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**Getting “Beyond the Fence”:  
Interrogating the Backstage Production, Marketing  
and Evaluation of CSC’s Virtual Tour**

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**Abstract:**

In 2015, Correctional Service Canada launched a virtual tour promising a ‘first-hand’ and ‘realistic’ depiction of life and work inside a federal penitentiary titled *Beyond the Fence*. Based on an analysis of Access to Information disclosures, we examine the backstage activities that went into the production, marketing and evaluation of the tour. Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) notions of frontstage and backstage, as well as MacCannell’s (1973) idea of staged authenticity, we reveal how representations of incarceration and punishment were sanitized to build legitimacy and consent for imprisonment. We conclude by reflecting on the need to study the content and form of state depictions of penalty, and the challenges that representations pose to working toward a future without carceral institutions.

A virtual tour would allow Canadians to experience firsthand a realistic correctional environment without having to physically visit an institution.

– [Excerpt from 2014 CSC Virtual Tour Script](#)

**Introduction**

Under successive Conservative minority (2006–2008, 2008–2011) and majority (2011–2015) governments that claimed to be ‘tough on crime’ and champions of putting ‘victims first,’ Correctional Service Canada (CSC) enacted changes that intensified austere living conditions for federal prisoners. Notable reforms included closing the prison farms that helped adjust long-term captives for life in the community through work with animals and crops (Goodman & Dawe 2016), removing the possibility of incentive pay for prison labourers while subjecting prisoners to an additional 30 percent deduction to cover “room and board” (Shook 2015; Shook & McInnis 2017), and

the removal of the “least restrictive measures” principle from the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (CCRA) that guided the placement and movement of prisoners. These changes coincided with more segregation placements, higher rates of use of force and other indicators of a deteriorating situation behind penitentiary walls (Sapers 2015).

As difficult conditions of confinement worsened, CSC expanded their capacity to confine, building more than 2,700 cells in existing penitentiaries for just over \$600 million (AG 2014: 2). Under pressure related to the cost of the Conservative punishment agenda (Piché 2015), CSC also decommissioned more than one thousand prisoner beds by closing Leclerc Institution in Laval, Quebec, along with Kingston Penitentiary (KP) and the Regional Treatment Centre located on its grounds in Ontario.

The decommissioning of KP in 2013 generated major public interest. Built in 1835, more than three decades before Canada’s founding, KP was the longest-running operational carceral institution in the country and held infamous prisoners (Ferguson et al. 2014). Proposed future uses for KP included public tours, which were common in the first years of its operations as a penitentiary until a warden disapproved of the zoo-like atmosphere (Morin 2013). While there was no initial commitment to turn KP into ‘Alcatraz North,’ CSC opened the door for local United Way and Habitat for Humanity affiliates to operate fundraising tours led by former staff members and volunteers in October and November 2013. According to CSC’s virtual tour [news release](#), “approximately 20,000 people visited the facility” during this period. The [document also noted](#) that many more expressed “significant interest” in getting behind penitentiary walls, including “many victims groups [who] have expressed interest in being able to see inside an institution for safety and security reasons.”

With renewed demand for prison tourism at KP and carceral tours in existing federal penitentiaries, [CSC began efforts to assemble a](#)

[virtual tour in December 2013](#) to showcase “elements of maximum-, medium-, and minimum-security facilities” located at Collins Bay Institution and Bath Institution in the Kingston area. Digital virtual heritage and culture is a growing field, indicated by the rise of the virtual museum (Sylaiou et al. 2010; Styliani et al. 2009). The CSC virtual tour initiative emerged at a time when the [organization recognized, citing a 2014 Justice Canada report](#), the following:

According to research studies, Corrections is the sector of the Canadian criminal justice system (CJS) for which the rates of public confidence are the lowest. One-quarter (25%) of Canadians believe the correctional system is doing a good job at community supervision, releasing offenders appropriately and helping them become law abiding citizens ... Compared to other sectors of the CJS, the public is least aware of the mandate and operations of the correctional system.

Facing a crisis of confidence, but with a window of opportunity to tap into public interest generated by KP tours, [CSC launched the \*Beyond the Fence\* virtual tour in April 2015](#), touting that “all Canadians now have the unique opportunity to see inside the walls of a federal institution from any device with internet access.”

Following our previous work on carceral tours drawing on materials obtained through Access to Information (ATI) requests (Piché & Walby 2010), along with our research on penal history museums (Walby & Piché 2015a), this paper explores the backstage of CSC’s attempt to generate support for imprisonment. We explore the backstage activities that went into the production, promotion, as well as the evaluation of the tour once this penal marketing exercise entered the public domain. Examining the processes involved in making representations of penality is a way of investigating how state authorities try to build legitimacy and consent for its policies and practices (Ross & Sneed 2017; Piché et al. 2017). Based on an analysis of the virtual tour, this study examines the meanings of incarceration CSC sought to impart as it engaged the “volatile and

contradictory” (O’Malley 1999) business of pain infliction and ‘care’ after nearly a decade of ‘law and order’ administrations led by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

The paper begins by reviewing literature on penal tourism and the rise of virtual museums. CSC documents about the creation, marketing and evaluation of the organization’s virtual tour are then analyzed. As the emergence of *Beyond the Fence* is linked to public interest in tours of decommissioned and operational penitentiaries, the conclusion revisits the symbiosis between punishment and its memorialization, and the significance of current approaches used by Canadian ‘correctional’ organizations to convey the idea that imprisonment is necessary and socially useful.

### **On Museums, Tourism and Representations**

Museums located in decommissioned lock-ups, jails, prisons and penitentiaries are sites where tourists venture to be entertained and to learn about punishment (Strange & Kempa 2003). Studies examining this practice, known as prison tourism, have explored the processes involved in transforming carceral institutions into heritage sites, as well as the representations of penality on display and their consumption by visitors (Wilson et al. 2017). Research conducted in different corners of the world, from Australia (Wilson 2008) to Canada (Walby & Piché 2015a) and in between (Welch 2015), reveal that most confinement museums reproduce negative stereotypes of prisoners, while venerating the work of prison staff and officials, along with penal institutions themselves. This framing by paid and unpaid museum staff is a deliberate attempt to create what MacCannell (1973) calls staged authenticity. The idea of staged authenticity refers to displays or representations curated or designed to appear as if they are an entrance into an authentic world, when in fact these are contrived performances. Brown (2009) has suggested that such meaning making practices create social distance between penal history museum spectators and criminalized persons.

In previous work, we have studied the symbiosis between punishment and its memorialization with a focus on how CSC contributes to the former through the provision of material (e.g., prison labour) and symbolic (e.g., narratives) resources to some penal history museums in Canada, producing “carceral-friendly distortion that further legitimizes state punishment” (Kleuskens et al. 2016: 587). Significant about these connections is the extension of the carceral state (Beckett & Murakawa 2012) into the memory work of cultural institutions. For this current study, we observed a symbiosis between punishment and its memorialization of a different kind, whereby tours offered in a penal heritage site (i.e., KP) generated an interest among penal spectators in accessing the realities of the punitive present, which gave rise to CSC’s virtual tour. As our analysis reveals, the virtual tour was as scripted as in-person carceral tours of CSC institutions can be (Piché & Walby 2010). Whereas video footage of prison life is sometimes used in certain contexts to convince an imagined punitive public that incarceration is tough enough (Lynch 2004), CSC’s *Beyond the Fence* initiative aimed to convince Canadians that its penitentiaries are clean, orderly and humane. Moreover, the staging of authenticity was executed in ways that reproduce the idea that carceral institutions are necessary today.

From hand-held devices to interactive tour displays and virtual reality kiosks, new technological developments are creating innovative ways of engaging with museum visitors (Carrozzino & Bergamasco 2010) and popular culture consumers. Virtual museums push this engagement with representation, myths and meaning into the online realm, making them more accessible. They are ‘curated’ in a similar way to brick and mortar sites, although expertise in communication technologies and computer programming are essential in this new domain. As Styliani and colleagues (2009: 526) put it, “virtual museums cannot and do not intend to replace the walled museums.” The goal is to reach audiences in new ways, as well as groups that may not visit a museum or that may not know much about a topic. Virtual museum sections are made interactive so viewers can choose what scenes and content to consume (Deshpande et al. 2007).

According to Sylaiou and colleagues (2010: 244), the goal is to create a “perceived presence or sense of being there.” These authors also note that while education is a central aim, “[e]ntertainment is a desirable attribute in any virtual museum experience” (Sylaiou et al. 2010: 252).

By producing a virtual tour, CSC created an encounter similar to a virtual museum whereby Canadians can supposedly experience the realities of life and work behind bars, to gain a sense of being there, without entering an actual penitentiary. Attempts were also made to make this encounter entertaining, which we return to in our analysis of CSC materials regarding the creation and marketing of their virtual tour using Goffman’s (1959) notion of backstage and frontstage. The frontstage is a zone where a performance takes place. The backstage is an area or time when a frontstage performance can be planned and prepared (Rettie 2009). We apply these concepts to organizational processes, rather than face-to-face interaction, to answer these questions: What went into the backstage production of the virtual tour (planning, scripting, filming and editing)? What went into the backstage roll-out of the virtual tour as it entered the public domain? How was the virtual tour evaluated, and what does their assessment reveal about CSC’s organizational objectives?

### **The Making of a Virtual Tour**

This section explores the cultural work involved in the production of a penal marketing exercise, which sheds light on CSC’s impression management practices (Goffman 1959) and their staging of authenticity (MacCannell 1973). We focus on the players involved in the making of the virtual tour, key changes made to the script they developed and aspects of the production process that highlight CSC’s whitewashing of pain infliction via imprisonment.

### ***The Players***

The involvement of cultural entities partnering with state entities to produce representations of penalty and carcerality prompted Kleuskens and colleagues (2016: 567) to call for an expanded conception of the shadow carceral state (Beckett & Murakawa 2012) that would move beyond material acts of liberty deprivation to consider the symbolic work involved in naturalizing them. Whereas CSC teams up with penal history museums that recount the history of Canadian federal penitentiaries in the past, providing them with relics and narratives of confinement, as well as staffing resources (Kleuskens et al. 2016), the documents we discuss below shed light on another shadow carceral state formation involving web firms who assist in marketing punishment through online mediums (also see Piché et al. 2017).

After being [initiated by CSC’s Assistant Commissioner of Communications and Engagement and approved by its Commissioner in December 2013](#), the services of Webdrive were retained to help create the virtual tour. Webdrive has an ongoing relationship with CSC through its work on [Let’s Talk Express eMagazine](#), which [promotes the organization’s work](#) to its staff, as well as other readers online. Prior to this contract, [Webdrive was also involved in developing Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s Black History Virtual Museum](#).

[CSC also tasked several of its personnel](#), who reported to its Assistant Commissioner of Communications and Engagement, to develop the script and oversee the logistics of the initiative initially touted as a “self-guided tour through maximum, medium, and minimum correctional facilities,” providing “victims of crime an opportunity to experience and learn about their offender’s surroundings while incarcerated,” and allowing “Canadians to experience and virtually visit a correctional facility.” CSC’s Executive Committee (EXCOM), comprised of the organization’s Commissioner and deputy commissioners working at national and regional headquarters, was also involved, offering feedback on and approving the script.



According to [prepared CSC media lines](#), the cost of the contract to produce the virtual tour was \$80,000, suggesting that only modest resources were dedicated by the organization towards reproducing penal necessity. However, the collaboration between carceral shadow maker Webdrive and many Canadian carceral state agents working for CSC highlights the breadth of players and depth of resources involved in legitimating penitentiaries and their contribution to ‘criminal justice.’

### *The Script*

In the months following the [2013 Christmas Eve approval of the virtual tour by CSC’s Commissioner](#), the initial script was developed. While the ATI records do not show how those involved in developing the tour arrived at their draft “[Script Outline and Story Board](#),” the documents contain numerous emails written between June 2014 and December 2014 by CSC staff members and officials of varying stature within the organization proposing modifications to the narratives accompanying the three-dimensional rooms and still photos featured in the tour. By September 2014, CSC’s Assistant Commissioner of Communications and Engagement began [prefacing emails seeking input](#) by noting “that the script has already been very carefully worded to achieve specific communication goals, therefore, there is no need for edits other than technical fact checking and flagging of sensitivities,” revealing evidence of precautionary project management. An analysis of emails proposing changes to the virtual script revealed five key areas of concern for CSC staff and officials.

First, [in June 2014 those with knowledge of CORCAN, CSC’s prison labour corporation, sought to include more information](#) about its “on-the-job training through four business lines — Textile, Construction, Manufacturing and Services.” [Suggested areas for further development](#) included mentioning “shops” such as “[m]etal fabrication, furniture fabrication and textile fabrication. (Welding, sewing and furniture building would fall under these categories).” [Other initiatives to highlight](#) included “the CAD drawing side” of

furniture making that give “computer-aided design skills to offenders,” along with their textile business, such as their “quite large” Coast Guard work and “aboriginal program making mitts and other textile-related products.” While the dwindling pay (Shook 2015) and work opportunities for federal prisoners (Demand Prisons Change 2015) went unmentioned, as the tour production process was coming to an end in December 2014, [a concern emerged from the office of CSC’s Commissioner](#) which was sent to the communications advisor who played a lead role in the initiative:

There is an issue with the tool crib in the background, since it’s open with tools missing. We’ll need to add an infobox here that explicitly states this is normally locked and all tools accounted for. I am working on this text now.

That this concern was expressed highlights how security takes precedence over other institutional imperatives such as rehabilitation via work in carceral settings (Mathiesen 1990), even when it comes to impression management.

Health and mental health care was a second key area where changes were made to the script. CSC had long been critiqued for practices such as using solitary confinement in response to self-harming behaviours resulting in preventable deaths in custody (OCI 2008), as well as the zombification of prisoners through psychiatric medication (Kilty 2008) and the lack of harm reduction services for those using drugs inside federal penitentiaries (Watson 2014). In this context, a CSC communications advisor “added segregation to the tour as a single item with the [maximum-security] range” on [18 July 2014](#), noting “We figured we’d put it in, although it’s likely to be taken out, at least we tried!” While [excerpts pertaining to segregation did make the final cut](#), there is no mention that those living with mental health issues are frequently held in such ranges (Sapers 2015). Among [other script additions](#) approved in this area was a mention that “All narcotics and controlled medications (those with a higher risk of abuse) are provided” in single or daily dosages. In the same [7](#)

[October 2014](#) email from CSC’s Assistant Commissioner of Health Services, it was also emphasized that “CSC Health care professionals respond to each inmate’s unique needs throughout their sentence, with quality health care that meets both professionally accepted standards and ensures patient safety.” These messages highlight the blending of security with ‘care’ within CSC impression management.

Prisoner access to recreation was a third major topic of discussion among CSC staff and officials in a context where ‘no frills’ prison conditions popularized by the Progressive Conservatives in Ontario in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Moore & Hannah-Moffatt 2002) had now taken hold in federal penitentiaries under successive Conservative governments (McElligott 2017). Concerns with avoiding ‘Club Fed’ accusations that had plagued CSC prior to the Conservatives assuming federal office (Wiebe 2000) are reflected in a [15 July 2014 email](#) from the communications advisor coordinating script development to officials at National Headquarters and the Ontario Region:

Yard: Can you please give me a bit of information about the yard, and what we would say about it? We wouldn’t want a 360, just a static image ... Yards are pretty plain, not much to them. I think the best thing to say about them is when and why offenders get them, what policy states about yard (number of offenders, etc.). Think it would be important to add the gym to this, as not every guy will go to yard, some may go to the gym. Think the important thing to note is that yard and gym time are only certain times of the day, and I’m pretty sure guys only get those things at the end of the day, after work, school and programs are finished, and once dinner has completed, so you’re looking at guys getting out there between 5-6. The big thing here will be guys just don’t hang out in the yard all day, that yard and gym are a privilege.

By [8 October 2014](#), the excerpt pertaining to the yard contained little information, and access was downplayed, as even excerpts linking recreation to rehabilitation were stripped.

New:

Inmates can spend some recreational time outdoors in a yard or in a gymnasium. The number of inmates that can be in the yard at a given time may be limited. Recreational time is only given once work and program times are finished.

Original (for reference):

As part of the rehabilitation process, inmates can spend some recreational time outdoors in a yard or in a gymnasium. Yards are available under each level of security. Only a limited number of inmates can be in the yard at a given time. Recreational time is only given once programs and meal times are finished.

A fourth key area of concern that resulted in the removal of script content pertains to the admissions and discharge process, which on [15 July 2014](#) one CSC official likened to “a check in for a hotel (as rudimentary as that sounds),” one where the ‘guest’ has their property “kept here that they don’t have in their cell and they can make a request to A&D for items.” While [in the same message](#) it was suggested that “a static image” of the “Parole Hearing Room” be included “with a paragraph or two about it,” [by 18 July 2014](#) it was determined that “[a]dding a parole hearing room became somewhat problematic.” With the [Parole Board of Canada having also created a virtual tour of their own](#), the decision was to link to their webpage instead. This decision enhanced the accuracy of CSC’s virtual tour when it was released, as those entering penitentiary gates online could not access the community just as an increasing number of prisoners could no longer exit their confines as the parole system deteriorated during the Conservatives’ reign (AG 2015).

[Another significant concern](#) noted by CSC officials was that the virtual tour took visitors through ranges in Collins Bay Institution and Bath Institution, both federal penitentiaries for men: “There is very little reference to women’s institution [*sic*] — you may want to reinforce.” [In the same 15 September 2014 email](#) from the office of CSC’s Assistant Commissioner of Corporate Services, it was also noted that “Section 14 refers to Healing Lodges and references Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan which is for women and considered multi-level security. The beginning of this section states that Healing Lodges are minimum-security.” As the twenty-fifth anniversary of “Creating Choices” (TFFSW 1990) — which attempted to set out a new path for the treatment of federally sentenced women — approached, one could expect that CSC would move mountains to include content specific to them. However, no content was developed pertaining to the realities of life and work in women’s penitentiaries as gender was nowhere to be found in the script, with prisoners referred to using the generic and harmful labels of ‘inmates’ and ‘offenders’ (also see Reed 1993). While one could come to the conclusion that where CSC is concerned, criminalized and incarcerated women are still “too few to count” (Adelberg & Currie 1987), the organization did take the time to craft the following [media line](#):

***Q4. Why does the Virtual Tour not showcase a woman’s institution?***

It was not possible to create separate tours for Women’s and Men’s institutions within the scope and timeline of the project to create the tour.

The standard of care for women offenders is the same as for male offenders. There are some differences in terms of layout and organization in women’s institutions compared with those for men, making it not possible to create a “combined” tour of a men’s and women’s institution.

A combined tour would have also resulted in a lessened virtual experience, given the amount of information required to explain the differences between a men's and a women's institution.

These are examples of what Scott (2015: 493) refers to as the sanitization of violence, atrocity and difficult histories. Institutional imperatives associated with operational efficiency trumped [CSC's stated intent](#) to produce a virtual tour that could provide "the public with timely, accurate, clear, objective and complete information about its policies, programs, services and initiatives...." Such tourism imaginaries and forms of branding hide the state's violence (Salazar 2017) at work in CSC penitentiaries.

### ***The Production***

Beyond script writing, exchanges pertaining to tone, design, filming and photography, as well as political vetting and quality control, were also key to the production of CSC's virtual tour. Below, we explore each of these elements of "carceral stage setting" (Walby & Piché 2015b: 233) in the context of the virtual tour's development, which aims to produce authentic, yet entertaining, representations of penalty for public consumption.

Throughout the development of the project, concerns were raised about the tone of the virtual tour. On [27 June 2014](#), a CSC official noted: "We have gone with a correctional officer talking to the public as our narrator. We'd like to imagine that the visitor is a member of the public." In this vein, a series of emails about the project from a CSC communications advisor to colleagues in late August 2014 noted: "[We'll be tweaking the script to make it sound a bit better since it's a verbal narrative \(it still needs to be more conversational\)](#)"; "[It reads a bit stiff, like a document, though we are aiming for a tone that is informational and authoritative](#)"; and "[Please note that some portions of the tour could benefit from further plain language edits.](#)" As the project advanced, it was emphasized that the [virtual tour's tone](#) was to "be friendly and informational, with a focus on a 'day in

the life’ view of a CSC institution. The story will be presented in a style similar to a documentary.”

Illustrating the importance of images in reproducing or challenging penal necessity (Brown 2014), Webdrive and CSC officials placed great emphasis on the design of the tour, which is comprised of three-dimensional movements and still photographs. Numerous technical maneuvers were required. For instance, a CSC official remarked on [13 February 2015](#): “I am wondering how much trouble it would be to put a static shot of each room with the intros. At the moment, there’s only images for the infoboxes.” Later on in the process, [files had to be manipulated to optimize access](#): “We’ve compressed the images and sound files to optimize loading times ... We’ve tested from both WebDrive as well as from our homes and we’re getting really quick loading times.” CSC relied on Webdrive to manage these issues.

As Webdrive and CSC officials went about selecting ‘hotspots’ and ‘artifacts’ in [August 2014](#), there was no mention of how prisoners and staff — who were not to be visible in the virtual tour — would be impacted by the shoot at Collins Bay Institution and Bath Institution. Their invisibility raises questions about CSC’s pursuit of authenticity, notably whether one can “[experience an institution first-hand](#)” without interacting with captives and captors. As filming and photography was scheduled for September 16–18, 2014, a [shoot schedule](#) featuring rooms and items to capture was developed. A [contingency plan was included in the virtual tour script under “next steps”](#) in case a lockdown was to occur during the shoot.

Sharing drafts of the virtual tour for the purposes of political vetting and quality control became a logistical challenge. For example, a [28 January 2015](#) email to the Minister’s Office for Public Safety Canada noted: “a technical difficulty prevents us from providing you with a fully-functioning copy of the tour — it is still limited to CSC in-house capacity. However ... we have given you a power point with screen captures that provide a good visual depiction of the scope of

the tour.” Despite challenges, technical staff were ready for troubleshooting as this [10 February 2015 email exchange](#) between web design and CSC communications indicates: “Just a note that we’re fully staffed and available to QC [quality control] anything related to the virtual tour this week. We promise a fast turn around so we can help wrap-up these final pieces.” The logistics of the initiative were dealt with in a clinical manner as CSC staged authenticity to brand itself as a principled organization (Gran 2010).

### **Unleashing the ‘Tiger’**

With virtual tour production nearing completion, the backstage communications and promotions work ramped up in January 2015 as launch options emerged. This work was spearheaded by the ‘Tiger Team’ consisting of those that were integral to the production of the tour itself. This team developed core messages, along with ‘products’ for the launch and promotion of the virtual tour, which included input and approvals from members of EXCOM. With Government of Canada communications becoming increasingly centralized during the Harper years (Blanchfield & Bronskill 2010), the communications portion of the project also included consultation with the Minister’s Office (MO) at Public Safety Canada (PSC) that oversees the work of all federal departments tasked with law enforcement and intelligence, as well as the [Privy Council Office](#) (PCO), which assists “the Prime Minister and Cabinet and its decision-making structures.”

Drawing on a series of internal documents (e.g., communications strategies, event proposals, memorandums and emails), the following section explores what went into the backstage roll-out of the virtual tour before it entered the public domain. We highlight how this initiative was orchestrated to reach and raise awareness among different audiences, both internal and external to CSC, with the explicit purpose of positioning the organization as a transparent entity serving the Canadian people by contributing to public safety and supporting victims of ‘crime.’ We show how this communications exercise included steps to avoid and neutralize critiques about the



violence of incarceration, notably with respect to mental health in penitentiaries and the use of solitary confinement.

### ***Communications Strategy and (Aborted) Launches***

The Tiger Team’s march towards releasing the virtual tour was not straightforward as events mostly outside the control of CSC influenced when, where and how the virtual tour was eventually launched. Below, we focus on these events and the considerations shaping decision-making, highlighting the dynamics of how CSC works to reproduce the idea that imprisonment is a necessary facet of the Canadian state that contributes to the well-being of its citizens.

A first opportunity to launch the virtual tour emerged during an [email exchange on 8 January 2015](#) between PSC officials concerning a ministerial visit to a CSC institution in Quebec later that month. In it, PSC staff were asked whether the Minister’s “wrap up statement” should “include a mention of the CSC ‘virtual tour’” or whether there was “a separate Ministerial event planned.” In [separate emails](#) the MO “advised that this visit is on hold for now” and that it wanted a Message Event Proposal (MEP) for the virtual tour’s launch. A [CSC official then suggested](#) that the Minister’s institutional visit should happen “somewhere close to Ottawa” coinciding with a launch in mid-February 2015. The [MO later declined this first launch date](#).

With an [MEP requested from the MO](#), the document the Tiger Team worked on and submitted on [28 January 2015](#) had to be reformatted because of new guidelines from the PCO. [Resubmitted on 3 February 2015](#), the MEP included two options for a launch on 27 February 2015:

- Option A: The release of a Ministerial statement inviting stakeholders and the public to view the virtual tour; or
- Option B: A media event to take place at an Ottawa-area postsecondary institution.

[Option A](#) was “preferred, as it maintains the ‘virtual’ theme of the tour — virtual launch, virtual roll-out, relying extensively on electronic and social media.” In contrast, [Option B](#) would entail an event attended by “Criminology/Police Services or other justice-system-related departments, as well as IT students,” featuring “the Minister’s announcement and brief remarks, followed by a live demonstration of the virtual tour, and several computer stations where attendees could open and navigate the virtual tour themselves.” [The latter option was framed positively](#), noting that the “participation of students would engage their professional interest in learning about the operations of federal corrections, and leverage their generation’s sophisticated use of social media to help promote the virtual tour.” [Further along in the MEP](#), however, “the potential for criticism of the living conditions in segregation” was noted. At the time, solitary confinement was a central issue dogging CSC within the academic and public sphere (Parkes 2015).

Consistent with the [original objectives outlined in the briefing note](#) seeking approval for the project, [the goal of the endeavour](#) was framed as contributing to the “Protecting Canadians” priority of the federal government, providing the former “with an opportunity to see inside a federal institution from any computer with Internet access,” including “a minimum, medium, maximum security cell and range, as well as various other areas of an institution including the chapel, workshop, programs room and health care centre.” The [regional considerations section](#) of the document noted that the “virtual tour was specifically designed to be representative/inclusive of all regions,” where “victims of crime” and “federal institutions” are located, underscoring the alleged authenticity of the initiative’s content, particularly its representativeness across different facilities. As the “interior of a federal penitentiary is something that most Canadians have never seen,” and because of “the ongoing interest in federal corrections, and regular media requests to film/photograph inside institutions,” [CSC anticipated](#) that there would be “a strong appetite for this product” with “pick-up on Twitter, Facebook,” as

well as potential “coverage on the websites of major national media (i.e., CBC, CTV, Global, Postmedia, Globe and Mail).”

In preparation for the launch, a “[Communications Strategy for CSC’s Virtual Tour](#)” was also produced by the Tiger Team, which included objectives such as reaching “internal and external audiences,” as well as supporting “the CSC priority of productive relationships with increasingly diverse partners, stakeholders, and others involved in public safety.” [Internal audiences targeted](#) included correctional officers (CXs), senior management, parole officers, program officers, regional and national headquarters employees, community advisory and victims’ advisory committees, volunteers and prisoners. [External audiences targeted](#) included families of prisoners, victims, secondary and post-secondary schools, partners, victim-serving organizations, media, the general public, as well as federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments.

To reach their intended audiences, the [Tiger Team planned and developed a series of promotional ‘products.’](#) These included a [memorandum to members of EXCOM](#), “[Speaking Point for Wardens](#),” a [general communiqué](#), a “[This Week @CSC](#)” notice, a [series of Tweets](#) for their “Twitter Campaign,” an FAQ sheet, an “Information for offenders fact sheet (hard copy),” [media lines](#), a [news release](#), content for [CSC’s homepage](#), text for a [YouTube video](#), a written [Public Service Announcement](#), and a letter from the Commissioner intended for its partners and educational institutions.

Four core messages were articulated across these products. First, most promotional materials noted that the virtual tour provides “all Canadians with an opportunity to see inside a federal institution from any device with Internet access,” highlighting the relative ease with which people can virtually gain access beyond the fence.

A second and related core message is that the virtual tour “consists of 360-degree panoramic views of various areas within an institution,

showcasing elements of maximum-, medium-, and minimum-security facilities.” Areas of an institution featured in virtual tour promotional material included the “security perimeter,” “entrance,” “visitor’s area,” cell ranges, a “CORCAN workshop,” “program room/classroom,” “Aboriginal cultural centre,” “chapel” and “health care centre.” Taken together, prospective tour participants were to be left with the impression that they could become more aware of the realities of incarceration, which is evidenced in [the Tweets targeted towards general and specific audiences](#) such as victims and students:

Have you been harmed by an offender sentenced to 2+ years?  
Check out #CSCtourSCC to learn more about what happens  
next [goo.gl/4lZHSg](http://goo.gl/4lZHSg)

Want a better understanding of the mind of an offender?  
Walk through their cells on a virtual #CSCtourSCC.  
[#psychology](#) [#psych](#) [goo.gl/4lZHSg](http://goo.gl/4lZHSg)

Third, whether the target audience was internal or external to CSC, key communications products (i.e., the memorandum to EXCOM, media lines, news releases and the [public service announcement poster](#)) also emphasized that the virtual tour emerged due to “significant public interest in attending the Kingston Penitentiary tours in 2014 [*sic*]”, proving that “Canadian correctional facilities remain a longstanding subject of interest for the public.” Providing information to “many victims groups [who] have expressed an interest in being able to see inside an institution” was also cited in these materials, serving as a justification for the endeavour. The main shift in messaging across the communications products is that when the target audience was CSC staff, they were encouraged “to view the virtual tour,” which was [marketed in the communiqué](#) as “an innovative way for your friends and family to get a glimpse into what it is like within a federal institution.” The [memo to members of EXCOM](#) also underscored that the initiative emerged, in part, to appease the interest of “staff that work outside the institutional environment [who] have expressed an interest in being able to see the

inside of an institution.” This desire to provide penal actors with the opportunity to “get inside” illustrates how the virtual tour was meant to achieve the same objectives legitimating live carceral tours (Piché & Walby 2010), minus the ongoing operational orchestration required to carry out the latter.

While the messages above touted the virtues of the project, CSC also prepared for “a negative reaction to the launch” and developed “media lines and messages for other audiences / a plan in case of a social media backlash,” in keeping with its deeply embedded precautionary approach to reputational risk (Watson 2015). This included having a [“response for those who perceive that CSC is using the virtual tour to position a positive message when issues such as mental health care and administrative segregation are top of public’s mind.”](#)

In addition to the promotional products produced prior to the launch of the virtual tour, the Tiger Team also planned post-launch marketing efforts for internal and external audiences. These included [an article in CSC’s staff magazine \*Let’s Talk Express\* that was eventually published in November 2015](#), along with the [inclusion of links to the virtual tour](#) in the “useful links section of News Releases,” “at the end of media responses” and at “the end of any correspondence that comes from CSC” via its Correspondence Unit, even when unrelated to the initiative itself. The [social media campaign via Twitter with posts targeting specific audiences was also to continue](#) (e.g., “Are you a student in criminology? Check out what the inside of a penitentiary looks like [#CSCtourSCC](http://fakeurl)”). In all these materials, CSC’s virtual tour was promoted or staged as an authentic encounter (MacCannell 1973) with an otherwise inaccessible prison world.

### ***A New, Innovative Option***

While Tiger Team was readying itself to “[jump into action!](#)” and preparing itself for a ministerial event, as of [23 February 2015](#) CSC

had yet to hear from the MO, with four days left before its second launch date. A launch did not take place on 27 February 2015 as envisioned by the Tiger Team, and on [20 March 2015](#) the MO opted out of doing an event altogether as the Minister’s “schedule is pretty busy.”

CSC was able to pursue another launch option without the Minister’s presence. As early as [February 2015](#), the Tiger Team learned the federal government’s Board of Management and Renewal Sub-Committee on Public Service Engagement was planning the “Blueprint 2020 — Innovation Fair.” The event offered “an opportunity for departments, regions, horizontal initiatives and functional communities to share their latest Blueprint 2020 initiatives” through displays in their “tradeshow area,” a “Fedtalk” presentation or other means. Selling the “innovative nature” of the tour, which “provides Canadians with an opportunity to see inside a federal institution from any computer with Internet access,” [CSC’s Assistant Commissioner of Communications and Engagement indicated the organization’s interest in participating.](#)

Staff from the innovation fair and officials from CSC exchanged several emails over the course of a month exploring the format of the virtual tour launch. With fair organizers advising that a five-minute presentation would likely not be long enough to discuss and demo the virtual tour, [CSC selected the kiosk option](#) to showcase the project. As the fair was oriented towards federal government staff and officials, the Tiger Team produced [a flyer about the virtual tour](#) with this audience in mind, incorporating its core messages about what it offers (i.e., an “opportunity to experience an institution first-hand”) and what spurred its creation (i.e., visits are frequently requested, which “[f]or safety and security reasons ... can be difficult to accommodate”). [Key lessons for the public service](#), including “[w]orking closely with all groups within an organization — and keeping the lines of communication open — are the keys to success,” and how something similar could be replicated in the future by using

technology “where the challenges of allowing employees to be physically present are prohibitive,” were also articulated.

Once launched, the tour was to be announced via a news release, outlined as “Option A” in the MEP submitted to the MO of PSC. By mid-April 2015, the content for the promotional products were finalized. Prior to the launch, the Tiger Team also sought to [promote the tour through Canada.ca](#), which began as an initiative that was supposed to bring all federal government departments under one online roof, but for the moment it serves as a central point for users to access general information about federal government services and key priorities (Roman 2016, 2017). More specifically, CSC sought a Canada.ca “[vanity URL](#),” which was ultimately [approved by a news media agent from the Privy Council Office](#). The [emails exchanged between the PCO and CSC communications](#) during this time reveal that the former wanted an image that they could attach that was “more representative of a penitentiary ... Something that people will immediately know that it is a prison, something which catch[es] the attention.” Given that the virtual tour was supposed to provide a “chance to see and experience a correctional facility first-hand,” a CSC communications official issued a [surprising response](#), noting that this would be a “challenge” because “we don’t really have a screenshot that represents ‘prison’ since it’s actually very different than what people expect.” After deliberating upon the suitability of several “static” shots — including one with “barbed wire” that was “not a very interesting image,” as well as a “range with cells from two different angles” and a “static shot of a gated range” — the [PCO decided](#) that they would go with the range with cells. Once this matter of aesthetics was decided, CSC had their “vanity URL” and the leverage of Canada.ca to generate traffic for the virtual tour launch. With most of the internal promotional products sent out on or by 16 April 2015, as well as the [public launch on 17 April 2015](#), the Tiger Team and high-ranking CSC officials now turned their attention towards assessing and reacting to the virtual tour’s reception.

## **Assessing the Success of the Virtual Tour**

To assess the success of the virtual tour, CSC relied upon a variety of [quantitative data measures](#), reflecting the organization’s long tradition of privileging such performance indicators to justify their *raison d’être* (Martel 2004). Over the years, CSC has thwarted several attempts by critical scholars, whose research is not driven by quantitative measures, to access penitentiaries (Yeager 2008). The “performance measures” CSC utilized to assess the virtual tour noted in the Tiger Team’s exhaustive [communications strategy](#) included: (a) the “number of tweets and re-tweets,” (b) “Media Coverage (Tone, location and #of articles),” (c) the “number of people who ‘take the tour’, monitoring website hits,” (d) the “number of media requests” and (e) “feedback from employees who viewed the virtual tour.” Below, we critically examine CSC’s assessment of the virtual tour’s success.

### ***#Tigerblood: Tweets, Retweets and Users***

With “[attention-grabbing tweets](#),” along with requests to its staff and partners to “[re-tweet](#)” the hashtag #CSCtourSCC — integral parts of the Tiger Team’s strategy to “[further the online reach](#)” of CSC’s virtual tour — the organization made social media engagement a key indicator of the project’s overall success. While the “tweets” sent out as part of their “[digital plan](#)” were “to continue for a year following the launch,” thus the quantitative measures that we were able to obtain may not be entirely reflective of the ultimate success of the campaign, an [email sent from CSC’s communications department regarding virtual tour web traffic](#) in the first week of the virtual tour’s life online indicated that “on Twitter, tweets resulted in nearly 150 clicks” combined in English and French. To put this in perspective, Charlie Sheen generated a million Twitter followers in under two-and-a-half days when he tweeted about having #Tigerblood running through his veins. This data would seem to suggest then, that when it came to Twitter, CSC’s ‘Tiger’ was tame. Yet the same document indicates that at the [apex of user-generated activity](#), Facebook — which was not mentioned at all in the communications strategy or



digital plan — was a source which generated 6,164 users. Such figures are underwhelming given that CSC (2015) had more than 18,000 employees in the fiscal year 2014–2015.

***‘Small Fish’ in a Big Pond: Virtual Tour Hits***

As noted above, CSC also sought to quantify their success based upon how many people “take the tour,” which was assessed by “[monitoring website hits](#).” In an [email exchange via Blackberry between CSC’s Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner of Communications and Engagement](#), one can see the success of the tour was being judged favourably based upon the number of website ‘hits’ that the tour had generated after its launch. The latter inboxes the former with “some interesting news from the launch of the virtual tour,” stating that CSC “took a little heat from our critics when it went live, but it is up and running and we will track usage.” To this CSC’s Commissioner replies, “I was following the comments in the news. No surprise.” Tempering this response, the Assistant Commissioner adds, “Yeah, disappointing but not surprising. The upside — more than 20,000 hits since last month.”

Our ATI requests also generated hard data from Google Analytics that CSC used to monitor the “virtual tour traffic.” In [two separate emails](#), one dated 20 April 2015 immediately following the launch, and the other dated 23 April 2015, a CSC communications advisor summarized the “numbers” for the Assistant Commissioner. She noted that “just over 14,000 have visited the tour page” in English and “the total number of pageviews (‘hits’) is just over 19,600,” while only “350 users visited the page from the Canada.ca carousel,” and “most visitors are in Canada (over half of which are from Ontario), though there were visits from the US, Australia and the UK.”

The same measures of web traffic were also provided for those who accessed the virtual tour in French. [Immediately following the launch](#), “apprx 2,600 people visited the tour page” and “the total

number of pageviews ('hits') is around 3,500," with only 55 people visiting "the page from the Canada.ca carousel," and a "vast majority being from Quebec" and "additional visitors from US, France, and Australia." Highlighting the positive internal reception to this data from within CSC National Headquarters was a remark included in an email by one official describing the results as "[so impressive.](#)"

Three days later, the numbers were "[updated](#)" as the organization began ramping up efforts to increase web traffic. In one email a CSC official indicates that they "will be calling the MO to see if we can start our Twitter campaign." Within 72 hours, not much had changed. The total number of "people who have visited the tour page" in English had only risen to 17,500, and the "total number of pageviews" or "hits" was just over 23,500, with 730 users visiting the page from the Canada.ca carousel. In terms of the French content, there was an increase to "3,800 people" who visited the tour page, while the total number of "pageviews" or "hits" hovered around 5,000, with only 115 of these visits coming via the Canada.ca carousel.

Although CSC saw these measures as a sign of success or rather an "upside" in the face of "[heat from our critics](#)" that they were receiving at the time, it is important to make [distinctions between "hits," "pageviews" and "visits."](#) Hits are misleading measures because a simple request to open a webpage can result in four hits in one log. Page views, on the other hand, show how many times a person views an entire page. Visits show how many times one IP address visits a page. If any two of these hits are separated by 30 minutes or more, two visitors are counted.

While CSC may have interpreted these numbers as "impressive," it should be noted that in the world of online activity even over 20,000 "pageviews" or "hits" are not typically seen as indicators of success. One webmaster, responding to an online question regarding "[What is a lot of traffic for a website?](#)", indicates that anything under 100,000 hits is considered "small fish." Even a lone blogger without the

advantage of leveraging the Canada.ca domain can generate as much or more online activity (see Piché 2015), and this is without a dedicated team of communications professionals like the ones assembled as part of CSC’s Tiger Team. Therefore, while [CSC may have patted itself on the back](#) for the “more than 20,000 hits since the launch” that the tour generated, the data would suggest that in reality its virtual tour was “small fish” in a big pond of online activity.

### **“Disappointing” Headlines**

While CSC deemed their virtual tour social media and webpage presence a success, their attempt to mitigate critiques fell flat, prompting senior officials to judge the [negative news coverage](#) as “[disappointing](#).” One of CSC’s “critics” include an author of this study, who was interviewed by CBC’s Kathleen Harris (2015) and described the production as “beyond belief” for its offering of a “glimpse into what an ideal institution would look like while paving over many of the disturbing realities of incarceration today,” calling it a “sanitized portrayal” and “marketing of pain at its finest.” Such reactions were mirrored by other “critics” such as then Correctional Investigator Howard Sapers who stated that the virtual tour is “a bit like a real estate ad showing pictures of a newly built guest room in a very old house in need of renovation.” Sharing similar misgivings was former Director General of PSC Mary Campbell, who stated that the virtual tour was “detached from reality” and asked the question “are you sure this wasn’t filmed at Disney Land?” Campbell called for a “real video, complete with all the screaming and noise of a real penitentiary ... with some double-bunking, maybe some waitlists for psychologist and other treatment programs, maybe some green bologna for supper,” and a “view of segregation with someone banging their head against cement” (Harris 2015).

The 17 April 2015 CBC News article generated an [email chain](#) that day as CSC officials attempted and failed to neutralize the critiques via email to journalist Kathleen Harris, whose name was redacted from the ATI records we obtained. Just as concerning to CSC was the

lack of media coverage of the virtual tour in other major news platforms they sought to reach. This development suggests that while state agencies attempt to manufacture consent with respect to penalty in new cultural domains, including through the staging of ‘real’ carceral settings online, such punishment work can be resisted in ways that are disruptive to the reproduction of imprisonment as a necessary and just practice.

## **Conclusion**

With an emphasis on institutional security, programs and services, along with the clean common and living areas for prisoners, one participating in the *Beyond the Fence* virtual tour would perhaps get the impression that CSC institutions fulfill their [mission](#), contributing “to public safety by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control.” While the objective of this paper was not to assess the veracity of the messages communicated and whether the realities presented match the lived experiences of federal prisoners housed in the penitentiaries showcased, our analysis of ATI disclosures from CSC reveals some of the backstage considerations shaping the development, roll-out and assessment of this communications initiative. Chief among them is the desire to omit potential areas of criticism (e.g., yard as a component of rehabilitation), while offering scant details that would provide a more fulsome picture of the realities of penitentiary life (e.g., pointing to the existence of programs available within institutions, yet not discussing the wait times to access them). As an exercise legitimating the carceral state and its oppressive practices, CSC’s virtual tour is a form of “state talk” (Pemberton 2008: 237).

The CSC virtual tour acts as an emerging form of popular culture camouflaging the violence and atrocities carried out in the name of punishment and security at carceral sites in Canada (also see Salazar 2017; Scott 2015). The virtual tour is a space where CSC attempts to represent and legitimate state authority (also see Ashley 2005). Digital virtual heritage is a growing field, so it is crucial that such

initiatives not reproduce unethical modes of representing ‘criminal justice’ such as those located in many brick and mortar penal history museums (Wilson et al. 2017). Just as responsible, professional, accurate and ethical curation is important in the conventional museum, so too are these activities in the making of virtual heritage spaces.

This emerging form of penal-memory symbiosis presents a challenge and an opportunity to scholars who wish to advance other visions of justice that go beyond the existing adversarial, punitive approach to criminalized acts (also see Draper 2015). The opportunity lies in the fact that there is significant interest in accessing what ‘criminal justice’ entails, as was revealed in CSC’s assessment concerning the need to tap into the surge of interest in penitentiary life that followed the closure of KP. The challenge is to advance forms of “critical punishment memorialization” (Fiander et al. 2016) that can highlight the injustices of policing, the judiciary and ‘correctional’ work at present, not just those of the past that give the false impression that current penal practices and policies are humane and effective. Building such a cultural infrastructure and confronting penal spectators with the realities of the criminalized is necessary to “counter cultural myth and raise doubt against the certainty of punitiveness” (Brown 2009: 211), and begin to displace punishment in favour of alternative forms of justice and politics.

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