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Mark Oliver looks at the growing phenomenon of prisoners' websites and asks if links from the clink are a good idea

Chris Morris' satirical TV news show the Day Today once had a sketch with prison authorities responding to the revelation that inmates at Strangeways had been running an international airport.

The notion of prisoners having their own websites may seem similarly comic, yet a small but growing group of high-profile inmates are now enjoying some of the freedoms of the information superhighway. And, as we shall see, the ones that exist have their surreal elements.

The prison service says prisoner internet access is heavily restricted as part of IT training courses, but there are no specific rules to stop material from prisoners that has been forwarded, for example by letter, being published online by third parties.

Last week the website of convicted murderer Jeremy Bamber raised eyebrows when it scooped three judges by revealing that he had lost his appeal 24 hours before they confirmed as much in court.

The site, jeremybamber.com, is an impressive affair, showcasing a tranche of evidential documents relating to his case. It also has a friendly colour picture of him, no doubt trying to look unlike a multiple-murderer.

Then there is Kingofhits.com the "official site" of pop impresario Jonathan King, jailed late last year for sex attacks on boys. The site carries postings from a "JK", ostensibly expressing his views of life inside (he says he was convicted by a jury of "well meaning but brain dead morons"). There are also denials of tabloid stories, advice on "how to be a success" and a section headlined "send money".

Bronsonmania.com claims to be the official site of serial hostage-taker and armed robber Charles Bronson, and showcases claims of prison brutality, pictures of his artwork, and opportunities to buy merchandise, including his book, Solitary Fitness.

However, the most recent one is barrygeorge.co.uk. The home page has two frosted pictures side-by-side of Barry George and Jill Dando, the TV presenter he was convicted of killing, and asks "A miscarriage of justice?". There are details of how to petition the home secretary for his release.

There is also convictsreunited.com, the friends reunited for lags, and the Guardian has a regular [prison columnist](#), Erwin James, who is serving a life sentence (payments for the articles are donated to charity) and whose pieces are [available online at Guardian Unlimited](#).

Earlier this year, the debate about prisoners writing for publication hit the headlines. In October, the prison service found Tory peer Jeffrey Archer to be in breach of prison rules for publishing an account of the start of his sentence for perjury. He was punished by being moved from a low security prison to a harsher regime for three weeks.

Prison rules - drawn up in 1963 - state inmates cannot publish for profit, compromise the privacy of other prisoners, or provoke disorder.

The Prison Governors' Association said that the parameters of prisoners publishing online would be governed by the "same principles". The prison service said governors would make decisions in individual cases, but added it was not possible for them to "police the internet".

Depending on their category, existing rules allow for authorities to monitor prisoner correspondence for offensive material, but aside from this, there is little else to impede inmates providing content for websites.

Dan Tench, a media lawyer at Olswang, says that under the European convention on human rights, prisoners have a right to freedom of expression which places the burden on the would-be restrainer to prove any material should be repressed. Mr Tench says: "There is no reason why prisoners should not have websites of their own ... it restrains unbridled government, the force of the executive just doing what it likes."

Yet some would disagree. The Mirror reported that when the Bamber site launched in March, it carried adverts for "sexy underwear" that had angered victims of crime groups.

Brian Caton, the general secretary of the Prison Officers' Association, says: "The last thing we want is criminals being allowed to bask in some kind of fame." He added that while teaching computer skills was important, "there is always a chance that prisoners with internet access will go to areas that they shouldn't".

David Roddan, the general secretary of the Prison Governors' Association, said offence to victims and their families was a primary concern and that there was a responsibility to protect them and the public. "I think anybody who has suffered child abuse themselves or members of their family have, will be offended by the principle of Jonathan King being able to run a website," he said.

But Mr Roddan said it would be "quite difficult to have a computer scheme, which we do, and some sort of policing arrangement against people setting up their own website, except for high security prisoners".

Perhaps more crucially, he said that governors had to be very careful not to stray into moral judgments "that in fact legally we are not entitled to make, and find ourselves being challenged in the European court".

A positive reason to support prisoner websites, is that they could be useful tools in genuine miscarriages of justice. The band Asian Dub Foundation used their website to campaign for Satpal Ram, who was released this year after serving 16 years for a murder committed during an assault by a group of white men in Birmingham.

Over the Atlantic, though, there was a case last year where the family of murdered 12-year-old Polly Klaas, from California, started a campaign to stop her killer and kidnapper, Richard Allen Davis, seeking young pen pals via a prisoners' charity website, the [Canadian Coalition Against the Death Penalty](#).

Marc Klaas, her father, told wired.com: "This guy killed my daughter, and there he is, smiling and asking for pen pals ... I'd hack the [website of the] son-of-a-bitch if I could." But managers of the site, which has web pages and pen pal requests for more than 1,000 condemned prisoners, were defiant.