

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

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Livin' In Luddite Land

The term "Luddite" was created back when England was beginning mass production with machines. Workers feared that machines would take their jobs away from them so they sabotaged them. It has come to mean anyone stuck in the technology of the past.

The head of the Wis. Dept. of Corrections must be a Luddite. We are living decades behind the rest of the country. We still have typewriters, can only make collect calls and do not have access to the internet, world wide web or cell phones. Carbon paper is still a hot commodity because we are not allowed to make photocopies of anything that is not legal or school-related.

The only computers available are from the 1990s and in Stanley there are only a few dozen for 1500 prisoners. Most prisoners are not allowed any access to a computer unless it is used to do legal research for a pending legal action or they are taking a school class that requires computer use. The DOC still provides floppy disks for prisoners to put their resumes on. Computers don't even come with floppy disk drives any more. Wouldn't a thumb drive make a little more sense? Not to a DOC official. Not if you're afraid of what a prisoner might put on a memory stick.

There are only a couple of typewriter manufacturers still making typewriters and most of their business comes from prisons. A notebook computer and printer would cost about what we have to pay for a typewriter, would be cheaper to operate, have multiple uses, and be less cumbersome than a typewriter, but they are not allowed. Why? My best guess is fear. Prison administrators are afraid prisoners are going to gain access to the internet so rather than allow computers with restrictions, we are kept in Luddite land.

What will the DOC do when there are no more printed books, magazines or newspapers? Or the post office stops delivering first-class mail?

It's time to integrate prisoners into our digital society. It may be necessary to physically restrain some dangerous people but there is no reason to deny prisoners access to email or the internet.