deride activists who engage in resistance behind a computer screen while failing to appear for resistance efforts in the streets. They call for real activists to join them in the streets. Other Ferguson activists seem to overlook or neglect the voices of prisoner activists who cannot be physically present. This “show up” marginalization hinders the SPFC’s efforts to build alliances with Ferguson groups. The Spokesperson is required to defend prisoners’ activist and ally identities and continuously point out prisoner marginalization on Twitter. Moreover, prisoner activists are unable to support Ferguson activists in free world resistance efforts. Although the SPFC is able to connect with Ferguson activists online, they are unable to connect in their

immediate physical environments.

Fourth, the challenges SPFC activists face in spreading counter-narratives demonstrate the persistence of mainstream media information privileging, even in the New Information Age. The SPFC ultimately has little control over how the media reports on the nonprofit settlement and the prison riot. The nonprofit responsible for the settlement is an established justice reform organization. It has a certain credibility as a professional organization employing lawyers, scholars, and specialists with advanced degrees. When nonprofit representatives announce that the organization has settled the prisoners abuse lawsuit and achieved victory, journalists commend the nonprofit's work. Mainstream media sources report that reform is imminent thanks to the nonprofit's efforts. Prisoners have trouble getting recognition that the settlement is not translating to better prison conditions.

Likewise, SPFC activists are dismayed when media coverage of the "cell phone riot" omits details about the circumstances leading up to the prisoner and corrections officer altercation. They assert that the mainstream media are not publishing the whole story (because they don't know the whole story). The ADOC's version of the riot becomes the public written history of the incident. With phones and the internet, SPFC activists have many ways to get in touch with media organizations. They could call, email, or message media organizations. They could explain that nonprofit's victory is not overtly improving conditions or the riot was preceded by suspicious drug-related deaths and mass searches. Yet, SPFC activists seem to lack the personal connections or organization credibility to ensure that this information is printed and not ignored.



## **CHAPTER 5.     NPRC ACTIVISM IN A JUSTICE REFORM CLIMATE (MID-FEBRUARY 2015 - JUNE 2015)**

### 5.1   “Let the Crops Rot in the Field”

In mid-February 2015, Prisoner Labor Movement and Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee activists learn of a prisoner resistance action in Texas. Prisoners at a private federal prison for “criminal aliens” are refusing to report to work. The PLM calls the action an “uprising.” The SPFC calls the action a “slave revolt.” Texas prison officials call the action a “riot.” The SPFC Spokesperson writes that the action is an example of why activists must record their environments and tell their stories. He explains, “Whenever we organize and protest our inhumane living conditions and treatment, the media and prison officials are quick to label those acts as ‘riots’ to distort the realities of modern prison slave camps.” The Texas strike earns national media attention. *Democracy Now*, *Mother Jones*, the *New York Times*, *Reuters*, and the *Huffington Post* publish stories about the work strike, the “disturbance control team” sent in by prison administrators, and the facility damage after prisoner-officer clashes.

Days after the Texas strike, the SPFC recommits to challenging low and no-wage prison labor. SPFC leaders announce that they are planning mass work stoppages. They intend to shut down prison industry production and halt facility upkeep until prison administrators meet SPFC demands. In a blog post, the Spokesperson and Chief Political Strategist declare, “We must let the crops rot in the field if we aren’t receiving benefit of the harvest.” They argue that an economic-based resistance strategy is essential:

Just like the Institution of Chattel Slavery, Mass Incarceration is in essence an Economic System which uses human beings as its nuts and bolts. Therefore, our new approach must be Economically based, and must be focused on the factors of production- the people being forced into this slave labor.

According to SPFC plans, the upcoming strikes will include prisoners in Alabama and in

Mississippi. The next strike will take place on March 1.

Two days before the strike, however, one Alabama prison goes on lockdown. Leaders of the SPFC issue an emergency alert on Facebook. “CONFIRMED THAT [THE WARDEN] HAS CALLED IN THE RIOT TEAM TO [THE PRISON], EVEN THOUGH NO ONE IS RIOTING,” the alert announces. An hour later, the PLM shares news of the lockdown and an action alert about the riot team dispatch. The PLM’s Facebook page reports that the riot team has been sent “to repress a peaceful and nonviolent protest--intimidating and assaulting protesters.” PLM leaders ask supporters to call the Alabama Attorney General. In a follow-up post, the PLM instructs free activists to call the warden directly, email the Alabama Department of Corrections, and spread the news of prisoner repression on social media.

Later in the day, the SPFC announces that the riot team is leaving the prison after hours of “beating and abuse.” Prisoner activists thank outside supporters for their calls and concern. They vow that the work strike will take place, as planned, on March 1.

On the morning of the strike, though, SPFC prisoner activists experience further repression. The Spokesperson relays that, at the prison where he is incarcerated, the warden is underfeeding all prisoners. Moreover, officers are threatening to completely withhold food from prisoners participating in the strike: “Officers shout that they will ‘starve’ men for refusing to continue to be subjected to slave labor without pay.” The SPFC’s Facebook page adds a photo of a prisoner’s meal. The photo shows two pieces of bread and small servings of grits, eggs, and beans. Supporters share the photo, like the photo, and comment with outrage. Commenters describe the underfeeding as “heart breaking,” “absurd,” and “utterly ridiculous.” By evening, the strike is over. The Spokesperson tweets, “The Non-Violent and Peaceful Protest has ended at [the prison]. Slavery continues in America !!!”

## 5.2 Prison Reform Becomes a State Legislative Priority

As the short-lived SPFC strike is taking place, an Alabama Prison Reform Task Force is preparing to introduce new state legislation. The proposed bill, according to the state senator leading the task force, will reduce prison overcrowding and improve justice services. The senator reasons that the bill is necessary to prevent a federal takeover of Alabama prisoners – which are operating around 185% capacity. He emphasizes, however, that the bill will not authorize prisoner release: “This bill is not soft on crime. We're not releasing anybody a day early from prison.” Instead, the bill will revise sentencing standards, divert some offenders from prisons to local jails and supervised release programs, create a mandatory supervision period for offenders released from prison, and expand probation and parole services.

The Prison Reform Task Force bill makes Alabama news. Journalists affirm that prison reform is an urgent issue – prisons are overcrowded and the state hasn't built new facilities since 1997. One journalist adds, “Reports of violence and sexual assault in the state's prisons have brought matters to a head.” The journalist explains that sexual violence at one women's prison and the rise of violent incidents at men's prisons statewide have necessitated state legislative intervention. Several articles mention the SPFC's complaints. Some even include SPFC photos and provide links and screenshots of SPFC YouTube videos.

Corrections officer Facebook pages share several articles about the Alabama reform efforts. Overall, the articles are optimistic. One article explains that bill will reduce prison overcrowding; another article states that the bill will “improve prison operations;” a third article proclaims that the bill will reduce recidivism. Commenters, however, are skeptical that the bill will deliver on these promises. A concerned commenter writes that the legislation will not address poor prison management:

I've seen way too often the shifting of HORRIBLE management to facilities that are running smooth. Do you think this is gonna change their ability to do their job? They'll just bring their stink to the new place. Hold these guys that make the big bucks accountable like we are held accountable.

Another commenter contends that the bill places blame in the wrong place. “The over crowding is the courts fault. The violence can be taken care of by letting the co's handle things their way,” the commenter explains. In general, commenters express disbelief that the bill will produce meaningful change.

### 5.3 “Smoke and Mirrors” and Health Lockdowns

The SPFC calls the Alabama prison reform bill a “scam.” SPFC leaders note that the Alabama Prison Task Force does not include any black men in its 25 members (19 white men, five white women, and one black woman). Moreover, the bill does not address discriminatory arrest and prosecution practices, poor prison conditions, inadequate prison education and treatment programs, and the large population of offenders currently in prison for nonviolent offenses. The Spokesperson worries that the bill will shift offenders into for-profit regional jails and pay-for-service supervision programs. He is especially suspicious of the expansion of work-release programs, noting that the bill authorizes these programs to deduct 65% of offenders’ gross earnings.

The SPFC again shares its proposed Education, Rehabilitation, and Re-Entry Preparedness Bill on Facebook. The committee writes:

As of March 8, 2014, the FREEDOM BILL remains the only legislation that calls for a mass release to address overcrowding, and true reforms in education, rehabilitation and re-entry preparedness in Alabama's prisons.

The SPFC encourages supporters to “get informed,” share the freedom bill, and oppose the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force bill. The committee also shares a series of articles called “Smoke and Mirrors: Inside the New ‘Bipartisan Prison Reform’ Agenda” for supporters to read.

According to the Spokesperson, this series demonstrates that the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force's bill is not real reform. Instead, the bill is part of a "new generation of reforms will reinforce structural racism, intensify economic violence and contribute to the normalization of a surveillance society."

The SPFC hosts a series of radio shows to dissect the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force bill. One prisoner activist argues that the bill is "the same old stuff." The Task Force wants to maintain racism, prison slavery, and the prison industrial complex. The bill allows them to maintain an incarcerated workforce and divert money to private prison companies. Another activist agrees: "The government is putting the slave noose around our necks. While we do nothing... they are tightening the rope." The PLM too starts a Facebook discussion about the Alabama Prison Task Force bill. PLM leaders allege that the task force is allowing "'private service companies' to come in under the guise of 'community correction', 're-entry' etc., when the objective is really to create more revenue streams to fund mass incarceration and prison slavery."

While the SPFC and PLM are raising awareness about Alabama prison reform, two Alabama prisons go on health lockdowns. Both prisons house SPFC activists. One prison locks down to prevent the spread of a "highly contagious virus" and another prison locks down to quarantine a tuberculosis outbreak. During the lockdowns, prisoners are confined to their units and all prison visits, including attorney visits, are suspended. An Alabama newspaper reports that the outbreaks demonstrate the seriousness of prison overcrowding. The newspaper points out that the Alabama state legislature is considering prison reform and "one of the goals of prison reform is to reduce overcrowding, which may lead to outbreaks."

#### 5.4 Executions, Contraband, and CO Attacks

In mid-March 2015, corrections worker Facebook pages are talking about another

development in Alabama. The drug that the ADOC has been using for lethal injections is being recalled. The drug maker has ordered the ADOC to return all of its unused supply. Some corrections experts suspect that the recall will render the ADOC unable to carry out executions. On Corrections Talk, commenters discuss the drug recall. Some commenters suggest execution alternatives:

“Hanging, Firing squad, Electric chair and Gas chamber... There's more than one way to skin a cat.”

“Hang em high quicker and cheaper.”

“Bullets cost less and are immediately effective.”

Other commenters wonder why it is so difficult for states to carry out lethal injections. They question the need for are so many regulations around execution drugs.

In addition, CO Facebook pages are continuing discussions about prison contraband and prisoners perpetrating violence against corrections officers. America's Invisible Warriors shares news of recent contraband issues: prison vendors smuggling drugs through facility kitchens, prisoners selling contraband in facility black markets, prisoners obtaining weapons from medical contractors, COs finding bullets in a prison cafeteria, drones dropping packages over prison walls, and prisoners using cell phones and social media. Commenters lament that prison administrators are not prioritizing contraband control:

“They are [in prisons] because the admin won't let us do our job”

“There not stopping it. Gang activity and posting to Social Media doesn't concern them. If it did they would assign someone to do only that.”

“I am convinced that administrations are more interested in meeting their quota of searches rather than locating the contraband. Smoke and mirrors !”

On the whole, commenters seem frustrated and overwhelmed by the issue of contraband. One commenter who identifies herself as a CO writes that she tries to keep contraband out. This is

difficult, however, when she is assigned “10 other duties.” Another commenter agrees, stating that, at the prison where he works, there is only one corrections officer assigned to contraband control and security threat group monitoring for three units.

Another prominent, and familiar, topic on corrections officer pages in March 2015 is prisoner violence against COs. Corrections Officers Together posts about a teen prisoner who strangled a CO, a “hulking prisoner” who attempted to rape a CO, a prisoner who murdered a CO, a prisoner who tried to stab a CO, and a prisoner who started an altercation which caused one CO to have a heart attack.

## 5.5 ICT Use after the Texas Uprising

Following the Texas uprising, the SPFC uses ICTs to plan a short-notice in-prison strike. So too, SPFC leaders use ICTs to spread news of strike repression. As the strike fizzles out, the committee uses their online platforms to question prison reform efforts in Alabama.

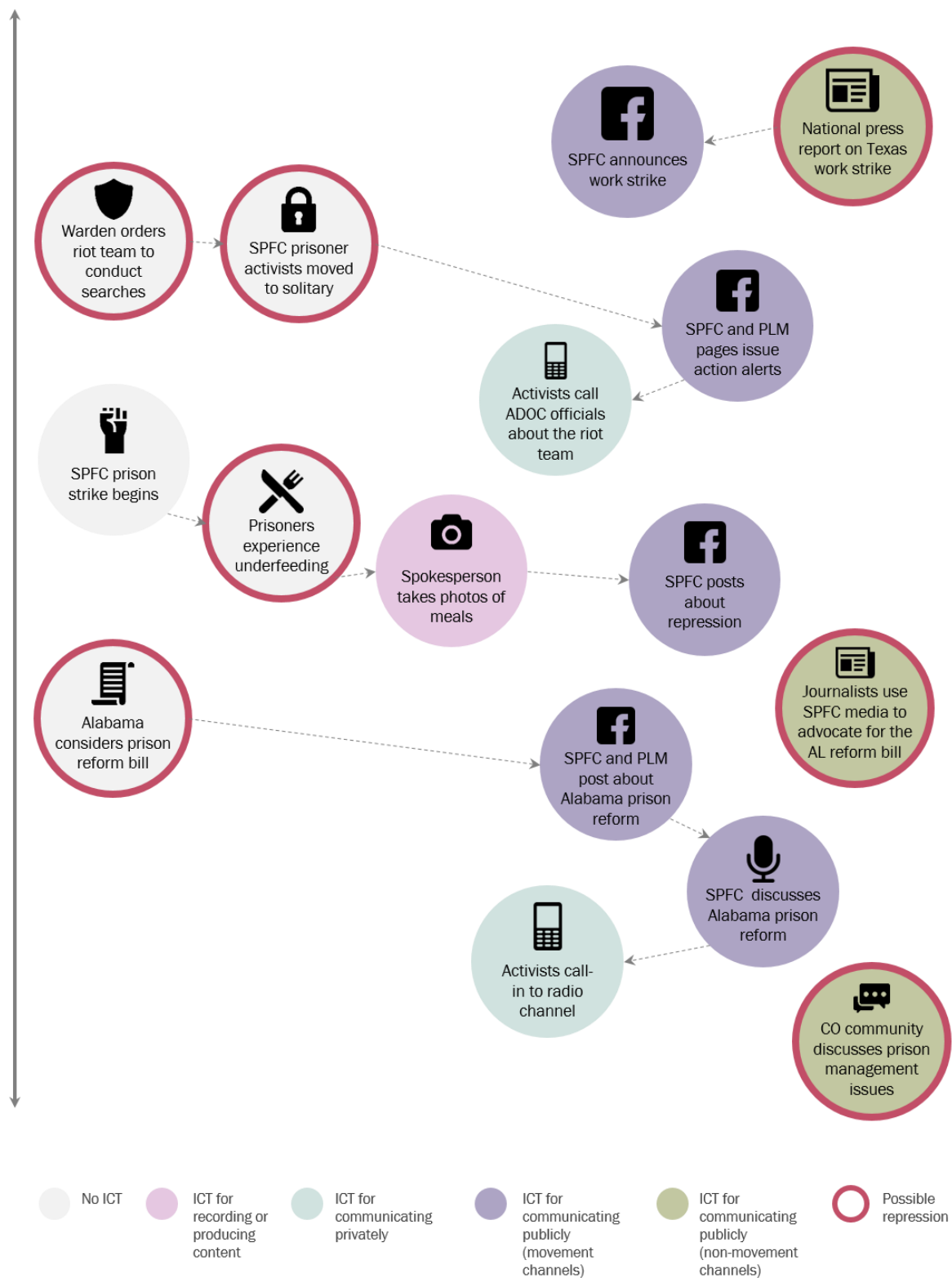


Figure 5.1 ICT Use as Alabama Considers Prison Reform (February and March 2015)



### 5.5.1 SPFC Work Strike Announcement

The SPFC announces its March 1 work strike just days after the Texas prisoner resistance action. Discussions on the SPFC radio show suggest that the Texas strike gives hope to SPFC activists. “Right now is the time to stand up,” one caller remarks. The Spokesperson points out similarities between Texas prisoners and SPFC activists: “The men in Texas went on a work strike and a hunger strike... protesting the same things we did, using the same strategy we did.” Callers note that Texas prisoners attract significant media coverage. Moreover, the Texas resistance produces results. After the disturbance control team enters the facility, some prisoners start fires and damage housing units. The destruction is so extensive that prisoner administrators are forced to close the prison and transfer prisoners to other facilities. SPFC activists find hope in the Texas prisoners’ ability to bring attention to their cause and force changes in their circumstances.

### 5.5.2 Pre-Strike Repression of Prisoner Activists

Two days before the SPFC strike, prison administrators put one facility on lockdown and call in a riot team. SPFC prisoner activists post updates about the lockdown on social media. The Spokesperson further describes the lockdown in an online radio show, hosted just hours after the riot team’s exit:

On Tuesday, [the warden] learned of the upcoming shutdown and called a meeting with all the kitchen workers. He straight-up, directly told the kitchen workers, ‘I heard about the work strike. If y’all shut down on my shift, I’m coming to see you. If you’ve got any contraband or anything, I’m taking it and I’m locking you up... Wednesday, [the warden] called a few brothers into his office to inquire about the upcoming shutdown. Thursday, which was yesterday...well, late last night, [the warden] ordered the Alabama riot team to [the facility]. They arrived there late last night around 12, like in the morning, and they have been shaking down pretty much most of the day. And they were targeting different brothers.

The pre-strike repression suggests that prison administrators are trying new tactics to prevent work strikes. One warden is authorizing the deployment of specialized officers, outfitted with tactical

gear and trained for prisoner confrontation. In the absence of an active riot or coordinated prisoner resistance effort, these teams are performing mass searches and moving certain prisoners to segregation cells.

This pre-strike repression is a contrast to the barbeque bribery and participation disincentives from a year earlier. It's more overt, more official, and more militant. For SPFC activists, this repression is concerning. Free activists quickly organize their call-in campaign, hoping that appeals to administrators will help keep prisoner activists safe.

### 5.5.3 SPFC Work Strike and Underfeeding

SPFC prisoner activists report that prisoner administrators respond to the strike by underfeeding all prisoners. The SPFC provides evidence of the underfeeding by sharing a picture of a prisoner meal. The picture receives sympathetic comments from page visitors. Yet, it fails to earn significant social media attention or news coverage. This lack of attention may be a consequence of the photo's relative mildness. The photo shows that prisoners are being fed a breakfast meal. The meal is small, but not outrageously small. The tray is not empty; there are several types of foods; and there are two pieces of bread. While the photo shows that the food is a light portion, it also shows that the food appears to be sanitary and edible. The photo does not inspire that same outrage as the SPFC video of the gross meat patties. Moreover, it isn't as shocking as reports of prisoner meals from other parts of the country (notably, Sheriff Joe Arpaio admitting to serving expired food to prisoners). Ultimately, the underfeeding seems effective. The strike is broken by evening. On the whole, the underfeeding incident is another reminder for SPFC activists of the demobilizing power of quality food insecurity.

### 5.5.4 Alabama Prison Reform Task Force Bill

After its introduction, the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force's bill becomes an important

topic of conversation in SPFC and PLM online media. The bill crafts a specific discourse about Alabama prisons. This discourse reasons that Alabama prisons are experiencing problems. Those problems are mostly attributable to overcrowding. Prison diversion programs and new sentencing guidelines are logical and cost-effective solutions. Not all people who commit serious crimes need to spend time in prison. People who are currently incarcerated, however, are in prison for good reasons. They should not be released.

This discourse has several important consequences. First, it signals an official acknowledgement from the Alabama state legislature that the prison system is flawed. Second, it links numerous prison issues to a root issue – prison overcrowding. Third, it crafts the problem of prison overcrowding as solvable with increased justice funding, evidence-based practices, and a greater “range of possible sanctions” for people who commit serious crimes. Fourth, it reinforces the characterization of prisoners as dangerous, bad, and requiring incarceration.

The SPFC and PLM take issue with the Alabama Prison Task Force’s problem and solution framing. Activists use Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and their radio show to contest the task force’s characterizations of prisoners, prison issues, and effective legislative solutions. The groups allege that this framing allows state legislators to remain willfully blind to the exploitation of prisoners, the brutality of the state, and the racial inequity of the justice system.

#### 5.5.5 Journalists Borrow SPFC Videos

Although the SPFC is actively criticizing the Alabama Prison Reform Bill, journalists are using SPFC photos and videos to validate the bill’s mission. Several online publications embed SPFC photos and freeze-frames of SPFC videos in their articles about Alabama prison reform. The articles give the appearance that the bill will address prisoner concerns. They employ SPFC media to demonstrate the Alabama prison problems; but they omit the context and commentary that these

photos and videos initially included. The articles appropriate activists' productions, while disregarding activist's explanations and interpretations.

#### 5.5.6 CO Talk: Prison Management Issues

As the Alabama Prison Reform Bill is circulating, corrections officers are sharing their own assessments of prison issues. These assessments, too, differ from the assessments of the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force. The corrections officer community is pointing out the links between overcrowding and administrative decisions and court sentencing practices. Moreover, the community is continuing to discuss the dangerousness of prison work and the lack of support officers feel for contraband control efforts. Yet, the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force bill doesn't address prison management or CO safety issues. Like prisoner activists, corrections officers are not seeing their concerns mentioned or their resolutions proposed.

### 5.6 Alabama Pushes Reform Forward and COs Discuss Outsider Interference

The Alabama Prison Reform Task Force's bill reaches the State Senate in early April. The bill's sponsor introduces the proposed legislation by explaining that reform is urgent: "This is a crisis which has reached a boiling point." After several small amendments, the state senate passes the bill with a 31-2 yes vote. One Alabama newspaper reports that debate on the bill "was notably free of the political wrangling that typifies most debates in the upper chamber." The bill is next sent to the Alabama House of Representatives.

Corrections Talk posts a news article about the reform bill. Page administrators note that the bill will ensure that the federal government does not interfere with Alabama prison operations. Some commenters write that preventing federal intervention is important. The federal government will release dangerous people and make society more dangerous:

“Don't let the feds in, they want criminals released. CA had to let them out and crime on the streets is out of control. You can not decriminalize crime and expect the streets and homes to be safe”

“‘Rehabilitating’ criminals who are incarcerated for capital and very serious crimes simply by letting them out is just asking for recidivism. They *\*will\** do it again, they will not be sorry, and we can blame the idiots we all voted for (or didn't.)”

Other commenters worry that, even if the bill prevents a federal takeover, it won't legitimately address prison issues. “They will never fund it they just came up with a plan to keep the feds at bay,” one commenter writes. On the whole, commenters seem to disapprove of the reform bill as well as dislike the idea of federal intervention. Federal officials and the Alabama legislators both feel like outsider groups. They are distant from the daily realities of prison and disengaged from the prison working environment.

In this moment, concern about outsider interference is growing in corrections worker communities. On Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together, commenters are discussing several recent judicial and legislative directives that appear to demonstrate outsider overstepping. Both pages post about a proposed reform bill in Florida which would establish a conduct review board for corrections officers. Commenters remark that the bill seems to attribute facility violence to CO negligence. “Just trying to shift the blame like every other politician,” one commenter maintains. “More people in another high level office with no actual experience...,” another commenter agrees.

Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together also share news articles about a judicial ruling on transgender prisoner health services in California. The ruling was made after a transgender prison sued the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The prisoner was diagnosed with gender dysphoria in the 1990s; yet prison administrators continued to house her in a men's prison and refused her petitions for gender affirming surgeries. In the ruling, the

judge mandated the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to provide the prisoner with necessary gender affirming medical care.

Commenters are angry about the ruling and suspicious of the prisoner. They respond to the articles with:

“Are YOU kidding?”

“This is not a major life a death medical procedure that the judge so claims it is the guy is gay and wants to get free raemun noodles and smokes for giving fake pus..... OK”

“Be a criminal and the tax payers pay for this garbage.”

“They already do this in NY it's disgusting!!!!”

Some commenters imply that the prisoner is trying to get out of “male jail.” An additional commenter adds that the judge ruling in the case should be required to pay for the “ridiculous” medical treatments.

Similarly, commenters on Corrections Talk are critical of a judicial ruling in a prisoner death suit. The suit was filed by the prisoner’s family, who alleged that corrections workers failed to provide the prisoner with adequate diabetes care. As a result, the prisoner died after going into hypoglycemic shock. The suit’s ruling affirmed that the state corrections department was liable for the prisoner’s death. Commenters wonder how the ruling happened:

“This is a joke. You shouldn't expect the same treatment as free person when you're in prison. Maybe him dying was karma for the fact he took someone else's life. Did a hit and run, killed his friend, then lied about it. And trying to blame blood sugar for the accident. No, you were drunk. Only in America are people this spoiled.”

“The judge is an idiot! Sorry the man is dead but this is lunacy!”

“Our courts are seriously F'ed up.”

To many page visitors, the judge in the suit represents an oblivious outsider passing judgment on

corrections professionals.

Page visitors discuss how difficult it actually is to accurately assess and treat prisoner health issues. Many commenters write that it is challenging to determine when prisoners are truly sick and when they are pretending to be ill. Some page visitors share Someecards. The cards say things like:

“So, what you’re saying is: that medical issue that you completely ignored for years is suddenly a medical emergency now that you are in jail and you have to be seen RIGHT NOW?”

“In the free world, your medical problems aren’t an issue. Get arrested, they become emergent as you walk through the door.”

Commenters assert that prisoners “discover” dental problems when they are incarcerated; prisoners seem to overdose intentionally to receive special treatment; and many prison medical conditions seem to disappear with crackers, water, and/or time.

## 5.7 “A Slow Tortuous Death Sentence”

The Spokesperson, the Chief Political Strategist, and one other SPFC leader are still in segregation in April. The Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee and the Prison Labor Movement remind supporters on Facebook that the SPFC Three have been confined to individual cells for more than a year. These activists remain classified as “threats to the security of the ADOC.” Despite their STG statuses, though, the SPFC Three are hosting online radio conversations and writing blog and Twitter posts. They discuss the Prison Reform Task Force Bill, the economics of prison labor, inequalities in the justice system, and strategies for resistance.

In one radio episode, the Spokesperson and Political Strategist discuss a new Alabama prison health lockdown. This lockdown was ordered after a gastrointestinal illness outbreak. The lockdown did not interrupt any planned SPFC actions. The Spokesperson, however, suggests that

prison administrators are intentionally exposing activists to health risks or, in the least, neglecting to protect activists from prison health risks. In a follow-up to the radio conversation, the Spokesperson urges prisoners to “wake up and stand up.” He explains that prison time is essentially “a slow tortuous death sentence.” According to the Spokesperson, prison administrators are passively killing prisoners through exposure to poor conditions, disease, and violence.

A series of violent events in mid-April give credence to the Spokesperson’s grim appraisal. Two prisoners are stabbed to death in Alabama men’s prisons. Another prisoner is seriously wounded in a stabbing incident. Prison administrators respond to the stabbings with lockdowns and riot control teams. According to the SPFC, the riot control teams violently clash with prisoners. They report that many prisoners sustain injuries from officers: a broken jaw, a head wound requiring staples, facial swelling, bruises, loss of consciousness, “blood everywhere.”

SPFC activists record the injuries on contraband cell phones. That night, the SPFC shares the videos on YouTube and uploads the photos on its blog and Facebook pages. The PLM, too, shares the recordings. The photos and videos are graphic. There are images of prisoners with black eyes, bloody gashes, and swollen faces. There’s a video of a restrained prisoner, lying face-down, surrounded by corrections officers, covered in blood. A narrator explains that the man has been beaten by the group of officers.

The Spokesperson writes a Facebook post explaining that the photos and videos undeniably prove that prisoners are being subjected to state brutality. He asks how anyone could deny the abuse when “we have videos and pictures that show what is going on.” Yet, on YouTube, the videos inspire little belief and even less compassion. On the video of the bloody prisoner surrounded by guards, commenters discuss:



“I didn't see anybody touch them except to put cuffs on him. For all you know they just broke up a fight and were restraining the ones involved. Did anybody see them strike anybody? Please know what your talking about before you speak”

“Wow! Who did the crime that got him/her sent to prison? If you don't want to live the prison life then don't commit a crime that sends you to prison. It's not rocket science. Someone commits a crime and is sentenced to prison and all of a sudden it's not their fault.”

“sometimes I believe these acts are staged. Isis war videos, this, funerals.”

For many commenters, the videos don't provide convincing enough evidence of state violence or prisoner victimhood.

## 5.8 COs Discuss the Riot Team Deployment and Alabama Passes Prison Reform

Several Alabama newspapers report on the riot team deployment. In these accounts, the riot team was deployed after an officer assault. The officer was injured by a prisoner and “following the assault, Correctional Emergency Response Team was sent to the prison.” According to the Alabama Department of Corrections, the clashes between the riot team and prisoners began after prisoners refused to return to their cells. The riot team twice ordered prisoners to comply with lockdown procedures; but the prisoners “became unruly and aggressively engaged the response team with physical force.”

Corrections Talk hosts a discussion about the riot team deployment. Commenters offer support, prayers, and well wishes for the injured officer. They also speculate on what caused the prisoners to refuse orders. “Not enough staff and too many inmates to supervise and my guess they saw an opportunity,” one commenter concludes. Other commenters suggest that the political climate emboldened these prisoners or prisoners were upset about not having enough treats. “Prison just isn't prison anymore too much politics in it makes our job that much harder. The public wants them off the streets, but then feel sorry for them as if they are being abused,” a commenter

who identified himself as a corrections officer explains. A small group of commenters are upset that the prisoners injured by the riot team were treated by medical staff. They discuss how frustrating it is that taxpayers are funding these prisoners' medical care.

A week after the riot team deployment, the Prison Reform Task Force's bill passes in the Alabama House of Representatives with a 100 "yes" and 5 "no" vote. The Governor of Alabama declares that the bill's passage marks "a historic day in Alabama." He announces that his intention to sign the legislation when it reaches his desk. The American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama commends state leaders on the passage of the bill. One Alabama newspaper applauds the task force for "seeing through the smoke-and-mirrors" to address the fundamental problems of Alabama's justice system.

On the same day, the Alabama House of Representatives reads a separate criminal justice bill from the Prison Reform Task Force. The bill authorizes the state to issue \$60 million in bonds for prison construction. According to the task force, the bond money will pay for the creation of 1,500 to 2,000 new prison beds. The bill will soon pass a vote in the House and Senate and be signed into law.

## 5.9 ICT Use as Alabama Passes Prison Reform

As the Alabama legislature passes prison reform legislation, SPFC activists are using ICTs to host conversations about prison health outbreaks and facility violence. In addition, SPFC and PLM leaders utilize YouTube and social media to broadcast recordings of injured prisoners. Public responses to these recordings, however, are not what activists hoped.

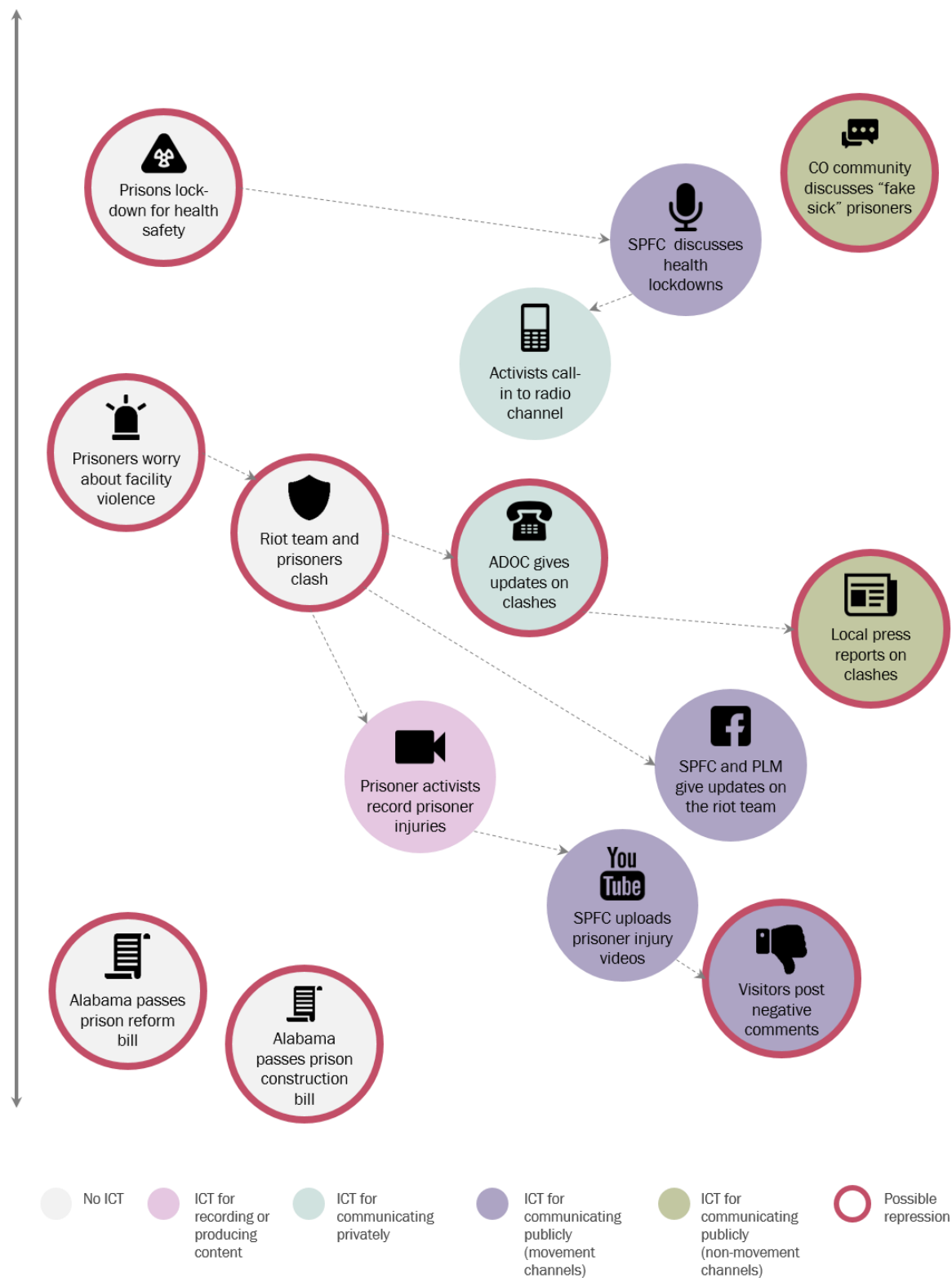


Figure 5.2 ICT Use as Alabama Passes Prison Reform (April to Early-May 2015)

### 5.9.1 Disease Outbreaks in Alabama Prisons

The outbreaks of tuberculosis, norovirus, and a gastrointestinal virus heighten SPFC leaders' suspicion of prison administrators. On the SPFC radio show, the Spokesperson, the Political Strategist, and callers consider that administrators are intentionally allowing the viruses to spread. SPFC activists suspect that prison administrators are capable of being this sneaky, dangerous, and ill-willed towards prisoners. This suspicion reinforces the idea that prisoners, especially prisoner activists, are in serious danger.

### 5.9.2 CO Talk: Fake Sick Prisoners

While the SPFC is discussing covert disease sabotage, corrections officers are talking about how difficult it is to determine when prisoners are truly sick. Two Facebook pages for corrections professionals discuss prisoners exaggerating and fabricating health problems. Mentions of “fake sick” prisoners inspire agreeing humor and intense anger from commenters. Some commenters make jokes about prisoners pretending to be sick. Other commenters express anger about prisoners who manipulate (or try to manipulate) caring and knowledgeable health professionals.

It does not seem coincidental that corrections workers and activists are discussing prisoner health in the same moment. Many U.S. states, including Alabama, are experiencing shortages of prison health professionals. Prison medical units are understaffed and overwhelmed with medical care requests.

### 5.9.3 Prison Stabbings and Riot Team Deployment

The prisoner stabbings and riot team clashes intensify prisoner activists' feelings of endangerment. The SPFC page reports on the aftermath of the stabbings in all-caps Twitter and Facebook posts:

“EMERGENCY ALERT !!!## RIOT TEAM CALLED IN. THEY ARE BEATING PEOPLE. BLOOD EVERYWHERE. OFFICERS HAVE WEAPONS”

“PLEASE CALL ALL MEDIA !!!#!”

“911 EMERGENCY”

“EMERGENCY !!!! SOS”

Free activists reply to the posts. They want to know details; they express their concern and support; and they offer to relay information to news organizations. The posts and comments suggest that activists believe this kind of violence cannot be overlooked by reasonable people. To SPFC and PLM activists, the prisoner stabbings and riot team clashes represent appalling and unjustifiable negligence and harm. If the media and the public was aware of the violence, they would care and they would do something.

#### 5.9.4 Riot Team Photos, Videos, and Comments

Prisoner activists are able to photograph and record some video of the riot team. These photos and videos, however, mostly show corrections officers standing near injured and bleeding prisoners. There’s no footage of officers physically harming prisoners. The videos inspire suspicion from online commenters. Some commenters wonder if the riot team used unnecessary force. Did the riot team really injure these men? Did prisoners somehow provoke the riot team? Other commenters wonder if the violence is a ploy by prison administrators to prove that reform is necessary. One activist writes: “It all started when the legislative session started. Every time the want more money, the ADOC will allow conditions to deteriorate and sacrifice a few lives just to get a few extra pennies.” Could the Alabama Department of Corrections somehow benefit from the violence and the videos depicting injured prisoners?

The newspapers that report on the riot team incident largely retell the ADOC’s version of

events. In this narrative, prisoners are the aggressors; an injured officer is the primary victim; and the clashes happened because prisoners were disorderly and uncooperative.

#### 5.10 The SPFC's Six Step Plan

After the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force bill passes, the SPFC Spokesperson gives several phone interviews to journalists. In the interviews, he discusses prison work programs, prisoner pay, and prison industries. He criticizes the ADOC for upholding a “modern slave system.” So too, he summarizes the SPFC's efforts to challenge exploitative prison labor.

The SPFC has decided to focus on economic strategies of resistance. According to the Spokesperson, direct economic pressure is the only effective way to end exploitative prison industries. The U.S. political system, he reasons, does not represent prisoners or prisoners' interests. Instead, it caters to the needs of organizations and companies that utilize prison labor:

We do not believe in the political process. We are not looking to politicians to submit reform bills. We aren't giving more money to lawyers. We don't believe in the courts. We will rely only on protests inside and outside of prisons and on targeting the corporations that exploit prison labor and finance the school-to-prison pipeline.

The economic tactics are part of an inside-outside resistance plan called the “Six Step Plan of Action.”

The six steps of the plan include: write a freedom bill, build in-prison resistance networks, recruit free activists on prison visitation days, organize in-prison work strikes, organize free world protests against organizations benefiting from prison labor, and disrupt prison industries. According to the SPFC blog, activists in several states are already advancing with the plan. In addition to the SPFC's core group in Alabama, there are also formal chapters of the SPFC in Mississippi and California and a network of anti-prison slavery activists in Ohio and Virginia.

Unlike the SPFC's earlier efforts, the Six Step Plan emphasizes both in-prison and free

world resistance efforts. In fact, the Spokesperson refers to free world actions as “essential.” He reasons that prisoners and free people are both playing roles in perpetuating prisoner exploitation:

Virtually EVERY person in prison, our families, friends and supporters, and even every organization that states that they are against mass incarceration prison slavery, are all contributing financially to the very companies that are exploiting the people through mass incarceration and prison slavery.

According to the Spokesperson, in-prison resistance must be coupled with free world actions which bring attention to and challenge prison profiteering.

The SPFC plans a free world action for May 30. On this day, free activists will gather at McDonald’s storefronts to draw attention to the food chain’s reliance on prison labor. An SPFC blog post explains that McDonalds is a good initial target because the company relies on prison labor in so many ways: “McDonald’s uses prison slave labor to produce products like their uniforms, spoons, frozen foods, process beef for patties, and also to process bread, milk and chicken products.” Leading up to the action, SPFC activists create digital fliers for the event. The fliers show a depiction of the McDonald’s clown character holding stacks of money, a close-up photo of prisoner hands grasping iron prison bars, and a crossed-out McDonald’s logo captioned “We’re not loving it.”

#### 5.11 PLM Members Rebel

As the SPFC is preparing for its free world protest against McDonalds, the PLM is spreading information about a prison rebellion in Nebraska. The PLM Facebook page shares a letter from a PLM prisoner activist describing the rebellion. According to the letter, a group of prisoners in Nebraska, some PLM members, drafted a note for prison administrators. The note included a list of grievances that prisoners hoped to see resolved. On May 10, the group gathered to present the note to prison staff. Alarmed by the congregating prisoners, corrections officers

attempted to disperse the group with force. The officers used mace, rubber bullets, bean bag rounds, and lethal force gunshots. Prisoners fought back. In the resulting chaos, two prisoners were killed, one prisoner was shot in the leg, many prisoners were injured, a group of officers were assaulted, and the prison sustained serious damage.

The letter-writer reports that he is under investigation following the rebellion. Conditions are poor, but he remains committed to challenging the prison system:

We have been receiving only (2) meals a day since with little or no way to make contact with our family or loved ones. What the future holds we do not know, but until there are no prisons left, we must fight.

The PLM declares its support for the Nebraska prisoners. In the weeks following the rebellion, the PLM Facebook page shares news articles about the incident. These news articles make no mention of the prisoners' grievance note. Instead the articles focus on the "rampaging inmates" who refused to follow orders to disperse. Months later, the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (NDCS) will release an incident report with information about the grievances note and surveillance footage of a prisoner holding the note in the air.

## 5.12 Rebellion and the Blue Line

Corrections officer online communities, too, are talking about the Nebraska rebellion. Corrections Talk posts an article explaining how the incident began with a disobedient prisoner: "The revolt began when officers confronted an inmate who was in the yard but was supposed to be on room restriction, and the prisoner refused to cooperate." According to the prison's warden, corrections officers ordered all prisoners to get down on the ground. When some prisoners remained standing, the situation escalated. The article includes a quote from the Governor of Nebraska:



My reaction to seeing the damage inside only reinforces that these are dangerous, hardened criminals inside this facility. We need to have facilities like this to protect public safety and we need to have strong laws to protect public safety as well.

Additionally, the article points out that the NDCS has been experiencing staffing issues. Corrections officers in Nebraska are frequently asked to work overtime or take extra shifts.

Corrections Talk page visitors comment on the article. Some commenters convey that they are not surprised. The NDCS is not paying corrections officers enough, not able to staff necessary positions, and requiring too much overtime:

“I worked this prison, and for NDCS, the problem stems from pay vs. how much FORCED OT is put down. They force people and burn people out within weeks or months. It's insane. Everyone saw this coming. There was no where near enough people working, guaranteed. Prayers for all staff.”

“Ummm let's see pay , lack of staff , lack of trained management and it is what inmates do if given the chance”

“its happening every state. under pay for the prison staff means inmates gain CONTROL. period.”

Other commenters suggest that prison administrators are not doing enough to control and punish prisoners. “Start putting these guys to work from sun up to sun down (hard Labor) rather than watching TV, lifting weights etc... Might make them think twice about going to jail... As it is now, it is a joke!,” writes one commenter.

Around the same time, corrections officers are discussing anti-law enforcement sentiments stemming from the death of Freddie Gray Jr. in Baltimore, Maryland. Gray was fatally injured while in the custody of the Baltimore Police. Corrections officers are noticing increasingly critical, negative, and sometimes hateful speech about the police and law enforcement generally. America's Invisible Warriors administrators ridicule activists protesting Gray's killing. They share articles that report that Freddie Gray Jr. intentionally injured his own spine. They accuse activists

of participating in a “witch hunt” of the officers involved in Gray’s death. Page visitors comment with memes implying that activists must be unemployed if they have time to attend the protests.

America’s Invisible Warriors repeatedly shares graphics and posts with the phrase “Blue Lives Matter.” Some commenters assume that this is callback to Black Lives Matter. They accuse the Black Lives Matter movement of engaging in “race-baiting” and advocating for violence against to law enforcement officers. Page administrators mock activists who are connecting police use of force to racism. America’s Invisible Warriors adds an image with the text “Racism isn’t the problem behavior is.” Administrators encourage visitors to think about the individual-level decisions that cause people to come into contact with the justice system. This anti-activist discourse, however, is only prominent on the America’s Invisible Warrior Page. On Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together, page administrators are not discussing the protests in response to Gray’s death.

All three corrections officer Facebook pages are, however, voicing support for the police. Administrators are sharing memes about the “blue line” and the “blue family.” These memes, which feature a black square with white text and a blue line, reference the unity of police officers, corrections officers, and other law enforcement officers. America’s Invisible Warriors posts a series of these memes over several weeks. Some of the memes say:

“To some, this is just a blue line... to others it’s a family crest.”

“If you are anti-police: I’m blue family, unfriend me.”

“Although I am but one man, I have thousands of brothers and sisters who are the same as me. They will lay down their lives for me, and I for them. We stand watch together. The thin blue line, protecting the prey from the predators, the good from the bad.”

“Come home safe. Your blue family needs you.”

Corrections Talk posts similar memes. One meme shows a blue line with text reading “RULE #1

EVERYONE GOES HOME.” Commenters respond “Amen... love to all brothers and sisters .” and “#holdthatline #TBL #Everylifematters.” Page visitors exchange links to products with blue line images and references. These products include religious notebooks, lapel pins, badges, t-shirts, stickers, bumper stickers, bracelets, bracelet charms, and phone cases.

### 5.13 The SPFC Protests McDonalds

In mid-May, the SPFC is preparing for its action against McDonalds. SPFC leaders create digital content to explain prison profiteering and communicate protest details. They upload a video to YouTube showing two prisoner activists discussing how private companies utilize prison labor. The SPFC adds blog posts about challenging prison profiteering. One post explains the SPFC’s McDonald’s protest strategy:

We will focus all of our attention on one corporation at a time, instead of using a scattered approach of multiple orgs spread out thinly over several corporate fronts.

In the end, McDonald’s and their corporate partners have a choice to make:

- 1) S-To-P investing in the ‘school-to-prison’ pipeline by building factories in prison to fuel mass incarceration FOR prison slavery, and start building those same factories in the neighborhoods where unemployment is high where their prison slaves comes from, or
- 2) Feel the wrath of the People until we close these storefronts down that are exploiting us by taking the money that we spend with your company to build prison factories, while at the same denying us employment.

So too, the SPFC holds online radio discussions about prison work programs and prison goods. To support the SPFC, the Prisoner Labor Movement shares information about prison labor and the planned strike against McDonalds. PLM leaders ask free activists to consider organizing solidarity demonstrations.

Days before the planned protest, though, SPFC and PLM leaders report that the Spokesperson has been injured. The Prisoner Labor Movement writes an emergency post:

URGENT!!!!!!! I NEED EVERYONE TO CALL [THE PRISON] AND ASK  
THE WARDEN ABOUT THE WELL BEING OF [THE SPOKESPERSON]!!!!  
WE GOT REPORTS OF HIM BEING ASSAULTED JUST NOW!!!!

The Spokesperson's mother creates a Facebook event for that day. The event page is titled "ATTENTION" I NEED EVEERYONE TO CALL [THE COMMISSIONER] ABOUT [THE OFFICER] WHO LEAD THE BEATING AND ABUSE TO [THE SPOKESPERSON]." The event's description lists a phone number for the commissioner and instructions to ask for the firing of the officer responsible for the beating.

According to prisoner activists, the Spokesperson was targeted for his activism. He was handcuffed by officers and beaten in his cell. A free activist from a New Jersey prison divestment group comments on the Spokesperson's mother's event page. He explains that he's added the Spokesperson's story to the divestment group's blog. The New Jersey activist receives pictures of the Spokesperson and information about the Spokesperson's injuries. He adds two photographs to his blog. Both photographs show bruises and large swollen lumps on Spokesperson's face and head.

The Spokesperson's injuries, however, do not seem to affect the planned McDonald's event. On May 30, free activists meet at McDonald's locations in Denver, Cincinnati, Atlanta, Birmingham, and Kansas City. Some activists hold signs. Others distribute fliers to McDonald's customers. The fliers explain how McDonald's uses prison labor. Free activists take photos of the event and post them to the SPFC's Facebook page.

#### 5.14 The SPFC and PLM Notice Change

The SPFC and the PLM continue to share information about prison industries after the McDonald's protest. The PLM Facebook page writes about how Whole Foods sells products made by prison workers. The SPFC page posts about the use of prison labor by BP, Aramark, Wal-Mart,

and Victoria's Secret. On their radio show, SPFC activists discuss prison labor and prison goods with callers and invited guests.

SPFC leaders remark that public awareness of prisoner labor issues seems to be growing. References to prison industries and prisoner workers are entering mainstream American pop-culture and media. *Orange is the New Black*, a fictional television show based on Piper Kerman's experiences in prison, releases its third season in June. In this season, a group of women prisoners begin working in a prison industries program. The program pays \$1 an hour to prisoners who sew underwear for a fictional company called Whispers. The show inspires reports on prison labor in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Post*, *Mother Jones*, *Attn.*, and the *Atlantic*. The *Washington Post* confirms that prisoners have, in the past, worked as seamstresses for a Victoria Secret supplier.

So too, a popular social justice app called Buycott releases a list of companies that use prison labor. The Buycott app is essentially a shopping guide. App users can easily look up brands, search products, and scan barcodes to see if their potential purchases were produced or distributed by problematic companies. The app encourages its users to "vote with your wallet" and refuse to buy from companies that utilize unethical business practices. Some of the companies on the Buycott prison labor list are McDonald's, Wal-Mart, Aramark, AT&T, BP, Nike, Macy's and Microsoft.

#### 5.15 ICT Use as the NPRC Protests McDonalds 2015

As the SPFC and PLM focus their resistance on prison industries, activists use ICTs to create digital content, organize resistance efforts, and take phone interviews. These groups also utilize ICTs to respond to acts of repression.

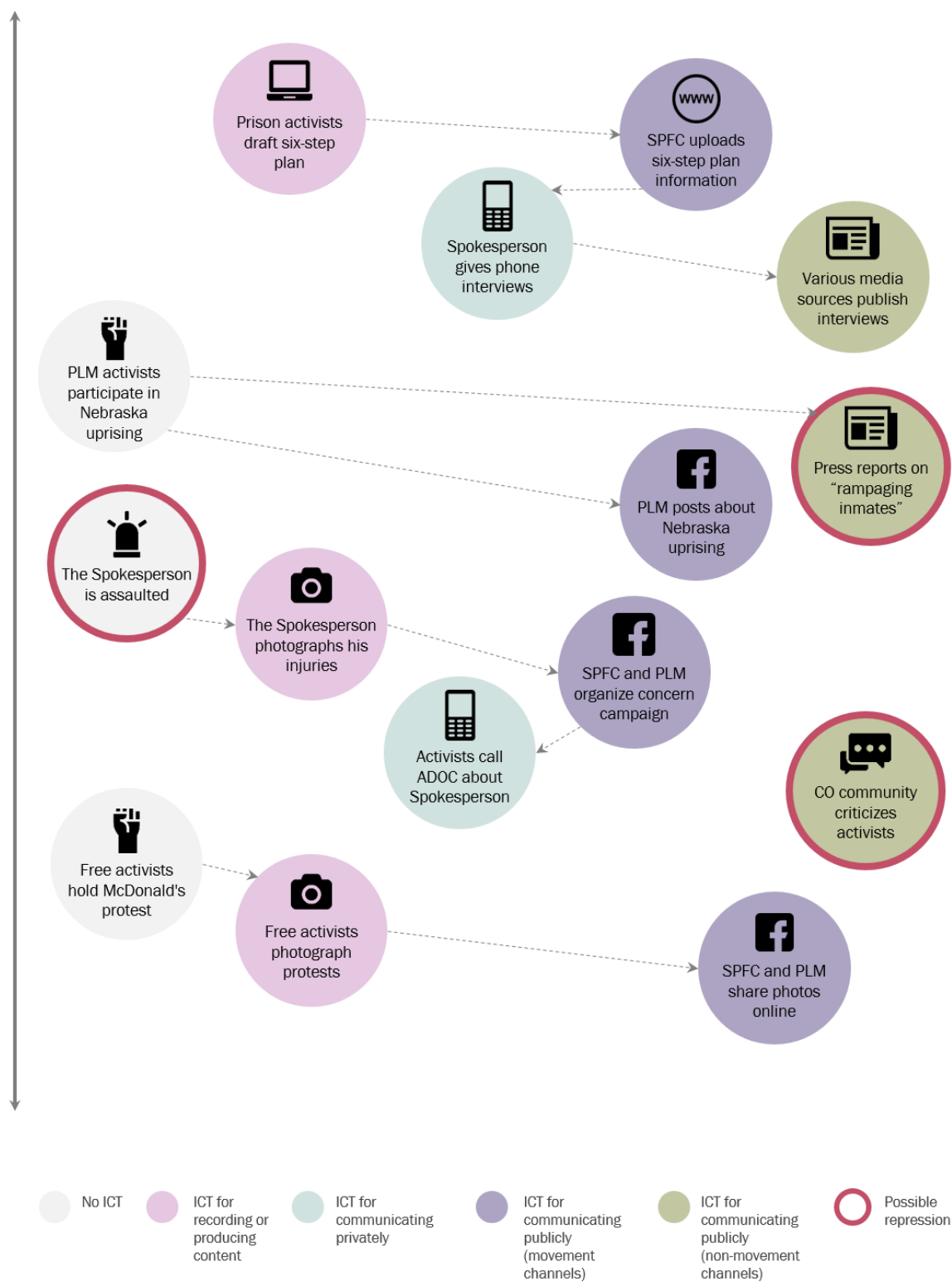


Figure 5.3 ICT Use as the NPRC Protests McDonalds (May to June 2015)

### 5.15.1 SPFC Phone Interviews and the Six Step Plan

As the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force Bill passes, the SPFC Spokesperson gives a series of interviews from a contraband cell phone. In the interviews, he describes prison conditions, prison work programs, and prison industries. He discusses the low wages that prisoners receive and the incentives for companies to contract with prison labor programs. His explanations are thorough, yet accessible. They appear to be crafted for free world audiences, less familiar with prison life and the justice system. It's possible that these interviews signal a new focus for the SPFC – a focus on mobilizing greater support from people outside of prisons.

The Six Step Plan, too, seems to indicate the SPFC's new commitment to rallying free world activists. The plan details how to recruit free activists in addition to prison activists. Moreover, it acknowledges that free people can take meaningful steps to bring attention to and challenge exploitative prison labor. Interestingly, though, the plan does not include a social media or digital contact strategy for engaging potential free activists. Free activists, according to the plan, should be recruited outside of prisons on visiting days.

### 5.15.2 Nebraska Rebellion

The prisoner rebellion in Nebraska, which involves some members of the PLM, is noteworthy for several reasons. First, the depiction of the Nebraska prisoners involved in the rebellion by the mainstream media is different from the depiction of the Nebraska prisoners by the PLM. The mainstream media describes Nebraska prisoners as inexplicably unruly; the PLM presents the Nebraska prisoners as well-intentioned, reasonable, and goal-oriented. PLM leaders struggle, though, to prove that the prisoners were congregating to peacefully advocate for themselves. Second, the prisoners who congregate before the rebellion seem to believe in their own agency. They are emboldened to draft a list of grievances and present the list to prison

administrators. Some journalists speculate that the Nebraska prisoners were inspired by activists in Ferguson (after the death of Michael Brown Jr.) and Baltimore (after the death of Freddie Gray Jr.). Third, the rebellion is very low-tech, even no-tech. The grievance list is hand-written. The PLM doesn't share tweets, texts, pictures, or videos from prisoner activists. Instead, PLM leaders disseminate a mailed letter from a Nebraska prison activist describing the incident. In news coverage of the rebellion, prisoners are cast as "rampaging" and "wild," but not organized or technologically capable.

### 5.15.3 Spokesperson Concern Campaign

The welfare calling campaign for the Spokesperson demonstrates, once again, the SPFC and PLM's ability to utilize ICTs for organizing rapid-response support actions. Within hours of the Spokesperson's beating, SPFC and PLM leaders are aware of the situation. The Prisoner Labor Movement quickly provides supporters with a phone number to call with concerns and a basic calling script. The Spokesperson's mother speedily creates a Facebook event for the call-in campaign. She shares the event with SPFC members and the established SPFC Facebook page. The Spokesperson is able to capture photos of his injuries and get those photos to internet audiences soon after the assault.

On the SPFC and PLM Facebook pages, activists do not question what events preceded the Spokesperson's assault. They do not ask if the Spokesperson was being unruly or disobedient. There is an implication that any assault on the Spokesperson must be motivated by a desire to silence him and demobilize the SPFC. Visitors of these pages seem aware of the Spokesperson's commitment to non-violence and disinterest in reckless rowdiness. They rally behind him and make concern calls for him.



#### 5.15.4 McDonald's Protest

The SPFC's action against McDonald's further highlights activists' evolving ICT skills. The SPFC uses Facebook, Twitter, and their blog to spread information about the action. The PLM uses Facebook to encourage activists to organize solidarity events. So too, activists use computers to create shareable digital graphics and printable fliers. Free activists participate in protests at several free world locations across the United States. After the action, free activists upload photos of the protest events. The photos demonstrate the free activists, in multiple cities around the United States, are hearing the SPFC and PLM's messages. Moreover, they are willing to publicly show their support for prisoners and prisoner concerns.

#### 5.15.5 CO Talk: Complaining Activists

While the SPFC is carrying out its Six Step Plan, some corrections officer communities are expressing anti-activist sentiments. On America's Forgotten Warriors, page administrators portray activists (particularly Black Lives Matter activists) as oppositional to law, law enforcement, and law officers. Administrators mock activists "complaining" about societal problems. Instead of protesting, administrators assert, activists should be reflecting on their own bad behavior and the bad behavior of their communities. This ideology is a stark contrast to how SPFC and PLM leaders discuss race, justice, and prison issues. From social media, though, it is unclear how wide or deep the anti-activist discourse actually flows within corrections communities. Two CO pages, Corrections Officers Together and Corrections Talk, don't share posts which ridicule activists. It is possible that visitors of these pages don't feel negatively about activists. It is also possible that the posting and commenting norms on these pages are different than the norms on the America's Invisible Warriors page.

### 5.16 Social Processes of Resistance and Repression in a Climate of Justice Reform

The SPFC's and PLM's use of ICTs in mid-2015 spotlights three recurrent processes of resistance and repression: tech non-transcendence, online reinterpretation, and the digital cataloguing of repressive symbolic resources.

First, the hunger, illness, and violence that activists experience illustrates the limits of ICTs. Although ICTs are powerful tools for virtually connecting activists, they are ineffective tools for directly altering activists' physical realities. Cell phones and social media cannot deliver more food to underfed prisoners, protect activists from disease exposure, shield activists from stressful or dangerous situations, or ease the pain of activists who are injured. ICTs allow activists to access virtual worlds. Yet, these technologies do not remove activists from their physical worlds. Activists are not able to fully escape their physical realities and physical limitations. Prisoner activists, especially, still must confront the hazards of their direct physical surroundings. The food deprivation during the April strike, the outbreaks of prisoner illness, the stress of the riot team deployment, and the assault on the Spokesperson illustrate activists' humanness and non-transcendence through ICTs.

Second, the experiences of activists online demonstrate the capabilities of ICTs to be used for re-interpretative efforts. Over and over activists use ICTs to document and explain their experiences. They write posts on social media, give interviews by phone, and upload photos and videos to the internet. Yet, each time, they are unable to provide the full context of their situations. They cannot provide their actual experiences to others – the physical environment, the sounds, the atmosphere, the events proceeding, and the events which follow. The natural time and capacity limits of interviews, photos, and video recording lend themselves to ambiguity and reinterpretation.

Activists post videos of the aftermath of the riot team deployment and allege that officers unnecessarily beat prisoners. Commenters, however, assign new interpretations to the videos. They

construct the prisoners as aggressors and the officers as heroes. Likewise, journalists give new meanings to the SPFC YouTube videos of unsanitary and unsafe prison conditions. When the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force is advocating for the expansion of justice sanctions and the addition of prison beds, news articles present the conditions in the videos as natural consequences of prison overcrowding and inadequate state funding. This depiction ignores how the Spokesperson verbally explains the deteriorating prisons. As the videos' narrator, the Spokesperson argues that the conditions developed from the ADOC's routine disregard of prisoners' humanity, prison capacity regulations, and facility maintenance. In effect, journalists borrow his visual evidence while substituting their own prognostic narratives.

Third, responses to NPRC activism showcase the digital archiving of repressive "symbolic resources" (Berger and Luckmann 1966). When leaders of the Southern Prisoner Freedom Committee attempt to draw attention to the riot team abuse, they are confronted with comments on YouTube about prisoners "faking" things, being aggressive, and deserving harsh treatment. One commenter even writes that "it's not rocket science" that prisoners will be treated poorly. After all, prisoners have committed crimes and deserve punishment. In online communities for corrections workers, commenters assert that prisoners probably provoked the riot team because they expect too much, are treated too well, and are prone to violence. Commenters assign similar explanations to the Nebraska rebellion.

These suspicions and explanations draw from cultural logics – ideas that are so commonly shared and reified they appear to be common sense (Geertz 1975). In actuality, there is a range of other logics that commenters could reasonably emphasize and assert. For instance, since many prisoners are sentenced to prison after accepting plea deals, it is possible to conceive of a cultural logic that prisoners are impatient (eager to get court proceedings finished) or enthusiastic about

comprise (ready to settle on court cases). Posts on Facebook pages for corrections workers showcase the accessibility of symbolic resources referencing the dangerousness, whininess, and badness of prisoners. These pages have a wide array of news articles, photos, memes, stories, commentaries, and comments which support repressive cultural logics. There are memes that depict prisoners as babies and stories of prisoners committing ultra-violent crimes. CO community Facebook pages serve as archives of evidence for repressive cultural logics about prisoners, organized by date. They reinforce the validity of assertions that prisoners are malicious, manipulative, and deserving of poor treatment.

These pages are not the only sites of repressive symbolic resource archiving, though. In fact, many commenters on corrections officer pages reference other online articles and share memes from other internet pages. A popular corrections news website allows visitors to navigate with hashtags, generating lists of news articles about prisoner violence, prison riots, contraband smuggling, and CO deaths. The Someecard website allows visitors to search for humor cards related to a range of topics including prison rape, prisoner violence, prison riots, prison food, and prison contraband. The Someecard website is the website from which commenters borrow graphics to suggest that prisoner illnesses are often fabricated. These graphics, along with other internet artifacts, are imbued with symbolic meaning and are fairly accessible and shareable online.

The catalogued troves of symbolic resources represent a noteworthy repressive force against prisoner activists. They make it easier for online commenters to access evidence to defend statements that dismiss and minimize prisoner activist abuse. Additionally, the repressive logics of these resources gain cultural weight and social inertia as they circulate online. The more these resources are shared, the more familiar these ideas become. The more these resources remain unchallenged, the more obvious and reasonable they appear.

## **CHAPTER 6. NPRC ACTIVISM AS ACTIVIST REPRESSION INTENSIFIES (JULY 2015 - MARCH 2016)**

### **6.1 The PLM Gets Organized**

During the summer of 2015, the Prisoner Labor Movement is growing its online presence and expanding its free activist resistance efforts. Leaders of the PLM announce that the group is starting a blog. The blog will serve as a space for PLM activists to share news and requests for support. The first blog entry on the website asks activists to contact prison officials in California on behalf of a deaf prisoner. The prisoner, who has medical documentation of his hearing impairment, has not been able to obtain a hearing aid or TTY text telephone.

The PLM follows this post with several more support requests. The requests come from prisoners experiencing issues related to denial of medication, abusive treatment by corrections officers, parole ineligibility, retaliation for grievance filing, contaminated drinking water, and forced program participation. Many of the requests include supplemental document files, such as scanned legal papers, petitions, exhibits, and official correspondences with government officials and judicial officers.

After launching the blog, the PLM publishes its second online newsletter. The newsletter is 16 pages long. It includes art and writing from activists as well as reports of prison resistance actions from February 2015 to June 2015. The SPFC's March 1 strike and the Nebraska rebellion are both mentioned. There's an essay by a prisoner in Missouri. The prisoner describes the repression he and his fellow prisoner activists are experiencing. He details "overly-strict phone restrictions, denial of meals (especially breakfast) by [certain guards], 24-hour light exposure, and denial of showers and recreation" as well as "the abuse of the chemical agents known as O.C. gas, mace, and pepper spray." He recounts worrying about sexual violence after being stripped to just

boxers and a t-shirt and placed with another prisoner. There is another essay which instructs prisoners how to develop self-discipline and mental fortitude to challenge prison conditions. So too, the newsletter includes a drawing of a raised fist, emerging from behind prison walls and a depiction of a prison as a school for revolutionaries. PLM leaders ask prisoner activists to share their newsletter copies with other prisoners and donate stamps, if they can afford to.

In addition to developing their online presence, the PLM is taking new steps to engage activists offline. The PLM organizes a mini-conference at their free activist headquarters. Activists gather to discuss short-term goals, long-term goals, and ideas for the movement. PLM leaders photograph the event and post pictures on Facebook. The pictures show more than a dozen people seated around a table. They are talking to one another, taking notes, typing on laptops, and sharing snacks. There are several large white papers on the walls with lengthy hand-written lists.

PLM leaders continue to host events at their headquarters throughout the summer and into fall. Many of the events are letter writing sessions. Free activists write support letters to send to prisoner activists. Some events also involve mailing information to prisoner activists. Free activists mail copies of the PLM newsletter, zines about prison and prisoner activism, and information about joining PLM. The PLM reports that only a portion of these letters and materials reach their intended recipients. A number of prison mailrooms reject mail from the PLM on the basis of inappropriate material and/or security threat group content.

Much of the rejected mail is sent back to PLM's headquarters. Some of the mail, however, is confiscated by prison officials. Prisoner mail policies differ across prison system and institution. Many prisons have rules dictating that rejected mail will be returned to sender, unless the mail is evidence of criminal activity, dangerous, damaged, or missing a return address. Certain prisons allow for mail confiscation if mail includes STG references or symbols.

Leaders of the PLM will discuss their experiences with mail censorship in a future interview. They will assess prison mailroom procedures as varying and unpredictable:

We try to be pro-active against the exclusion of mail from facilities. Some of the zines we send in have a ‘free speech primer’ for prison mailrooms on their inside cover, which cites the legal precedents that say they can’t block stuff just because they don’t like it. Sometimes mail still gets rejected, it seems like it often depends on mailroom staff and maybe what they ate for breakfast or something. Prison staff is often very arbitrary and unpredictable when it comes to enforcing rules, sometimes they don’t enforce rules that do exist, other times they make new rules up on the spot.

Leaders will also note that the PLM is perpetually fundraising for the cost of postage. Activists are sending out hundreds of letters and the cost of stamps and mailing supplies is adding up. Despite the costs, the PLM is encouraging mail correspondence instead of email correspondence. PLM leaders are wary of prison email systems. Prison email “stores the text of the correspondence in a keyword searchable format, which makes monitoring and shutting down communication extra easy for them,” leaders note.

## 6.2 COs Discuss Public Narratives and Alabama Prison Conditions

In corrections worker online communities, page administrators are continuing to discuss the impact of the deaths of Michael Brown Jr. and Freddie Gray Jr. Administrators share essays about how Brown and Gray’s deaths have resulting in the stereotyping and misrepresentation of law enforcement. In one piece, a journalist condemns media organizations for spreading false narratives about police violence and “attacking” the legitimacy law enforcement. In another piece, a corrections officer writes that there are “a few rotten apples” in law enforcement. In general, though, law enforcement officers are honest, well-intentioned, respectful, and hardworking. The officer explains that members of the public are judging law enforcement officers without knowing them or even talking to them. Commenters remark that the public largely doesn’t understand and

doesn't try to understand the work of corrections officers. "Walk a mile in their shoes and the public would be demanding more respect for these officers," writes a commenter who identifies himself as a corrections officer.

In mid-summer, corrections officer pages are also discussing news from Alabama. An anonymous corrections officer is speaking to the media about Alabama prison conditions. Moreover, he is sharing photographs from inside Alabama prisons. The corrections officer writes that he has decided to quit his job. He wants the public to know, however, about the poor conditions in which prisoners live and corrections officers work. The corrections officer describes the facility where he works as unsanitary and scary. "It rained in that prison, literally," the officer explains, "All the way through the prison, literally just buckets of raining water and mold growing down the walls and nothing was ever done about it." He shares photos of moldy walls, broken toilets, and exposed wires. The officer adds that the COs are in "constant survival mode." They are supervising too many prisoners, encountering dangerous contraband regularly, and struggling to facilitate rehabilitation without adequate prison programming. On Corrections Talk, some page visitors are shocked by the corrections officer's photos and statements. "That's so crazy," one commenter remarks. Alternatively, some page visitors are not at all surprised. "Welcome to any prison over ten years old," another commenter writes.

The Alabama CO interview is released just before the Alabama state government announces a budget shortfall. Legislators assert that the state's revenue will not cover the costs of proposed prison reform efforts. Moreover, the Alabama Department of Corrections may actually need to make cuts. Articles about the budget deficit suggest that cuts could lead to less officers are supervising more prisoners. In addition, corrections administrators may not be able to address worsening contraband issues. In one news article, a corrections officer reinforces just how



dangerous prison contraband cell phones are becoming. He recounts how a group of prisoners began yelling and crowding around when his colleague attempted to confiscate a prisoner's cell phone.

On Corrections Talk, page visitors share concerns about the Alabama budget for corrections. They criticize the Alabama legislature for not prioritizing public safety and reiterate the need for adequate staffing and contraband management efforts. Some visitors warn that budget cuts will make prisons less safe for officers:

“More officers will die!!”

“Someone's going to get killed”

“Moral will drop and people will quit and they won't have anyone to staff their facilities. Assaults will rise as well as officer deaths. This idea may look good on paper but reality will smack them in the face when their first negligent lawsuit arrives on their doorstep”

Other page visitors suspect that budget cuts will force Alabama to release some prisoners. “Be careful. Look what happened in CA. The courts eventually will order mandatory releases,” the commenter explains.

### 6.3 Prisoners as Lawyers Goes Online and the SPFC Goes Quiet

As fall approaches, another prisoner advocacy group emerges online. The group, which calls itself Prisoners as Lawyers (PAL), creates a Facebook page. They title their Facebook page “Prisoner lawyers, ask us your questions.” Activists invite prisoners to contact the page for legal help. They explain that the page is managed by jailhouse lawyers – prisoners who are knowledgeable about legal matters, but do not have law degrees.

Initially, PAL does not appear linked to the SPFC or the PLM. The group is based in North Carolina. Their Facebook page does not cross-post SPFC or PLM content. Instead, the page

provides hyperlinks to online litigation guides and responds to visitor posts. Page administrators answer visitor questions like, “How do I determine if a court ruling is retroactive” and “What can I do if a prison refuses to provide treatment for Hepatitis C?”

While PAL is becoming active on the internet, the SPFC is going quiet online. The SPFC Facebook page is scarcely posting in September, October, November, and December. Its few posts are primarily re-shares of earlier images and writings. The SPFC’s radio show stops recording new episodes. The SPFC blog stops sharing new posts. The SPFC Twitter account stops posting at the end of August. Its final tweet reads, “He sold / this he transfered.”

The tweet seems to indicate the Spokesperson’s transfer. For his disciplinary violations, the Spokesperson is transferred to a new prison. This new prison is an Alabama maximum security facility specializing in “controlling repeat and/or multiple violent offenders with lengthy sentences that are behaviorally difficult to manage, and several hundred inmates sentenced to life without parole.”

#### 6.4 COs Confront the War on Law Enforcement

Alarm about anti-law enforcement violence and rhetoric resurges in online corrections communities in August. America’s Invisible Warriors posts about how activists have returned to Ferguson, Missouri, one year after the death of Michael Brown Jr. The page shares a warning from a political website advising police officers to watch out for Black Lives Matter activists who are planning to kill police officers. Page administrators assert that Black Lives Matter activists are out of control: “The authorities need to stop catering to these assholes! Lock them up!!” Commenters agree:

“Fuck black lives matter, their a racist group!!”

“Who really cares what a race baiting bunch of ASSES think Black Lives matter then grow up cum bags!”

“I am sick and tired of these racist miscreants!!! Us citizens need to start putting an end to their madness!!!”

“What a bunch of thugs.”

Page visitors express profound worry that police officers, corrections officers, and other members of law enforcement are being targeted by angry and violent activists.

America’s Invisible Warriors shares links to two videos about the War on Law Enforcement. In one video, Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly talks to a guest about the epidemic of violence against police. In another video, a sheriff proclaims that the U.S. President, Barak Obama is spearheading the war on law enforcement. Obama, the sheriff explains, is spreading lies, supporting activists who disparage the police, and refusing to acknowledge the growing violence against law enforcement officers. The page also shares a meme that declares, “The war on police officers must come to an end.” Page administrators assert that corrections officers and police officers must watch out for each other. Administrators post an image with text that reads, “If I see a criminal attacking a Police Officer I will not stand around taking video I will protect the Officer !!!”

Administrators for the Corrections Talk page are talking about anti-law enforcement violence, too. The page posts an article about how “law enforcement across the country is under attack.” Commenters note that correctional officers, like police officers, are facing dangers related to the War on Law Enforcement. Corrections Talk administrators share several images with text stating “Correction officer lives matter” and “Honor those who serve / Correctional Officers.” Commenters encourage COs to take the War on Law Enforcement seriously. One commenter provides a link to a blog post which argues that FBI data shows that law enforcement officers are

the most at-risk group in America.

## 6.5 Handguns, Cell Phones, and a Stabbing in Alabama

As talk of the War on Law Enforcement is circulating, two events stoke fears of corrections officer attacks in Alabama. First, corrections officers catch three people throwing packages with guns, drugs, and cell phones into a prison over an exterior wall. The incident takes place at a prison where the SPFC has been organizing protests. It is the prison where the Spokesperson was incarcerated before his transfer. In online CO communities, commenters express relief that the guns were found before they could be used to cause harm. So too, they commend COs for intercepting the packages and taking security precautions.

Second, a corrections officer is stabbed at the same prison. According to news articles, the officer was instructing a prisoner to return to his cell. When the prisoner refused, the situation became tense. The prisoner became physically aggressive. Two nearby prisoners joined the assault on the CO. The prisoners stabbed the officer with “a homemade shiv.” After the assault, the officer was taken to the hospital for his injuries. On Corrections Talk, page visitors write that the assault is indicative of the growing violence in against COs. One commenter explains:

We have inmate on inmate stickings everyday, and now they are seeing that nothing really happens when they do it to the officers and because we are so short handed, housing close custody inmates in a prison designed to house min-medium custody inmates, I'm afraid we are only gonna have officers assaulted with weapons more often..

Other commenters agree that attacks on COs are becoming more common, especially in understaffed prisons. “They are probably working at 30% and without a show of force inmates will take advantage,” writes a commenter who identifies himself as a retired Alabama CO.

## 6.6 ICT Use as the PLM Grows Online and Offline

In summer and fall 2015, NPRC activists are using ICTs to produce online content and coordinate free activist resistance efforts. With the Spokesperson's transfer, the SPFC's social media use has dramatically declined.

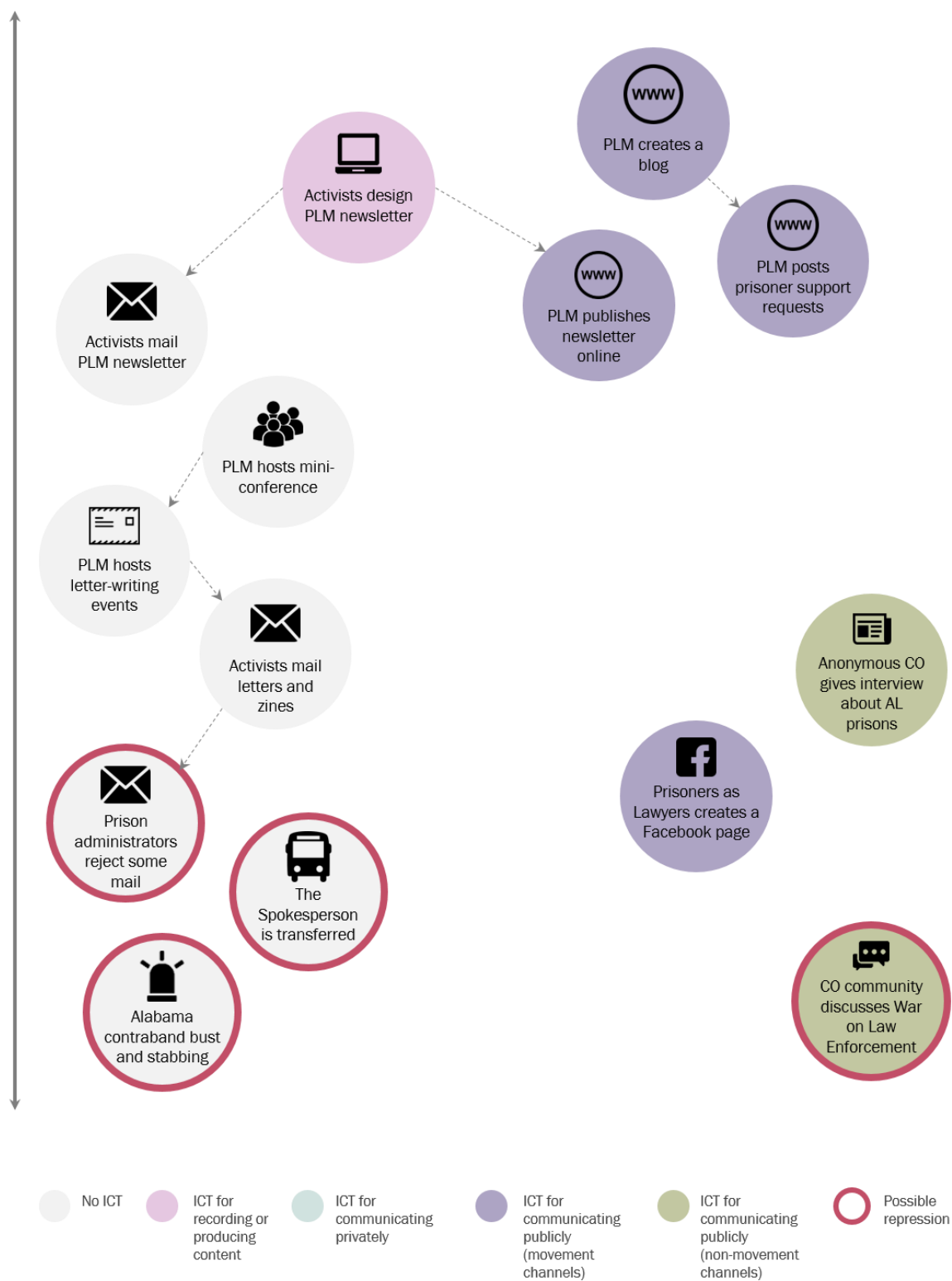


Figure 6.1 ICT Use as the PLM Grows Online and Offline (Summer/Fall 2015)

### 6.6.1 PLM Blog and Second Newsletter

The PLM is steadily expanding its digital presence. The group creates a sleek and visually-appealing blog. The blog is well-designed; it has an effective navigation bar and a coherent visual scheme. Unlike the PLM Facebook page, the PLM blog allows visitors to preview PDFs documents, easily navigate to old posts, search for words and phrases, and browse content tags. The blog acts as a detailed, sorted, and searchable archive for PLM content.

The PLM also publishes its second newsletter. Similar to the first newsletter, the second newsletter is attractive and polished. The document was clearly created with a word processing program. Attributions in the newsletter indicate that free activists helped to design, format, and produce the document. PLM leaders make the newsletter available for online viewing and announce that copies will be mailed to prisoner activists.

The PLM is paying for mailing supplies including stamps, envelopes, and paper. A portion of the mailed newsletters reach prisoners; however, many newsletters are rejected by prison mailrooms. These rejections are significant. The mailed newsletters are physical products of the PLM's time, effort, and money. Rejection not only means that printing and mailing costs go to waste; it means that PLM activists must devote further effort into deciding how to handle the mail rejection incidents.

Variation in mail policies across prisons, the complexity of some prison mail policies, and the arbitrariness of prison mail policy enforcement make it difficult to respond to mail rejection. If mail is returned to PLM headquarters, PLM leaders must determine why the mail was rejected and how to appeal the rejection decision. If mail is rejected without notice, PLM leaders must also confirm that the mail was delivered to the prison but not received by the prisoner. The PLM begins putting disclaimers on their newsletters and print materials for prisoners. The disclaimers state that the PLM is familiar with prison mail law and their writings are protected free speech. Even with

the disclaimers, however, the PLM still encounters mail rejection and mail confiscation.

#### 6.6.2 PLM Mini-Conference and Headquarters Events

Throughout the summer, leaders of the PLM are drawing free activists to the group's headquarters. The headquarters is a physical space devoted to prisoners' rights activism. At the mini-conference and at other events, activists are engaging in fairly low-tech resistance efforts. They are talking and brainstorming in face-to-face meetings. They are hand-writing notes, lists, and letters. One reason why the PLM is choosing low-tech options is because these options are practical. The PLM has a space for hosting in-person events because of their affiliation with the large union. The PLM also has a growing local activist network. These activists are able to be physically present at PLM headquarters at the same time. Another reason for this tech absence is activists' mistrust. PLM activists are worried that messaging and email technologies are being, or could be, monitored and analyzed by prison officials and law enforcement. PLM letter-writers are opting not to utilize prison email systems. Many free activists are limiting or censoring their texting communications. Some activists are texting each other using a secure texting app. PLM leaders are encouraging activists to think carefully about how they use ICTs.

#### 6.6.3 PAL Facebook Page

The formation of PAL is a noteworthy event on the timeline of the NPRC's development. The PAL founders are not, at this point, connected with the SPFC or the PLM. The group formed independently of these organizations and will not become a NPRC member until 2016. The PAL Facebook page is, for now, a direct assistance page, rather than an activism page. The page's founders offer to share their law knowledge with individual prisoners confronting legal issues. "Ask us your questions," the page's title announces.



#### 6.6.4 An Anonymous CO Comments on Alabama Prison Conditions

The anonymous interview with an Alabama CO is likewise a noteworthy event for the SPFC. In the interview, the corrections officer validates many of the complaints of Alabama prisoners. The CO discusses issues of sanitation, safety, and health. He portrays prison administrators as negligent and willful in allowing prison conditions to deteriorate. He proposes that prison administrators make facility improvements and expand programming and rehabilitative services for prisoners. These suggestions align with some of the SPFC's stated goals. Yet, the suggestions are originating from a source of authority. The CO provides his photos and experience working in prisons as grounds for his knowledge claims about prison issues. Unlike prisoner activists, however, the corrections officer doesn't need to admit a stigmatized identity to validate those knowledge claims. He is an employee of the prison, rather than a person sentenced to spend time in the prison.

#### 6.6.5 The Spokesperson's Transfer

When the Spokesperson is transferred to a maximum-security prison, the SPFC suffers a major blow. Before the transfer, the Spokesperson was hosting the SPFC radio show, writing online content, planning resistance efforts, mobilizing prisoner activists, and representing the SPFC in news interviews. Moreover, it seemed as though the Spokesperson's activism could not be stopped. He had been denied privileges, intimidated, moved to segregation, housed in a dry cell, and even beaten. Yet none of these acts of repression quieted the Spokesperson. He always quickly found a way to reestablish himself as the voice of the SPFC. This time, the Spokesperson is fully silenced. The transfer is abrupt. Without warning or explanation, the SPFC's Facebook and Twitter pages stop sharing new content. The SPFC's radio show stops recording new episodes. It is the first time that the SPFC sees their leader lastingly and effectively demobilized.

#### 6.6.6 CO Talk: The War on Law Enforcement

Talk about the War on Law Enforcement is having several notable effects. First, corrections officers are visibly offering support and solidarity to other COs and law enforcement officers. CO page administrators and commenters are expressing concern for each other's wellbeing. They are declaring their familial love, gratitude, and willingness to risk their own safety for one another.

Second, conversations about the War on Law Enforcement are delineating metaphorical "sides." As corrections officers are recognizing who is on their team, they are also identifying their opponent. Their solidarity is oppositional; their war has an enemy. The Corrections Officers Together and Corrections Talk pages are broadly casting "cop-killers" and people harboring anti-law enforcement sentiments as the enemy. The America's Invisible Warriors community is suggesting that Black Lives Matter activists, "thugs," and liberal public figures are also the enemy. The identification of Black Lives Matter activists as enemies is not ideal for the SPFC. SPFC activists have publicly aligned themselves with Black Lives Matter, and the two groups share some of the same issues of concern. It's not clear, however, how COs working in facilities with SPFC prisoner activists are understanding and interpreting the War on Law Enforcement.

#### 6.6.7 Alabama Contraband Bust and CO Stabbing

Two events at the same prison indicate that Alabama corrections officers have cause to worry for their safety. Corrections officers catch a group of three people introducing guns, drugs, and cell phones into the prison. Although the contraband is discovered and intercepted before reaching prisoner hands, it does enter prison walls. Moreover, its method of entry is not sophisticated. The contraband items are simply thrown over a prison wall.

Soon after the smuggling bust, a corrections officer is stabbed. From ADOC accounts, the stabbing seems senseless. A disobedient prisoner became spontaneously aggressive and violent.

Two additional prisoners joined the first prisoner to gang up on the CO and seriously injure him. This version of events fits with the War on Law Enforcement narrative. It is an unnerving example of a law enforcement officer doing his job when he is randomly attacked by aggressors.

## 6.7 The Chief Political Spokesperson Becomes Ill

The SPFC has only minimally participated in social media since August. Their Twitter account is inactive; their Facebook is very occasionally re-posting old content. On October 1, however, SPFC activists emerge in another internet space: a public Facebook page dedicated to proving the Chief Political Strategist's wrongful conviction. A free activist named Lady Zahira is concerned that the Political Strategist is experiencing medical neglect. The Strategist is ill. He is still being held in segregation. He has been experiencing intense and prolonged stomach pain since mid-September. According to Lady Zahira, the Strategist communicated his illness to prison administrators. Prison administrators did not take his complaints seriously. On September 24, the Strategist convinced an officer to transport him to the infirmary. Medical staff suspected that intestinal blockage was causing the Strategist's pain. They recommended that the Strategist be taken for x-rays to determine the cause of the blockage.

As of October 1, the Strategist has still not received an x-ray or follow-up care. Lady Zahira contends that the ADOC is acting "deliberately indifferent to [the Strategist's] medical condition." She urges supporters to call the warden and the ADOC commissioner. The PLM also shares an action alert on its Facebook page. The alert encourages PLM members to call the ADOC commissioner and ask that the Strategist be treated for his illness.

Lady Zahira provides updates about the Strategist over the next week. Without care, the Strategist's pain worsens. He experiences bouts of vomiting, light-headedness, and constipation. He begins refusing to eat. On October 5, he refuses to shower. He bangs forcefully against the

shower stall door which causes “the already cracked plexiglass window to break.” The shower stall incident prompts the warden to visit the segregation unit and speak to the Strategist. The warden arranges for the Strategist to be transported for an x-ray, which reveals that Strategist has an intestinal knot. After the appointment, Lady Zahira is sure that the Strategist will receive prompt care for this serious issue.

On November 10, the Strategist has still not received follow-up care. Lady Zahira makes a Facebook event for a letter-writing campaign on behalf of the Strategist. She writes that she hopes to send 200 letters to the warden and the ADOC commissioner. These letters will remind prison administrators that the Strategist still needs treatment and show that people are concerned about his wellbeing. Lady Zahira drafts a sample letter for supporters to sign and send. She offers to print copies of the letter and mail them to activists who do not have printer access. Despite the calls and letters, the Strategist does not begin receiving treatment until December. The warden at the prison where the Strategist is incarcerated will attribute the delay in care to a lengthy “prior authorization process” required by the prison’s private healthcare provider, Corizon Correctional Healthcare.

## 6.8 Corrections Officers Talk about Prison Order Problems

The year, so far, has felt turbulent for many corrections officers. Dozens of prisons in the United States have experienced major disturbances, including prisoner hunger strikes, prisoner demonstrations, attacks on corrections officers, and violent riots. Online corrections officer communities are processing what the disturbances mean for their facilities, their jobs, and their health. Page visitors worry that prison administrators are not prioritizing staff safety as prisoners are becoming increasingly rebellious.

Corrections Talk and America’s Invisible Warriors post an article about the aftermath of a prison riot in Arizona. According to the article, the riot followed numerous prisoner complaints

about inadequate food, lack of healthcare access, and facility violence. The riot, which lasted three days, left nine corrections officers and four prisoners injured. Additionally, a corrections officer involved in the riot committed suicide days after the incident. The article cites two corrections experts who place blame for the riot on prisoner administrators: “Contrary to the belief of many in prison administration, government, and media, most prison disturbances are not the result of inmate organization; they are due to administrative disorganization.” Commenters mourn the corrections officer’s death. They also criticize high-level administrators who overlooked the prison problems. “The DOC monitors walked around with blinders on. Most close to retirement, riding out there days,” one commenter writes. “Near six figure salary stuffed suits is what they were,” another commenter agrees. A third commenter adds that prison officials are continuing to overlook major prison issues:

They know about the staff shortages and keep padding the numbers!! They keep dropping our core staffing numbers to show that they are not under staffed. Who responds to emergency situations when the core numbers are at the bare minimum?

On the whole, commenters seem to feel as though prison administrators need to be doing more to manage prison order and prevent facility violence.

Corrections Talk shares articles about other riots in Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and California. The articles explain how understaffing, new prison policies, and ill-advised administrative decisions shaped prison conditions leading up to the riots. Page administrators write that prison officials need to take steps to prevent violent and disorderly situations: “Administrators need to be proactive in controlling situations, rather than waiting to respond after lives are in danger.” Corrections Talk invites visitors to respond to a survey about riots and prison violence. The survey notes, “Riots and other disturbances are not new. But today's prisons and jails are increasingly responding to these chaotic and unpredictable events.”

Discussions on America's Invisible Warriors and Corrections Talk suggest that some page visitors believe that recent incidents of prison unrest are related to Black Lives Matter and criminal justice activism. Commenters assert that prisoners are observing activists disrespect and challenge law enforcement officers. Moreover, corrections officers are becoming hesitant to use necessary force. One commenter writes that, in this political climate, corrections officers must prioritize their own safety: "We can't be afraid to do our jobs... it's better to be judged by 12 than carried by 6."

## 6.9 PLM and SPFC Leaders Experience Repression

As the holidays approach, the PLM hosts a special card-writing event at their free activist headquarters. They ask free activists to write non-religious holiday messages to show their support for and solidarity with prisoner activists. The PLM promotes the card-writing session with a Facebook event. In the event description, PLM leaders offer to accommodate free activists who cannot attend the event:

If you would like to send holiday greeting cards to friends and fellow workers in prison, please send a note to the [PLM] facebook page and we will provide you with addresses. If you let us know what state you live in, we can try to provide addresses of people in your state.

Free activists post on the event page with updates and photos of their cards. "Success! 60 cards done," one activist reports.

In addition to writing cards, free activists from the PLM are gathering to show support for other groups organizing against police violence and racial injustice. PLM free activists attend protests following a police shooting in Minneapolis and the grand jury decision not to indict of Brian Encinia (the Texas Trooper who arrested Sandra Bland; Bland died in custody). Just before Christmas, a group PLM free activists attend a Black Lives Matter demonstration in Minnesota. At the demonstration, a PLM leader is arrested. Fellow activists fear that the leader was targeted

by police for his prisoner advocacy and union leadership position. Moreover, they are concerned that he will be mistreated in jail. The PLM's associated union creates an event to draw attention to the PLM leader's arrest. The union asks members to call the police station and request that the leader and other arrestees be treated respectfully and processed promptly. "Call NOW. Call Repeatedly. Ask your friends and family to call," the union implores.

Dozens of activists write on the event page, confirming their calls and relaying messages from the police department. "When I called the jail an hour ago, they told me charged still had not been filed," one activist writes. "The person who answered [the phone], before hanging up on me, said that she was recording my phone number and would be charging me with harassment if I continued to call," says another. The leader is released on bail after spending a night in jail.

#### 6.10 SPFC Voices Reemerge Online

The SPFC is ending the year without the Spokesperson or Political Strategist in command. The Spokesperson has been transferred to a new facility. In this new facility, he is not able to post to Twitter and Facebook. He cannot host the SPFC radio show. The Political Strategist is still recovering from a serious intestinal issue. The SPFC has not organized major events or published new writings in months.

Outside of prison, though, SPFC free activists are working to revive the committee. The Spokesperson's mother and another free activist, Ms. Majesty, are coordinating a re-launch of the SPFC online radio show. These two women are organizing a group of prisoner wives and family members. They call the group the Southern Prisoner Family Brigade (SPFB). The Spokesperson's mother creates a Facebook event for the show. She invited SPFC activists and SPFB members. She encourages them to tune in and consider joining the conversation. When the SPFC radio re-launches in January 2016, Ms. Majesty hosts the first show. She introduces the

segment by explaining the goals of the SPFB: “It’s important that we as family members of incarcerated loved ones support them in addition to fighting for their rights.” An SPFC activist calls in to the radio show. He thanks Ms. Majesty for “stepping up to the plate” and expresses his appreciation for the Spokesperson’s mother. The caller notes the Spokesperson’s absence: “We all miss him.”

#### 6.11 ICT Use as NPRC Leaders Face Repression

In late 2015 and early 2016, SPFC and PLM activists are dealing with several significant prisoner activist repression events. In response to this repression, activists are using ICTs to organize concern campaigns and demonstrate support for prisoners.



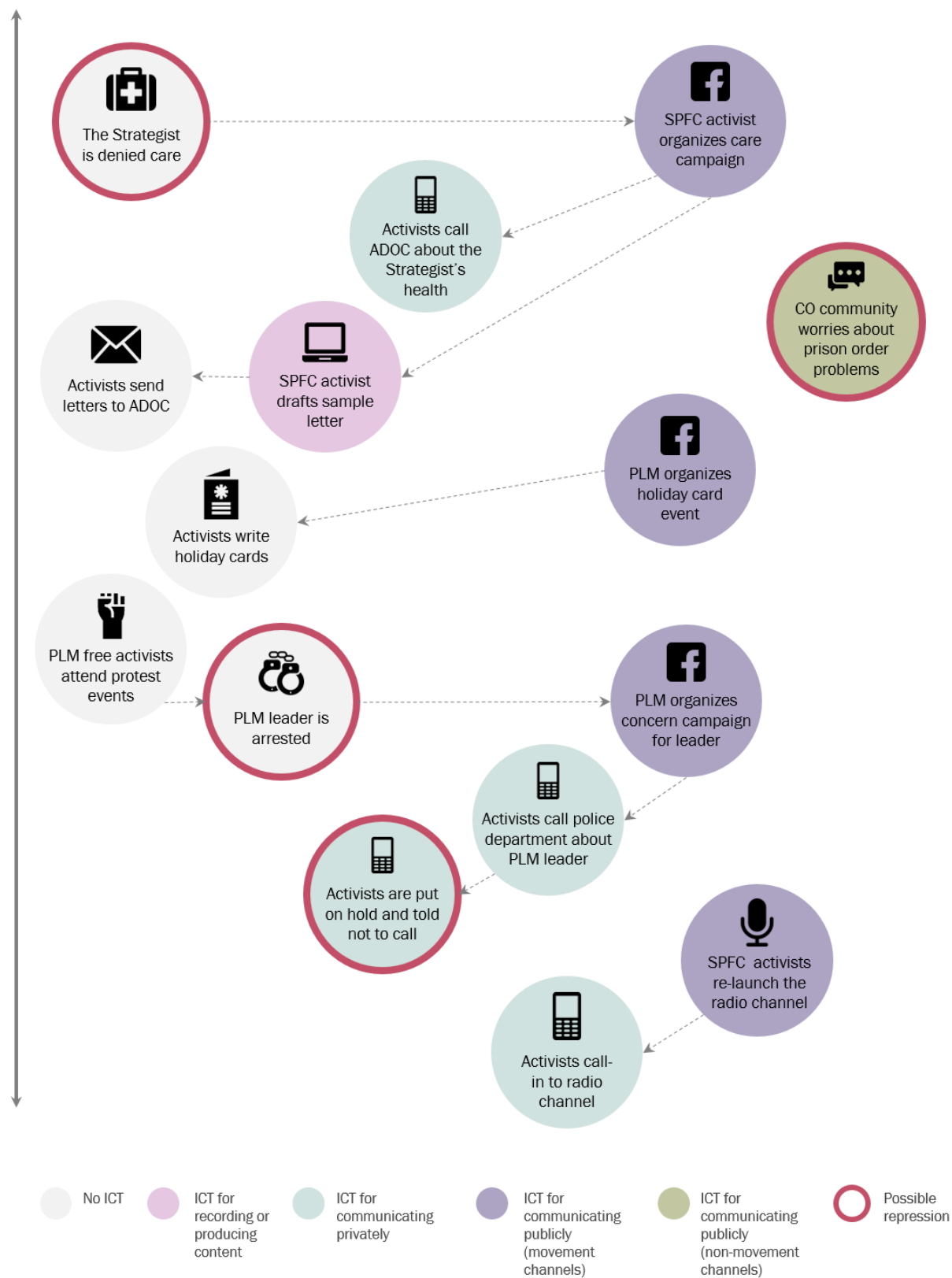


Figure 6.2 ICT Use as NPRC Leaders Face Repression (November to Early-January 2015)

### 6.11.1 The Strategist's Care Campaign

The Strategist's illness, emerging just after the Spokesperson's transfer, derails the SPFC's activism. From late September through December, the Strategist is suffering intense pain from his intestinal knot. His energy is focused on getting treatment and regaining health. He and the Spokesperson are unable to lead the SPFC. The SPFC's in-prison resistance efforts are put on pause.

During this time, Lady Zahira takes the lead. She coordinates a calling campaign to protest the Strategist's denial of healthcare. When the calling campaign doesn't produce results, she organizes a letter-writing event on Facebook. She reasons that the ADOC will not be able to ignore hundreds of physical letters. Many of the letter-writing event's attendees are free women. Twenty-six profiles indicate that they are "attending" the letter writing Facebook event; 22 of the profiles belong to women. Lady Zahira drafts a sample letter for activists to send to prison administrators. She offers to print and send copies of the letter to other activists who do not have printer access. Interestingly, Lady Zahira and event attendees refer to this effort as a "support" initiative. They do not refer the care campaign as SPFC activism or label themselves as SPFC activists. Rather, they frame the effort as providing aid to SPFC activists.

### 6.11.2 CO Talk: Prison Order Problems

In online communities, corrections officers are remarking on the frequency of prisoner riots and uprising. It seems as though these disturbances are becoming more common. Additionally, many of these disturbances feel preventable to officers. COs discuss how administrators could have done more to manage prison order and avert the disturbances: hire more staff, require less overtime, ensure all shifts are properly staffed, make greater efforts to retain skilled staff, be more aware of prisoner dynamics, and allow staff to use necessary force in dangerous situations. Some

commenters are acknowledging that they want the administrators at the prisons where they work to do more. They are worried that, in a disturbance, they, their colleagues, or the prisoners they supervise could be injured or killed. It is possible that this worry is leading some COs to be more attentive to prisoner issues and proactive towards preventing dangerous situations. It is also possible that this worry is leading some COs to be mistrustful and fearful of prisoners and more reactive to signs of threat.

#### 6.11.3 PLM Card Writing

Around the holidays, the PLM invites free activists to write cards to prisoner activists. PLM leaders host a card writing session at their headquarters and share information about how non-local free activists can participate. Like the earlier letter writing sessions, the card writing event is low-tech. The PLM provides stamps and letter writing materials to activists who attend the card writing event at PLM's headquarters. Free activists make the cards by hand and send them through the mail. PLM leaders take care to ensure that the cards writing effort is inclusive. Leaders ask free activists to consider non-Christian prisoners and refrain from writing Christmas-related messages. On the event page comments, a free activists writes that she and her friends are happy to make the cards. "Folks r into it, honestly :)," the activist explains. They are enjoying spending time together, crafting the cards, and putting effort into a good cause.

#### 6.11.4 PLM Leader Arrest

After a PLM leader is arrested, PLM activists are immediately worried. They are fearful that their leader will be abused, intimidated, or treated unfairly by law enforcement while in custody. The PLM's union creates a call-in campaign for the leader. The union reasons that, if the police department receives hundreds of calls from people worried about the leader, police officers won't dare to mistreat him. Callers report that the repeated call-ins frustrate

representatives from the police department. These representatives ask activists to stop calling, put activists on hold for long stretches of time, hang up on activists, and threaten to charge activists with harassment. It is possible that the calling campaign is sending a message that police should treat the PLM leader with care; there could a public response if the leader is mistreated. It is also possible that the calls are increasing police resentment towards the leader. The calls take time to answer; the callers are suspicious and not friendly; and police staff are answering the same questions repeatedly.

#### 6.11.5 SPFC Radio Re-Launch

After five months of silence, the SPFC online radio show returns. Two free activists, Ms. Majesty and the Spokesperson's mother work together to re-launch the SPFC radio show. Ms. Majesty hosts the show, while the Spokesperson's mother manages the show's audio and caller queue. Like Lady Zahira, Ms. Majesty and the Spokesperson's mother refer to their efforts as support work. In the radio show, Ms. Majesty explains that she is temporarily "helping out." She clarifies that she is a SPFB member. She supports the SPFC; but, she is not their new leader. In future radio shows, Ms. Majesty will state that, as a person who has never been incarcerated, she can only ever have a support role in the movement. "There's a lot going on behind bars that people on the outside don't understand," Ms. Majesty explains.

#### 6.12 The PLM Releases a Third Newsletter and Plans a Trans Prisoner Solidarity Day

In the new year, PLM leaders are writing another newsletter and preparing for a Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity. This newsletter, the PLM's third newsletter, will feature a timeline of recent prison resistance efforts, a glossary of union-related words, a drawing of black men

hanging from the statue of liberty, an illustration of George W. Bush Jr. wearing a Ku Klux Klan hood, writings from anti-capitalist and revolutionary prisoners, and the PLM newsletter's first article from a woman prisoner. A collection of articles in the newsletter will discuss recurring issues with prisoner mobilization. Activists will stress that issues within the prisoner community, such as racial and social divisions, are important to recognize and confront. This newsletter will be remarkable for two reasons. First, the PLM will publish a Spanish translation of the newsletter's content. Second, this newsletter will announce that a prisoner activist collective is considering a mass prison strike in September 2016. The third newsletter, like the last two, will be rejected by some prison mailrooms.

In order to prepare for the Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity, the PLM is producing online content and organizing an information event. The solidarity day will take place on January 22. Free activists will be invited to attend presentations on transgender prison issues at a bookstore nearby the PLM free activist headquarters. In preparation for the event, PLM leaders post informational zines on their website about transgender prisoner issues. They share a guide for transgender prisoners on finding resources and legal assistance, a FAQ sheet about LGBTQ prisoner experiences, compiled information about how to advocate for LGBTQ prisoner rights, and a collection of writings about the Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity. The zines are educational and expressive. They include statistics about LGBTQ incarceration and explanations of policies affecting LGBTQ prisoners in addition to poems, drawings, and essays by transgender prisoners. The PLM writes a Facebook post about the zines and asks supporters to forward the zines to other prisoner advocacy organizations: "Hello friends, if you or anyone you know sends information to prisoners on a regular basis (like through books to prisoners projects or whatever) please consider including these new zines."

On the morning of the Trans Prisoner Days of Solidarity, the PLM Facebook page posts several graphics. The graphics use colors from the transgender pride flag. They have text which states “I STAND WITH TRANS PRISONERS.” On each graphic, there are a few sentences about transgender prisoner issues, written in a smaller font. The PLM logo is featured at the bottom of each graphic. The PLM encourages activists to share the graphics and “Let all your friends know where you stand!”

On the same day, the Federal Bureau of Prisons passes a series of new administrative rules. The rules formalize the BOP’s policies on Communication Management Units (CMUs). CMUs house federal prisoners that are deemed exceptionally threatening to the public or the security, safety, or order of prison facilities. In CMUs, prisoners are held in segregation cells; are closely monitored; are not permitted to have contact visits; and have intense communication restrictions. Although the BOP has been operating CMUs since 2007, the administrative rules on CMUs took years to codify. The establishment of these rules legitimates the legality and penal necessity of CMUs. It appears that the CMU rules affect at least one PLM member, an environmental activist who helped organize the Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity.

### 6.13 COs Again Consider Transgender Prisoner Healthcare

The PLM’s support of transgender prisoners is significant. Policies on the treatment of transgender prisoners differ wildly across states and prison systems in the United States. Some prisons have policies requiring prisoners to be housed by the assigned sex at birth or legal gender. Some prisons require that transgender prisoners submit medical evidence that their gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth, in order to be housed in units that match their gender identity. Some prisons house transgender prisoners in administrative segregation or special units.

Moreover, online corrections communities seem largely mistrustful of transgender prisoners and unsympathetic towards transgender prisoner issues. It is likely that CO feelings about transgender prisoners differ widely across prison systems, prisons, and individual corrections officers. Still, online corrections communities are overwhelmingly hostile when discussing transgender prisoners. In that past six months, CO communities have hosted discussions on dozens of news articles about transgender prisoner healthcare, violence against transgender prisoners, and transgender prisoner legal advocacy. Almost all of the comments in these discussions disparage transgender prisoners or criticize transgender-sensitive policies.

On Corrections Talk, administrators solicited opinions about a policy in Texas that would allow transgender prisoners access to hormone therapy. Some commenters suggested that paying for this medication is an improper use of tax money. “I don't believe taxpayers should have to pay for this....obey the laws and do whatever you can afford to with your body..with your OWN money,” one commenter replied. Other commenters responded with intensely negative reactions: “ill spay & neuter each and everyone of them with my Black n Decker which has a Very rusty blade if theyll supply the smallest of Pickle Jars!!!!” None of the post’s 48 commenters conveyed support for the Texas policy.

America’s Invisible Warriors shared a post about California transgender health policies. Commenters here similarly expressed disapproval of the new health policy. “That’s bullshit,” one commenter wrote. “Disgusting,” another commenter remarked. A third commenter responded with a meme of actor Morgan Freeman pointing at the sky and text reading, “This is why the aliens won’t talk to us.”

#### 6.14 “The Show Must Go On” and PAL Discovers the SPFC

Throughout the month of February, Ms. Majesty and the Spokesperson’s mother continue to manage the SPFC online radio show. Ms. Majesty leads discussions about how to support incarcerated people, how to build unity between prisoners and free people, and what free people can do about abuse and violence in Alabama prisons. She presents some of the research she’s conducted online, citing statistics and findings from *The New Jim Crow* and ADOC reports. She talks with the Spokesperson’s mother, prisoner activists, family members of prisoners, and, in some shows, the Strategist. She invites activists to send letters to the SPFB. She and the Spokesperson’s Mother will read the letters on the show.

In one show, Ms. Majesty discusses what actions free people can take. She proposes providing love, demonstrating that free people care, listening to prisoners’ stories, assisting with legal issues, and motivating prisoners. Callers acknowledge that free people can make important contributions to the prisoners’ rights struggle. “That support is so important... it feels good when you have it,” a caller who identifies himself as a prisoner explains. He adds that free people can also recruit prisoners to the SPFC. Free people can listen to the radio show, learn about resistance efforts, and provide that information to their relatives in prison. “If you on the line and you listening and you got a son or a daughter or anybody in prison... do something,” the caller instructs free radio show listeners.

In another show, Ms. Majesty hosts a discussion with the Strategist and two other prisoner activists. One of the prisoner activists is a prisoner who was moved to segregation in 2014 along with the Strategist and the Spokesperson. Ms. Majesty and the discussants talk about future plans, politics, and prison policies. A caller phones in with a blocked phone number. The Spokesperson’s mother rejects the call. The caller phones in again. The Spokesperson’s mother explains that she will not allow the caller to speak until the phone number appears unblocked. The caller states that



she “is not a bad person” and she knows someone in the SPFC. The Spokesperson’s mother removes the caller from the caller queue. On the radio show, the Strategist explains that no one will be able to speak on the show if they call with a blocked phone number. The SPFC wants to know who they are allowing on their show.

Also in February, PAL is beginning to share information about the SPFC. The PAL Facebook page adds a post about how the SPFC is gaining support in the state of Virginia. So too, the PAL page shares links to news articles about prisoner labor issues and prison slavery. There are indications that PAL is building an alliance with the SPFC. PAL is cross-posting articles from the SPFC page. Likewise, SPFC members are beginning to appear in the PAL page’s community discussions.

#### 6.15 Corrections Officers Worry about Attacks, Drones, and Beyoncé

In February 2016, feelings of worry and fear are still palpable in corrections officer online communities. Corrections Talk shares two news stories about prisoners punching corrections officers. Corrections Officers Together shares several news articles about prisoner attacks on COs. One article describes an incident in which a corrections officer was pulled into a cell and beaten by several prisoners. Another article details the facial injuries of a CO who was assaulted by a prisoner. A third article recounts a brutal attack on a corrections officer in New Jersey. The officer, who suffered a severe brain injury, received only 40% of her normal salary in worker’s compensation while she was recovering. She joined a group of COs asking the New Jersey legislature to create an injury fund for corrections officers wounded in prison attacks and riots. Commenters respond to the posts about CO attacks with concern:

“Assaults are increasing because they know we can't do anything and anything we do do will be held against us.”

“Hope our Brother Officer heals quickly, not that we do a dangerous job or anything eh?”

“ Yet the govt wants to get rid of the box and the politicians swear that these mutts are the victims. BROTHERS AND SISTERS STAY SAFE. WATCH EACH OTHERS BACK.”

Commenters affirm that, as corrections officers, they do not feel protected on the job. They worry that politicians and prison administrators are not correctly assessing the dangers of CO work.

Moreover, online corrections communities are concerned that broader cultural forces are making corrections work more dangerous. America’s Invisible Warriors shares an article titled, “Connecting the Dots: Beyoncé, Cop Killers, Gun Control, and Panera Bread.” The article details how politicians, business leaders, and Beyoncé are contributing to violence against law enforcement. According to the author, these public figures are fueling anti-law enforcement discourses and promoting violence against law enforcement officers. Each of them is them is, in some way, responsible for recent police officer deaths:

So, the blood of these police officers is on the hands of many – whether they be the marginally-talented wives of drug-dealing gangsta rappers, socialist billionaires who personify ‘New York values,’ repulsive authoritarian activist groups, POTUS, or chicken-hearted CEOs of second-rate fast food bakeries. We can blame them all equally and with passion.

The article represents a worry that discourses which cast law enforcement officers as aggressors and villains, instead of professionals and people worthy of sympathy and care, will have deadly consequences.

At the same time, corrections officers are paying new attention to drone incidents in prisons and jails. America’s Invisible Warriors posts a news article about a prisoner fight that erupted after a drone dropped drugs in a prison yard. Corrections Talk shares several articles

about drones delivering contraband to prisoners. The articles mention incidents involving drone delivery of cell phones, tobacco, illicit drugs, pornography, and saw blades. One article explains how, in addition to drone delivery, drone photography could also become a problem for prisons. Drone pilots could take photos of prisons to help prisoners plot escapes and riots. In the comments, page visitors discuss the challenges of addressing drones. Drones can stealthily navigate into prison airspace. Only some states authorize corrections professionals to shoot down drones. Many drone pilots don't register their drones, making tracing drone owners difficult. Commenters note that legislators haven't figured out how to effectively address drone issues affecting prisons.

#### 6.16 ICT Use as the NPRC Builds Solidarity

At the start of 2016, the NPRC is using ICTs to create digital informational resources, organize a Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity, conduct internet research, and host conversations on the SPFC radio show.

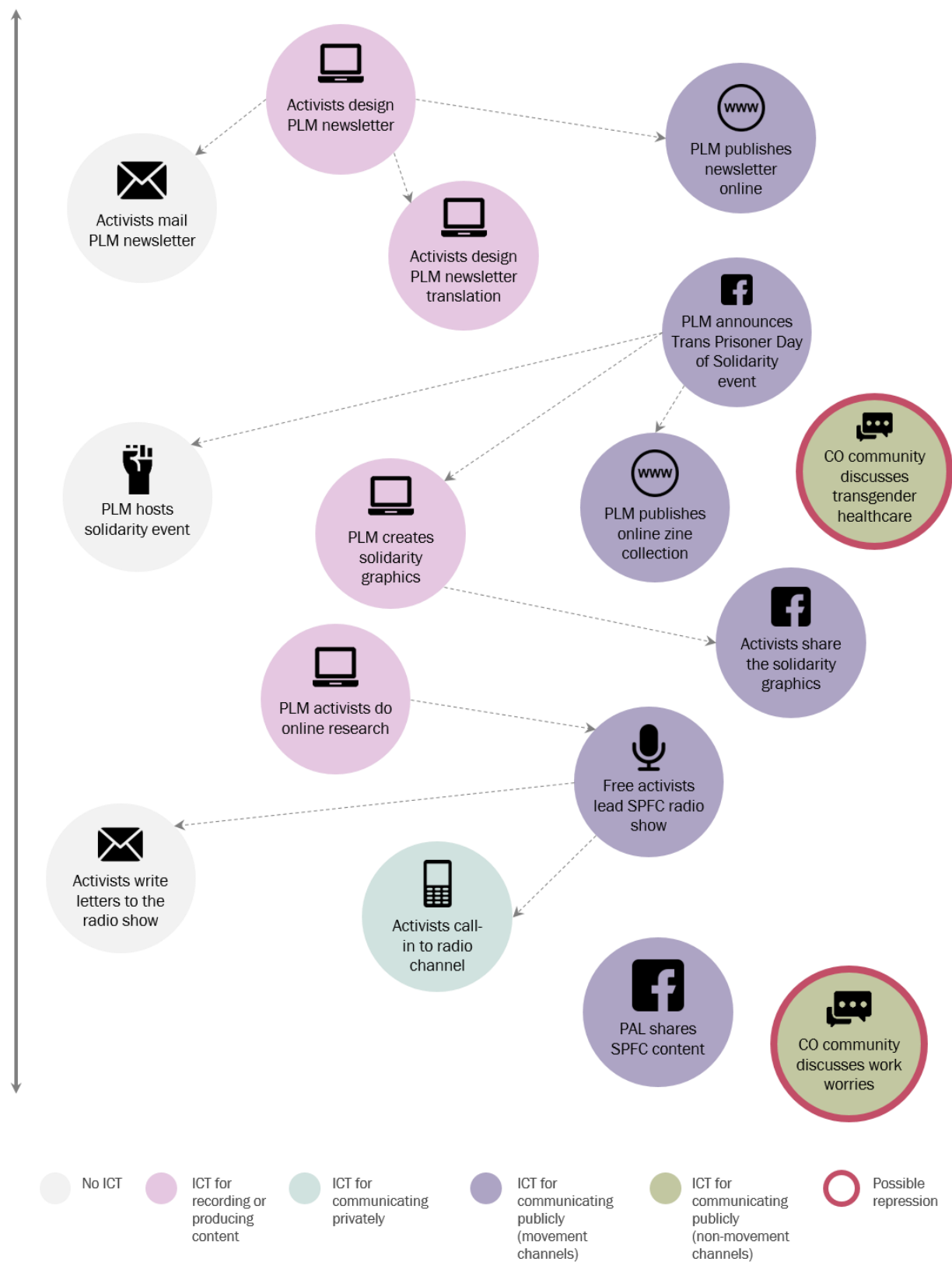


Figure 6.3 ICT Use as the NPRC Builds Solidarity (January - February 2016)

### 6.16.1 The PLM's Third Newsletter

The third newsletter from the PLM is special for several reasons. First, the newsletter includes a glossary of terms for activists. This glossary provides simple definitions for terms and acronyms related to prisoners' rights activism. Some of the terms include "class war," "general executive board," and "delegate." The glossary serves as an accessibility resource, introducing new activists to PLM ideas and union terminology. Second, the newsletter's content is published in English and Spanish. Writings from prisoner activists and PLM leaders are translated into Spanish. So too, the glossary of terms provides translated definitions. The Spanish version of the newsletter is not as well-formatted or cleanly designed as the English version. It is, however, a step towards including prisoners and prisoner supporters who are more comfortable with Spanish than English. Third, this newsletter announces that a group of prisoner activists are interested in organizing a mass strike in September 2016. Details about the strike plan are sparse. The announcement is a basic groundwork for later, more specific plans.

### 6.16.2 The Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity

The Prisoner Labor Movement's decision to organize a Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity event suggests that the PLM is taking LGBTQ prisoner inclusion and solidarity seriously. Leading up to the Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity, PLM activists compile a collection of zines for prisoners, prisoner allies, and prisoner advocates. The PLM makes the zines available online. PLM leaders also offer to print and mail the zines to prisoner activists. The zines call for the inclusion of LGBTQ people in prisoners' rights and abolitionist activism. "We are always stronger together," one zine explains. The PLM zine collection is remarkable because, in the past, not all members of the NPRC have aligned themselves with LGBTQ prisoners. Leaders of the SPFC distanced themselves from LGBTQ prisoners in their early video recordings. Many of

the zines, however, have a reconciliatory tone. They invite prisoners who have harbored anti-LGBTQ feelings in the past to step into acceptance. “We understand that racism, state violence, and capitalism are the root causes of violence in our culture, not individual ‘bigots’ or even prison guards. We must end the cycle of oppressed people being pitted against one another,” one zine explains.

As the Trans Prisoner Day of Solidarity approaches, PLM leaders share digital fliers with details about the event. The fliers encourage activists to learn about transgender prisoner experiences and resistance efforts. PLM leaders arrange for a bookstore to host presentations about transgender prisoner issues. So too, the Prisoner Labor Movement shares links to transgender prisoner advocacy and activism groups.

PLM leaders are choosing to align themselves with transgender prisoners at a time when public discourses about transgender people in the United States are often unkind and insensitive. Comments in corrections officer online communities over the past few months have highlighted some of these discourses. Online, the PLM receives praise for recognizing transgender prisoner issues. Facebook page visitors comment that the event is “excellent,” “awesome,” and “educational.”

### 6.16.3 SPFC Radio Shows

Throughout January and February, Ms. Majesty and the Spokesperson’s mother continue to organize and host the SPFC radio show. Ms. Majesty prepares for the shows by conducting internet research. During the radio shows, she shares her findings. Additionally, Ms. Majesty and the Spokesperson’s mother read letters on the show. These are letters from activists who cannot join the radio show conversations. The letters convey support and gratitude for the SPFC’s efforts.

Since the radio show began, the Spokesperson's mother has managed radio show callers using the last four digits of their phone numbers. She reads aloud the last four digits of each caller's phone number when it is the caller's turn to speak. During a February radio show, the Spokesperson's mother handles a caller who blocks her phone number. The Spokesperson's mother refuses to let the caller speak until she reveals her phone number. Although a caller's number would not reveal her caller's identity, it is important for the SPFC's tracking purposes. If the caller says unkind or disagreeable things on the radio show, the Spokesperson's mother can terminate the caller's call. Without a phone number as identification, though, that caller can again call in and reenter the caller queue. If the caller's phone number is known, the Spokesperson's mother can ensure that a disruptive caller is not allowed in the queue again.

#### 6.16.4 PAL Cross-Posting

The posts on the PAL Facebook page indicate that PAL leaders are making connections with SPFC. The PAL page shares information about the SPFC. Moreover, SPFC activists appear on in PAL Facebook discussions. These posts suggest that PAL activists and SPFC activists are, at least, aware of each other. Although both organizations established themselves independently in different states, they are now connected online. As 2016 progresses, this connection will become more important.

#### 6.16.5 CO Talk: Work Worries

For years now, CO page administrators has regularly shared news of attacks on corrections officers, dangerous situations involving corrections officers, and CO deaths. Talk about work worries is not new. Its persistence, however, is significant. In the past year, corrections officers have shared fears that the CO work environment is becoming exceptionally unsafe and law enforcement is blatantly under attack. Nevertheless, COs are not observing substantive efforts to

make their work conditions safer. In fact, it appears as though corrections officers are even confronting new dangers. Threatening technology is evolving faster than prison administrators and political leaders can regulate and manage. For many visitors on CO Facebook pages, the lack of focus on CO safety confirms “hug-a-thug” culture is permeating corrections leadership. Administrators are caring more about prisoners – people convicted of crimes – than prison workers.

### 6.17 Alabama Mega-Prison Plan

In March 2016, the SPFC is discussing a new Alabama state prison proposal. In this year’s State of the State address, the Alabama governor announces a plan to build four new mega-prisons, close 14 existing prisons, and convert the remaining prisons into reentry facilities. One mega-prison will house women prisoners and three mega-prisons will house men prisoners. The new mega-prisons will have high-tech security, new prisoner management features, better health centers, and more extensive programming. The plan is expected to cost \$800 million.

SPFC activists are skeptical that the plan will be funded by the legislature. On an SPFC radio show, the Strategist explains that Alabama is not serious about improving prisons. In the previous year, the Alabama legislature struggled to fund prison reforms when passing the state budget. Another activist joins the conversation and speculates on what will happen if the plan is funded. He explains that, if the mega-prisons are built, prisoners won’t truly benefit. “There’s nothing in it about freedom for us,” the prisoner explains. He asserts that the mega-prisons will simply warehouse even more poor people and people of color. “These facilities are designed for your children,” he warns radio listeners.

In another radio show, the Strategist hosts a conversation about the politicization of prison violence. He asserts that he has already observed politicians utilizing incidents of prison violence



to justify the prison proposal. “They are spinning that the prisons are out of control and everybody’s dangerous in an attempt to scare millions out of the people of this state through fear tactics,” the Strategist explains. He predicts that politicians and administrators will tolerate and possibly promote prison violence in order to get the proposal passed and funded. “You are absolutely right,” another activist pronounces.

In news coverage of the prison proposal, journalists seek input from the nonprofit that filed that lawsuit on behalf of prisoners in 2014. The nonprofit’s director criticizes the plan for failing to address prison corruption, prisoner abuse, and systemic prison issues. He uses a sports metaphor to describe the proposal: “It’s like a team that has a losing record every season that says, ‘Well, the solution is to build a new stadium.’ That’s not going to get you a better team.” When news of the prison proposal reaches Corrections Talk, commenters are hopeful that building new mega-prisons will benefit prisoners and COs. One commenter responds, “Hope it works out 0:).”

#### 6.18 A Drone and Two Riots

In mid-March, one Alabama prison, the prison where the Strategist is incarcerated, experiences two major destabilizing events. The events follow a bizarre drone landing on the prison yard. An Alabama newspaper describes the drone landing as a sign of impending chaos:

The drone touched down in the prison yard at night, like a four-rotor, remote-controlled omen. When they found it, the guards knew it foretold chaos. Prisoners in Alabama had outpaced their jailers, using new technology to smuggle in phones, weapons, drugs and money. Meanwhile the state’s antiquated, overcrowded prisons grew increasingly unmanageable.

On a night following the drone discovery, two prisoners start a fight (not necessarily related to the drone). When a corrections officer intervenes in the fight, he is stabbed by one of the prisoners. The CO calls for backup. Soon after, the warden and a team of officers arrive to calm the situation. Tensions rise; more prisoners become involved in the situation; one prisoner stabs the warden. The

COs and the warden retreat, leaving prison units unsupervised. Without supervision, prisoners damage property, light fires, break windows, and wander the prison halls.

Some prisoners take photos and videos of the riot and post them to the internet. In the videos, the disorder of the units is evident. Alabama newspapers report that the riot lasts through the night before the ADOC dispatches a team to bring the prison under control. According to a prisoner involved in the incident, the riot team enters the prison wearing tactical gear, deploying tear gas, and threatening to shoot prisoners with shotguns. Prisoners surrender. The riot team restrains each prisoner with plastic handcuffs. While the prisoners are restrained, the riot team searches the unit for weapons, cell phones, and dangerous items. The search results in the mass destruction and confiscation of all sorts of prisoner property. Prisoner items that are not seized are strewn throughout the unit. “They destroyed our locker boxes, threw our property all over the place, confiscated commissary products, plastic bowls, cups, etc,” the prisoner explains. The riot team repairs a portion of the damage and replaces several broken locks. When the riot team leaves, the prison remains on lockdown.

The SPFC is quiet about the riot. They post no updates on their Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube pages. A day after the riot, the PLM writes a Facebook post about the incident: “Breaking! Serious happenings in Alabama prison. Please share! Our thoughts go out to those inside and their families. This model of justice is no justice at all.” The riot gains Alabama local news coverage. Journalists note that prisoner cell phones are illegal and prisoners should never have been able to record the videos, take the photos, or upload their content online.

Less than three days after the riot, the prison again erupts. According to a prisoner account posted by the PLM, prisoners are upset about stealing. When the riot team exited the prison, they left prisoner property lying around the units. Several prisoners took advantage of the situation and

claimed property that did not belong to them. Other prisoners were upset and formed a group to ambush the thieves. As the ambush takes place, corrections officers attempt to convince the prisoners to return to their bunks. Prisoners retaliate by throwing items at the COs. The COs leave the unit and another riot begins. This time, prisoners from two units refuse to participate in the riot. These prisoners lock themselves inside their dorms and call prison officials on a contraband cell phone. They want officials to know that they are not involved, will not resist the riot team, and are fearful that officers will be unnecessarily violent with them.

During the riot, several prisoners use cell phones to communicate with local news channels. One prisoner calls the news station to report that he is worried that prisoners will fight back against the riot team. He explains that the rioting prisoners are “fed up” with poor prison conditions. To verify his identity, the caller messages a photo of himself in the prison to the news station. Another prisoner participates in a video chat with a reporter. During the chat, he shows the reporter that prisoners participating in the riot are sitting on their bunks, talking to one another, barricaded within the unit. He explains that the prisoners are peacefully resisting because they want to see change at the facility. The news station airs parts of the reporter’s video chat. The reporter tells viewers that things may look peaceful, but “remember that they have the camera and they are only showing what they want you to see.”

The prisoners involved in the riot compile a list of demands. The demands include 1) immediate federal intervention, 2) the release of prisoners serving excessive sentences, 3) the abolishment of habitual offender laws, 4) extensive parole reviews with clear criteria, 5) improved education programs, and 6) monetary compensation for prisoners’ pain and suffering. The prisoners message the demands to journalists from a contraband cell phone. Their demands, however, go unmet. The ADOC sends a riot team to the facility. The police department and the

county sheriff send officers to assist the riot team. The officers enter the prison and reestablish control.

#### 6.19 The Aftermath of the Riots

Following the riot, prison officials identify a group of riot leaders. Some of the leaders are moved to segregation; others are transferred to a different prison. One of the transferred prisoners will later report that he and the other transferred prisoners are beaten when they arrive at the new prison:

Upon entry to the back-gate receiving area at [the prison], one by one, all five of these men were taken into a secluded area and then brutally beaten while handcuffed... At least two of the assault victims, [names removed], reported that during the beatings they were stomped in their testicles and told that this was being done so they wouldn't ever have children. All of these assaults have been verified through medical files, statements, and eyewitness accounts.

News of their assaults won't reach the SPFC until June. The prisoner will communicate the description of events using a contraband cell phone.

After the second riot, several prison units remain in disarray. There is broken glass and fire damage. The ADOC has ordered that the facility will remain on lockdown until repairs are made. Less than 24 hours after the riot has ended, the prison is staging a media tour. The tour is intended to allow journalists, the Alabama governor, a state senator, and the prison commissioner to observe and document facility conditions with an armed escort of state troopers. During the tour, visitors are not allowed to speak to prisoners. Instead, they observe the damage and talk to members of the riot response team.

Prison officials release a statement about the riot, following the tour. The statement notes that the riot team confiscated dozens of contraband cell phones. The Alabama governor use the visit to promote his mega-prison proposal. He argues, "These riots & other issues in the prison

system will continue if the problem isn't addressed. I have a plan & encourage the Leg. to pass it.”

On Corrections Talk, commenters respond to the governor’s comments by asking why changes haven’t been made already:

“Once again it takes staff getting hurt before anyone looks into safety issues that have been there for a long time.”

“It didn’t get that way over night.”

Commenters wonder why politicians and prisoner administrators have waited so long to assess and respond to the major problems at this prison.

The PLM and PAL host discussions about the Alabama riots on their Facebook pages. An anarchist news network called It’s Going Down also writes a story about the riots. The story reaches a group called the Toxic Prison Alert Network (TPAN). TPAN has just launched a Facebook page. The network comprises a group of environmental activists who are concerned with prison ecology issues. TPAN leaders note that SPFC activists have been trying to draw attention to prison health and safety issues for years. Moreover, they encourage environmental activists to stand in solidarity with the prisoner activists in Alabama.

The SPFC reemerges on the internet several days after the riot. Ms. Majesty hosts a radio show about the riot and the political response to the riot. She introduces callers that were involved in the riot. One caller explains that he is upset that so much of the media coverage has focused on the contraband cell phones. Additionally, he is bothered that the governor’s proposal is overshadowing the prisoners’ demands. He argues that the mega-prisons will not address the issues that led the prisoner to riot. The prison environment crushes and dehumanizes prisoners, denying them of growth and hope, he explains:

Let’s talk about the cause. I was down there in segregation when guys were being handcuffed behind their backs, their cells shaken down, their property thrown all over the place... then beaten, heads banged up against the steel doors... Then you

file the report, follow the rules and regulations of the administration to the warden and you get no response and you see this going on all over the unit, all throughout the prison. Brothers being disrespected, not allowed to receive an education, talked to like you're less than an animal on a daily basis... People coming to work with their problems. And how do they get rid of that energy? They decide that they are gonna go in the dorms and beat some people up, bust some people up, take your property, destroy your property, abuse you, talk to you like you are less than a human being every day. In segregation, being denied literature, books to read... Your parents coming to visit, your family driving hours, being denied because their clothing is not according to this lady's standard... Don't touch your relatives. Don't do this. Don't do that. Everyday you are afforded no opportunity to build yourself, the better yourself, to grow and develop into something that is worthy of high recognition. They offer you nothing but the most inhumane treatment imaginable. You file petitions to the court... Motion denied, Rule 32 denied, parole denied, everything denied, transfer denied, everything is denied. Where is the hope?... How much is a person supposed to take?

Other callers agree. They are disappointed that the media is ignoring prisoner perspectives.

As the month progresses, media concern over the riot and prison conditions fades. Prison issues quickly becomes overshadowed by a government sex scandal. The Alabama governor is accused of have an extra-marital affair with a staff member. Moreover, there is evidence that he lied his relationship with the staffer and misused funds to conceal the affair. State legislators suggest that impeachment and criminal charges are possible. Journalists speculate that the scandal will make it difficult for the governor to gain political support for his mega-prison proposal.

## 6.20 SPFC Free Activists Meet for Saturday Prison Protests

The SPFB is determined to keep pressure on the ADOC to make improvements to the prison. The SPFB discusses their plans on the SPFC's radio show. One SPFB member proclaims that free people must continue the fight that prisoners started: "We gotta pick up the flag and march forward." Ms. Majesty agrees, "It's time to put our boots on, strap up, pull up our hair, take off the earrings, and step up." Callers discuss the importance of maintaining the momentum

until real change is achieved. “It’s for the future; it’s for your children; it’s for your children’s children,” an SPFB member explains.

To get the attention of the ADOC, the SPFB decides to coordinate weekly protests at the prison where the riot took place. The Spokesperson’s mother, Ms. Majesty, and another SPFB member organize the protests and manage the protest logistics. The Spokesperson’s mother provides her personal cell phone number as a contact number for anyone with questions. To promote the weekly SPFB protests, the SPFC announces the events on their Facebook page and on their radio show.

For each protest, members of the SPFB assemble outside the prisons with signs, banners, flags, and drums. One large banner reads, “END PRISON SLAVERY.” Another banner has the words, “SOLIDARITY WITH PRISON REBELS.” SPFB members march, chant, wave their flags, and beat their drums. At one protest, corrections officers confront the protesters in camouflage tactical gear. The COs tell SPFB members that the road directly outside of the prison is a private road and the protest must be moved to a further away public road. Several members photograph the events and post the photos on Facebook.

The weekly protests achieve a mention from the anarchist news site. It’s Going Down publishes an article on the protests and shares photos of the events. The PLM shares the article. PAL, too, shares updates on the protests. Commenters respond to the resistance actions with comments like “Hell Yeah” and “The power of the people.”

#### 6.21 ICT Use during the Alabama Riots

During the Alabama riots, the SPFC, PLM, and PAL use ICTs to communicate with the media, spread information about the riots, challenge media narratives, and coordinate a series of free world actions.

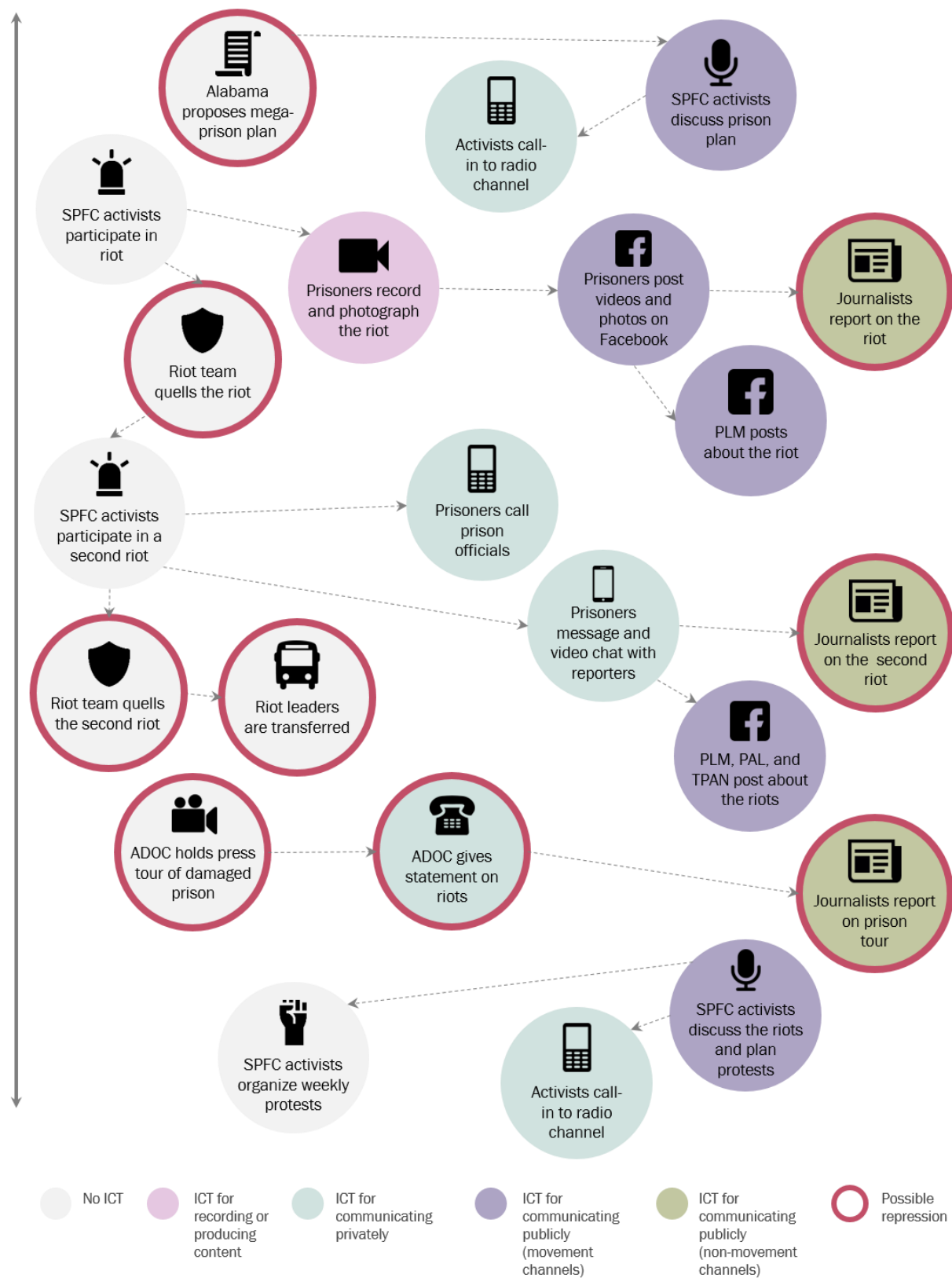


Figure 6.4 ICT Use during the Alabama Riots (March 2016)



### 6.21.1 Alabama Mega-Prison Proposal

Like the Alabama Prison Reform Task Force's bill from the year prison, the Alabama governor's mega-prison proposal has varying implications for the SPFC. The proposal acknowledges that Alabama prisons are experiencing issues. Moreover, it specifies that prison conditions in Alabama need improvement. The proposal provides the SPFC with additional evidence that prisoners are suffering and changes need to be made.

Yet, the mega-prison proposal again assigns blame to crowded conditions. According to the governor's logic, the most severe prison problems will disappear when there are bigger prisons; prisoners are consolidated in regional facilities; and facilities have more up-to-date technology. This framing of prisons issues differs from how the SPFC understands their experiences. SPFC leaders assert that building bigger prisons will not address the harsh sentencing laws that are sending people, disproportionately poor people and people of color, to prison for unnecessary lengths of time. Likewise, consolidating prisoners geographically will mean that many prisoners are housed further from their families and communities. The SPFC argues that undermining these human connections will do further harm to prisoners.

So too, the mega-prison proposal alarms activists. The SPFC worries that political leaders will need to present compelling evidence to the public in order to find \$800 million in funding. SPFC leaders suggest that politicians and prison administrators will willfully allow prison conditions to get worse or even promote facility violence.

### 6.21.2 Alabama Prison Riot #1

For many SPFC activists, the Alabama prison riot is confirmation that prison administrators are neglecting their safety to further the mega-prison proposal. SPFC leaders suspect that the prison's warden is exacerbating prison violence, instead of managing it. They wonder why he

remained in charge of the prison after his disciplinary history involving an assault on a prisoner. They wonder why he became involved in the stabbing situation, since his presence only seemed to make the situation worse.

During the first riot, prisoners use contraband cell phones to record riot happenings. The photos and videos show prisoners lighting fires and breaking windows in an attempt to access other areas of the prison. Some SPFC prisoner activists are involved in the riot. There are, however, no posts on the SPFC page while the riot is taking place. The photos and videos do not make prisoners appear organized, reasonable, or goal-oriented. Instead, prisoners appear rowdy, reckless, and dangerous. The fact that many prisoners wrap shirts and white cloth over their faces only makes the videos appear shadier. The prisoners look as though they are on bad behavior; they look like criminals. In media coverage of the riot, this is how the prisoners are presented. Rather than people who are rebelling against harsh conditions of abuse, prisoners are portrayed as dangerous, out-of-control lawbreakers.

### 6.21.3 Alabama Prison Riot #2

The second riot builds after prisoners become upset about property theft. It seems that prison administrators do not fully grasp how confiscating and disorganizing prisoners' belongings will affect prison order. On the SPFC radio show, prisoners have discussed how difficult it is to purchase even basic items in prison. Prisoners must save up for long periods to afford commissary items with their wages. Alternatively, prisoners can ask family members and friends to send money to their accounts. That money, however, is subject to fees.

The second riot is smaller than the first. Fewer prisoners want to participate. Some prisoners even want to actively distance themselves from the riot. The variation in prisoner responses is evident in how different prisoners use contraband cell phones. One group of prisoners

uses cell phones to talk with administrations, deny their involvement, and ask to be recognized as non-aggressors. Another group uses cell phones to contact the media, frame the riot as a protest, and present a list of demands.

#### 6.21.4 Media Coverage of the Riots

Overwhelmingly, media coverage focuses on how prisoners kept cell phones after the first riot and what the riot means for the mega-prison proposal. Some SPFC activists are hopeful that the media will help expose the conditions at this prison; journalists will “uncover” the truth. On a radio show, after the riot, the Strategist explains that he initially thought the media tour would be empowering. Prisoner activists would have a chance to tell their stories and show evidence of their treatment. He is hugely disappointed when corrections officers ask prisoners to relocate to other areas of the prison during the media tour. He realizes that the tour will allow prison administrators and Alabama political leaders to impose their interpretations and explanations for the riot.

It does appear as though the Alabama governor uses the riot to bolster his mega-prison plan. The governor tweets, “The situation at [the prison] is under control, but is another reminder that we must address the issues that plague our prison system.” As he tours the prison, journalists and members of his staff follow him with video cameras and still cameras. He pauses for photographs near areas of the prison with visible damage. After the visit, his staff uploads footage from within the prison. In the footage, the governor proclaims, “We have a real problem in this state; but, we also have a real solution and we have presented that solution.”

#### 6.21.5 The NPRC Grows

Despite how journalists depict the riots, news coverage of the riots has an aligning effect on the NPRC. Online, the PLM, PAL, and the TPAN post articles about the riots to express solidarity with the rioting prisoners and the SPFC. The PLM and PAL share news articles that do

not present the prisoners involved in the riot in a positive way. One article refers to prisoners as “inmates” and emphasizes the damage prisoners inflicted on the prison during the riot. Page administrators seem to trust, though, that followers will assume media bias and reinterpret the article as evidence of a justified prisoner rebellion. Page visitors do appear sympathetic to prisoners. Commenters respond with supportive comments and “love” reacts on Facebook.

The riot is able to find positive news coverage from an online anarchist media website It’s Going Down. The website shares a list of prisoners’ demands, context about prisoner issues, and information about the SPFC. A group called the TPAN discovers and shares the article from It’s Going Down. The TPAN is just beginning to develop its online presence. In sharing the article, the TPAN validates SPFC concerns and positions themselves as SPFC supporters.

#### 6.21.6 Saturday Prison Protests

The riots also have an effect on the SPFB, the group of free activists supporting the SPFC. The brigade is already assisting with the SPFC online radio show. After the riots, leaders of the brigade call for free people to assemble at the prison. SPFB members bring large banners and drums. These objects are intended to signal to prisoners that activists are willing to show up to support the SPFC. The SPFB hopes that prisoners will be able to see the signs from behind prison walls. Likewise, the SPFB wants to make enough noise that prisoners inside know that free care for them.

### 6.22 Social Processes of Resistance and Repression in a Climate of Justice Reform

The SPFC and PLM’s use of ICTs in late 2015 and early 2016 spotlights three recurrent processes of resistance and repression: voluntary tech opt-outs, digital abeyance structures, and the prisoner’s digital dilemma.

First, tech-opt outs by some activists highlight individual and situational preferences for non-tech forms of communication and information sharing. In fall 2015, leaders of the PLM encourage activists to send handwritten letters in order to avoid prison e-correspondence monitoring. So too, PLM leaders bring activists physically together for events at headquarters. The in-person events allow activists to be present with one another as well as share snacks and letter-writing supplies. Activists from the SPFC choose non-tech methods of communication in certain situations as well. Lady Zahira organizes a letter-writing campaign for the Strategist. She reasons that the time and effort of letter-writing adds to campaign's symbolic weight. If the SPFC mails 200 physical letters to the ADOC, that will make a more profound statement than sending 200 emails or calling 200 times. Furthermore, the SPFB organizes protests at the prison with drums and banners. Although the SPFB is already communicating with prisoner activists on the radio show, they believe that making noise outside the prison will send a specific message. Prisoners will be able to hear and glimpse their support across the prison walls.

Second, the SPFC's extended lull reveals the committee's digital abeyance structure (Earl and Kimport 2011: 185). The SPFC is temporarily demobilized by the Spokesperson's transfer and the Strategist's illness. During this time, SPFC leaders do not write new resistance content; SPFC activists do not coordinate resistance efforts; and the SPFC's online presence stagnates. For months, the SPFC is inactive. Then, in 2016, the SPFC is revived by the Spokesperson's mother and Ms. Majesty. The two women have never been leaders of the SPFC. They've served primarily in support roles since becoming involved. Yet, they successfully reengage a large number of SPFC activists. They start hosting online radio shows and bringing activists together for on-air conversations. They get activists talking about prison issues and calling for resistance again.

The Spokesperson's mother and Ms. Majesty are able to restart resistance activity partly

because of the structures of continuity within new ICTs. The SPFC's Facebook page serves as a list of people interested in SPFC activity. The page stores the names of people with whom the SPFB can connect. Unless followers "unlike" the Facebook page when SPFC activity drops off, their profiles remain on the SPFC followers list. When the Spokesperson's mother wants to publicize the radio show's new episode, she can choose to share the event with the profiles who continue to "like" the SPFC page. Similarly, the Spokesperson's mother and Ms. Majesty broadcast the show from the SPFC's official channel. This channel has a subscription feature. Radio listeners can choose to be notified when new episodes of the show air. When Ms. Majesty begins her broadcast, subscribers receive a notification. They are made aware of the new content without have to seek out the radio show on their own. The features on Facebook and the internet radio site allow the Spokesperson's mother and Ms. Majesty to more easily reach the SPFC's base to revive resistance activity.

Third, the treatment of prisoner activists suggests that prisoners face a unique digital dilemma. The dilemma centers on the restriction of information from prisons, the promise of ICTs, and the consequences of ICT use for prisoners. In order for to problematize prison conditions and challenge hegemonic narratives that prisons are "resorts," prisoners must provide persuasive evidence. In the digital age, photos and videos can be extremely compelling, especially when they appear unaltered and real.

ICTs are appealing because they allow users to document their conditions visually. Yet, prisoners are not allowed to use ICTs for this purpose. In fact, because prisons in the U.S. are largely closed institutions, very few people are allowed to use ICTs to digitally document prison conditions. Prison administrators have immense control over which images and recordings of prison are available to the public. Largely, public representations of prison suggest that prisons are

undesirable places to stay, but fitting institutions for people convicted of crimes (Wozniak 2014).

To challenge this pervasive narrative of prison and draw attention to prison problems, each prisoner faces a particular dilemma. Does the prisoner admit to breaking rules and using contraband ICTs in order to document prison conditions? Does the prisoner try to problematize prison conditions without visual evidence? Does the prisoner try to problematize prison conditions without admitting to being in prison?

	Prisoner does not share digital evidence	Prisoner shares digital evidence
Prisoner does not admit to being in prison	Opponents assess claims as baseless	Opponents question the authenticity of the digital evidence
Prisoner admits to being in prison	Opponents question the evidence for the prisoner's claims	Prisoner validates grounds; opponents question prisoner's character and motives; prisoner risks disciplinary consequences

Figure 6.5 The Prisoner's Digital Dilemma

First, a prisoner can, hypothetically, make claims about prison conditions without admitting to being in prison and without providing digital evidence. This type of claim is not likely to be successful, though. Opponents can dismiss the claim as lacking evidence and source credibility.

Second, a prisoner can make claims about prison conditions without using ICTs to capture visual evidence. In this situation, the prisoner's claims are not likely to catalyze a major public

opinion shift. Movement opponents are likely to question what evidence the prisoner can provide. What proof can the prisoner offer to substantiate their assertions? Could the prisoner be lying?

Third, a prisoner can record prison conditions and share the recordings without admitting to being in prison. In this scenario, opponents may question the authenticity of the recordings. If the claimsmaker wasn't in prison, how did the claimsmaker obtain the evidence? How can the claimsmaker be sure that the recordings truly represent prison conditions?

Fourth, a prisoner can record prison conditions and reveal their prisoner identity. The recordings will offer visual evidence. The prisoner's knowledge of prison reality cannot be questioned. Still, opponents can attack the prisoner's credibility, motives, and character. Moreover, it is possible that prison administrators could identify the prisoner from the recordings and impose specific repression. Prison administrators could punish the prisoner for breaking facility rules with disciplinary sanctions, privilege revocation, rehousing, transfer, or threat labelling.

Prisoner activists face this dilemma over and over again. In order to draw attention to prison problems, prisoners must admit to being in prison. In order to problematize an issue at a particular facility, prisoners must admit to being incarcerated at that facility. In order to share specific stories of prison abuse, prisoners must admit to being present during, involved in, or victimized by the abuse. As the riots take place, some prisoners call in to local news channels. These news channels ask for evidence that prisoners are actually involved in the riot. In order to confirm this, activists send pictures messages and participate in video chats with reporters. The Spokesperson and the Strategist readily identify themselves as prisoners using ICTs. As a consequence, they are held in segregation for years. The Spokesperson is transferred to a different facility. In order to make effective claims, prisoners are compelled reveal their stigmatized identities as rule-breakers.



## **CHAPTER 7. THE NPRC PRISONER STRIKE (APRIL 2016 - SEPTEMBER 2016)**

### **7.1 The PLM Organizes a Prisoner Strike in Texas**

At the beginning of April, the Prisoner Labor Movement is preparing to lead a prisoner strike in Texas. PLM activists are planning a multi-facility work strike to protest opaque parole procedures, poor living conditions, forced prison labor, ineffective grievance processes, inadequate public legal counsel, and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's (TDCJ) \$100 prisoner medical copay.

The PLM began organizing the strike in February. PLM prisoner activists drafted an informational document about prison conditions in Texas, using prison typewriters. The document called for resistance against the "abuse, corruption, and danger" presented by the TDCJ. PLM leaders used the document to develop a resistance campaign. They wrote blog posts, designed internet graphics, compiled information on Texas prison labor, created Facebook events, and started a prisoner support crowdfunding page. The PLM announced that the strike would take place on April 4.

As the date of the strike approaches, the PLM releases a media statement. The statement details the Texas prisoner's complaints, plans for the resistance effort, and demands. Leaders of the PLM urge journalists not to ignore this important protest. On the day of the strike, prisoners in seven Texas prisons refuse to leave their cells. At some prisons, prison administrators respond to the strike by implementing lockdown procedures. Programming is canceled; visitation is canceled; and prisoner privileges are suspended. The PLM reports that certain prisons respond more punitively than other prisons. At several prisons, administrators threaten mass write-ups if activists don't return to work. Inside at least one prison, corrections officers leave the lights on overnight

and interfere with activists' sleep. At another prison, corrections officers tell prisoners they will only eat bologna or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches until the strike ends.

Outside of prison, PLM activists in at least nine states are participating in solidarity actions. They are handing out fliers, marching with banners and signs, and holding informational sessions. PLM free activists are managing a "phone zap" Facebook event. The Facebook event page encourages supporters to call TDCJ officials and convey their support for the strike. Activists post on the event's wall. They communicate that their calls are being forwarded to secretaries in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Additionally, these secretaries mostly seem annoyed, bored, and uninterested on the phone.

Members of the SPFC help promote the strike. They post the Texas prisoners' demands on Facebook and direct activists to the PLM's website. They reaffirm their solidarity with the PLM. Likewise, the TPAN voices its support for the Texas prisoners. The TPAN's Facebook page writes a post about prison conditions in Texas. The post includes a link to information about Texas prisoner health concerns, prisoner mistreatment, and hazardous prison work environments.

The strike persists for several weeks. During this time, the PLM writes a series of updates about the striking prisoners. The updates are picked up by a small number of Texas news organization and online news publications. PLM leaders express appreciation for the journalists who report on the strike. They are disappointed, however, that that strike is not receiving more mainstream national news attention. The PLM writes on its website that there is a "corporate media blackout" on the strike.

Despite the lack of news coverage and the repression efforts of the TDCJ, the strike appears to achieve some results. Prison administrators begin to address grievance filings; prisoners feel that their complaints are starting to be taken seriously. The PLM will announce an official end to

the strike on May 2. The TDCJ will respond to the strike with a quiet disciplinary code edit. The TDCJ will enact a rule prohibiting Texas prisoners from using social media or having family members maintain social media sites for them.

## 7.2 The PLM, the TPAN, and the SPFC Make Announcements

As the Texas prison strike is taking place, the SPFC, the TPAN, and the PLM each make big announcements. First, the SPFC declares that Alabama prisoners will engaging in their own strike. On May 1, SPFC prisoner activists will again refuse to work. Second, the TPAN reports that free activists will gather in Washington DC for a weekend of action for prison justice. The weekend of action will take place from June 11 to June 13. Third, the PLM officially publicizes plans for a nationwide prison strike on September 9. The strike will start on the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Attica prison riots.

The SPFC, PLM, PAL, and TPAN cross-post these announcements. The PLM asks activists to support the SPFC prison strike and consider attending the TPAN weekend of action. PAL shares information about the SPFC prison strike and the PLM nationwide strike. The TPAN encourages activists to learn more about the SPFC strike and the nationwide strike. The SPFC writes that it will be participating in the nationwide strike. So too, the committee endorses the weekend of action in DC. Online, the NPRC core organizations share each other's blog posts, Facebook posts, and digital graphics. Although neither PAL nor the TPAN officially declare their alliance with the SPFC and PLM, this period marks the start of these four groups' cooperative organizing.

## 7.3 The SPFC Plans a May Day Strike

The SPFC launches its work strike on May 1, just one day before the PLM will report that the Texas prison strike has ended. The SPFC blogs about the rationale for the strike. "WE WILL

NO LONGER VOLUNTARILY PARTICIPATE IN THIS SLAVE SYSTEM WHERE ECONOMICS ARE PLACED OVER OUR HUMANITY,” their blog post proclaims. The SPFC and PLM also post a flier for the strike. The flier states the prisoners intend to peacefully protest. They are seeking new a full review of Alabama parole practices, the abolishment of life without parole, the end of prison slavery, improved prison conditions, the expansion of prison education programs, and the rejection of the Alabama mega-prison plan.

On the first day of the strike, the SPFC asserts that prisoners are refusing to work at four prisons. In response, these prisons are implementing lockdowns, underfeeding prisoners, and halting cleaning and laundry services. SPFC prisoner activists relay updates about the strike to free activists using contraband cell phones. They accuse administrators of engaging in “bird feeding” – intentionally serving small food portions to coerce prisoners to abandon the strike. SPFC leaders are able to get in touch with several news organizations. They ask journalists to tell the public about the strike and the bird feeding.

The ADOC, however, releases its own media statement. The ADOC acknowledges that prisoners are striking, but denies that the strike is part of a structured protest. The strikers, according to the ADOC, do not have a clear set of demands. The ADOC promises that all prisons are ensuring that prisoners’ basic needs are met. COs are preparing meals and assuming prison maintenance responsibilities to sustain facility operations. In Alabama local news, the strike is largely framed as a baseless act of rebellion. One newspaper writes that prisoners are disobeying orders by refusing to work and “have not given any demands, or a reason for refusing to work.”

As the strike progresses, prisoner activists continue to photograph of their meals. The SPFC posts some of the photos on their website and on Facebook. The photos show trays with two cupcakes and a scoop of baked beans; a scoop of mixed vegetables and one slice of bologna on

one slice of white bread; a scoop of corn, two hotdogs without buns, and one slice of white bread. Eventually, the photos reach several online news publications. *Vice News* publishes a story on the Alabama strike and the prisoner meals. The story notes that a prisoner source told journalists that the strike's leaders used cell phones to coordinate the action. At least some of the cell phones were purchased from corrections officers.

*The Intercept* reports on the strike on May 10. A journalist from *The Intercept* conducts a text interview with an unnamed SPFC prisoner activist. Using a contraband cell phone, the SPFC activist relays that he and his fellow strikers are growing weak from inadequate nutrition. He asserts that the underfeeding is indicative of how poorly prisoners are treated when they advocate for themselves: "the food is a blatant violation and these violations are the reason that we even formed a strike from the start."

Soon after, the SPFC is invited to lead a discussion about the strike on *Democracy Now*. Two activists participate in the discussion, the Strategist and an SPFC free activist. The Strategist calls into the show on a contraband cell phone. He explains that the call is illegal; but cell phone calls are his only option for getting the message out about prisoners' treatment:

We are engaged in a struggle for our life, a freedom struggle, with the conditions and so forth. And in all means, a war, you know, warfare, you use what tools are available to you. And in this struggle for freedom, justice and equality, we're doing just that. We're using every tool available to us to get the maximized effect.

Midway through the discussion, the SPFC free activist joins via video chat. The free activist reiterates that the Strategist's call is risky. "They get caught with a phone, it's \$25 the first time; second time, \$50; third time, \$75," the activist explains. Both activists discuss the history of the SPFC, the prison strike's goals, and the repression that prisoners have been experiencing. Additionally, they express their solidarity with the PLM and encourage the public to learn about the September 9 nationwide strike. Unlike much of the earlier coverage of the strike, the

*Democracy Now* discussion is affirming. Participants in the conversation treat the activists' statements as honest and concerning.

On May 12, the strike comes to an end. The SPFC and the PLM issue a joint statement. They report that the strike has achieved one of its goals; the Alabama mega-prison proposal was rejected by the Alabama state legislature. The strike, though, has been "broken by the unexpected employment of work-release prisoners as strike-breakers." According to SPFC leaders, prison administrators brought in minimum security prisoners to cover activists' facility and industry jobs. Prisoner activists were growing tired of lockdown procedures, experiencing headaches and physical symptoms of malnutrition, and starting to feel as though the strike could not achieve further gains.

#### 7.4 Corrections Forums Respond to the April and May Prisoner Strikes

Reports of the Texas and Alabama prison strikes appear on the Corrections Talk Facebook page. Page administrators share an article about prisoners protesting "slave-like conditions" in Texas. Commenters write that the strike is outrageous; Texas prisoners have no reason to complain about their treatment:

"commit a crime in the USA, get 3 hot meals and a cot, your own nutritionist, free medical treatment and in most cases free dental, your laundry is done for you, no more cooking your own food or grocery shopping, no more rent to pay or utilities... is this punishment or a vacation?"

"Don't forget about the free gym membership too. I pay \$40/month for mine."

"Poor babies. If they didnt commit the crimes, they wouldnt have to worry about their poor conditions. I have sympathy for any of them"

"Why does anyone care about these literal dregs of society? I wish they would all get caught in a fire..."

“Texas offenders are the best cared for with nutritious meals, excellent healthcare, and many provisions people outside of that fence do not get. What we have is a club med homeless shelter.”

Page visitors are largely frustrated by the strike. They do not think that Texas prisoners are treated unfairly. They feel that prison should be uncomfortable and prisoners should be required to work to offset the costs of their incarceration.

The Alabama prison strike gets a mention on Corrections Talk as well. The page posts a news report proclaiming that the strike has been broken. The report depicts the prisoners’ demands as “extensive” and unreasonable. Moreover, it frames the administrative decision to utilize minimum-security prisoners to break the strike as a creative and effective.

The strikes, however, are not major topics of conversation in online corrections communities. All three corrections Facebook pages are posting extensively about corrections officer on-duty deaths and assaults. Concern about the War on Law Enforcement still lingers; distrust of prisoners still permeates online discussions. Corrections Officers Together writes a post which reaffirms that COs must take care of one another. “Despite extensive training and great care in the performance of duties, acts of violence against Officers can and do occur,” page administrators write. They assert that Corrections Officers Together will do everything possible to support “Officers murdered at the hands of incarcerated felons.”

CO community pages share news articles COs being injured and killed on the job. There are articles about a CO being stabbed by a prisoner, a CO being injured by a prisoner with a concrete rock, four COs suffering injuries a prisoner with an “inmate-manufactured weapon,” a CO who was beaten to death by a prisoner, and a CO who was killed by a prisoner with an iron rod. Page visitors assert that prison administrators urgently need to prioritize corrections officer safety. “We need to quit hugging criminals,” one commenter remarks. “Oh he just needs

programming and to be understood, liberal logic,” another commenter says sarcastically about a prisoner who assaulted a CO.

#### 7.5 ICT Use during the Texas and Alabama Strikes

During the Texas and Alabama prisoner strikes, NPRC activists use ICTs to organize in-prison resistance, coordinate free world solidarity events, report on strike repression, and reach out to members of the media. This period marks the first time that NPRC core organizations appear unified online. They cross-post each other’s announcements and promote each other’s events.



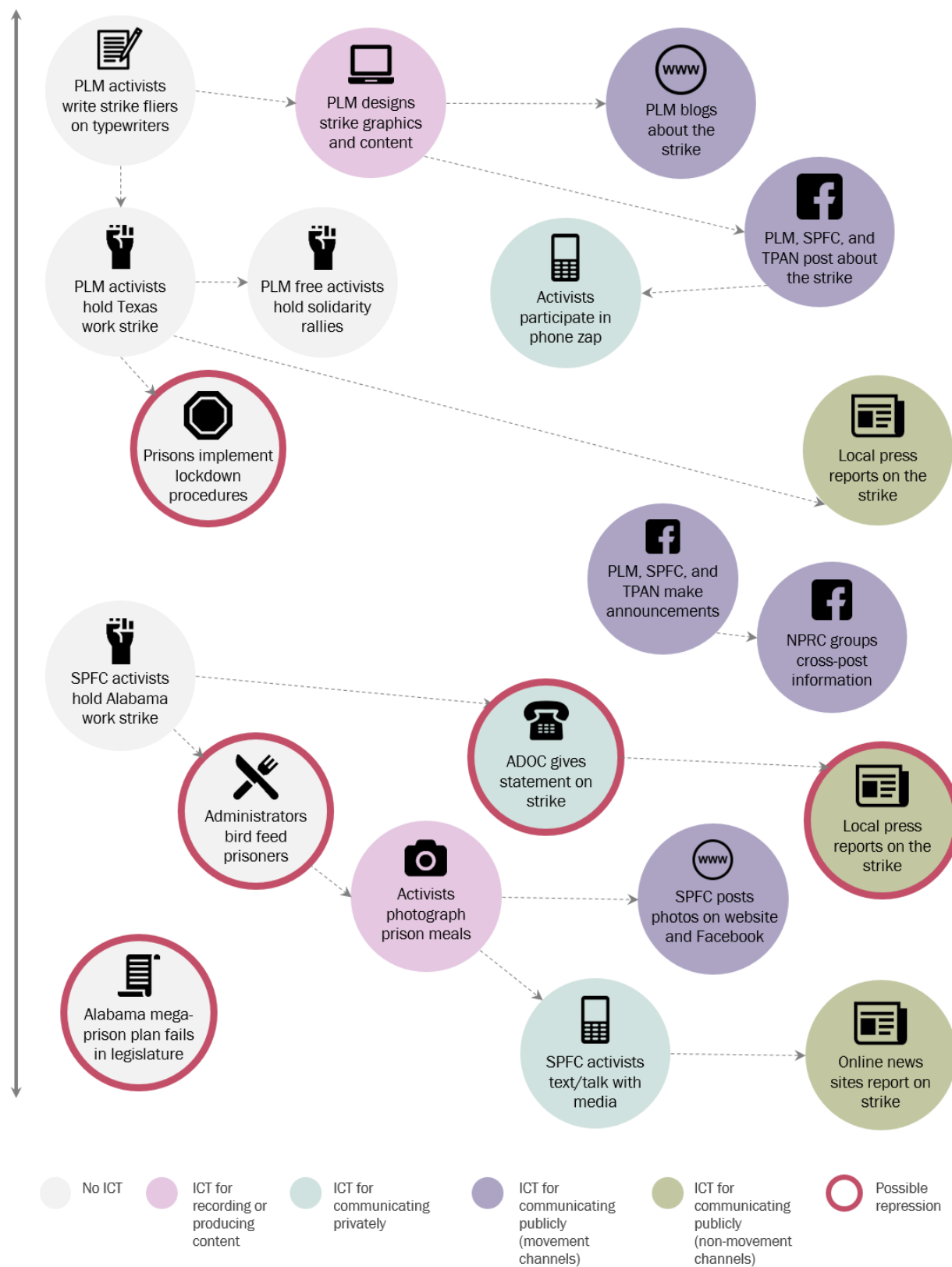


Figure 7.1 ICT Use during the Texas and Alabama Strikes (April to May 2016)

### 7.5.1 The Texas Prison Strike

The Texas strike begins with a typewritten document. Prisoners in Texas use a prison typewriter to create the document calling for prisoner resistance. The TDCJ stocks Swintec clear plastic typewriters in their prison commissaries. One Swintec costs \$225 (from 2016 price list). Typewriter ribbon is an extra \$6.50. Correction ribbon is \$2 more. PLM leaders scan and circulate the document online. They also supplement the document's call for resistance with digital graphics, blog posts, and Facebook events.

The strike itself is primarily non-tech. Prisoners refuse to attend work. They remain in their cells in protest. The PLM's free activist solidarity work, however, is a mix of tech and non-tech resistance. The PLM reaches activists in multiple states through Facebook and blog information sharing. PLM leaders organize free activist marches and flyer distribution events in major cities around the country. They encourage activists who are unable to attend local events to participate in other ways. The PLM suggests that activists can call into the TDCJ and vocalize their support. Alternatively, activists can contribute to the cause by donating to the PLM's online crowd-funding page.

### 7.5.2 Texas Facility Lockdowns and News Blackout

PLM prisoner activists in Texas are discouraged from participating in work strikes through collective punishment. During the strike, many prisons implement lockdown procedures. Visitation and recreation are cancelled; the prison store is closed; mail is not distributed; and prisoners are confined to their units. Striking and non-striking prisoners are all penalized for the strike. So too, prisoners' friends and families are affected. They are not permitted to visit their loved ones, even if those loved ones have traveled long distances, taken off work, or extensively

planned their prison visit. In effect, the lockdown spreads the social and emotional costs of the strike beyond participating prisoner activists.

News coverage of the strike further discourages activists. PLM leaders lament that news organizations don't seem interested in reporting on the strike. There appears to be a media "blackout" around the resistance effort. By in large, the strike's coverage is restricted to mentions in local newspapers and write-ups on politically left-leaning online media sites.

### 7.5.3 NPRC Wave of Announcements

During the Texas prisoner strike, three NPRC organizations make big announcements. The SPFC, TPAN, and PLM reveal plans for major resistance efforts. The SPFC will launch their own strike in-prison. The TPAN will bring activists to DC for a weekend of resistance. The PLM will be coordinating a national prison strike.

The announcements seem to draw from the momentum of the Texas prisoner strike. Leaders of the SPFC assert that their strike will also serve as a solidarity action with Texas prisoners. The TPAN publicizes that its weekend of action will include organizers of the Texas strike. PLM leaders will host a discussion on mobilizing prisoner resistance. The PLM reasons that a national strike is necessary because the issues affecting Texas prisoners are also affecting prisoners around the country.

### 7.5.4 The Alabama Prison Strike

The May 2016 Alabama prison strike demonstrates the SPFC's mobilization capabilities. The committee announces the strike in April. They promote the strike on Facebook, their website, and their radio show. During one radio show, Lady Zahira addresses prisoners. She explains that the SPFB and other free people will stand with the strikers. They will do whatever is necessary to

help prisoners advocate for their rights: “We got you,” she assures prisoner listeners. In short time, SPFC leaders persuade hundreds of activists across four prisons to engage in the work strike.

#### 7.5.5 Bird Feeding and Facility Neglect

Prison administrators respond to the strike by locking down several prisons. COs are forced to assume facility care responsibilities. SPFC activists accuse prison administrators of intentionally neglecting facility upkeep and prisoner diets. It is unclear, however, how much of a toll the strike is taking on corrections workers. In addition to their regular security responsibilities, COs are now cooking and serving food to prisoners, managing trash collection, maintaining facility cleanliness, assuming laundry duties, and supervising prisoners who are without programming or recreation.

Prisoners at the striking prisons begin to notice symptoms of malnutrition within a week of the strike’s start. They feel tired and weak. They worry that they are not receiving enough calories to sustain their physical health. Prisoner activists take photos of their meals and furtively send the images to people outside of the prisons. This time, their meal photos attract outrage. The photo of one piece of bologna on one piece of white bread with a small serving of mixed vegetables, especially, makes an impact. The meal in the photo doesn’t even include a full sandwich.

#### 7.5.6 Media Contact through Contraband Cell Phones

The photos of substandard prisoner meals catch the attention of several online media organizations. *Vice News* talks to a prisoner involved in the strike. *The Intercept* interviews an anonymous prisoner via text. When the articles are published, the reporting is sympathetic towards the SPFC’s cause. Still, the articles refer to striking prisoners as “inmates.” The article in *The Intercept* emphasizes that the anonymous prisoner is serving a life sentence for murder. On the *Democracy Now* segment, the Strategist and another activist are given time to speak about the

strike and prisoners' treatment. The *Democracy Now* host and commentators use the terms "prisoners," "people," and "men" to refer to the prisoners participating in the strike. Some of the *Democracy Now* show is devoted to talking about the Strategist's contraband cell phone use. The host, however, allows the Strategist to explain why he is using the phone and the consequences he could face for calling in to the show.

## 7.6 Planning for a Prisoner Freedom Summer

Following the Alabama prison strike, the SPFC is energized. Activists successfully held their strike for almost two weeks. Likewise, the Alabama mega-prison plan failed to pass during the legislative session. SPFC leaders express hopefulness. "This Summer 2016 will be Freedom Summer all over again," the SPFC proclaims in a blog post on its website. The committee is planning two major free world campaigns for the summer. First, free activists will gather for an Incarcerated Lives Matter vigil at Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, Alabama. Second, free activists will hold a series of protests at prisons across the state of Alabama. The protest series is called the SPFC/SPFB Freedom Tour. The SPFB is coordinating the events.

Other organizations in the NPRC seem invigorated as well. PAL has decided to organize a mass march in Washington DC in 2017. The march is more than a year away. PAL, however, is hoping that the event will draw a huge turnout from people across the U.S. The group is creating informational content and making alliances with other organizations.

The PLM is promoting their nationwide prison strike for September 9. PLM leaders have created a Facebook event for the strike. So too, they are designing graphics, fliers, and other materials to publicize the strike. Many of these materials include photos of the Attica prisoner rebellion. The photos show prisoners standing confidently together, their fists raised in the air. PLM leaders promise that the strike will be a historic display of prisoner unity: "In one voice,

rising from the cells of long term solitary confinement, echoed in the dormitories and cell blocks from Virginia to Oregon, we prisoners across the United States vow to finally end slavery in 2016.” The PLM releases its fourth newsletter on May 28. The newsletter reports that the strike plans are set: “Confirmed!! September 9th!! It's on!! Get ready!!”

The TPAN will host their weekend of action in DC from June 11 to June 13. Leaders of the TPAN have invited former prisoners, PLM leaders, leaders of LGBTQ prisoner groups, environmental activists, anarchist activists, and advocates for detained immigrants to speak. These speakers will lead conversations about prison issues on June 11 and June 12. On June 13, attendees will engage in protest actions “in the streets.”

## 7.7 “Amateur Hour is Over”

In late May and early June, corrections officer communities are discussing contraband smuggling and corrections technology. Page administrators for Corrections Talk post about a CO who was caught bringing drugs into an Alabama prison. The prison is a facility where the SPFC has been organizing. Commenters call the CO an “idiot” and a “shitbag.” Some commenters add that contraband smuggling by COs is a growing problem. Low job pay incentivizes COs to make money in other ways. Some corrections officers turn to illegal schemes. “Corruption everywhere,” one commenter laments.

Corrections Talk shares another article about a woman who tried to smuggle cell phones, alcohol, tobacco, and rolling papers into a prison in Oklahoma. The article acknowledges that contraband “drops” are a major issue. Free people can make thousands of dollars throwing contraband items over prison walls or flying items in with drones. The article notes that, in the past three years, law enforcement has apprehended numerous suspects attempting to smuggle in cell phones, cell phone chargers, electronic tablets, mp3 players, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, hot

sauce, lighters, weapons, tattoo guns, and even wifi hotspots. Yet, law enforcement technology is advancing as well. Some prisons have cell phone sniffing dogs and specially trained contraband detection officers. Law enforcement officers are getting better at preventing and intercepting contraband drops. “Amateur hour is over,” the article reports.

On Corrections Talk and America’s Invisible Warriors, page administrators invite comments about corrections technology. Commenters acknowledge that there have been significant advancements in the technology available to corrections workers. These technologies, though, can be expensive. Many prisons cannot afford cell phone detection devices or digital prisoner monitoring systems. Instead, officers must rely on their experience in prisons and observations of prisoners’ behavior to prevent contraband smuggling and rule breaking. Corrections Talk administrators share two essays about how to effectively search for contraband. In both essays, corrections professionals offer suggest that COs look for suspicious prisoner activity and review contraband discovery reports. When prisoners become exceptionally friendly or exceptionally skittish, they may be trying to coax the officer away from a contraband hiding spot. Likewise, old contraband reports can help CO identify frequently-used contraband hiding spots.

NPRC activists, too, are taking note of corrections technologies. In early June, PAL posts a news article about prison phone monitoring systems. The article reports that a computer algorithm which listened to prisoners’ calls helped corrections officers identify prisoner rule breaking. The algorithm discovered that prisoners were calling phone numbers on their approved calling lists. Then, their approved contacts were setting up three way calls with unapproved contacts. PAL warns that this technology could be used against NPRC activists. “Watch what you say on the wall phones,” the PAL page advises.

The PAL Facebook page later shares a news article about cell phone sniffing dogs. The article explains that cell phone sniffing dogs are trained to find lithium batteries. One dog in California has already found 1,000 cell phones. The article's author mentions that New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, Florida, Texas, and California are actively using cell phone sniffing dogs.

### 7.8 A Weekend of Action in DC

On June 11, the TPAN is kicking off its "Weekend of Action." The weekend starts with informational sessions on prison ecology, eco-prisoners, prison pollution, and prison health risks. The sessions are led by former prisoners, lawyers, activists, prison advocates, and prisoner family members. For particular sessions, prisoners participate remotely, using cell phones to call in for the conversations. The TPAN posts updates about the sessions on their Facebook page. "EXTREMELY powerful panel focusing solely on the voices of former political and social prisoners who are organizing for collective liberation!," the TPAN posts about one session. "Packed house this morning," the TPAN writes in reference to another session.

On the second day of the weekend of action, the PLM speaks at a session. The session is called "Resistance behind Bars." Leaders of the PLM discuss how they built an alliance with the SPFC. They offer insights about how to organize resistance actions in prisons. Other sessions from the day focus on LGBTQ prison issues, the rural prison boom, government entrapment and repression, and immigrant detention.

The third day of the Weekend of Action is devoted to protests and marches. Activists gather in the morning with banners and signs they made the night before. There are signs exclaiming "End toxic prison slavery!" and "Prison industries = toxic sweatshops". Groups of activists hold large banners reading "No new prisons!" and "Fight toxic prisons." The TPAN rallies activists



outside of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP). A group of activists gather in front of the BOP parking garage to prevent BOP staff from getting to work.

After holding the garage entrance for an hour, activists march to the Department of Justice and the FBI headquarters. As they march, activists chant "burn prisons, not coal" and "break the locks, no more cops." TPAN activists photograph the protests. The TPAN posts the photos on their website and Facebook page. Leaders of the TPAN call the protests "a small, but disruptive public action." The TPAN weekend of action earns coverage from *It's Going Down*. The website publishes several photos and an interview with a TPAN leader. In their coverage, *It's Going Down* encourages activists to visit the TPAN website and learn more about the group.

## 7.9 SPFC Incarcerated Lives Matter Rally and PLM Strike Endorsements

In late June, supporters of the SPFC meet in Kelly Ingram Park for an Incarcerated Lives Matter rally. Attendees travel various distances to attend. Some attendees are local; many attendees drive in from city across the state; a group of attendees organize carpools from out-of-state. The rally attendees vary in age. There are older men and women. There are also young adults, teenagers, and children at the rally. SPFC leaders provide water and snacks for attendees. They assemble attendees around a small stage with an SPFC banner, a sign, and a table. During the rally, a series of speakers address attendees from the stage. The speakers are former prisoners, faith leaders, prisoner advocates, and prisoner family members. The Strategist's mother speaks about the injustices her son has experienced. As she begins her speech, she becomes emotional. "Ya'll are going to have to kinda excuse me. I get kinda sensitive behind this," she apologizes. The Spokesperson's mother responds, "It's all right. It's all right."

An SPFC activist video records the speeches on a cell phone. The SPFC adds the recordings to their YouTube page. The committee also plans to discuss the Incarcerated Lives Matter rally on

their next radio show. These plans, however, do not pan out. Ms. Majesty creates a Facebook event for the radio show while she is traveling. Since she creates the event while she is in another time zone, the event is listed for the incorrect time. By the time the Ms. Majesty and the Spokesperson's mother realize the error, it is too late to contact listeners with the correct time.

As the SPFC is gathering supporters in Birmingham, the PLM is mobilizing support online. The PLM creates a digital fundraising event. On the event page, PLM leaders encourage individuals and groups to donate what they can and contact others about making donations. The PLM is asking for donations of any size. The fundraising event, however, also has a contest component. PLM leaders are promising \$200, "swag," and other prizes to the activist that can raise the most money. According to the PLM, organizing the nationwide prisoner strike is expensive. The group is anticipating spending over \$15,000 on printing and mailing costs alone. Moreover, they would like to start a fund for strike-related travel and unforeseen costs.

Throughout June and July, the PLM is also seeking endorsements for the September 9 nationwide prisoner strike. So far, the strike has been endorsed by the NPRC core organizations, the PLM's affiliated union, and the National Lawyers Guild. PLM leaders are contacting prisoners' rights groups, abolitionist groups, labor unions, social justice groups, racial justice groups, anarchist organizations, and news organizations. The PLM releases a call for endorsements and a digital flier with an overview of strike plans and a summary of strike goals. The flier explains, "Forty-five years after Attica, the waves of change are returning to America's prisons. This September we hope to coordinate and generalize these protests, to build them into a single tidal shift that the American prison system cannot ignore or withstand."

By September 9, the nationwide prisoner strike will be officially endorsed by over 65 organizations. These endorsements will come from unions, organizations, and media outlets from

across the U.S. as well as several international groups. More than 100 individuals will personally endorse the strike, including faith leaders, academics, former prisoners, and prisoner family members.

#### 7.10 ICT Use during Freedom Summer 2016

During the Freedom Summer 2016, the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition is using ICTs to plan major in-prison resistance efforts, coordinate free world actions, document and report on collective actions, raise money, and attract endorsements for the September 9 strike.

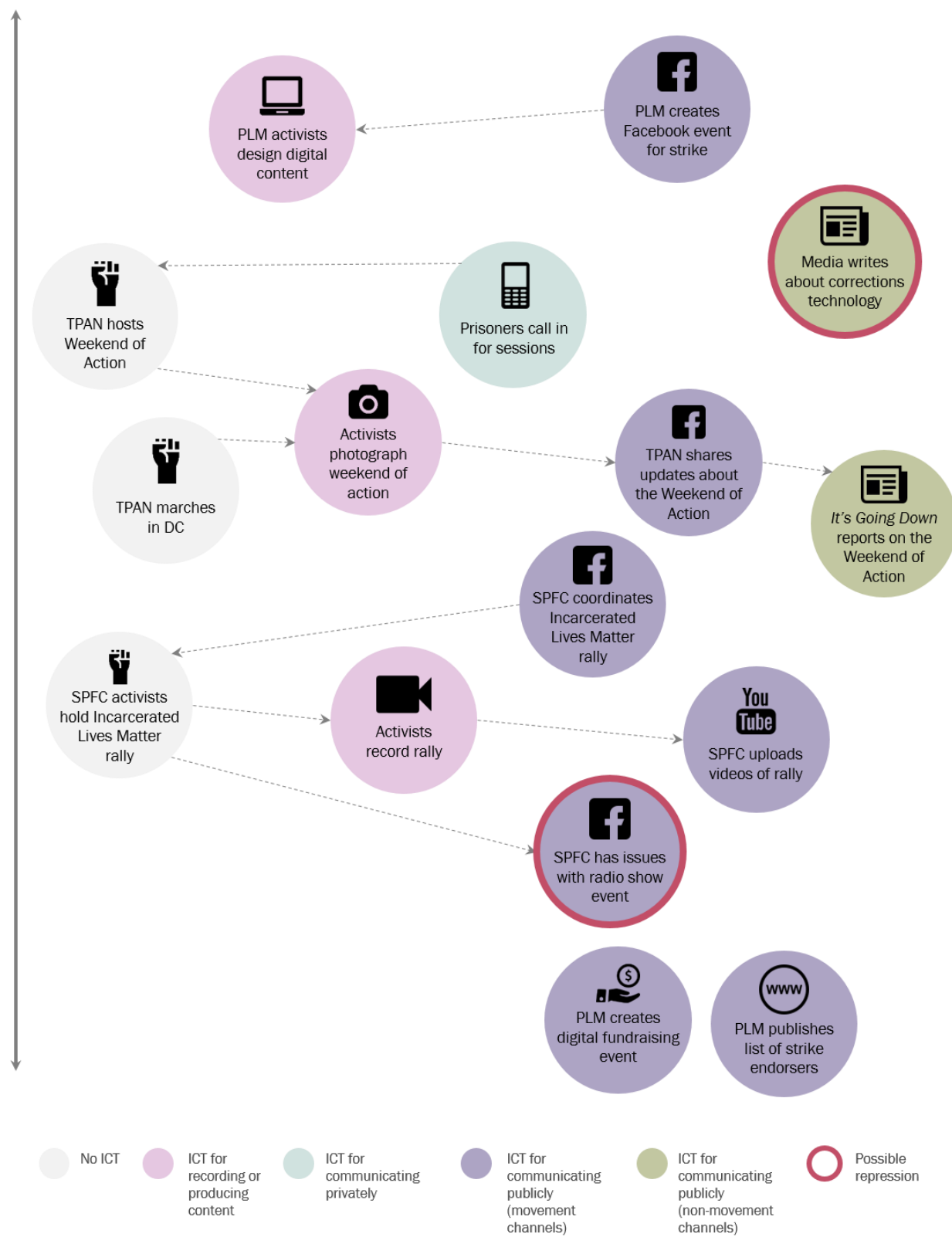


Figure 7.2 ICT Use during Freedom Summer 2016 (June to July 2016)

### 7.10.1 The NPRC Makes Plans

In summer 2016, the New Prisoners' Right Coalition is active like never before. The PLM is preparing for their nationwide prisoner strike in September. The group is creating visual and textual digital content. Their content is visually appealing and well-designed. Moreover, the content utilizes representations of prisoner strength and unity. Many of the strike fliers and graphics include pictures from the Attica prisoner rebellion. In the pictures, prisoners appear unafraid and collectively defiant. The PLM uses photos from when Attica prisoners held the prison, before state troopers retook the facility.

The SPFC is similarly evoking historical resistance in their summer campaign. The SPFC plans their free world initiative, involving a rally and a protest tour around the state of Alabama. They describe the initiative as a "freedom summer," drawing inspiration from the 1964 Freedom Summer civil rights campaign. In their digital materials, the SPFC uses a photo of a statue from Kelly Ingram Park. The statue shows a black civil rights "foot soldier" being confronted by a police officer and an aggressive police dog. The statue's dedication honors the Birmingham civil rights activists that faced "attack dogs, high powered water hoses, and bombings" in the 1960s.

The TPAN is preparing for its first major resistance effort. Their visual materials for the effort are serious. The weekend of action fliers have black backgrounds, bold fonts, and high contrast illustrations. TPAN leaders promote the weekend of action as a conference, an opportunity for alliance-building, and an "in the streets" direct action.

In summer, PAL is transitioning to its new role. The organization is no longer solely a prisoner support group. PAL is promoting other NPRC actions. So too, PAL has announced that it will lead a mass free-world march in DC in 2017. The organization is still responding to prisoner legal support requests; however, it is also becoming increasingly involved in prisoners' rights organizing.

### 7.10.2 Corrections Technologies

In corrections officer Facebook online communities, page visitors have important conversations about corrections technologies. They discuss advanced technologies for prisoner surveillance, prison management, and facility security. They acknowledge, however, that most U.S. prisons do not have these technologies. Moreover, these technologies are too expensive for many prison budgets. NPRC activists, too, are thinking about corrections technologies. News of new prisoner monitoring technologies especially concerns activists. Activists worry that some prisons have corrections technologies that prisoners do not know about. At these prisons, prisoners could be revealing information to prison administrators without realizing it.

### 7.10.3 TPAN Weekend of Action

The TPAN's weekend of action is significant for several reasons. First, the weekend of action brings varying prisoner activist groups together in Washington DC. The TPAN invites leaders from groups focusing on a range of issues, including prison labor, prison ecology, LGBTQ prisoner issues, immigrant detention, and state violence. The Weekend of Action allows these groups to learn more about an array of prison issues. Moreover, these groups have a chance to build alliances and grow support for their organizations. Second, the Weekend of Action provides the PLM with a forum to promote the nationwide prisoner strike. In the organizing prisoner resistance session, PLM leaders discuss strike plans. Other groups in attendance voice support for the strike and share strike information online. Third, the Weekend of Action culminates in collective protest actions. The actions involve disrupting work at the Bureau of Prisons and marching in the DC streets. The protests involve minor confrontations with traffic and police. They afford activists with a chance to be "in the streets." They also give activists a small win. The TPAN

declares that the protest actions successfully block the BOP parking garage for an hour and demonstrate activist solidarity and strength.

#### 7.10.4 Incarcerated Lives Matter Rally

The Incarcerated Lives Matter rally is a key event for the SPFC. The rally is a kick-off to the SPFC's freedom summer. It draws activists to a historically significant location in Birmingham. Kelly Ingram Park was a gathering spot for civil rights activists in the 1960s. The park commemorates civil rights activism with statues, sculptures, fountains, and other public art installations. The park also has a unique significance for the SPFC: SPFC leaders organized their first free work action at the park in 2014. Activists gathered for a rally and vigil during the April 2014 prisoner strike. During the Incarcerated Lives Matter rally, prisoner family members and prisoner advocates come together. They organize carpools; they share food; and they spend time in each other's company.

#### 7.10.5 PLM Strike Endorsements

During the summer, the PLM works to find endorsements for the nationwide prisoner strike in September. The endorsements are largely symbolic; although some endorsers donate money to the prisoner strike fundraising campaign and offer other forms of support. To PLM leaders, the endorsements mean legitimacy and increased informational reach. Endorsers offer their names in support of the strike and prisoner demands. The more names on the endorsements list, the more support the strike appears to have. As the endorser list grows longer, the resistance collective appears more and more formidable. Likewise, most endorsers have online platforms. Endorsers share information and PLM digital graphics, sending news of the strike to wider audiences.

### 7.11 Planning the September 9<sup>th</sup> Strike

As September 9th approaches, the four core organizations of the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition prepare for the nationwide prison strike in different ways. The SPFC broadcasts online radio shows and holds protests at prisons across Alabama. On the SPFC radio channel, Ms. Majesty and the Spokesperson's mother facilitate conversations about the strike, reducing prison violence, and keeping youth of color out of the prison system.

Ms. Majesty, the Spokesperson's mother, and the rest of the SPFB also organize protests outside of facilities across the state. The protests are part of the SPFC/SPFB Freedom Tour. According to the SPFC website, the tour has an outreach function:

The FREEDOM TOUR 2016 will be conducting protests statewide and conducting at least one demonstration at EVERY prison in the state of Alabama, to organize and then mobilize families and to bring awareness to the problems plaguing the Alabama prison system and the solution to these problems.

Some activists photograph the Freedom Tour and share the photos to Facebook. The photos show gatherings of small groups of activists marching with signs and beating drums. A series of photos suggests that the protests are monitored by the police and corrections officials.

The PLM is working on a fifth newsletter. PLM leaders are collecting writings and art on prisoners' rights and the upcoming nationwide prisoner strike. The PLM receives an art submission, an illustration, showing prisoners marching and holding signs. Prisoners' signs read, "We're the ones we've been waiting for" and "Prison lives matter." The PLM also receives an essay from an anarchist prisoner. In the essay, the prisoner writes that the strike is going to powerful. Furthermore, anyone who doesn't participate will be complicit in prisoner oppression:

What we have here is a huge social base, across prison walls, which are extremely pissed off. And we have an opportunity to harness that anger and point it at our enemy, that's all the analysis I need and I say that if you oppose this in any way, you're nothing but a house slave ready to defend your master.



The PLM will publish the newsletter at the end of August, a week and a half before the nationwide prisoner strike.

In addition to creating the newsletter, PLM leaders are enacting a four-part pre-strike plan. The plan involves designating prisoner leaders, organizing fundraising efforts, finding "graphic design/video savvy" volunteers to develop strike digital content, and building local free world groups. The PLM is trying to build in-prison resistance networks, raise money, create compelling strike information materials, and develop free world resistance communities. PLM activists are creating a variety of digital content to promote the strike. On the whole, the materials are visually appealing and provocative. They have striking fonts, images of raised prisoner fists, photographs from the Attica rebellion, and coherent design schemes.

PAL is working on two digital outreach efforts. First, PAL activists are creating informational documents and digital graphics for their 2017 free activist march. The march will take place in Washington DC, near the White House. PAL is promising that the march will be a massive action for prisoners' rights. The group is promoting the march as a follow-up to the nationwide prisoner strike. They hope the prisoner strike will bring attention to prisoner issues, grow activist networks, and convince more people to become involved in prisoners' right resistance in 2017.

Second, PAL is responding to legal questions from prisoners and prisoner family members. As the strike date approaches, prisoners and their loved ones want to know about the legal and institutional risks to prisoners participating in the strike. The PAL Facebook page announces that prisoner lawyers are "flooded with messages" and individual responses may be delayed. PAL leaders write a public post explaining that prisoners who fear repression for participating in the strike can engage in other forms of discreet resistance:

For those prisoners that fear direct participation (for a host of reasons that maybe valid), we recommend work sabotage on all levels. This was a strong tactic used by the slaves pre 13th amendment. Post 13th slave amendment it should be re explored. Modern day guerrilla tactics within the beast... Support disruption!

PAL writes that it will do everything possible to support the prisoner strike and the prisoners who experience repression.

The TPAN is working to plan solidarity events for nationwide prisoner strike. The group is organizing a series of noise demonstrations at federal prisons on September 9 and September 10. The noise demonstrations are intended to communicate to prisoners that free people care about prisoner issues, support prisoner activism, and want the strike to success. TPAN leaders hope that, in addition to spotlighting prisoner labor issues, the demonstrations will bring attention to prison ecology concerns. The TPAN is creating Facebook events for the noise demonstrations. The event pages instruct activists to bring drums, noisemakers, and large banners.

#### 7.12 Pre-Strike Disturbances in Alabama

In the weeks before the strike, tensions are high in Alabama prisons where SPFC activists are incarcerated. The SPFC posts on Facebook that, at one prison, corrections officers are beating prisoner and spraying them with "chemical agents." The officers seem to be targeting prisoner activists. At another prison, there is a brief facility disruption, reminiscent of the March prison riots. It's Going Down reports on the six-hour incident:

The revolt began when several prisoners and at least 1 CO were injured in an altercation which lead to this most recent riot. As the altercation moved from fight to riot, a barricade was set up as the Cert Team arrived. The barricade was put in place in the C Dorm, which houses 114 prisoners. Power and water were shut off after the dorm was taken and the entire prison was put on lockdown.

After the disturbance, a group is prisoners is transferred to segregation cells. The prisoners are temporarily denied calling privilege, mailing privileges, and access to their personal property. On

August 30, another prison goes on lockdown. The lockdown follows a fatal prisoner-on-prisoner stabbing. The SPFC explains that the stabbing happened after the two prisoners go into a fight. Prisoner administrators refused to rehouse the prisoners separately. Then, while one prisoner slept, the other prisoner stabbed him to death. In a blog post, the SPFC writes, "Because the Department of Corruption let him by placing both of these guys back in the same dorm after they had already fought. [His] blood is on their hands."

Shortly after, on September 1, an Alabama corrections officer is stabbed. The stabbing takes place at the prison that recently experienced the six-hour riot. The SPFC writes updates about the stabbing on Twitter. "He was transported to hospital but doesn't look like he will make it," the SPFC tweets about the CO.

News of the corrections officer stabbing in Alabama reaches corrections officer online communities. Corrections Talk and Corrections Officers Together post about the attack. Corrections Officers Together writes that the officer was stabbed after denying the prisoner "an extra tray of food." Commenters respond with well-wishes for the officer and criticism of the ADOC:

"praying for a speedy recovery"

"Prayers for this officer"

"When will it stop!"

"We are praying for him and all the officers. The staff and officers are walking into time bombs everyday . The state of Alabama cannot decide or agree on how to deal with these enormous problems that have been brewing in our prison system now for more than 25 years. Such a tragedy.."

"Those darn 'Adults in Custody.' Wonder if Alabama staff are referring to this punk ass coward as something other than he is."

The Facebook post on Corrections Officers Together receives dozens of angry and sad reacts. For weeks, the injured corrections officer remains in the hospital, in critical condition. He will pass away on September 16.

Leading up to September 9, there is almost no mention of prison resistance on corrections officer Facebook communities. CO online communities are, however, extensively discussing electronic contraband. Corrections Talk posts about three corrections officers that were caught smuggling drugs, cell phones, and other items into Georgia prisons. “Always the few that make us look bad,” one commenter responds. “Like wtf did you think would happen? You can't do favors for just some of the inmates, when one finds out and you don't hook them up too...indictments!,” another commenter responds. Corrections Talk also posts about a prisoner who recorded his escape using the camera on a contraband cell phone. The prisoner took photos and videos of himself and two other prisoners crawling through facility pipelines, reaching the facility roof, and repelling down the side of the facility. Commenters poke fun at the prisoner. “Do it for the Vine,” one commenter remarks, in reference to the video sharing web platform Vine.

Corrections Talk and America's Invisible Warriors administrators add more Facebook posts about cell phone and electronic contraband. They share articles about cell phone blocking technologies, the “explosion” of electronic contraband, and cell phone contraband policies in California. Commenters worry that the penalties for prisoners who possess contraband cell phones are not harsh enough:

“..umm escape paraphernalia? Can be, and have been, used to organize hits (inside and out) and riots? Hello.....wrong direction, need to increase penalties...”

“Jesus. cellphones are a proven threat to the safe and effective operation to any facility in any State. why not use the money to youre saving by not giving us raises to buy state of the art signal jammers?”

“Have to wonder how the cell phones get there in the first place really. Because it's not as if inmates can just walk down to ATT and purchase one. I think the way to stop it would be a life sentence for anyone found proving an inmate with a cell phone.”

“Wtf??? This is one of the highest security risks we have in corrections... you are putting staff at risk with these hug a thug law changes..”

Commenters also share their observations related to cell phone contraband. One commenter writes that he has seen cell phones sent to prisoners by mail and cell phone handoffs during prison visitation. A second commenter adds that he found 70 cell phones in one drop: “their friends walked through 2 miles of cow pasture in the middle of no where to throw them over the fence into the rec yard.” A third commenter remarks that sometimes COs bring cell phones into prisons because they can make a profit or because they are too friendly with prisoners.

### 7.13 Pre-Strike Actions across the U.S.

The nationwide prisoner strike is officially scheduled to start on September 9. In the days leading up to the strike, activists across the U.S. are already engaging in acts of resistance. It's Going Down publishes a “diary of actions” that take place pre-strike. The diary includes a list of resistance efforts, information about the efforts (their location, the group sponsoring the action), and photos of the efforts. The resistance efforts take place in prisons and outside of prisons. Prisoners in Alabama smuggle in a large flag with the PLM's logo and the words “SEPTEMBER 9<sup>TH</sup> NATION WIDE PRISON STRIKE.” The prisoners hang the flag in one prison and take a photo. They then upload the photo to Facebook. Free activists in several states engage in banner drops, poster hanging, and graffiti writing. They create large banners with bold fonts and hang the banners on highway overpasses, bridges, and fences. They paste posters with details about the strike in public places. They write graffiti on building, bridges, public structures, utility boxes, and business which use (or have used) prison labor. Activists in Denver use permanent marker to

scrawl messages in a Starbucks bathroom. “End prison slavery! #PrisonStrike2016. Starbucks profits from prison slavery. Fuck Starbucks! FIRE TO THE PRISONS,” one message announces.

Additionally, free activists organize information sessions and support initiatives for the upcoming strike. They make Facebook events for discussions and presentations at coffee shops, bookstores, and community centers; teach-ins; film screenings; benefit brunches; benefit barbeques; and benefit concerts. The events are geographically spread out. There are information sessions and support initiatives in Washington, Florida, California, Arizona, Wisconsin, Indiana, Minnesota, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, Texas, Maryland, North Carolina, Kentucky, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Michigan, DC, Tennessee, Oregon, Nevada, Georgia, Wyoming, and Colorado.

Ahead of the strike, a prisoner in Ohio starts a hunger strike. The prisoner has been working as a local leader for the PLM and helping to coordinate the nationwide prisoner strike. According to reports from the PLM, the prisoner was moved to segregation in August. Since, he has been denied calling and prison email system privileges. Prison administrators have labeled the prisoner as a security threat group member. He is engaging in a hunger strike to protest his treatment. Just before the nationwide strike, prisoners in Florida organize their own rebellion. They put blankets and sheets over the windows of corrections officer “bubbles.” They smash surveillance cameras; break holes in the dorm ceilings; and damage beds, walls, and doors. Local Florida newspapers report that the rebellion may be part of a “loosely organized national strike.”

#### 7.14 ICT Use Leading up to the Nationwide Prisoner Strike

Leading up to the nationwide prisoner strike NPRC activists use ICTs to create digital graphics and materials for the strike, plan information sessions and support initiatives, share symbolic photos of resistance, and report on pre-strike prison conditions.

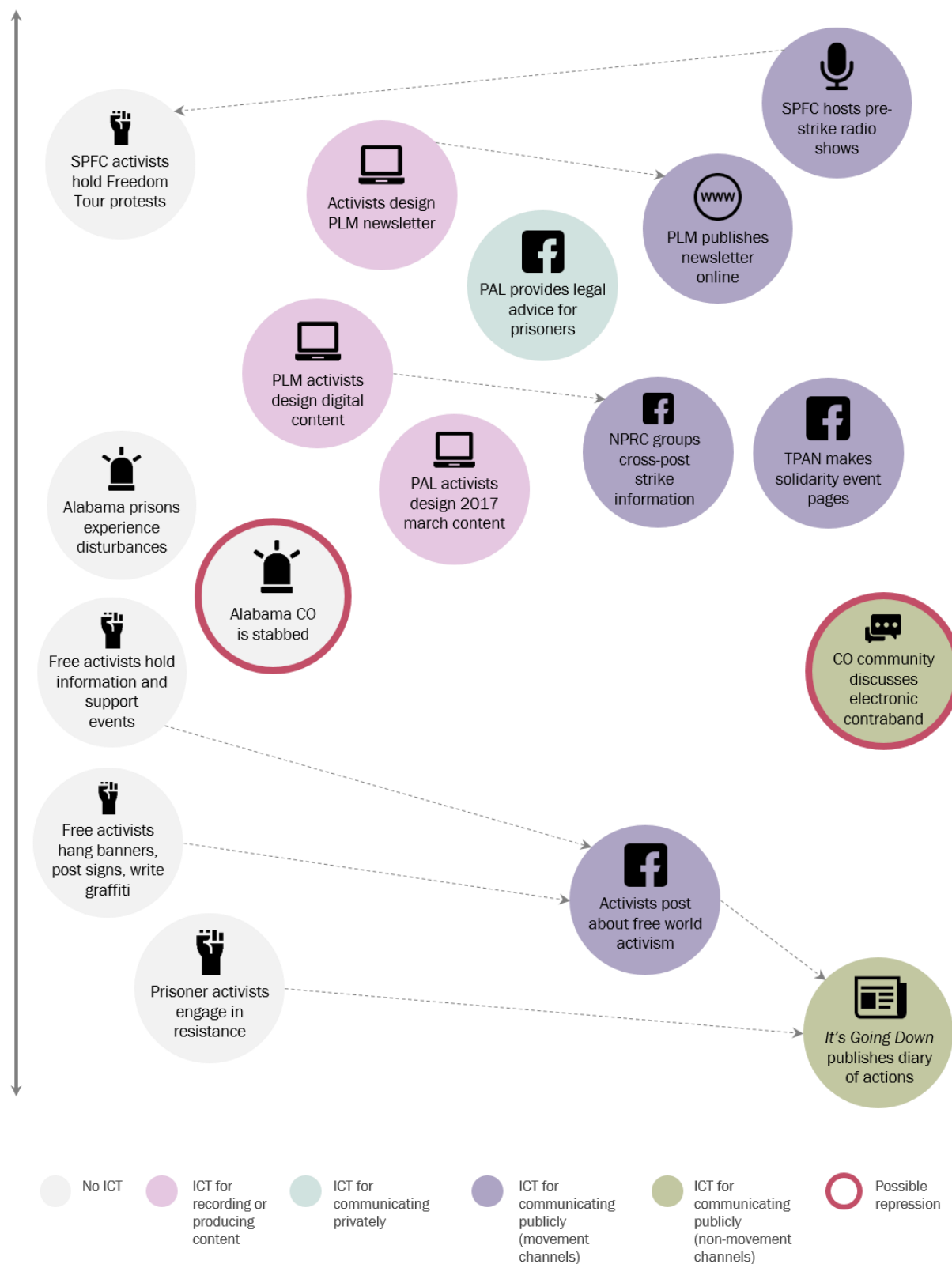


Figure 7.3 ICT Use before the Prisoner Strike (August and Early-September 2016)

#### 7.14.1 Pre-Strike Planning and Organization

The core organizations of the NPRC focus their pre-strike efforts in different ways. The SPFC takes steps to motivate and mobilize their existing base. They hold radio show conversations and invite listeners to share their thoughts, opinions, and questions. Free activists in the SPFC also travel to prisons to engage with other potential supporters. They drive around the state and attempt to spread word of the strike to prisoners' family members. The PLM works extensively on developing online content, producing digital materials, promoting fundraising campaigns, and publicizing the strike. The group utilizes activists' technology skills to craft shareable representations of the strike. These representations are not only eye-catching and well-designed; they also express the PLM's hopes and intended tone for the strike. PAL and the TPAN are both figuring out how to piggyback their plans and concerns on the September 9th strike. PAL wants to promote their 2017 DC march. The TPAN would like to draw attention ecological issues relating to prisons and prisoners.

#### 7.14.2 Pre-Strike Legal Advising

PAL offers pre-strike legal advising to prisoners and prisoner families. Their team of jailhouse lawyers responds to Facebook messages about the risks of participating in the prisoner strike. This service is important for several reasons. First, the rules, policies, and laws on prisoner activism can vary widely across prisons. At one prison, participating in a prisoner demonstration can be a minor rule violation. At another prison, participating in the same demonstration can be a major offense, punishable by reclassification, STG labeling, segregation time, or denial of privileges. The range of institutional and legal sanction can further vary if corrections officials feel the demonstration threatens prison security.



Second, the institutional rules and legal statutes related to prisoner activism are not always accessible to prisoners or even free people. Most prisons do not have manuals which explicitly detail the possible consequences of participating in a prisoner strike. Moreover, the regulations on prisoner behavior are spread across state codes, corrections operating procedures, and facility regulations. In some states, certain operating procedures and regulations are secret and not accessible to the public. Leading up to the strike, prisoners and their family members have justifiable uncertainty about the risks prisoners are facing by participating in the action.

#### 7.14.3 Alabama CO Stabbing

To the SPFC, the Alabama corrections officer stabbing is upsetting and inopportune. At the time of the stabbing, the SPFC tweets just that the officer is injured and will likely not survive. In a later blog post, SPFC leaders will write that because this attack happens just before the nationwide prisoner strike, it undermines the strike's legitimacy. It makes corrections officers suspicious that the strike will actually be nonviolent. So too, SPFC leaders feel that the CO stabbing is a preventable tragedy. They accuse prison administrators of purposely encouraging facility violence for political reasons, without regard to the safety of corrections officers or prisoners.

#### 7.14.4 Corrections Talk: Cell Phone Fears

Corrections officer online communities are discussing electronic contraband just before the strike begins. Commenters are noticing that cell phones are entering prisons in many different ways. Moreover, prisoners are using cell phones for sometimes benign and sometimes threatening purposes. On the whole, commenters seem to feel that the penalties for having a cell phone in prison are not severe enough. Likewise, the penalties for bringing cell phones into prisons are not as harsh as they should be.

#### 7.14.5 Free World Pre-Strike Solidarity Actions

Free activists make substantial efforts to promote the nationwide prisoner strike online and offline. In addition to creating strike media, sharing strike information online, and planning free activist solidarity events, a number of activists also hang signs, drop banners, write graffiti, and engage in symbolic solidarity displays. Some of these pre-strike actions could have serious legal consequences, especially if the actions involve defacing or damaging public or private property. The activists who participate in these solidarity actions receive a type of praise on the internet. NPRC organizations and It's Going Down commend activists and post photos of the banners, posters, graffiti works, and vandalism.

#### 7.15 The September 9 Prison Strike in Prisons

On the day of the strike, prisoners refuse to attend work, hold demonstrations, and engage in various resistance efforts. Free activists hold solidarity actions. According to It's Going Down, at least 29 prisons are affected by the strike. The PLM creates a publicly-editable Google Doc for activists to report how many prisoners are participating, which prisons are affected, and which prisons are experiencing lockdowns. PLM leaders acknowledge in the document that it will take time for the full extent of the strike to become known:

It will be at least a week before we start to have an idea of what all has actually occurred starting September 9th. Prison administrators do not understand nonviolent resistance, so they respond to any significant strike activity as they would a riot. Many units have been and will be put on lockdown which means mail and phones will be cut off, preventing most prisoners from contacting us to let us know what is happening.

The PLM makes a second Google Doc for call-in campaigns. The document is a collection of concerning incidents involving prisoner activists. PLM activists describe the incidents of repression or suspected repression. They provide phone numbers that free activists can call about

the incidents. These numbers are typically office phones for prison wardens, state prison officials, or prison commissioners. The phone numbers are accompanied by suggested calling scripts. The PLM also publishes a third document, crediting the strike's prisoner leaders. The document gives prisoner leaders' legal names, chosen names, and mailing addresses.

It's Going Down is covering the strike extensively. Journalists for the site begin compiling a list of prisoner demonstrations and actions, prisoner repression incidents, and free world resistance efforts. The site notes that some prison administrators who were aware of strike plans preemptively put certain facilities on lockdown. Nevertheless, prisoners are participating in the resistance in a number of different ways.

Table 7.1 Types of In-Prison Resistance Actions on September 9

- Work stoppages, work slow-downs
- Marches
- Hunger strikes
- Sit-ins, refusals to return to cells/dorms
- Collective grievance documentation/sharing
- Recreation boycotting, court boycotting, visitation boycotting
- Riots, fire-setting, prison damage, confrontations with COs

According to It's Going Down coverage, prisoners in men's prisons, women's prisons, and jails in the U.S. and in several other countries are participating in the strike. The site relays that three women in Washington are holding a small work stoppage: "There was a symbolic protest at Washington Correctional Center for Women in Gig Harbor on September 9. Three women refused to go to work in the prison library." Prison administrators respond by dispatching a riot team to move the prisoners to segregation cells. For their participation, the prisoners are facing 20 days in segregation, job reassignment, and possible custody reclassification. In other states, whole dorms and large groups of prisoners refuse to participate. "Sept 9th, all inmates at [one prison] refused to

report to their prison jobs without incident... Officers are performing all tasks,” It’s Going Down writes about one Alabama prison.

PAL, the PLM, the SPFC, and the TPAN are also tweeting, posting to Facebook, and writing blog posts about the resistance actions and repression incidents they are aware of. The groups report that prison administrators are largely responding to the strikes with lockdowns. Administrators are canceling visitation, restricting privileges, canceling programming and recreation, and confining prisoners in their cells or dorms.

Table 7.2 Forms of Prisoner Repression on September 9

**Privilege Denial**

- Calling privilege suspensions, visitation privilege suspensions
- Programming cancellations, recreation cancellations
- Shower time limitations, calling time limitations
- Paused mail distribution

**Disciplinary Action**

- Rehousing, reclassification
- Facility transfers
- Violation issuances
- Job reassignments

**Force**

- Riot team deployments
- Cell extractions
- Physical restraints, immobilizations, shackling
- Tear gas
- Shock shields
- Police-trained dogs
- Intimidation with non-lethal firearms
- Assaults by COs
- Exposure to violent prisoners

**Discomforts and Inconveniences**

- Substandard meals
- Denial of property
- Mass searches
- Sleep interruption

At certain prisons, though, prisoners are experiencing more serious forms of repression. Some prisoner activists are being harassed, intimidated, and physically abused by corrections officers. A subset of prisons is responding to the strikes militantly, sending special teams of officers to restrain prisoners, perform cell extractions, and conduct mass searches.

Prisoners report their repression experiences over prison phone calls, on contraband cell phones, through sympathetic corrections officers, and through family members. It's Going Down receives a message from a prisoner's family member in Michigan. The message explains that prisoners were confronted by a special team of officers following a demonstration in the prison yard:

About 400 of the men were on the yard in a peaceful march around the yard. The warden was called and he came out to address them to see what their demands were... The warden promised to fix the things he could and said the other things he would have to take to legislation. The men thought they had come to a common agreement and began to disperse.

To their surprise as soon as the warden went back in and shut the door the tactical team came storming in with guns, rifles, tear gas and shields. Anthony says they started grabbing the men that they believed to be instigators out the showers naked, and off their beds, out their cubs and zip tied their arms behind their back and threw them on the ground outside in the rain for 5-6 hours. He said the men were not allowed to use the restroom in that time frame and some even used it on themselves. Once they saw the armed ERT team coming in is when some of the men started to tear up 2 of the units because they were upset and afraid for their lives.

On their blog, the SPFC asserts that prison administrators at one prison respond to the strike by releasing violent prisoners from segregation back into dorms. Most of the repression reports, however, are not this extreme. By in large, prisoners relay that administrators are limiting prisoner movement and curtailing prisoner privileges in response to the strike.

### 7.16 The September 9 Strike Outside of Prisons

It's Going Down chronicles free world resistance actions for the nationwide prisoner strike. The site estimates that free activists are holding solidarity events in more than 60 cities in the United States and abroad. Activists are hanging banners; posting fliers; holding noise demonstrations, rallies, protests, and marches; engaging in acts of civil disobedience; organizing business disruptions; hosting film screenings and information events; and distributing fliers.

The TPAN is coordinating a series of rallies outside federal prisons. The group has posted plans for the rallies on Facebook and their blog. The TPAN also releases a media statement about the rallies and the strike. The statement explains that prisoners “are subjected to slave conditions based on the 13th Amendment of the US Constitution, which exempts prisoners of protection from slavery.” Moreover, it mentions that prisons are generally unhealthy and unsafe environments: “Prisons all over the country are coupled with environmentally hazardous land uses that threaten the health of prisoners and local ecosystems.” At the rallies, free activists hold banners and signs and sing “fire, fire to the prisons” with megaphones.

The SPFC holds their own rallies outside of prisons in Alabama. Activists gather with megaphones, banners, signs, and drums. Some demonstrators wear SPFB shirts. An activist and her husband photograph one of the rallies and post the photos to Facebook. On Twitter, the SPFC posts that sheriff's officers arrive to monitor the rallies.

In addition to the SPFC and TPAN demonstrations, there are other events outside prisons and jails. Many of the events are noise demonstrations. The purpose of these events is to signal to prisoners that free people recognize and support the strike. At a few of the noise demonstrations, activists set off flares, fireworks, and smoke bombs. At other events, activists march in public spaces and distribute fliers about prison labor. Some of the marches intentionally block busy roadways and disrupt traffic. Many of the flier distribution efforts disrupt business activity.

Activists pass out fliers at Walmart, McDonald's, and other businesses that use prison labor. At one McDonald's, activists distribute fliers and give free lunches to passersby that agree not to eat at McDonalds's.

Table 7.3 Types of Outside Prison Resistance Actions on September 9

- Noise demonstrations
- Rallies
- Marches
- Banner drops
- Calling campaigns, faxing campaigns
- Flier distribution efforts
- Posting signs, stickering
- Acts of vandalism, graffiti writing
- Informational sessions
- Community-building events, letter writing campaigns
- Public discussions
- Film screenings
- Road blockading, traffic disruptions

In addition, free activists engage in hundreds of small efforts to promote and publicize the prison strike. They participate in calling campaigns, write graffiti, paste stickers, hang posters and banners, vandalize businesses which use prison labor, and vandalize law enforcement memorials. In response to the collective demonstrations and individual resistance efforts, a number of free activists are arrested. The PLM urges supporters to donate to these activists' bail funds. Rally and demonstration attendees are, in some places, asked to leave or relocate by law enforcement. For the most part, though, free activists do not face serious consequences for their participation.

#### 7.17 Where is the Media?

The most extensive news coverage of the nationwide prisoner strike comes from the anarchist online news site, It's Going Down. The site provides information about the strike, details

about strike solidarity efforts, and news of prisoner repression. Journalists on the site are sympathetic towards prisoners and overtly express support for the prisoner strike.

In addition to their own coverage, It's Going Down posts a hyperlinked list of "corporate" and alternative news coverage of the strike. Their list shows that mainstream news organizations are slow to pick up news of the strike. Alternative news sites, such as *Quartz*, *Mother Jones*, *Slate*, *Mask Magazine*, *Buzzfeed*, and *Wired*, publish articles soon after the strike's start. These articles mention the PLM and the SPFC. They detail prisoners' demands; they discuss why the strike is taking place; and they acknowledge the effort that went in to planning the strike.

Select corporate media organizations report on lockdowns and prisoner resistance actions at individual facilities when the strike starts. These organizations, however, largely fail to contextualize the lockdowns and protests as related to the nationwide prisoner strike. They describe the prison incidents as local happenings. A small number of corporate newspapers and news stations discuss the nationwide prisoner strike. These discussions highlight how prisoners used contraband cell phones and social media to organize the strike; how prison administrators handled the strike; and how prisoner labor differs from slave labor.

NPRC activists are disappointed with the news coverage of the strike. PLM leaders wonder why big news organizations are not picking up stories about the strike. "The #PrisonStrike didn't merit a single mention in NYT, Washington Post, NPR, CNN or MSNBC," the PLM posts on its Facebook page. As the strike progress, the PLM writes a blog post about the news coverage. The post begins:

Anyone relying on mainstream media wouldn't know it, but the US prison system is shaking up right now. No one knows how big the initial strike was yet, but the information is slowly leaking out between the cracks in the prisons' machinery of obscurity and isolation.



Activists speculate whether mainstream journalists are unaware of the strike or uninterested in writing stories about the strike.

On the PAL Facebook pages, activists discuss whether it would be useful to call media organizations and demand they cover the strike. PAL leaders float an idea to “flood the television media with calls to cover the strikes.” Some activists believe that the media silence is conspiratorial. “The less press coverage there is, the less the outside world will know of the horrible conditions that are in our prison system - they want to keep it a secret!!,” one activist writes.

Even some alternative news sites speculate on the mainstream media silence about the strike. RollingOut.com writes an article titled, “Is mainstream media ignoring the largest prison labor strike in US history?” AlterNet writes a similar piece. It is called “Did You Know We Are Having the Largest Prison Strike in History? Probably Not, Because Most of the Media Have Ignored It.” The piece notes that the strike’s coverage is limited. Moreover, the news outlets that are writing stories about the nationwide prisoner strike have a focus “on spectacle over substance.”

#### 7.18 COs Respond to the Strike

Corrections Talk administrators share numerous posts about the nationwide prisoner strike. The posts receive hundreds of comments, likes, angry reacts, and laughing reacts. One article reports that the strike is taking place in 24 states. In the article, the strike is framed as a protest of poor prison conditions and low prisoner pay. Commenters respond in different ways. Some commenters are incredulous, unable to believe that prisoners will sustain a multi-state strike. “Won't last two days,” writes one commenter. Other commenters are angry. They accuse prisoners of being entitled and spoiled. “How about they are required to work to earn their three daily meals, free utilities, a roof over their head, free cable, free clothes, laundry, medical care!,” writes a commenter who identifies himself as a CO. “I hope its a hunger strike so the prisons save \$\$ on

food then maybe they will die and we will really save some \$\$.

Just a thought...,” another commenter adds. Another subset of commenters makes suggestions about how to handle to prisoner strike. The suggestions include starve prisoners, place prisons on lockdown, feed nurtiloaf or expired food to prisoners, serve peanut butter and jalapeno sandwiches to prisoners, add time to prisoners’ sentences, shoot prisoners, hang prisoners, gas prisoners, send prisoners to Afghanistan or Iraq, and remove televisions from prisons.

Corrections Talk administrators post another article from the *Los Angeles Times*. The article describes the strike as limited. It includes a quote from an Alabama prison official: “I know there are inmates who are saying there is this big, wide work stoppage but that is just not the case.” The article’s author notes that prisoners are using the word “slavery” to describe their work assignments. Commenters on Corrections Talk have a difficult time understanding why prisoners feel they should be paid to work:

“They get free medical, clothes,water,electric,Movies(Netflix),soap, Shampoo,razors,food, haircuts,gym,lawyer, phyc. Meds, and the list goes on.”

“Slaves were not allowed to go free but criminals have the choice to alter their behavior and not go to jail. Apples and oranges, but Liberals will tell you different and say you're racist or that you don't care about humans if you disagree with them.”

“They are not ‘forced’ to work. Many jails/prisons ask for volunteers and then screen them. THEY ask for the job. THEY are told what is required. You committed a crime, why get coddled?”

“Slavery? And how many inmates pay for allof their food, healthcare, dental, laundry, housing, electricity, security, toilet paper, soap, TV, rec., tooth paste, toothbrushes, Tylenol/Ibuprofen, library, etc...”

Moreover, some commenters are bothered that prisoners used contraband cell phones to organize the strike. One commenter, though, writes that she works in corrections and is troubled by the comments on the article. “I find some of these comments disturbing. Remember that over 90% of

inmates are released back to the public. That means that aside from protection of the public, one of our top priorities is rehabilitation, not punishment,” she explains. Additional commenters reply accusing her of being naïve, too soft on prisoners, and unnecessarily hostile to other commenters.

America’s Invisible Warriors administrators write a few posts about the nationwide prisoner strike. One post includes a link to an article about how prisoners “tried” to organize a coordinated strike. The article notes that prison administrators submitted requests to social media sites to deactivate the accounts of prisoner activists and remove their digital content. On America’s Invisible Warriors, commenters discuss whether the strike signals that prisons are becoming too soft on prisoners. “We need good old fashioned chain gains. Prison isn't meant for a good time. It's punishment,” one commenter asserts. Other commenters reiterate that prisoners chose to go to prison. “They COMMITTED a CRIME,” writes a commenter who identifies herself as a corrections professional.

Corrections Officers Together does not post about the nationwide prisoner strike. It is possible that the page is trying not to draw attention to the strike or unintentionally promote the strike. It is also possible that page administrators are more focused on recognizing the anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks and honoring fallen law enforcement officers.

#### 7.19 ICT Use during the Nationwide Prisoner Strike

During the nationwide prisoner strike, activists use ICTs to coordinate solidarity actions, engage in solidarity actions, report on strike participation, report on prisoner repression, and discuss the media silence on the strike.

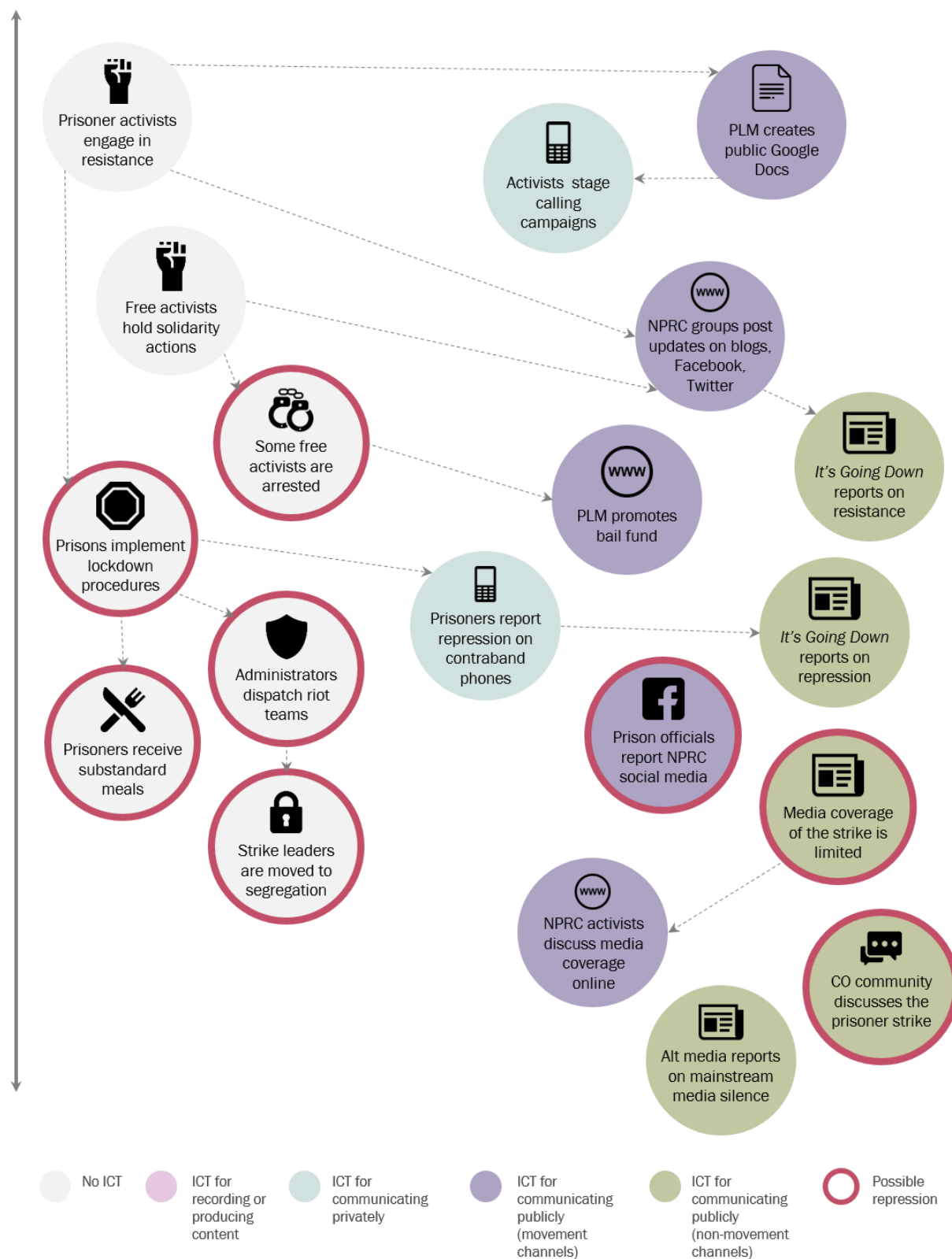


Figure 7.4 ICT Use during the Nationwide Prisoner Strike (September 2016)

### 7.19.1 The Prisoner Work Strike

The nationwide prisoner work strike is the main event for the New Prisoners' Rights Coalition. NPRC activists have expectations that this action will be huge. They hope that this mass strike will attract the attention necessary for the public to demand better prison conditions and fair wages for prisoners. Given the geographic scope of the strike and the limitations on prisoner communication, it is difficult for activists to assess how many prisoners are actually participating, how long they are participating, and how they are participating. Some prisoners cannot engage in the work strike because they did not have work assignments. Activists suspect that at least a portion of prisoners without work assignments participate in other ways, such as hunger strikes or symbolic acts of resistance.

Prison administrators respond to the strike in different ways. Their responses vary from putting prisons on alert and limiting prisoner privileges to dispatching riot teams and placing strike leaders in isolation. In the most extreme cases, strikers face overt repression through force. Teams of corrections officers confront strikers with non-lethal arms, electric shields, police-trained dogs, and tear gas. In the most typical cases, strikers face disciplinary write-ups and temporary privilege suspensions.

### 7.19.2 Free World Non-Tech Resistance

Free activists involve themselves in the September 9th resistance in a number of different ways. One of the most common ways is demonstrating at prisons and jails. These demonstrations have two purposes. First, they bring free activists in close proximity with prisoners. Free activists and prisoner activists are still separated by prison and jail walls. The closer free activists can get and the louder free activists can be, though, the more likely it is that prisoner activists will see or hear the demonstrations. Second, the demonstrations position free activists as prison and jail

watchers. The presence of free activists outside prisons and jails reminds prison administrators that there are members of the public who care about and will respond to the mistreatment of prisoners on strike.

Another common form of resistance for free activists is marching and attending rallies in public spaces. The goal of these events is different. Free world activists are trying to spread information about the strike to the public and the media. They aim to attract attention from people who are unfamiliar with the strike or unaware that the strike is happening.

#### 7.19.3 Free World Tech Resistance

One of the major objectives of free activists during the nationwide prisoner strike is to spread accurate news about the strike and the prisoners participating in the strike. The NPRC's core organizations ask activists to share posts, graphics, photos, and news articles relevant to the strike. Leaders of NPRC organizations want to make sure that the strike is not ignored or misrepresented. NPRC activists use technologies in other ways besides spreading strike information. Free activists use phones to call prison administrators and express concern for the striking prisoners. They use fax machines to spam prison offices with support messages for the strike. They co-create Google Docs to describe and document important strike updates.

#### 7.19.4 Mainstream Media Silence on the Strike

Despite the NPRC's efforts to promote the nationwide prisoner strike, the mainstream media is slow to report on the strike. When corporate journalists finally report on the strike, they focus on prisoners' rule breaking. They write about prisoners using contraband cell phones and social media to plan the strike and provide updates about the strike. They direct attention to prison policies about electronic contraband, instead of prison conditions and prisoner labor compensation.

This type of coverage is discouraging to activists. Even when the media acknowledges prisoner resistance, they ignore prisoner grievances.

#### 7.19.5 CO Talk: The Prisoner Strike

Online corrections officer community page visitors have strong opinions about the nationwide prisoner strike. Many visitors feel that the strike is baseless. They cannot fathom why prisoners would complain with all of the “free” services and luxuries prisons provide. Some visitors identify themselves as corrections workers, people with special knowledge of the prison system. They cite this special knowledge as proof that prisoners are dumb, whiney, or manipulating the public for sympathy. In the future, some corrections officers will speak out in support of prisoners. A group of officers in Alabama will even organize their own “blue flu” protest to demand that prison administrators take measures to make prisons safer. On Corrections Talk, America’s Invisible Warriors, and Corrections Officers Together, however, commenters will continue to delegitimize prisoner concerns and question the motives of prisoner activists in the years to come.

#### 7.20 Social Processes of Resistance and Repression during the September 9<sup>th</sup> Prisoner Strike

The New Prisoners’ Rights Coalition’s use of ICTs during the September 9th prisoner strike demonstrates two recurrent processes of resistance and repression: virtually unreachable zones and intra-movement tech power disparities.

First, the technological disconnectedness of the prison environment disadvantages and advantages NPRC activists in particular ways. The prisons where NPRC activists are incarcerated intensely regulate technology use. Prisoners are legally prohibited from recording their surroundings, documenting their treatment, or virtually sharing their worlds. Prison workers, too,

have restrictions on how and when they can make digital recordings of the prison environment. It is common for prisons to have security cameras and other technologies for documenting prison activity. These digital recordings, however, are generally not publicly accessible. In effect, most prisons that the NPRC organizes in are virtually unreachable zones. Members of the public do not have sensory access to prison environments. They cannot observe or experience how prisons look or operate internally.

This disconnectedness is the root of the prisoner's digital dilemma. The absence of accessible sensory information renders the prison environment ambiguous. Prisoners must break the law if they want to provide compelling visual evidence of mistreatment. The prisoner strike, however, demonstrates that the virtual inaccessibility of prisons can also advantage prisoner activists. Prisoners make a variety of claims about their treatment and their living conditions. Prison administrators sometimes counter these claims with public statements or after-the-fact photos. Rarely, though, are administrators able to provide clear, in-the-moment recordings to support their counterclaims. Prison administrators, like prisoners, lack digital evidence to prove their version of prison reality.

In making sense of the prison environment, the public has just an incomplete, loose collection of reality assertions. Members of the public must create their own constellations of truth about prison conditions and prisoner treatment. If members of the public feel that the prison system is a legitimate institution, this constellation is likely to resemble prison administrators' version of reality. If members of the public feel that the prison system is illegitimate, this constellation is likely to more closely resemble prisoner activists' version of reality.

Second, the nationwide prisoner strike is a valuable illustration of the consequences of intra-movement tech power disparities. Leading up to the strike, activists with technology access



have considerably more power in shaping the NPRC's digital identity. Free PLM activists are designing strike informational materials and graphics. Free SPFC activists are leading discussions on the SPFC radio show. Free activists are participating in resistance efforts outside of prisons, documenting this resistance, and posting this resistance on NPRC online pages.

When the SPFC began organizing, prisoner leaders were hesitant to include free activists in their resistance. They wanted to empower prisoners to advocate for themselves. They also wanted their resistance to be peaceful and respectful. The SPFC Spokesperson was especially concerned with subverting stereotypes that prisoners are violent, wild, or uncivilized. Prisoner activists, however, relinquished some control over their digital identity to reach wider audiences and maintain momentum during periods of repression.

The NPRC's digital identity leading up to the strike and during the strike is somewhat different from SPFC leaders' original vision. Free activists are defacing and destroying property in the name of prisoners' rights. Certain NPRC member organizations are sharing calls for prisoner violence and "any means necessary" activism. The NPRC, in general, is fairly reflexive about centering prisoner voices. Yet, the digital presence of the NPRC does not seem to fully belong to prisoners anymore. At this point in time, the technology power disparities are noticeable, but not necessarily destabilizing for NPRC activists.

## **CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION**

### **8.1 NPRC' Use of New ICTs**

From 2013 to 2016, New Prisoners' Rights Coalition activists use a variety of new information and communication technologies to record and produce content, communicate privately, and communicate publicly. Prisoner activists use contraband cell phones to record spoken word performances and conversations among prisoners; document prison conditions, prisoner treatment, and prisoner resistance; remotely participate in interviews and discussions; and share updates and information with free activists and each other. Prisoner activists use social media platforms to share content and information; connect with each other, outside activists, journalists, and other prisoners' rights groups; craft their digital identities; and coordinate multi-location resistance efforts. Prisoner activists also use legal phone and email systems in certain contexts to communicate with family members and free activists.

Free activists use cell phones to communicate with prisoners, each other, the media, and prison officials; photograph and record free world resistance efforts; and receive photo messages and updates from prisoner activists. Free activists use social media to organize and promote events; share information from prisoners; and coordinate free world resistance efforts. Unlike prisoner activists, free activists also use computers, computer programs, high-quality cameras, and camcorders. They create digital graphics; launch fundraising campaigns, design documents in word processing programs; participate in streamed video interviews; and produce volumes of free resistance photos and recordings. For a limited number of support campaigns, they use email and fax machines to contact prison officials.

Table 8.1 NPRC Non-Tech and ICT-Assisted Organization and Resistance

	<b>Mostly Prisoner Activists</b>	<b>Both Prisoner and Free Activists</b>	<b>Mostly Free Activists</b>
<i>Non-Tech</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work strikes, work slow-downs</li> <li>• Verbal appeals</li> <li>• Hunger strikes</li> <li>• Illustration, drawing, pen-and-paper art</li> <li>• Writing, typewriting</li> <li>• Prison damage, fire-setting</li> <li>• Sympathetic CO information relays</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrations</li> <li>• Acts of civil disobedience</li> <li>• Letter-writing</li> <li>• Verbal conversations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Noise demonstrations</li> <li>• Vigils, rallies, marches</li> <li>• Press conferences</li> <li>• Informational and educational events</li> <li>• Graffiti and vandalism</li> <li>• Poster and banner hanging</li> <li>• Newsletter and zine distribution</li> <li>• Business disruption</li> </ul>
<i>ICTs for Recording or Producing Content</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio recordings</li> <li>• Prison condition photography and videography</li> <li>• Prisoner interview recording</li> <li>• Prisoner resistance recording</li> <li>• Meal photography</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document drafting</li> <li>• Newsletter creation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solidary event photography and videography</li> <li>• Graffiti and vandalism photography</li> <li>• Internet research</li> <li>• Letter template creation</li> <li>• Digital content creation</li> </ul>
<i>ICTs for Communicating Privately</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal advice messaging</li> <li>• Text-chain communication</li> <li>• Prison phone calls</li> <li>• Prison email messaging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews with media</li> <li>• Texting</li> <li>• Photo messaging</li> <li>• Cell phone calls</li> <li>• Video chats</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calling campaigns</li> <li>• Email and faxing campaigns</li> </ul>
<i>ICTs for Communicating Publicly</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YouTube video posting</li> <li>• Online radio</li> <li>• Facebook posting</li> <li>• Facebook event creation</li> <li>• Tweeting</li> <li>• Blogging</li> <li>• Google Doc collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online petitions</li> <li>• Online crowd-funding</li> <li>• Bail fund campaigns</li> </ul>

Much of the NPRC's organization and coordination efforts rely on contraband technologies. In order to communicate effectively, affordably, and without the likelihood of surveillance and censorship, activists utilize cell phones, social media, and internet messaging regularly. The NPRC's resistance, however, includes a mix of non-tech, tech-assisted, and tech-reliant tactics. Activists chose to participate in offline demonstrations, tech-enabled events, and online campaigns.

## 8.2 NPRC's Use of New ICTs over Time

Across time, the NPRC's use of ICTs undergoes three noteworthy shifts. First, the NPRC's digital presence grows immensely over years of activism. When the first NPRC organization, the SPFC, initially goes online, the committee creates a basic website, a YouTube page, and a Facebook page. The SPFC adds a series of videos, a few illustrations, a small collection of photos, several paragraphs of text, a spoken word recording, and a pdf "book." When the NPRC begins its nationwide prisoner strike, its core organizations have three websites, four Twitter pages, four Facebook pages (plus additional affiliated Facebook pages and groups), an online radio channel, an online newsletter, an online collection of informational resources and zines, dozens of blog posts, thousands of Facebook and Twitter posts, and hundreds of uploaded photos. The NPRC has a base of Facebook followers, Twitter followers, online radio listeners and subscribers, newsletter subscribers, and blog supporters. Moreover, the coalition has a tremendous amount of publicly-available digital content.

Second, as time passes, the NPRC increasingly uses ICTs to record and share free activist efforts and experiences. When the SPFC forms in 2013, activists primarily use ICTs to record prison conditions, organize prisoner resistance, and craft the SPFC's digital identity as a prisoner-led resistance group. In 2016, activists also use ICTs to document free activist solidarity events, share digital graphics and materials designed by free activists, amplify free activist voices, and

record and report on free activist resistance efforts. This shift may be a result of changes in the NPRC's membership composition over time. The PLM and the TPAN both have a sizable number of free activists. When these organizations join the NPRC, the number of free activists and amount of free activist activity grows. The increase in free activist content may also signal an intentional push for accountability within the NPRC. The recordings could mean that free activists are trying to ensure that their advocacy is known to and approved by prisoner activists. The shift towards more free activist content could, alternatively, be a troubling sign for prisoner activists. It may indicate that NPRC prisoner activists are losing control over the NPRC's digital presence.

Third, the NPRC changes its reliance on certain ICTs. Moreover, at different time periods, the NPRC uses ICTs differently. At the beginning of 2014, the SPFC is using Facebook, YouTube, and its website to engage with activists, supporters, and the public. By summer 2014, the SPFC is posting updates on Twitter and hosting discussions on its radio show. In December 2016, after the Spokesperson is transferred and the Strategist is ill, the SPFC is almost completely quiet online. The PLM starts with a Facebook page; creates a Twitter page; and subsequently launches a website. The PLM, at first, uses the Facebook page to share support requests from prisoners. Later, the PLM posts the support requests on their website. PAL starts as a Facebook page for individually addressing prisoner legal issues. Over time, PAL leaders also use the page to promote NPRC resistance efforts and begin planning their 2017 free world march. The Toxic Prison Alert Network briefly uses cell phones to include prisoner activists in discussions during the Weekend of Action. So too, other NPRC organizations briefly utilize online petition sites and online crowd-funding sites. Across years, months, and even days, the temporal cross-sections of the NPRC's ICT use vary considerably.

### 8.3 NPRC's Use of New ICTs in Response to Repression

During their years of activism, the NPRC confronts many forms of repression. Prisoner activists experience interpersonal hostility and threats; surveillance; physical discomforts and abuse; privilege denial; disciplinary sanctions and fines; STG labeling; exposure to violence, disease, and physical dangers; economic stress; misrepresentation; silencing; and dehumanization and delegitimization online. Free activists face disrespect; surveillance and monitoring; threats; STG labeling; arrests; silencing; misrepresentation; and online ridicule.

NPRC activists respond to this repression by using illegal ICTs to humanize prisoners, using illegal ICTs to document prison conditions, seeking unmonitored methods of communication, migrating across online platforms, shifting communication responsibilities from prisoner activists to free activists, and pausing resistance efforts. To counteract stereotypes about prisoners being manipulative, dangerous, and unfeeling, prisoners use cell phones and social media to tell their stories. They emphasize their humanness, familial and social connections, emotions, fear, and hopes. They represent themselves as teachers, parents, relatives, friends, advocates, intellectuals, leaders, and seekers of justice. To disprove notions that prisons are too comfortable or resort-like, prisoners use cell phones to record and photograph prison conditions. They share these recordings on the internet. In addition, they discuss their treatment in written posts, on internet radio, and over the phone.

NPRC prisoner activists and free activists are near-constantly concerned with how their communications could be monitored, censored, or revoked. Activists worry that the things they say during prison phone calls, over prison email, during prison visits, or in mail processed by the prison could jeopardize prisoners' communication privileges, institutional privileges, security classification, or safety. This worry motivates prisoner activists to seek out other forms of communication.

Table 8.2 NPRC Repression Experiences

	Mostly Prisoner Activists	Both Prisoner and Free Activists	Mostly Free Activists
<i>Physical Repression</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate, unpleasant meals</li> <li>• Property denial</li> <li>• Shower denial</li> <li>• Sleep disruption</li> <li>• Dry cell placement</li> <li>• Abuse, assault</li> <li>• Physical restraint</li> <li>• Exposure to environmental hazards, violence, and disease</li> <li>• Medical neglect</li> <li>• Isolation</li> <li>• Tear gassing, pepper spraying</li> <li>• Use of electric shields, police-trained dogs, non-lethal force weapons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body and property searches</li> <li>• Secondhand exposure to trauma</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pretrial detention</li> </ul>
<i>Interpersonal Hostilities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dehumanization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal confrontation</li> <li>• Concern dismissal</li> <li>• Ridicule</li> <li>• Intimidation</li> <li>• Silencing, disregard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impoliteness on phone calls</li> </ul>
<i>Institutional Sanctions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contraband confiscation</li> <li>• Programming cancelation, recreation cancelation</li> <li>• Threats of disciplinary violations</li> <li>• Disciplinary violations</li> <li>• Grievance dismissals</li> <li>• Security reclassification, transfers</li> <li>• Activism disincentives (rule creation, work incentives)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• STG labeling</li> <li>• Mail rejection</li> <li>• Visit denial</li> <li>• Call denial</li> <li>• Facility lockdowns</li> </ul>	
<i>Economic Repression</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fines</li> <li>• Job reassignment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prison email “stamp” charges</li> <li>• Writing material charges</li> <li>• Prison phone call charges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bail charges</li> </ul>
<i>Legal Sanctions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parole ineligibility marking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criminal charges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threats of arrests</li> <li>• Arrests</li> </ul>
<i>Interpretive Repression</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criminal stereotyping</li> <li>• Pejorative labeling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rumors</li> <li>• Message misrepresentation</li> <li>• Contradiction</li> <li>• Activist identity mischaracterization</li> <li>• Racial stereotyping</li> </ul>	
<i>Surveillance and Monitoring</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social media takedown requests</li> <li>• CO surveillance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Call, mail, and visitation monitoring</li> <li>• Social media monitoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Police protest monitoring</li> </ul>

Contraband cell phones introduce new risks for prisoners; however, they offer the most effective way to discuss resistance plans without the likelihood of monitoring and censorship.

NPRC activists respond to online repression through platform migration. When an online space become nonviable for or hostile towards the NPRC, activists do not halt their online activism. Instead, they shift to a new space. They move from one site or platform to another or they create their own online spaces.

During times of intense prisoner activist repression, NPRC organizations sometimes go dark. For periods of time, these organizations become quiet and inactive online. They wait for the repression to subside before resuming activity. Digital abeyance structures (Earl and Kimport 2011) allow organizations to maintain their digital identities, connections with activists and supporters, and resistance frameworks. Other times, NPRC organizations redistribute activist responsibilities. Free activists become tasked with coordinating resistance, mobilizing support, and maintaining movement momentum.

#### 8.4 Lessons from Studying the NPRC

This study of the NPRC offers eight important lessons about prisoners' rights activism, ICTs, and prison policies.

**1. New ICTs can be useful tools for today's prisoners' rights organizing. Yet, non-tech and low-tech communication and resistance are still important and valuable to activists.** Cell phones, social media, internet, and other technologies are fairly persistent in NPRC activism. From the SPFC's launch in 2013 to the nationwide prisoner strike in 2016, NPRC activists utilize new ICTs for a variety of purposes. They rely on prison phones and contraband cell phones to get information in and out of prisons. They use legal cell phones to coordinate free activist events.



They use cameras and camcorders to document free activist resistance. They use social media and web resources to connect with fellow activists, supporters, allies, and the media.

Yet, at certain times, activists intentionally choose not to use limited-feature technologies, dated technologies, or non-tech methods to communicate and organize. Prisoner activists choose non-tech resistance efforts, such as work strikes and hunger strikes, because of the disruptive power of these resistance techniques. So too, free activists choose non-tech forms of communication and resistance. They organize letter-writing campaigns, hoping that letters will give their message a greater symbolic weight. They organize noise demonstrations outside prisons and jails to ensure that prisoners hear them and feel supported. Free activists believe that their physical presence with drums, noisemakers, large banners, and mega-phones is valuable.

**2. New ICTs do not assure movement success. They do not remove all barriers to activism. They do not guarantee that activists' concerns will earn attention, be taken seriously, or be resolved.** Despite the affordances of new ICTs, the NPRC does not succeed in convincing prison administrators to meet their demands. Moreover, the NPRC is not able to get their primary demand, proper compensation for prisoners, met. When NPRC activists share their grievances online, they are met with limited support, hostility, and disinterest (consistent with Van Laer and Van Alest 2010). Many of the internet spaces that NPRC activists enter are digitally hostile lands. Visitors of these spaces treat activists with disrespect and contempt. Most internet platforms have no specific regard for activists' content. On YouTube, the SPFC's videos are buried within the masses of video content on the site. Their channel does not attract large numbers of views; their videos do not reach the YouTube homepage; their content is digitally sidelined. Overall, the NPRC is best able to attract internet attention to content that is gross, shocking, appalling, or immediately gratifying (consistent with Lim 2013).

**3. Unequal ICT access can introduce within-movement power disparities. Tech-privileged activists may intentionally or unintentionally assume greater control over the movement's digital identity, online communications, and direction.** The roles and responsibilities of NPRC prisoner and free activists shift over time. When the SPFC begins organizing, activists hope that prisoners would chiefly be in charge of leading, planning, and engaging in resistance activity. Less than three years later, free activists are hosting the SPFC radio show, producing graphics and fliers for resistance actions sponsored by the SPFC and its affiliated organizations, and engaging in hundreds of free world resistance efforts in the name of prisoners' rights activism.

The NPRC attempts to manage their within-movement digital inequality in several important ways. The PLM shares letters, writings, and drawings from prisoners. They compile a newsletter of prisoner activist creative works. They ensure that a prisoner activist serves as the lead editor on the newsletter. The SPFC creates an online radio platform to make prisoner activists' voices heard. They primarily post content written and created by prisoner activists. The PAL Facebook page is maintained almost exclusively by a group of prisoner activists. The TPAN organizes call-ins to include prisoner activists in their Weekend of Action discussions.

In their first years of organizing, NPRC activists appear to limit the negative consequences of digital inequality. Two situations, however, suggest that digital inequality has the potential to have major effect on activists and social movements. The first situation is the nonprofit lawsuit. The nonprofit is not an NPRC organization; it is a prisoner advocacy group that briefly allies with NPRC prisoner activists. Initially, prisoner activists are excited to hear that the nonprofit is challenging the treatment of prisoners. In a short time, however, the nonprofit settles its suit. Prisoner activists do not approve of the settlement terms. They feel as though the nonprofit betrayed them and disregarded their interests. Yet, the nonprofit is more effectively able to deploy

their digital resources. They release an online press statement. They attract media coverage of the settlement that makes the nonprofit seem successful and settlement appear just. NPRC activists are limited in their abilities to challenge this representation of the lawsuit and settlement.

The second situation is a digital takeover. This situation will not take place until 2019; I do not discuss the takeover in my analysis. I am aware of it, though, because I continue to follow NPRC on social media. During the takeover, a SPFB member hijacks the SPFC page for a short time. The SPFB activist changes the SPFC Facebook password and locks SPFC activists out of the account. The SPFB member posts content that SPFC prisoner activists do not support. Prisoner activists have difficulty clarifying that the content did not reflect SPFC sentiments and reclaiming control of the account.

**4. The digital unreachability of the prison environment is mostly challenging, but sometimes advantageous for prisoner activists. Prisoners struggle to prove the veracity of their complaints. Prison administrators, however, have limited resources to disprove prisoner accusations.** For the most part, the NPRC is disadvantaged by the digital unreachability of the prison environment. Prisoner activists cannot easily convey their immediate surroundings to people across prison walls. They cannot legally photograph or video record their cells, dorms, facilities, or interactions with each other or COs. Prisoner activists have a tough time providing legal, compelling evidence of abuse and rights violations, especially to members of the public who trust hegemonic discourses about "soft" prisons and "spa" prisons (Wozniak 2014). Yet, in certain contexts, the digital unreachability of prisons is advantageous for prison activists. When members of the public question the legitimacy of the prison system, the burden of disproof falls on prison administrators. Since administrators have exclusive legal access to the digital documentation of prison conditions, they are responsible for providing evidence that

prisoner accusations are false. By in large, prison surveillance procedures do not allow prison administrators to easily access and disseminate clearly decipherable, exculpatory footage (Mears 2008).

**5. Harsh ICT policies do not fully control illicit ICT use by prisoners. Instead, they incentive prisoners to engage in riskier communication practices, plot illegal activities, find new online platforms, and create their own online spaces.** The NPRC's activism and the discussions in corrections online communities suggest that prisoners are using contraband ICTs despite institutional and legal prohibitions. NPRC prisoner activists use contraband cell phones to communicate, organize, and share information. They access and maintain social media accounts. Corrections officer communities report that prisoners also use cell phones and other devices to commit crimes, plot escapes, record bad behavior, and harass and intimidate others (consistent with Christie 2010 and Fitzgerald 2010). Harsh ICT policies appear to be moving prisoner cell phones and social media accounts out-of-view of prison administrators. They are not, however, keeping cell phones out of prisons and prisoners off the internet. Instead, prisoners and supportive free people are planning more elaborate schemes to smuggle electronic contraband, including bribing COs and corrections workers, coordinating over-the-fence throws, and organizing drone drops. The added risks mean that contraband cell phones are reaching only the prisoners willing to jeopardize their disciplinary record, good time, and parole chances. Moreover, restrictions on prisoner social media use are leading prisoners to migrate platforms or designate tech proxies. In effect, prisoners are moving their digital presences into spaces that prison officials cannot monitor or tasking free people with managing their digital identities.

**6. Some prisoners are seeking out ICTs because they perceive prison administrative practices as procedurally unjust.** The SPFC begins organizing after their complaints are repeatedly ignored by prisoner administrators and their grievances are neglected and dismissed. In 2013, prisoner activists want some fairly specific things fixed. They want prison maintenance to clean up the spider webs and handle the bug problem. They want the predominately black dorm to have the same amenities as the predominately white dorm. They want prisoners to quality food, necessary medical care, and adequate mental health services. They want to be paid for their work. The SPFC's early videos show the Spokesperson trying to verbally appeal to prison staff and the warden to fix the issues. The Spokesperson explains that he has filed complaints, talked to COs, and made his concerns known. The efforts did not achieve change. SPFC activists begin organizing online because they believe that they do not have other legitimate options. They cannot achieve change through institutional processes. They need outside people to care and put pressure on the ADOC to make improvements.

Many of the PLM prisoner support requests indicate that prisoners at other facilities try administrative remedies before seeking outside help. They notify COs; they file grievances; and some even file legal petitions. Still, their conditions do not change. The lack of acknowledgement from prison officials and the absence of perceivable change leads activists to question the efficacy of prison grievance procedures.

Prison disciplinary procedures seem to exacerbate prisoners' mistrust for prison administrative processes. A prisoner accused of violating a prison rule does not have the right to plead innocence in court. Instead, a prison administrator, disciplinarily officer, or disciplinary panel determines guilt/innocence and appropriate punishments. This means that prisoners can lose good time, have their privileges suspended, or be rehoused

or reclassified without legal representation or a court hearing. Within the first year of SPFC activity in Alabama, the ADOC adds rules against prisoner work strike participation and social media use. The passage of these new rules streamlines the process for punishing prisoners for engaging in work stoppages and social media activism, two of the SPFC's prominent tools of resistance.

Moreover, NPRC activists discover that prison administrators can utilize security threat group labeling to sanction activists. STG labels can be assigned by prison administrators. Like disciplinary procedures, STG labeling is an institutional process. Labeling a prisoner as a STG member allows prison administrators to restrict the prisoner's privileges, more closely monitor the prisoner's communications, mark the prisoner's record, and demonstrate that the prisoner is not rehabilitated or ready for parole. Prison administrators, too, can designate free activists as STG members and activist groups as STG groups. This process allows administrators to deny mail, visits, and communication from certain free people and groups. To many NPRC activists, prison grievance systems, disciplinary procedures, and STG labeling processes seem to be designed to dehumanize prisoners and silence complaints, rather than keep facilities safe and promote justice.

**7. Prison policies should take into consideration the trauma, fears, and concerns of corrections workers. Corrections officers are the on-the-ground actors who uphold and enforce prison policies. Technology, especially contraband technology, represents a threat to CO safety and wellbeing.** For years, CO online communities regularly discuss serious traumas and workplace issues. They voice concern for their safety and the safety of their coworkers. They express distrust for prison administrations and prison policies. They communicate feeling generally overworked, underpaid, and unappreciated. To COs, prisoner ICT use represents a

legitimate danger. COs see a direct connection between cell phones and prison violence. Cell phones can be used by prisoners to coordinate collective rebellions, threaten prison security, and virtually victimize others. Cell phones can also inspire violence. If one prisoner steals or damages another prisoner's cell phone, this may cause an argument or a fight. If a CO tries to confiscate a contraband cell phone, prisoners may respond with violence.

Conversations in online CO communities suggest that current ICT policies are not wholly functional for COs. Many COs feel that their facility is not doing enough to stop technology contraband. Cell phones and other electronics are entering the facility, despite the hard work of corrections staff. As technology is advancing, electronic devices are getting smaller and contraband smugglers are developing new methods to get electronic devices into facilities. Prisoners are persuading, incentivizing, or coercing staff members to break the law and furnish electronic contraband. By in large, COs seem to need more resources or a new approach to adequately control electronic contraband.

**8. Prisoners' rights activists face a tremendous amount of cultural hostility in the U.S. That hostility doesn't disappear on the internet. In fact, the internet may be amplifying and normalizing anti-prisoner sentiments.** NPRC activists encounter a tremendous amount of overt hate on the internet. So too, they deal with plenty of subtle animosity. This hostility varies across online spaces. Certain spaces are more unfriendly than others. This hostility can be, at times, striking, but rarely surprising. Most of the dehumanizing and debasing online comments about the NPRC reflect persistent negative cultural discourses about prisoners and prisoners' right advocates. These comments portray prisoners as malicious, manipulative, lazy, dangerous, dumb, or "thugs" (Jewkes 2007; Doude 2018). Accordingly, free world prisoners' rights activists must be manipulated people, "inmate-lovers," or former prisoners.

The hostility faced by the NPRC is a reminder that the internet is not a safe and welcoming place for everyone (consistent with Van Laer and Van Aelst 2009). The internet and its contents are cultural productions. They are imbued with cultural logics, collective moral sentiments, and shared prejudices. Rather than creating a universally empowering public forum, the internet largely provides a digital replication of societal inequalities. Memes, digital graphics, and symbolic representations on popular internet sites reproduce repressive cultural ideas. Online, these cultural ideas become accessible and sharable communication resources. Furthermore, the more these ideas are shared, the more they become normalized and accepted as “common sense.”

## 8.5 Future Directions for Research

In this dissertation project, I provide an exploration how new ICTs are shaping prisoners’ rights activism. I find that prisoners’ rights activists use illegal and legal ICTs to communicate with each other, the media, and the public; engage in non-tech, tech-assisted, and online resistance efforts; experience many forms of repression online and offline; struggle to legally communicate the realities of the prison environment; make efforts to address within-movement tech power disparities; at times, engage in risky communication practices and migrate to unmonitored digital spaces; and generally seek administrative remedies before mobilizing online. Future research could build on these findings by more closely examining 1) what factors proceed activists’ decisions to organize online; 2) when tech power disparities threaten movement cohesion or stability; 3) which digital spaces are more or less sympathetic towards prisoners’ rights activists; 4) how ICT use varies across prisoners’ rights movements; and 5) how successful and non-successful prisoners’ rights campaigns use ICTs differently (or similarly).



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