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Media Portrayal of Ex-Offenders in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper is a review of the media portrayals of ex-offenders in local news media platforms such as The Straits Times, Today, and Channel NewsAsia. This paper analyzes the voices represented in the media on the issue of the reintegration of ex-offenders into society. From the analysis of n=182 media articles, three key themes arise in local media discourse that emphasizes the role of key players — the government, the ex-offender, and the community — in reintegrating ex-offenders into society. These themes raise several questions on the media framing of ex-offenders, the order of prioritization in voices, and the erasure of some voices from the discourse. Through delving deeper into the questions, this paper offers valuable insights into the media discourse of ex-offenders in Singapore and the fundamental question of what ‘reintegration’ means.

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Studies have identified the powerful influence of the media as an important source of information, which can then shape people’s opinions and attitudes towards issues (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). That said, there are potential biases in the construction and reporting of news stories (Hamborg et al., 2018). Little empirical research has been conducted in Singapore on how the local media influences people’s perception of ex-offenders. As such, we are interested in examining and analyzing how the ex-offender community is portrayed on local media outlets such as Channel NewsAsia, TODAY, and The Straits Times.

Through qualitative content analysis of local online newspapers over the past ten years, we analyze the different voices represented in the media and the distribution of these voices on the issue of reintegration of ex-offenders. We would extract several recurrent themes in the ex-offender population through systematic coding of the news articles from these platforms. Through analysis of these themes, we hope to better comprehend the socio-political context in which ex-offenders in Singapore inhabit.

Literature Review

On Media and Society

Weitzer and Kubrin (2004) said that “The field of communication studies has increasingly regarded the reception of media messages as a dynamic process in which viewers actively interpret and perhaps reconstruct those messages in light of their personal backgrounds and experiences”. The social construction of reality thus begins when the producer decides what story to cover and continues all the way to the consumer’s living room, where social reality is (re)constructed.

People are often exposed to an abundance of information and news media outlets can be considered part of the journalistic cultural field (Benson, 2006) that shapes our consumption and representation of knowledge (Bourdieu & Bourdieu, 1993). This is because the news is taken to be factual, objective, and not swayed by the subjective opinion of the reporter (Rogers, 2019). As such, the media has become a tool that can shape public attitudes through entrenching naturalized perceptions (Hall, 1980), reaffirming the dominant social, political, and cultural discourses in society.

Due to the multi-faceted nature of news reporting, it is pivotal that the news aims to provide an objective, factual account of events in their report. From the information reported, the audience would form their own opinion on the matter. However, there are still potential biases in the construction and reporting of news stories (Hamborg et al., 2018).

Gramsci’s notion of ‘hegemony’ (1971) is a cultural and ideological process of domination based upon Marxian bourgeois values (Çoban, 2018). In contemporary times, ‘hegemony’ is mobilized as a ‘tool’ (Briziarelli & Hoffmann, 2018) to understand mass media. In this ‘age of media hegemony’ (Block, 2013), the extensive influence of media or ‘mediatization’ has the power to impact every aspect of social life (Mazzoleni, 2008b) and construct our social reality (Gamson et al., 1992; Yan, 2020). News media outlets can cast the spotlight on particular issues, ‘frame’ them in various ways, and ‘portray’ actors in certain lights (Druckman & Parkin, 2005, p. 1030). Representations of social groups that do not have control over the means of producing information in mass media are often perpetuated and ‘naturalized’ (Gerth & Siegert, 2012) through mass media according to each media outlet’s ‘media logic’ (Altheide & Snow, 1979).

Lipschultz and Hilt (2002) propose that there are two levels to the social construction of reality with regards to news media. At the first level, producers construct reality through the bureaucratic decisions they make about which events to report and how they will report them (Chermak 1997). In this process, biases are inevitable where the news media imposes self-censorship of certain undesirable notions that deviate from the standard civic discourse. This suggests that there are a series of value judgements that have been imposed in the selection and censorship process. The second level suggests that viewers construct their own reality based on how they understand and interpret the news. Not everyone receives and processes news in the same way; audience characteristics and experiences can be influential.

Opinions about the media may be generalized (e.g., the media is liberal; Lee, 2005), or targeted to the way that specific topics are covered by the news media. As the ex-offender community is a vulnerable population, there needs to be sensitivity in media reporting about ex-offenders.

News articles and media representations are a potent force in shaping the mindsets and attitudes of the general population toward ex-offenders (Mccombs & Reynolds 2009). However, news media in Singapore are subject to a host of legislation (Tey, 2008) that invokes a culture of self-censorship through ‘calibrated coercion’ (George, 2007). Reigning in the media has thus

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allowed the People's Action Party (PAP) to consolidate its power over the Singaporean public and maintain its political legitimacy (Chua, 2017).

The media's ability to assign labels onto certain populations makes it worthwhile to study the implications of these categorizations on the labeled. Labeling theory states that people come to identify and behave in ways that reflect how others label them (Crossman, 2020). This theory is associated with the concepts of self-fulfilling prophecy and stereotyping. For example, describing someone as a 'criminal' can cause others to treat the person more negatively, and, in turn, the individual acts in a manner that is consistent with the expectations that others have of him.

Ex-offenders are referred to by various labels through the news media. Often, the narrative of ex-offenders' history of incarceration portrays them as distrustful. The ex-convict who returns to society is at once labeled an outsider and is regarded as 'one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group' (Becker, 1973). This label has severe ramifications since consumers of the media may internalize such notions of ex-offenders, thereby impeding the ex-offender's ability to reintegrate into society.

On the Issue of Reintegration

In Singapore, the issues of recidivism, reintegration, and rehabilitation are key concerns of the criminal justice system concerning ex-offenders (Ganapathy, 2018). Before we dissect the complex issue of reintegration, it is imperative to define the term 'reintegration'. Due to the subjectivity of media frames (Reinerth & Thon, 2016) and the possibility that these representations are agenda-driven, we would be adopting an academic definition of 'reintegration' for reference.

Specifically, the concept of 'reintegration' is always seen through a binary lens, where an ex-offender is either reintegrated socially or not (Sommers et al, 1994), but Fox (2014) asserts that there is a fundamental difference between 'rehabilitation' and 'reintegration' — the former is psychological while the latter is social in nature. Recidivism, or re-offending, is often over-attributed to the lack of rehabilitation because there is an imperative for ex-offenders to change their ways, even if compelling evidence shows that high recidivism could be due to a lack of 'reintegration' opportunities (Pratt, 2000).

Singapore has been statistically successful in reducing the recidivism rates which refers to 'the percentage of local inmates detained, convicted and imprisoned again for a new offense within two years of their release' (Singapore Prison Service, 2017). Despite this, reintegration remains a significant challenge faced by many ex-offenders today and this is attributed to several factors, owing to the complexity of the issue. This is confirmed by the recurring theme of reintegration in the pool of articles collated.

Consistent with the heavy investments that Singapore has made in the ex-offender space seen in the provision of financial aid and awards (Liu, 2019) and the emphasis on employment and job preparation in reintegration efforts, Laub & Sampson's (2001) definition of integration fits best. They defined integration as the transitional phase from incarceration to community life, where ex-offenders are expected to adjust to mainstream society and maintain a crime-free lifestyle. The maintenance and adjustment suggested here hints at a degree of being watched closely such that ex-offenders adequately conform themselves in reintegration to the larger society.

While this definition can be said to be representative of the reintegrative efforts in Singapore, it lacks the allocation of responsibility and insufficiently encapsulates representation. The inadequacies of these definitions can be complemented by Maruna's (2006) postulation that residents should be the main agents of integration. He says, "If reintegration is not community-based it is not re-integration, frankly". Yet, whereas resettlement is typically characterized by an

insular, professionals-driven focus on the needs and risks of offenders, restorative reintegration would instead seek to draw on and support naturally occurring community processes through which informal support and controls traditionally take place. Citizens, not professionals, would be the primary agents of reintegration". Maruna further defines reintegration as one that transcends physical co-existence but is a "restorative terrain" where forgiveness, reconciliation, and acceptance are experienced by ex-offenders and society.

Uggen et al. (2006) have a more structural focus on reintegration. They postulate that reintegration should also include adequate and representative political participation of ex-offenders in state matters. They mention, "Felons and ex-felons face disadvantages arising out of incomplete citizenship and the temporary or permanent suspension of their rights and privileges. It thus makes sense to ask whether political participation and community involvement, as well as work and family factors, are central to successful reintegration". The academics invite us to think beyond the interpersonal encounters but how societal change and progression can include ex-offenders.

For this project, although we acknowledge the validity of Laub and Sampson's definition, we propose that this definition can be complemented by the other definitions cited above. Beyond successfully habituating the ex-offender into adopting a conventional lifestyle, this project will highlight how the underrepresentation of ex-offenders' voices limits the extent to which reconciliation — as mentioned by Maruna — is possible. Additionally, the definition by Uggen et al. (2006) will also aid us in critiquing if the representation of ex-offender voice is adequate amidst other powerful structures in society.

Due to the salience of reintegration discussed in the media, this research project is interested in analyzing the different voices represented in the local media and the distribution of these voices on the reintegration of ex-offenders. As such, this paper will go in-depth into how the local media discusses the reintegration of ex-offenders into society through the voices represented in the media and the distribution of these voices. Thus, our central question in this paper is: How does the mainstream press discuss the responsibility of the reintegration of ex-offenders in Singapore society from 2004 to 2019?

The theoretical framework that guides our analysis is Interpretive Framing. Attributed to the works of Erving Goffman, the framework focuses on how social issues, ideas, and norms are presented to the larger society (Matthes, 2009). Acknowledging that communication through the media is an avenue for organizations and governments to present social issues in a certain light, our team has decided to employ frame amplification and extension (Snow et al., 1986). Media representations of reintegration are amplified with a keen focus on the attributes, personalities, and ideas conveyed. Meanwhile, frame extensions necessitate questioning if these representations do justice to the issue of re-integration and encapsulate the breadth of symbolic experiences of ex-offenders involved eclectically.

Method

As the focus of the research was on understanding how the media reports and discusses ex-offenders, all the articles were collected from major media outlets in Singapore such as The Straits Times, TODAY, and Channel NewsAsia. A total of 182 articles were sourced through the database, Factiva, using the keywords "ex-offenders", "ex-convicts", "ex-inmates", "ex-criminals", and "ex-prisoners", filtering articles since 2004, the year when the term "Yellow Ribbon" was first introduced in Singapore. The term "Yellow Ribbon" was chosen as it has become synonymous with how the community can offer a second chance to reformed ex-offenders.

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We used qualitative content analysis as a theoretical framework. Qualitative content analysis is a research method in which features of textual, visual, or aural material are systematically categorized and recorded so that they can be analyzed (Borah, 2011). This method was well suited to the study's exploratory intent of dissecting the media frames used to portray ex-offenders in the local media.

Central to the content analysis is the process of coding. Coding was conducted for the first ten percent of articles by two researchers. The coding process began with open coding of each sentence — the unit of analysis used in this study — to identify salient keywords to be further analyzed. Axial coding was then used to identify how these open codes related to one another, with patterns, eventually distilled via the process of selective coding into broader categories related to the discussion of ex-offenders. This coding process progressed iteratively, with the two researchers gathering to resolve any differences in opinion before returning to recode the articles again. Eventually, a common codebook was established to guide the coding of future articles.

Subsequently, all four investigators then performed open and axial coding for all articles to identify quotations in support of the themes earlier identified in the codebook. The data was then actively discussed to produce three large themes about the research question of ex-offender reintegration. These themes reflect the inherent nuances and complexities of news reporting in Singapore, as well as the tensions that exist between state and civil society.

The coding process reflected a high level of inter-rater agreement — as reflected by the satisfactory $\kappa = .83$ obtained during the development of the initial codebook — which attests to the reliability of the coding process.

Quantitative Count

A quantitative count was performed to determine the amount of representation that each actor received across the 182 news articles. A total of 9 actors were identified — Ex-Offenders, Family Members of Ex-Offenders, the Government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Employers, Researchers, Prison Officers, Volunteers, and Members of the Public. Out of the 182 articles, the number of articles that each actor was featured in is summarized in the following chart:

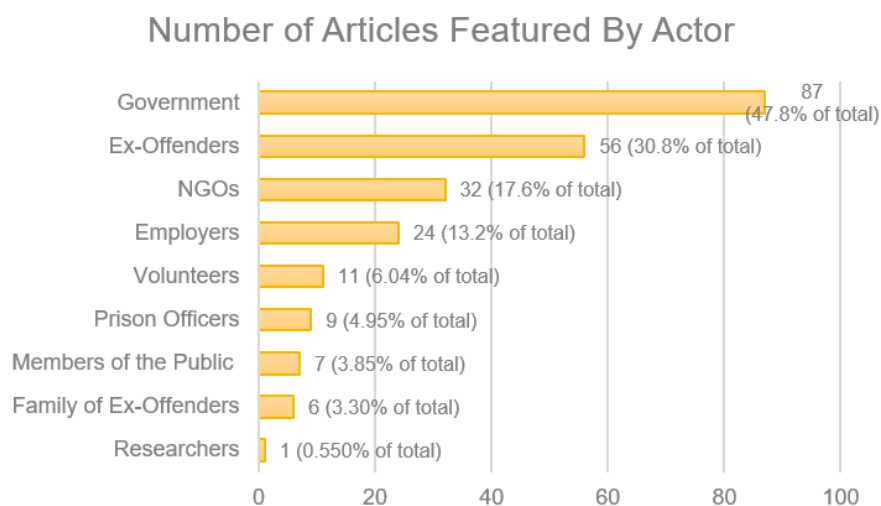


Table 1: Distribution of actors in the sample of media articles.

As shown above, the government is represented most heavily, having been quoted in a total of 87 (47.8% of total) articles. The amount of representation is closely followed by that of Ex-Offenders and NGOs, who are each respectively represented in 30.8% and 17.6% of all articles.

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Nevertheless, while the percentage of articles featured is useful in gauging the consistency of a player’s appearance in the news media across time, it is not as precise in revealing the actual amount of coverage that each player receives. If a single actor were represented multiple times in the same article, the figures quoted above would underestimate the actual coverage that this actor receives. Conversely, if a player were merely quoted in passing but across a wide spread of articles, the figures above would overestimate the representation of this voice.

To resolve this issue, a second quantitative count was performed on the number of unique representations received by each player. Here, a player would receive repeated counts even in a single article if multiple examples of the same player were quoted, for example, if two different ex-offenders spoke. The results of this count are summarized as follows:

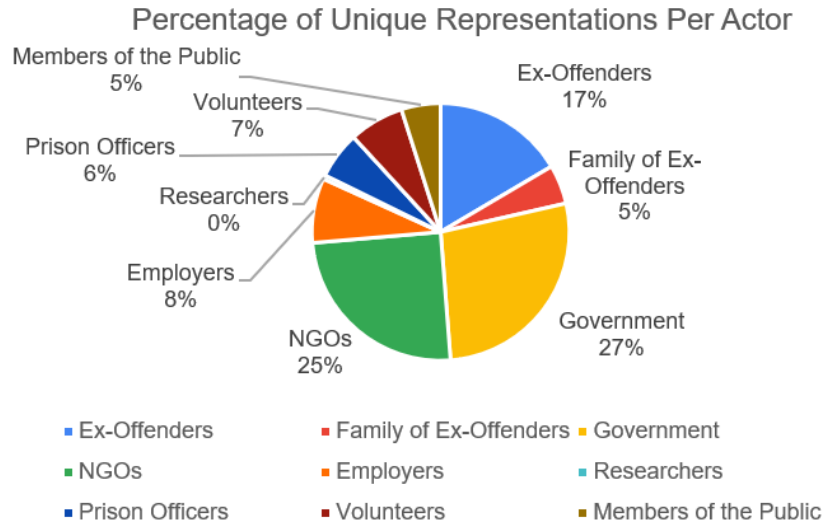


Table 2: A Pie chart of the percentage of unique representations per actor.

The dominance of the state voice in the news coverage of ex-offenders is again revealed by the fact that government actors received the highest number of unique representations. Interestingly, NGOs (25%) received more unique representations than ex-offenders (17%), despite the latter’s coverage across a greater spread of articles. This observation suggests that while the ex-offender voice was represented more frequently, there were much lesser ex-offenders that could speak in the media as compared to the number of NGOs that could do so.

Qualitative Analysis

From the media articles, three key themes surfaced about the issue of reintegration. They are, the state as the central actor, ex-offenders as individually responsible, and the synergistic collaboration between agencies and partners for ex-offender reintegration into society. Each theme includes supporting sub-themes, summarized as follows:

State as central actors	
State as initiator	State as gatekeeper
Ex-offenders as individually responsible	

Explicit instruction for EOs to change for the better	Role model EOs as a normative example for others	EOs' acknowledgement of their individual responsibility	EOs' conventional success earns them the 'right' to call for others' help
Synergistic Collaboration for EO reintegration			
The need for state-society collaboration	Help for EOs is framed as conditional on their individual resolve to change		Community being called out for creating roadblocks that hinders EOs' reintegration

Table 3: A summary of the themes and sub-themes covered in the content qualitative analysis.

1) *State as Central Actor — Bringing EOs back into society*

The voices of state actors are represented heavily in media sources because of the state's centrality in facilitating ex-offender reintegration, a phenomenon that is elucidated through the following subthemes.

a. State as initiator

The media has heavily featured the plethora of initiatives that various state actors have introduced to meet the multifaceted needs of ex-offenders. In fact, many news articles encountered often functioned as factsheets introducing readers to programs such as the following:

[73] ...the Yellow Ribbon Community Project, which provides assistance and guidance to families of newly-admitted offenders for their financial, education, housing, or employment needs, has grown from 8 to 61 participating divisions with more than 580 grassroots volunteers. (Tan, 2014)

The Yellow Ribbon's series of initiatives is helmed by the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE), a statutory board under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). Nevertheless, even where the state was not the direct provider of services to ex-offenders, its active role as the central hand that congregated and coordinated the multitude of non-state service providers was still evident, described in the media as follows:

[91] Aftercare professionals and volunteers working with ex-offenders will get more training and guidance under a new framework that will be ready later this year... drawn up by CARE Network, an umbrella organization that assists ex-offenders, and will have training programs that include specialized counseling for drug addiction as well as befriending skills... CARE Network is made up of eight core members, which include the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Singapore Prison Service, and the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises. Over 100 other agencies have also become network partners. (Spykerman, 2013)

Here, the state's regulation of non-state actors is demonstrated on two fronts. Firstly, while the CARE Network was conceived as an integrated "umbrella organization" enabling state and society to meet the needs of ex-offenders in collaboration, its classification of the few state agencies as "core" and other non-state agencies as "partners" alludes to a central-peripheral

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distinction that reveals the dominance of the state within the ex-offender space. Secondly, in producing a training framework for new helpers, the state could orientate newcomers of the space into adopting its same priorities for ex-offender reintegration. Hence, while society is welcome to contribute towards helping ex-offenders to reintegrate, the state clearly sets the agenda.

State leadership in the realm of ex-offender reintegration is further elucidated by society's regard of the government as the default go-solution provider. In tackling the difficulties ex-offenders face in seeking employment, for example, the government is seen as the central actor that must first be involved before other non-state players can be driven to action. In the words of a social enterprise owner dedicated to the reintegration cause:

[57] The Government should come out and start the ball rolling by hiring ex-offenders themselves. (Channel NewsAsia, 2015)

Where state involvement is lacking, society also readily calls out these absences. Pointing to the public sector's own conservative hiring of ex-offenders, an employer in the private sector states:

[167] Government agencies should lead the way by accepting more ex-offenders into the public sector... I think Government agencies can do more to hire ex-offenders. It is easier for them to get jobs in the private sector currently. (Yin, 2005)

From the above sentiments, it is evident that where ex-offender reemployment is concerned, the state is valued not simply as another alternative employer of ex-offenders; it is further expected to provide moral leadership to other employers in the private sector by modeling the hiring of ex-offenders as normatively right. That the state is expected to take on such an influential role reveals the extent of its clout within the ex-offender reintegration space. Yet, in approaching the state for leadership, non-state actors also further entrench the dominance of the state within this domain. Over time, the state's centrality in the reintegration of ex-offenders is thus maintained in this cyclical fashion.

b. State as gatekeeper

The state's influence over the reintegration effort is also manifested in its direct control of the types of ex-offenders that may re-enter society. For the select few who — having completely left their lives of crime behind them — exemplify the model ex-offender, the state generously allocates resources towards helping them return as dignified members of society. The Yellow Ribbon Project, for example, organized an award ceremony that

[83] ... saw 140 ex-offenders being recognized for staying crime-and-drug-free since their release. (Channel NewsAsia, 2013)

As a concrete testimony of an ex-offender's successful redemption, such an award reinstates the ex-offender as a legitimate member of society while conferring upon him an honor that may discount the stigma that his past attracts. For other ex-offenders, whose misdeeds are considered too severe, however, the state is equally powerful in withholding their ability to fully blend back into society. State policy, for example, finely differentiates ex-offenders whose criminal records may be considered as 'spent' – and hence not declarable – from those who must be permanently marked by their past as follows:

[53] ... to qualify for a record to be spent, ex-offenders must satisfy certain criteria, such as fulfilling a five-year crime-free period and having been sentenced to no more than three months imprisonment or S\$2,000 in fines. (Channel NewsAsia, 2016)

Beyond deciding which ex-offenders are eligible to return as full members of society, the state also tightly regulates the extent to which the overall community of ex-offenders may participate in society. What roles or functions that ex-offenders may or may not fill upon their release is carefully delineated at the policy level. On numerous occasions, the state has indeed exercised its authority to bar ex-offenders from occupations it deems them unsuitable for. In the public sector, for instance, the MHA has declared that:

[23] Different government agencies impose restrictions on ex-offenders for some jobs "to protect the interests of the public" (Seow, 2018)

Since the state's regulatory powers extend into the private sector, neither are occupations in this area fully accessible to ex-offenders. The Land Transport Authority (LTA) justifies its refusal to license ex-offenders as taxi drivers as follows:

[65] This calibrated approach is needed to maintain public confidence in the safety of our taxi services, especially as it is common for taxi passengers to travel alone and sometimes late in the night. (Channel NewsAsia, 2015)

From these statements, it is evident that in the eyes of the state, the stain of an ex-offender's past would always render them different from other members of society. They are a risk that must be guarded against, and whose reentry into society must be carefully managed to avoid jeopardizing the safety of the law-abiding majority. In sum, the state's role as gatekeeper thus allows it to selectively include or exclude ex-offenders from society as it sees fit. Through different policies, the state in effect contributes both towards and against the reintegration effort.

2) *EOs as Individually Responsible — Seeking acceptance to rejoin society*

Ex-offenders as individually responsible refer to how the mainstream media portrays the agency of the ex-offenders in facilitating their reintegration into society. Their agency however seems to be compromised by being spoken for through state actors. Through this, the media portrays a didactic approach adopted by civil society actors to determine and prescribe ex-offender agency.

a. Explicit instruction for EOs to change for the better

Across the articles, state actors seem to be explicitly instructing ex-offenders to be responsible for their own reintegration. This is seen in the following where key state actors are directly asking for ex-offenders to take an active role:

[119] 'As we encourage more employers to offer employment opportunities to ex-offenders, we also want to release inmates to play their part and show commitment to staying employed.' Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said yesterday at the International Corrections and Prisons Association's (ICPA) annual conference, which is being held here for the first time (Spykerman, 2011).

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From the above, a minister in Singapore is directly asking for-ex-offenders to “play their part”. As this is a large-scale event, it was deliberately intended by the state actor to explicitly call on the role of ex-offenders to contribute to their reintegration. The state actor asserts that while the government lends its support to encourage employers to provide job opportunities to ex-offenders, it emphasizes how ex-offenders also need to play their part. This is further reinforced by other state actors who also explicitly emphasize the crucial responsibility of the ex-offender.

[82] Senior Minister of State for Home Affairs Masagos Zulkifli said: “We want to help ex-offenders in our society break the cycle of re-offending and come together as a community to help them rebuild their lives. “We will work closely with the community to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders into society. However, it is ultimately the responsibility of the individual not to re-offend. If he does, he will be dealt with swiftly and strictly by the law” (Channel NewsAsia, 2013)

The recurring state actors portrayed in media that emphasize EO responsibility reflects the government’s stance that centralizes EO agency for their reintegration into society.

b. Role model EOs as a normative example for others

Also, ex-offenders who have successfully reintegrated into society through their active role are taken to be a normative example for other EOs to emulate and follow. This implies that those who follow the government’s prescription to reform are not only rewarded but also hailed as an example for fellow ex-offenders to emulate. With the prerequisite that the ex-offenders are provided opportunities to change and reintegrate into society, they are expected to make full use of the opportunities given. This underscores the crucial role of the ex-offenders in leveraging the opportunities given and playing an active role in their reintegration. That said, it also highlights the foundational role of government initiative and support for their reintegration. Below is an excerpt by a state actor who praises ex-offenders and highlights positive qualities in ex-offenders that are needed for their reintegration:

[26] Dr. Yaacob said he was glad to see how the trainees were determined to start afresh and make a living for themselves. “With their passion for cooking and their determination to master a new skill, I am confident that they will bring cheer to the people they cook for, and brighten their own lives in the process,” he said (Lai, 2018).

Dr. Yaacob highlights positive qualities such as passion and determination in the ex-offender and a desire to change as crucial for ex-offenders to be reintegrated into society. Through intrinsic motivation, the ex-offender can both facilitate and catalyze his reintegration into society as he can “bring cheer to people”. Yaacob also mentions the bidirectional effect of the positive qualities on people on the receiving end as well as to the giving ex-offender, where the ex-offender stands to benefit by doing their part.

The media also lauds initiatives such as the Yellow Ribbon Project that rewards ex-offenders who have reformed and contribute to society. In one instance, an ex-offender who was recognized and awarded recounted the following:

[83] Reuben Narain, who received the Certificate of Outstanding Achievement, said: “It’s been described that people like us belong to the rubbish heap of society. Even in rubbish, you find house flies hovering around them. But for drug addicts, even the houseflies do

not want to hover around them. When I hear a statement like that, it made me realize where I am, and how far I have spiraled down" (Channel NewsAsia, 2013)

From the above, Reuben had made a comparison of ex-offenders, including himself as "rubbish" and drew an image of ex-offenders as undesirable such that even houseflies do not hover around them. This refers to the notion that ex-offenders who return to society are labeled as an outsider and regarded as someone who "cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group" (Becker, 1973). This notion is one that has been internalized in society and his reflection on his journey illustrates his willingness and determination to change for the better. Reuben's voice has been represented in the media and through his own effort, he was able to achieve the award and be taken as a normative example for other ex-offenders to emulate to be able to reintegrate into society even amidst the stigmatization which can be a barrier for many others.

These ex-offenders who express individual responsibility are the role models that are handpicked by the state through presumably selective representation since their voice affirms the stance of the government in emphasizing EOs' individual responsibility for their reintegration. Furthermore, the awarding of certificates for presumably role-model ex-offenders is a form of validation of a certain behavior, where those who perform that behavior are rewarded. In a way, this prescribes a certain formula for ex-offenders to be 'reintegrated', which may lead to a form of prescribed agency. In a way, this then undermines the agency of ex-offenders, which belies the government's calls for ex-offenders' responsibility for their reintegration.

c. EOs' acknowledgment of their individual responsibility

Whilst the government actively pushes for the responsibility of ex-offenders, the voices of ex-offenders are also represented in the media articles that also agree and openly acknowledge their individual responsibility to reform themselves towards becoming acceptable members of society.

[132] Ex-offender Jumat Tawil said: "This kind of organization really helps ex-offenders *but it all boils down to us* also where we individually must come out and try new things. We must come out in public and show society that we can do jobs and maybe even do them better" (Channel NewsAsia, 2010)

That the sentiments expressed by ex-offenders are congruent with the government's calls for EO responsibility suggests that ex-offenders truly believe that they are responsible for their own reintegration. While the sentiment might be genuine, we cannot rule out the possibility that EOs may have internalized the official narrative of reintegration that has been institutionalized by the government.

It is important to acknowledge how the media amplifies the positive attributes of ex-offenders, but the tension lies insofar that these attributes are represented only among the selective few ex-offenders represented in the media. While we accept that the government has been actively initiating actions for EO integration, we also acknowledge the role of EOs who themselves may have their own intrinsic motivation to change for the better, which is validated and reaffirmed by the government.

Even with all the community support given, the EOs themselves need to show their abilities and capabilities to seek community acceptance.

[153] "I think what is important for the ex-offender is to help prepare themselves for reintegration. Preparing has to do with attitude. Attitude has to change and then ultimately if

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the person can prove themselves, they can go back to society. We don't expect society to accept you if you are not doing anything. So I think it's always first thing first - we change our attitude first and then we go back to society. When you prove yourself, I think the society will accept you." said Freddy Wee, ex-offender and Director of Breakthrough Halfway House (Channel NewsAsia, 2006)

From the above, Wee accounts for how ex-offenders should not even expect society to accept them, which reiterates the underlying notion of how ex-offenders are viewed as outsiders and should not be accepted into society due to their history of incarceration leading to distrust in the community. This notion is further reinforced by other accounts of ex-offenders who agree with this were [6] former inmate Mohamed Salleh used to feel that he was the “trash of society”, but now he has an opportunity to contribute back to society every day (Goh, 2019). This reaffirms the notion of how ex-offenders are viewed as outsiders since the comparison of ex-offenders as ‘trash’ suggests that ex-offenders are perceived as useless and worthless to society. As such, ex-offenders see it as their responsibility to challenge — through their own efforts — existing societal perceptions of them as “defective”. Hence, they regard redemption not as a right but a privilege to be earned.

d. EOs’ conventional success earns them the ‘right’ to call for others’ help

EOs have to attain some form of conventional success that complies with the narrative of the government for their voice to be represented in the media. This narrative is referring to how ex-offenders accept government initiatives and support and have attained success in their endeavors. This can be seen in the following:

[57] Chef Benny Se Teo is pessimistic about the acceptance of others like him in Singapore - because he is an ex-offender. "In my lifetime, I will never be able to see Singapore society really helping ex-offenders, hiring them, helping them integrate, giving them a chance," Mr. Se Teo told 938LIVE On The Record on Friday (Oct 16). "The Government should come out and start the ball rolling by hiring ex-offenders themselves" ... More employment avenues are also opening for ex-offenders, thanks to the Government’s tightening of the foreign labor inflow. Yet he struck a note of pessimism when he said that such employers had “no choice” but to hire ex-Offenders (Channel NewsAsia, 2015)

From the above, Mr. Benny Teo is doubtful of community acceptance of ex-offenders and thus calls for the government to “start the ball rolling” by hiring ex-offenders themselves. This points to three things: (1) that Mr. Benny Teo has been hailed as the classic success story for ex-offenders since he started his own restaurant that hires ex-offenders and from reaping his success, his voice has been represented in the media and he takes this opportunity to call out the government to do more, (2) his pessimism for the community’s lack of acceptance to ex-offenders reinforces the notion how ex-offenders are viewed as the othering, which will be discussed in greater detail in the discussion portion, and (3) Mr. Benny Teo’s calling the government to hire ex-offenders suggests a tension where the government has been actively encouraging employers to hire ex-offenders, yet they do not model hiring ex-offenders itself.

This is supported by another account where in article [167], there is a lack of state involvement in the hiring of ex-offenders where the government imposes limits on the opportunities that ex-offenders can access. Not only that, but Mr. Benny Teo also highlights how

despite the greater employment opportunities given to ex-offenders, he emphasizes how these employers are “forced” to hire them as instructed by the government. This relates to the government’s dominant role in initiating ex-offender’s reintegration and the power structure involved. There exists a tension whether the employers who hire ex-offenders are genuine in hiring ex-offenders or were instructed by a higher authority that prescribes a formula for ex-offender reintegration.

3) *Synergistic Collaboration — Meeting each other halfway*

Synergistic collaboration between the various stakeholders refers to the idea that the collaboration of community partners and agencies to bring about ex-offender reintegration would be much greater than each sole individual agency effort. The media places responsibility on the community for the successful reintegration of ex-offenders. It emphasizes collaboration among employers and the various agencies to facilitate ex-offender’s reintegration.

a. The need for state-society collaboration

In the media, it has been explicitly mentioned and actively emphasized by various stakeholders that there is a need for state-society collaboration. This is especially important because the ex-offender has several contact points from the point of exit from prison, and as such, these contact points need to work together with the collective goal of reintegrating the ex-offender. This is reaffirmed by a state actor below:

[5] Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Home Affairs Amrin Amin said at the launch: “What they (the former offenders) need is a strong ecosystem, so that they can have that support network, so that they can bounce back and rebuild their lives and rejoin society (Goh, 2019)

Mr. Amrin emphasizes that ex-offenders in what he aptly terms as a strong “ecosystem” where the different systems in society need to interact with one another and work together to help ex-offenders rebuild their lives. With a strong ecosystem, the ex-offender can tap on various resources to be reintegrated into society.

b. Help for EOs is framed as conditional on their individual resolve to change

The media also portrays that help given to ex-offenders to be conditional insofar that the ex-offenders need to take active responsibility and that only with their active involvement and willingness to change would help be given to them. This is echoed in the voices of a state actor, notably by the Prime Minister:

[143] “If you have made a mistake, if you have offended, then there has to be punishment. But if you have taken the punishment and you are prepared to correct yourself and make good and come back onto the right path - if you make the effort, we should give you the second chance,” said PM Lee (Channel NewsAsia, 2017)

The Prime Minister emphasizes how ex-offenders need to take the lead in their reintegration. When the ex-offenders are accountable for their actions and have decided to change for the better, the government and the community would be willing to give them the second chance. This is similar to the “help me help you” notion where for ex-offenders to receive help, they have to first help themselves, which sets the condition for help to be given. By helping themselves, the ex-offenders make the process of their reintegration easier which emphasizes the crucial of the EO responsibility in taking the initiative to change.

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c. Community being called out for creating roadblocks that hinder EOs' reintegration

In the media, the wider Singapore community is called out for creating mental roadblocks that impede the repentant ex-offender's genuine desire to change. In a way, this shifts the blame to the community for hindering ex-offender's reintegration into society because it is their mentality towards ex-offenders that led them to their non-acceptance of ex-offenders. Noticeably, the media portrays state actors to be calling out the community for having such roadblocks.

[127] Mdm. Halimah said: "The minute you hear that somebody was an ex-offender or was in jail before, that creates a lot of mental blocks. That perhaps this person is not trustworthy, not sincere, not honest, or cannot be trusted (Chan, 2010).

From the above, Mdm. Halimah, now the president of Singapore, has called out the community for creating mental roadblocks in their mind due to their tainted associations with the term "ex-offender". She rationalized that this mental roadblock is linked back to the notion of ex-offenders as someone who cannot be trusted due to their history of incarceration. People's mental cognitive biases hinder their acceptance of EOs into society and this is partly shaped by the media presentation of ex-offenders.

Another state actor, Minister Wong has also highlighted —as noted by the media — that whilst the statutory board under the government, SCORE, has initiatives such as employment training to assist in ex-offender reintegration, he asserts that ex-offenders fundamentally need to be given the opportunity for their reintegration.

[71] At the event, Culture, Community and Youth Minister Lawrence Wong said that while SCORE can train inmates to help them reintegrate into the workplace and community, they must first be given that opportunity to do so (Channel NewsAsia, 2014).

Minister Wong acknowledges that even though ex-offenders are supported in their reintegration, a factor that hinders their full reintegration is how some ex-offenders are deprived of access to opportunities for reintegration. This hindrance can be brought about by the community's reluctance in accepting reformed ex-offenders back into the community.

An alternative perspective raised by a spouse of an ex-offender: "People say to accept an ex-offender, it's very difficult. But, for them (ex-offenders) to accept us, it is also very difficult for them. Because of the way they handle things - they must learn it the new way" (Channel NewsAsia, 2013). This is a novel and interesting viewpoint as it challenges the conventional notion of how the community should accept ex-offenders, but instead posits whether the ex-offenders would be able to accept the community and their readiness to do so. This hinges on the flipside of community acceptance from the perspective of the ex-offender and the idea of the community being flawed instead of the ex-offender, which has not been considered previously.

Discussion

Media framing of ex-offender agency

Ex-offenders are portrayed as 'partially-agentic' individuals who are individually-responsible for resisting the temptations to go back to a life of crime but are also limited in their agency because they are at the receiving end of aid from the government and the community. However, this portrayal of ex-offenders' 'partial' agency might actually be serving the larger

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purpose of maintaining the moral boundaries of society by using the news media to propagate ‘non-integration’ under the guise of ‘reintegration’.

Ex-offender voices are commonly featured under circumstances that: (1) emphasize their agency in restraining themselves from reoffending and contributing back to the community or economy, or (2) highlight their gratitude for any help received and expressing remorse for their past misdeeds. The ‘reintegration’ of ex-offenders and their reacceptance into society is conditional on some form of economic or social contribution as evidence of contrition. These help to outline the state’s ‘model’ ex-offender, providing ex-offenders to work towards to attain ‘reintegration’.

This curated caricature of a model ex-offender in turn creates a cultural environment that worsens the problem of ‘reintegration’ rather than rectifies it. By framing ex-offenders as being prone to reoffending and locating the problem of recidivism within the individual ex-offender, state intervention into the ex-offender’s private life becomes justified. The success of these interventions is reinforced through the ex-offender voices that express gratitude for the help received, further justifying the need for these interventions, and undermining the individual capability of ex-offenders to help themselves. This cyclical manner of portraying the ex-offenders as members of society with a limited agency in fact helps to solidify the societal perception of ex-offenders as ‘lesser’ members who need to be helped and are themselves responsible for their own plight. ‘Benevolent othering’ (Grey, 2016) of ex-offenders, which disguises exclusion through welfare (Carroll, 2016), occurs when the state has a ‘claim to superiority’ and is in a power position to ‘give’ to the ‘others’, and this is consistently observed from the quotes that show how the state is the initiator of ‘reintegration’ programs for ex-offenders and is the default ‘go-to’ for solutions. Other quotes such as the ones that show how the ex-offenders are grateful for the help rendered to them also reflect the ‘weaker’ power position of ex-offenders who are on the receiving end of help. In fact, the common usage of the words such as ‘help’ and ‘give’ points to the one-way beneficiary-benefactor relationship between the state or community and ex-offenders as a result of the power differential between the two actors involved. For instance, in quote [71], Culture, Community and Youth Minister Lawrence Wong asserts that ex-offenders must ‘be given that opportunity’ to ‘reintegrate’ into the workplace. In quote [132], Jumat Tawil, an ex-offender himself, mentioned how organizations ‘help ex-offenders’ but need to be supplemented by ex-offenders’ individual efforts.

Far from eliminating discrimination towards ex-offenders, such a media portrayal of them is actually continuously maintaining the gulf that separates ex-offenders from mainstream society by emphasizing their limited agency, in turn promoting ‘non-integration’ behind the facade of ‘reintegration’. The state is likely to benefit the most from the portrayal of ex-offenders as having limited agency because it serves the practical function of deterring potential criminality and maintaining social order. Ex-offenders’ limited agency that stems from their ‘lower’ social status in society is perceived as the ‘retribution’ for their past crimes. Being of ‘lower’ social status, ex-offenders are portrayed as needy and require assistance from the ‘higher’ echelons of society with the power to offer help. Redemption is also not earned after incarceration; ex-offenders need to constantly renew their ‘right’ to be ‘reintegrated’ by being ‘model’ ex-offenders and making contributions to society. Future felons plotting to commit crimes would thus be compelled to think twice before stepping foot into criminal life because of the potentially life-long exclusion from society. As such, the portrayal of ex-offenders as having limited agency is crucial for the state to maintain social order and deter potential criminals from crossing the boundaries of the law, albeit

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at the expense of ex-offenders who are led to engage in a futile chase with the hope of being ‘reintegrated’.

Exposure to both media and societal influences, it is very likely that ex-offenders are also ‘internalizing’ the narrative about them and performing their scripted role in the hope of being reaccepted into their society. Based on the quote [83] by an ex-offender, Reuben Narain, who received a Certificate of Outstanding Achievement by the Yellow Ribbon Project, he describes how mainstream society perceived drug offenders like him as the ‘rubbish heap of society’ that ‘even the houseflies don’t want to hover around’. The certificate awarded to him validates his contribution back to society borne from his repentance, in turn positively reinforcing (Jones et al., 2011) his identification with the ‘model’ ex-offender propagated by the news media and the notion of ‘reintegration’ that is prescribed for him.

Treat them the same as us	Treat them differently
They have turned over a new leaf and the past is the past	Their record means they will always be a safety risk Need to maintain moral boundaries of what is right and wrong; deterrence of other potential criminals
They need to be treated as one of us before they can turn over a new leaf	To instill in them the motivation to prove themselves and turn over a new leaf. Remind them that they were responsible for their plight, thus the onus is on them to redeem themselves
They are agentic individuals like any one of us	They need help because they are needy

Table 4: Characteristics identified in the treatment of ex-offenders

Based on Table 4, there is a salient tension between how ex-offenders are portrayed in the news media. On one hand, they are expected to actively adapt to social norms and prove their worth as reliable, law-abiding citizens after incarceration; on the other hand, ex-offenders are also the ‘lesser other’ whom one should be ‘benevolent’ to and offer help. It is evident that the government’s definition of ‘reintegration’ propagated through the news media is more aligned with that of Laub & Sampson (2001)’s because ‘reintegration’ is viewed in a binary manner whereby one has either successfully transitioned into community life, or not. Yet, the structural and psychosocial facets of ‘reintegration’ are not addressed here. Ex-felons are systematically excluded from society because of their ‘labeled’ status as wrongdoers who deserve to have their rights and privileges suspended as punishment. Ordinary citizen involvement in the ‘restorative’

process of 'reintegration' is also not the center of attention in the media but is instead attributed to the ex-offenders' individual efforts and the duty of organizations to extend 'reintegrative' welfare. As such, the analysis reveals a lack of dimensionality in the existing definition of 'reintegration' and calls for a definitional expansion.

Greater prioritization of ex-offender voice

The representation of voice is an essential point of analysis in understanding the responsibility of re-integration in Singapore. From the quantitative analysis of this research, the state has an upper hand in framing the voices of ex-offenders in mainstream media. The state has 27% presence but ex-offenders 17%. With a combined readership of more than 1.5 million (Singapore Press Holdings, 2019) and following Chemak's analysis of the role of media in social construction, mainstream media is largely influential in formulating and labeling the ex-offender population. The media affirms ex-offenders who have displayed resilience to change themselves for the better. Such representations amplify inherent positive attributes such as "passion" and "determination" to highlight the strengths of the ex-offenders, which emphasize the individual ex-offender responsibility in their reintegration. However, while the media affirms the good qualities and achievements of ex-offenders, these representations are often in tandem with state-funded-or-led initiatives. This begs one to question if the reintegration of these ex-offenders is primarily driven by the ex-offender through their positive attributes or the support from the government. For example, across the 55 articles filtered that have direct quotes from ex-offenders, only about 12% of the articles can be said to be representations that focus on ex-offenders' entrepreneurial and community service efforts and life difficulties. This limited representation of ex-offenders who are seemingly dependent on government support is unable to paint a representative picture of the ex-offender community. Concurring with Lipschultz and Hilt's (2002) postulations, the media is a medium for social construction through the reporting of bureaucratic decisions and civic attitudes. However, the overbearing presence of the state in the representation of ex-offenders becomes concerning as what civil society understands and learns about the ex-offender population from the media can be seen to be subjected to how the state determines to represent them.

Representation of ex-offender voices tends to be viable only when recognized actors such as the government, organizations, and employers are present. As earlier discussed, such a method of representation can be seen to influence society to perceive ex-offenders as a select group that needs to be instructed, further relegating ex-offenders to the status of the powerless other in the very society they rightfully belong to.

Studying these representations through frame extensions (Snow et al., 1986) highlights how the state has the prerogative to decide the definition of 'reintegration'. The lack of independent social-political representation is a barrier to the civil integration of ex-offenders. 'Reintegration' cannot stop at ensuring that ex-offenders do not re-offend seen in the emphasis to "show commitment to staying employed". Instead, 'reintegration' needs to be gainful: the voices of ex-offenders in the social and political realm need to be heard. In this manner, ex-offenders can voice out their concerns and needs and help to co-create processes and outcomes for 'reintegration'.

Furthermore, the effects of stigmatization, even after many years of campaigning and community engagement seem to have an indelible grip on ex-offenders seen through the narration of their unfavorable experiences in society, even referring to themselves as "trash". From the lack of representation as discussed, the pervasiveness of stigmatization that ex-offenders feel could be said to be an effect of a one-dimensional representation of ex-offenders in the media. For example, the frequent perpetuation of ideas that ex-offenders need to "be accepted" creates a dialectical

tension with the concurrent motive of destigmatizing. As the Labeling Theory suggests, people tend to identify with the 'label' that is marked on them. Hence, with the emphasis on the need to be helped, such lopsided representations of ex-offenders in the media can have a disabling effect on their perception of self and agency. As the news media propagates these ideas, public opinion is likely to be swayed such that the public unconsciously views and identify ex-offenders through these 'labels', creating a psychosocial barrier for ex-offenders' re-acceptance into society.

Ex-offenders expressing the distance between them and society in the media further confirms the lack of an equitable social standing for them as a community in Singapore society. The discrepancy in social standing is an effect of structural, social, and emotional isolation and the 'labels' placed on ex-offenders, leading to a 'de-prioritization' of the ex-offender voice in civil and political discourse. As Freire (1968, p. 90) puts it, "Dialogue, as the encounter among men to 'name' the world, is a fundamental precondition for their true humanization". Freire emphasizes the necessity of authentic exchange between individuals for the purpose of co-creating reality, which he terms "name the world". From these exchanges, the parties involved can engage in mutual understanding, without imposing their assumptions and labels on each other and the voices of ex-offenders can be represented in these exchanges and not be deprioritized.

For a more holistic approach to the 'reintegration' of ex-offenders such that the transitional process, structural limitations, and psychosocial aspects are taken care of, there is a need to create a representative space for discussion and debate about 'reintegration' that incorporates the ex-offenders' perspectives. The representations of ex-offenders cannot be limited to showing how they have benefited from existing programs, stereotyping of salient characteristics, or framing ex-offenders as being helpless individuals. True representation requires the communication of the person and not what the person has to do, has done, or needs.

Therefore, before allocating responsibility to any actor, representations of the ex-offender space need to inform members of the public holistically. Here we must ask ourselves, whose voice should be heard the most in the processes and systems of integration. In the articles read, there was much emphasis on society's collaborative role for the 'reintegration' of ex-offenders. However, for society to be adequately equipped, the voices of ex-offenders should be prioritized over or alongside the need to publicize initiatives for the space. Alternative viewpoints of common ex-offenders, those who have yet to achieve predetermined or expected success, those whose interests and desires are different from the norm, and those who face many struggles to self-forgive, love themselves, and receive love can be more intentionally pursued, hence humanizing the representations of ex-offenders.

Erasure from discourse

According to the spiral-of-silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), the homogeneity of information across various media outlets can eliminate diversity of opinions, like the state-controlled news media space in Singapore. This not only reduces the audience's capability to source for contradictory information, but it also reinforces the audience's tendency to be 'selective' when consuming information from the news media such that the information 'confirms' their preconceived views (Westerwick et al., 2017).

Based on the quotes analyzed, there is a consistent pattern in the types of ex-offenders and circumstances in which they are represented in the media. 'Model' ex-offenders who (1) achieved some form of material success or contributed to society, or (2) are repentant and grateful for the help they received, are given a voice in the news media to express their sentiments. Ex-offender voices also tend to be pegged to the presence of other recognized actors such as organizations before they can be heard, as explained in the point above. Yet, what is more, striking is in fact the

voices of ex-offenders that have been erased from news media coverage. This omission misrepresents the whole population of ex-offenders because not all ex-offenders are given a voice to define the terms of their ‘reintegration’. From the qualitative analysis earlier, although ex-offender voices are represented quite extensively across the 182 articles analyzed, the spread of ex-offender types that are put on the pedestal of the news media is limited. On the contrary, the erasure of ‘non-model’ ex-offenders’ voices serve the purpose of putting forth the state’s prescribed definition of ‘reintegration’.

The erasure of information is also evident in other areas and serves the purpose of helping the state to consolidate its one-dimensional definition of ‘reintegration’. The hegemonic presence of the state’s voice in the news media effectively crowds out the ex-offenders’ voices. ‘Reintegration’ is thus likely to be more aligned with the state’s definition while excluding other facets to ‘reintegration’, resulting in a lack of dimensionality in the definition. At the same time, although the initiatives introduced to benefit ex-offenders are wide-ranging and do respond to their needs in some ways, the state-controlled news media tends to misrepresent the ex-offender population typologically. This mode of erasure of ex-offender voices is likely to neglect the complex needs of ex-offenders across society for the sake of propagating the narrow definition of ‘reintegration’ prescribed by the state.

Limitations and Future Research

Our findings are limited by the range of news sources being used for analysis. Despite the wide-reaching impacts of the three media outlets chosen because of their prevalent usage across society, there are also many other alternative news platforms and sources of information about ex-offenders such as blogs, books, and journals that future research should consult that people are exposed to in this technological age. Turning our attention to the alternative forms of media can be useful in understanding a fresh and more personal perspective of the ex-offender population.

The research team also lacked the bandwidth to conduct an in-depth quantitative content analysis in addition to the qualitative content analysis in this paper, leading to a shortfall in research robustness. Additionally, in this research field, there also exists an opportunity to do a sentiment analysis of representations and how it affects the layman on the street. This would help in thematizing the general public’s understanding of responsibility and reintegration.

Future qualitative research should attempt to capture the understandings, needs, and aspirations about ‘reintegration’ from the ex-offenders.

Nevertheless, the qualitative content analysis still provides deep insights into the news media representation of ex-offenders in Singapore and problematizes the very fundamentals of ‘reintegration’ that has been adopted and circulated through various media platforms over many years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has dissected the news media representations of the voices distributed on the issue of ‘reintegration’ from three state-controlled news sources in Singapore. It is clear from both the qualitative and quantitative data of this research paper that the representations are largely determined by the state who has a ‘hegemonic’ presence in the media. In the analysis, three main themes surfaced: the focus on the role of the state as the main actor in driving ex-offenders’ reintegration, the ex-offenders’ individual responsibility, and the synergistic collaboration between the various stakeholders involved. These were the key messages of how the responsibility of ‘reintegration’ should be shared.

Through the discussion, however, it was highlighted that the media tended to frame ex-offenders in a one-dimensional manner while emphasizing model caricatures that all ex-offenders

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should conform to. Compounded by the effects of underrepresentation of ex-offender voices in the media, it then becomes problematic and difficult to understand the multi-faceted, inter, and intra-personal elements of ex-offenders and their conception of 'reintegration'. Erasure of information from news media may also neglect the diversity of opinions and understate the complex needs of ex-offenders.

These themes indicate that the responsibility of 'reintegration' is a shared pursuit that is led and directed by the state. The state's presence makes it an influential player in determining the modes, methods, and expected outcomes, much like Laub and Thompson's definition as earlier discussed. However, through the analysis, we see that this very influence and similarity in messaging has unintended consequences such as the systemic erasure of other equally important viewpoints. There must be more efforts to represent a diversity of voices, which would then provide a more holistic and encompassing definition of 'reintegration'. Finally, this underscores the need to also broaden the definition of 'reintegration' to include inter-systemic aspects such as mutual reconciliation and legitimate platforms for ex-offenders to influence processes in 'reintegration'.

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