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Challenges and Paradoxes of Digital Rehabilitation in Prison: Lessons Learned From a Pilot Project in Austria

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Abstract

Prisons serve contradictory objectives: While incarceration aims to secure and isolate individuals from society, it also seeks to rehabilitate offenders and prepare them for reintegration. The digitalisation of prisons and the implementation of digital rehabilitation take place within this fundamental tension, which is further exacerbated by systemic challenges such as limited financial resources, overcrowded facilities, and persistent staff shortages. Drawing on a study of digital rehabilitation in Austria, this article combines qualitative interviews with incarcerated people, a survey of prison staff, and the observation of a pilot project introducing digital technologies in prison. The findings reveal significant structural barriers, ranging from institutional culture and staff resistance to limited resources and an absence of strategic commitment, and highlight the paradoxes that arise when digital technologies intended to support rehabilitation are implemented within institutions primarily organised around security and control. Addressing those barriers requires a clear institutional mandate that prioritises social inclusion and treats rehabilitation not as subordinate to security, but as an equally central objective of the prison system.

Keywords

digital rehabilitation; digitalisation of prisons; ICT in prison; institutional culture; structural barriers

1. Introduction

Penal policymakers and prison administrations hold high expectations for digital rehabilitation and "smart prisons" (Knight & Van De Steene, 2017; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018). These prisons are expected to benefit authorities and heighten security by technological means as well as improve the lives of incarcerated people by providing them with opportunities to maintain family relationships and engage in programmes aimed at

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their rehabilitation (McKay, 2022). Smart prisons—i.e., prisons that integrate digital technology into prison management, security and service delivery in order to enhance efficiency, safety, rehabilitation, and social reintegration (UNODC, 2026)—promise both more rehabilitation and a reduction in the human resources required in a secure environment. As modernisation in prisons is urgently needed to avoid fostering a generation of "cavemen in an era of speed-of-light technology" (Jewkes & Johnston, 2009) and to prevent digital illiteracy among (formerly) incarcerated people, many countries have introduced prison media systems in the last decade.

In what follows, we focus on digital rehabilitation as defined by United Nations bodies (UNICRI, 2024; UNODC, 2026) as the use of digital technologies that support rehabilitative processes and the preparation of incarcerated people for successful reintegration into an increasingly digital society. The positive effects of digital rehabilitation on re-entry and reoffending have been demonstrated (McDougall & Pearson, 2020; Zivanai & Mahlangu, 2022). Prison media systems can support successful rehabilitation by strengthening relationships with relatives (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018), improving self-confidence, fostering autonomy and reducing prisoners' dependence on prison staff (Beyens & Geerts, 2026; McDougall et al., 2017). Prison media systems offer access to educational programmes (Hopkins & Farley, 2015; Monteiro et al., 2015) and contribute to preparation for release and reintegration (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2026; Knight & Van De Steene, 2017; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018).

Nevertheless, scholars have also pointed to the possible negative effects, including new forms of isolation (Robberechts & Beyens, 2020), responsibilisation and pseudo-autonomy (Crewe, 2011; Hofinger & Pflegerl, 2024a; Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016), as well as the creation of a new digital divide and digital vulnerability within prison walls (McKay & Macintosh, 2024). It has therefore been argued that digitisation strategies in prisons should not exacerbate inequalities, but rather be rehabilitation-oriented and needs-based (Van De Steene & Knight, 2017), ideally co-produced, involving end users from the outset and throughout all stages of technological development (Morris & Johns, 2024). Moreover, there is also a risk that in the context of imprisonment, security concerns regularly take precedence over the goal of rehabilitation. In times of austerity, the selective digital transformation of prisons can function as a "Potemkin façade," enabling prisons to present themselves as modern without structurally improving the conditions of the majority of the prison population (Hofinger & Pflegerl, 2024a).

In this article, we investigate these risks, tensions and sometimes paradoxical aspects of digital rehabilitation using the example of Austria. It is based on a two-year research project that accompanied the implementation of a prison media system. We examine the efforts, but also the barriers and resistance towards digitalisation. By doing so, we have encountered paradoxes and contradictions in the process that go beyond the specific use case of Austria. We demonstrate that, despite great efforts by the project team, only a few digital services were actually provided to a small number of incarcerated people. The main achievement was making the *elis* e-learning platform—used in German and Austrian prisons—available inside prison cells at any time. Via *elis*, educational, vocational, life-skills, media, social-competence, leisure, release-preparation and distance-learning resources in various formats (von der Mehden & Killinger, 2024) were made available to incarcerated people. Still, we show that in the overall project and in prison digitalisation more broadly, tools and services that promote security and reduce the workload of staff are more likely to be implemented than measures that support rehabilitation, especially if they involve communication and a perceived risk of misuse.

1.1. General Situation of the Austrian Prison System and its Status of Digitalisation

The Austrian prison system is under considerable strain. The system suffers from severe overcrowding with an occupancy level of 117% (World Prison Brief, n.d.). While some buildings are modern, many prisons are outdated and in need of renovation. Due to overcrowding, prison cells are equipped with bunk beds, so incarcerated people are often housed in cells accommodating five or more people (Hofinger & Fritsche, 2021). Compared to its neighbouring countries, Austria has a relatively high rate of imprisonment of 104 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 71 in Germany and 77 in Switzerland (Aebi & Cocco, 2025). The staff–prisoner ratio is relatively low, with 2.1 prisoners per staff member, in comparison to Germany and Switzerland with one staff member per 1.3–1.4 prisoners (Aebi & Cocco, 2025). Furthermore, Austrian prisons have a high proportion of foreign nationals, namely 52% (World Prison Brief, n.d.). The detention of mentally ill offenders in forensic institutions has also increased substantially over the last two decades (Lengauer et al., 2022). In addition, a severe shortage of staff—of correctional officers as well as of other professionals in health and social care—is exacerbating the situation. All too often, incarcerated people are left to fend for themselves: Lock-up times are long and can be up to 23 hours per day for those who do not work (Hofinger & Fritsche, 2021). At the same time, the state is highly indebted and therefore pursuing austerity policies, which hinder costly reforms and transformations.

Despite these challenges, rehabilitation and reintegration remain important guiding principles in Austrian penal policy; the prison system is intended to provide incarcerated people with structured daily routines involving work, education, therapy or physical activity outside their cells (Ministry of Justice, 2020). In practice, however, the conditions described above leave only limited scope for such activities.

In this context, the level of digital rehabilitation in Austrian prisons remains remarkably limited. Apart from the pilot project presented in this article, incarcerated people do not have access to digital devices or services in their cells. In most prisons, digital technologies are restricted to "computer rooms," which are only accessible to certain individuals at specific times. While the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated digital innovation in many countries, the transformation in Austrian prisons has remained modest, apart from a limited extension of video calls.

To advance innovation and digital rehabilitation in Austria, a pilot project was launched in July 2024, providing about 70 men in three different units with access to various types of digital devices and services through the Belgian PrisonCloud system. The pilot project aimed to introduce PrisonCloud on a limited scale for a specific period of time. The project was not planned as a preliminary stage for the immediate nationwide introduction of digital services in prisons, but rather as a test environment for learning opportunities, to gather feedback from incarcerated people and staff. Nevertheless, there were expectations that the project would provide the impetus for more digital rehabilitation in Austria. Ten in-cell devices and 30 laptops for use in prison cells, as well as a kiosk located in a prison corridor were deployed. The prison in question was selected due to the recent establishment of a vocational training unit with the necessary IT infrastructure. In addition, the prison governor and his staff were supportive and showed a high level of willingness to cooperate.

2. Methods and Empirical Basis

The article is based on a two-year study on digital rehabilitation in Austria. We examined the specific needs of incarcerated people through qualitative interviews and analysed the attitudes of prison staff through a

survey. These data were collected to prepare and implement the pilot project. The pilot project was subsequently monitored from a social science perspective through participant observation and interviews with incarcerated people. The findings were presented to the general directorate of the prison administration, to prison governors and personnel responsible for education and training. Their feedback also informs this article.

2.1. The Needs Assessment

A total of 35 qualitative interviews with incarcerated people were conducted across three Austrian correctional institutions, along with four interviews with formerly incarcerated people who served long sentences. The study employed the problem-centred interview method (Witzel, 2000), which follows an inductive–deductive approach that integrates pre-existing knowledge while remaining open to new aspects that the interviewees bring up. The objective of the interviews was to gain insight into their experiences and needs regarding the use of ICT in prison and after release.

While the core thematic areas were comparable across both groups, slightly adapted interview guides were used. Interviews with currently incarcerated participants focused on their present situation in prison and prospective needs, whereas interviews with formerly incarcerated people were designed retrospectively and focused specifically on their experiences after release, particularly with regard to digital literacy and the challenges of navigating an increasingly digital society. Participants in this group were explicitly asked how they experienced the transition to a digital society, whether they felt prepared during incarceration, and to what extent expanded digital access in prison might have facilitated their reintegration.

The interviews with incarcerated participants addressed two main topics. Firstly, they were asked about their current situation in prison, the possibility of legally accessing digital services, and their evaluation of limited access to ICT. Secondly, interviewees were encouraged to develop a vision of a needs-based digital transformation that would help them spend their time in prison more meaningfully and prepare for life after release. In this context, interviewees were specifically asked about features and applications offered by major providers of prison technology. This approach allowed for broader visions to be considered, while simultaneously relating them to existing institutional constraints, as participants were explicitly prompted to formulate their needs in relation to existing technical possibilities (e.g., currently available applications), thereby grounding their responses in practical feasibility. The digital applications discussed in the interviews were related to communication with the outside world, administration and self-management, information and education, preparation for release, and entertainment.

The needs assessment involved both male (n = 25) and female (n = 10) participants between the ages of 15 and 80, with sentences of varying lengths. Participation was voluntary, with recruitment either through self-enrolment or by invitation from the prison administration. The formerly incarcerated people were recruited with the help of the probation service. Before each interview, participants received an information sheet outlining the project's goals. They were also verbally informed about the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. To ensure anonymity, consent was given only verbally, and the participants were not required to sign any forms. The interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and were conducted in the absence of correctional or probation officers.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The transcribed data were systematically coded and analysed using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. The data from both groups were analysed using the same coding framework, with the interviews from formerly incarcerated individuals serving as a complementary perspective to contextualise and validate the anticipatory needs articulated by currently incarcerated participants. The content analysis process (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022) began with deductively derived categories, which were expanded through open coding into inductively generated subcategories.

The deductive categories were primarily derived from the interview guide and reflected the main thematic areas addressed in the interviews, such as communication, education, etc. In addition, overarching analytical dimensions included the current situation in prison, future-oriented perspectives, and the anticipated effects of digitalisation. Within these deductive categories, inductive subcategories were developed through a systematic coding process. These subcategories captured the specific positions, expectations and concerns expressed by the participants. For example, within the category "education and information," inductive subcategories were self-directed learning, improved educational opportunities, or the meaningful use of time. At the same time, the analysis followed a cross-cutting matrix that differentiated between perceived opportunities and risks, allowing both positive expectations and critical perspectives (e.g., concerns about misuse, inequality of access or increased control) to be systematically incorporated into the analysis. The iterative inductive analysis involved continuous comparison across cases and categories, enabling the progressive refinement of the coding system and ensuring the consistent integration of emerging themes into the overall analytical framework.

2.2. Staff Survey

An online survey assessed prison staff attitudes towards digitalisation in prisons. It weighed perceived benefits against potential risks and identified which domains staff favoured or resisted. The questionnaire also explored the potential of digital tools in communication, administration, education, preparation for release, and entertainment. Open-ended items invited respondents to raise additional, potentially less familiar considerations.

The invitation to participate in the online survey was distributed via prison governors. The initial invitation was sent by the Federal Ministry of Justice, followed by a second reminder from the research team two weeks later. In total, approximately 600 prison staff completed the survey. Respondents comprised around 75% prison officers, 20% specialist service staff (psychologists, medical professionals, and social workers), and about 5% administrative staff. Although only around 15% of staff in Austrian prisons completed the survey, the analysis shows that both supporters and opponents of digital rehabilitation took part. We do not claim, however, that the data are representative of the total population of prison personnel in Austria.

Accordingly, data analyses were mainly descriptive. To inform the design of the pilot project, we calculated frequencies and visualised distributions, conducted group comparisons, and explored relationships in the data using SPSS statistics. Specifically, we contrasted the assessments of prison officers with those of specialist services. We further tested associations with contextual variables (such as facility type or key demographics) and evaluated their statistical significance. Open-ended responses were grouped thematically to contextualise and enrich the quantitative patterns. The analyses revealed pronounced differences between the two occupational groups and helped identify domains seen as offering the greatest potential as well as those that elicited the strongest resistance.

2.3. Expert Interviews

Furthermore, 15 national and international experts were interviewed. The experts interviewed represented various fields, including prison administration, prison management, IT services, specialist social services, education, digital learning, and legal expertise on data protection. Interview guidelines were adapted to each expert's area of focus while collectively addressing opportunities, risks, and practical recommendations for needs-based digitalisation. These interviews aimed to complement a more comprehensive understanding of digital rehabilitation from different perspectives, thereby informing the planning and implementation of the pilot project.

The expert interviews were transcribed or documented through detailed interview protocols and analysed using thematic content analysis. Similar to the analysis of the interviews with (formerly) incarcerated people, a combination of deductive and inductive coding was applied. Deductive categories were derived from the overarching analytical framework of the study (e.g., opportunities, risks and implementation requirements), while inductive codes captured more specific expert assessments and field-specific considerations. The analysis resulted in thematic clusters relating to, for example, resocialisation potentials, organisational and infrastructural requirements, security concerns, resource implications, and practical implementation strategies. These themes were used to contextualise and complement the needs articulated by the interviewed incarcerated people.

2.4. Research Accompanying the Pilot Project

The research described so far was conducted to prepare the pilot project. When the pilot project started in July 2024, the research team closely followed its implementation and the first six months of operation. We visited the prison, located in rural Upper Austria, ten times before and during the pilot phase. In total, we conducted 24 interviews, four of them group discussions, with incarcerated people during our visits. Before the launch of the pilot project, we asked the participants about their needs and expectations for the digital services to be implemented in their prison unit. When the project started, we investigated incarcerated people's actual experiences with the laptops, in-cell devices, and the kiosk, as well as the services provided. We examined which features they used, how the services changed their daily routines, how they used their time in prison, and how satisfied they were with the implementation of PrisonCloud. We also explored their assessment of different areas, such as education and information, administration, communication, and preparation for release, in order to understand how digital tools could support daily life in prison and their prospects after release.

Furthermore, we interviewed the staff working in the unit, social services staff, the person in charge of IT, and staff responsible for education. We also conducted observations in the pilot units and held informal discussions with individuals involved in the project.

Another important source of information was the presentation and discussion of our research findings with the general directorate of the Austrian prison administration, prison governors and other decision-makers at the end of the project. In a "World Café" workshop, we discussed their attitudes towards providing digital tools and services for incarcerated people, and their vision of a digital prison and digital rehabilitation. During these discussions, we gained valuable insights that will be presented and put in perspective in the next chapter.

The accompanying research was not analysed as a separate dataset using formalised coding. Instead, materials were documented as field notes, interview summaries, observation protocols, and workshop outputs, and were iteratively synthesised to identify recurring themes. Following an integrative, practice-oriented approach, insights from interviews with incarcerated people and staff, observations, and the World Café were combined to identify key factors, opportunities, risks, and organisational requirements. The synthesis informed a structured project report and implementation guidelines; in this article, it is used to contextualise and triangulate the interview findings, particularly regarding implementation opportunities and constraints.

3. Research Findings in the Light of a Contradictory Prison Context

In this section, we present selected findings from the empirical fieldwork. The results are structured around the key domains of communication, administration, education, preparation for release, and entertainment. Our analysis highlights the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in digital rehabilitation in prisons, along with the practical barriers that impede its implementation.

3.1. Communication With the Outside World

The expansion of digital communication tools emerged as a key issue in the interviews with incarcerated people. The interviewees, especially those with children and partners, emphasised the need for more communication and better contact with family members and friends. In their view, the use of personal digital devices for this purpose would greatly improve their situation. Participants described the current situation as problematic because of high phone costs, limited access and lack of privacy. One interviewee complained of "basically spending most of my money" on phone calls; others reported that, for financial reasons, calling relatives abroad was difficult. Another interviewee criticised the limited access, as phones are installed in the hallways and cells are closed for most of the time: "You end up fighting over whose turn it is and how long you get to stay on the phone—it's the Stone Age." The interviewees expressed willingness to follow security rules and would prefer controlled digital options to illegal phones. They would appreciate video calls, phone calls, messaging or email—in fact, any opportunity to communicate more frequently, at lower cost, and with greater privacy.

At first glance, the attitudes of staff that emerged in the online survey, especially those of the uniformed prison guards, seemed hesitant and highly risk-aware. However, the majority did not oppose the safe implementation of digital services for incarcerated people: 70% of the prison officers and 95% of specialist services saw digital communication with family and friends as an opportunity. The experts interviewed also highlighted the potential of digital devices to improve communication with relatives and foster meaningful relationships. While some of them remained sceptical and emphasised the need for monitoring and the resulting personnel costs, others considered expanding communication via digital devices to be a worthwhile and manageable risk. Moreover, the prison governors with whom we discussed the project findings were notably progressive in their advocacy of digital rehabilitation and in favour of permitting certain forms of digital communication, such as video calls for incarcerated people in their cells. They also expressed the hope that the widespread use of illegal smartphones could be reduced if more legal communication options were available.

However, the prison administration and the prison that hosted the pilot project were very reluctant to grant incarcerated people any new opportunities to communicate with the outside world. To date, no services that allow communication have been implemented in the pilot project. There is still a possibility that email (in the form of *elis* mail) could be established in the course of the pilot project, but it has yet to be implemented. *Elis* mail would enable incarcerated people to communicate with selected recipients, such as family members or the probation service. Ongoing discussions revolve around how this communication should be monitored. Until now, communication with the outside world has not been expanded. On the contrary, access to the website of a distance-learning university that had previously been available was blocked because of a newly detected minor risk of illegal communication via the website. Likewise, all access to websites that feature chatbots was blocked, because this was seen as "communication." While other countries or cities, such as Berlin in Germany, allow incarcerated people to make video calls from their cells to preselected numbers without any surveillance (Flaig, 2024), no such possibilities currently exist in Austria. Nor can incarcerated people in Austria make regular phone calls via PrisonCloud, unlike in Belgium. Aside from security concerns, this is due to the fact that the prison administration has a contract with a telecommunications provider that does not permit cooperation with other providers.

Although digital communication is theoretically recognised as an important opportunity for improving the conditions of incarcerated people, implementing such tools in practice remains extremely difficult. The fear that incarcerated people might misuse the technology is considerable. While the widespread use of illegal phones is a matter of public knowledge, the prison system appears to only partially acknowledge its responsibility for illegal communication—even when it results in serious incidents. Media reports have documented the widespread use of illegal smartphones in prisons in general, and in high-risk cases in particular (Marchart, 2024). Nevertheless, the administration appears to tacitly tolerate illicit mobile phone use, defusing responsibility for it, even though authorising regulated communication would effectively establish accountability in the event of misuse (UNODC, 2026). Consequently, a regime that provides broad legal access while rigorously suppressing and controlling illegal phones is not being implemented. Neither insights from rehabilitation research highlighting the importance of social bonds and relationships in the process of desistance (Folk et al., 2019; Laub & Sampson, 2003), nor the significance of this issue for incarcerated people themselves within a "needs-based" digitalisation framework, have led to the introduction of in-cell video calls, not even within the controlled setting of the pilot project. By contrast, prison administrations and political decision-makers in Belgium and Berlin have consciously made the strategic decision to permit communication with the outside world and to take full responsibility for it (Flaig, 2024; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020).

3.2. Administration and Self-Management

The current system of forms and requests is fully paper-based. Incarcerated people submit their requests using a special form (called the *Elferzettel*). Other types of requests, such as for appointments with doctors or psychologists, are submitted on other forms in different colours, depending on the intended recipient. During our observation of participants, we saw piles of papers on the prison officers' desks waiting to be processed. This analogue system contributes to slow bureaucratic procedures and places an additional burden on prison staff, who have to manage a high volume of paper-based requests alongside their everyday duties. The benefits of digitising administrative processes would be significant for staff and incarcerated people alike, because digital self-service and electronic records reduce paperwork and manual data entry

that burden daily operations while supporting normalisation and greater autonomy for people in custody (McDougall et al., 2017; UNODC, 2026).

Most of the incarcerated people we interviewed were in favour of the digitisation of these paper-based forms, as the current system was described as a "paper mess" (*Zettelwirtschaft*). If requests could be submitted digitally, "you wouldn't need to bother the officers anymore," as one interviewee put it. Respondents also hoped that digitisation would make the process more transparent, as it would then be possible to see whether a request was already being processed, had been approved or rejected, or had simply been lost (for similar findings see Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2024). In addition, interviewees expected digitalisation to provide greater data protection. Currently, the only "protection" consists of folding the request form in half. In this way, those who are not the intended recipients may nevertheless access private information contained in the request, as several interviewees pointed out. In their view, digitisation could help ensure that sensitive information—for example, the reasons why someone wants to see a doctor or psychologist—is only shared with those specifically responsible for processing the request.

While the experts we interviewed advocated digitising requests and complaints to cut bureaucracy, the prison guards who responded to our survey were sceptical about digitising the system. This is surprising since the current paper-based administration generates a lot of work: The request forms must be constantly issued, collected, sorted, deciphered, translated, typed, or forwarded, all of which takes up time and resources. One reason for their scepticism was the fear that digitisation would overload the system, i.e., that the sheer volume of requests or complaints would flood the system. As incarcerated people have a legal right to submit such requests, the process cannot be formally restricted; in practice, however, it is often delayed or informally curtailed. For example, in one facility we visited, interviewees were only given two forms per week and only permitted to submit them on a designated weekday, as several respondents credibly reported. This procedure, but also the handling of requests on paper in general, thus reduces and slows down the incoming demands which, given the scarce institutional resources (e.g., appointments with doctors), can be useful from the organisation's perspective (Hofinger & Pflegerl, 2024b).

The key point in this regard is that digitising the application and complaint system would also mean that all communication, processes and decisions would potentially be transparent and traceable, thereby affecting the current working practices of prison staff. While this may be in the interests of incarcerated people and aligns with the expectations they associate with digitisation, full transparency and formalisation appear less desirable from the perspective of the prison administration. In their view, digitisation makes it easier to detect informality (Büchner, 2018) and therefore threatens informal but functionally beneficial practices such as distributing only two request forms per week. Both the functional role of the current paperwork process and concerns about an overloaded system explain the prison officers' reservations regarding digitising the application and complaint process, thereby curbing organisational efficiency's role as a driver of prison digitalisation.

During the pilot project, the participating incarcerated people submitted requests via PrisonCloud. Those who received a prompt response were positive about it and said they intended to use it in the future. However, others either did not get a timely response or received no reply at all, leading them to revert to paper-based forms. When introducing such a system, it is therefore crucial to insist on a clearly defined start date and ensure that it is operational from that point onwards. Otherwise, users may try its features, find

them unreliable and abandon the service altogether. Research consistently shows that trust is pivotal to the adoption of new technologies, whereas distrust hampers uptake and leads to non-use (see, e.g., Lee & See, 2004). This illustrates how important responsiveness and efficiency are for the successful implementation of digital systems, as they also shape the emergence of a digital usage culture—an aspect often overlooked in discussions of digitisation and technology adoption.

That said, some developments have already taken place. Prison administration entails communication with people from many different countries, as more than half of the Austrian prison population are foreign nationals. In the survey among prison staff, the respondents saw the greatest potential for digital tools and services in translation software and communication with non-German speakers. During the pilot project, a feature that translates requests for staff has already been implemented. In a subsequent step, this feature should also be introduced for incarcerated people. At this point, it is very important to point out that innovation and technical support should not only be accessible for incarcerated people, but also for staff working in prison (see, e.g., UNICRI, 2024). If prison staff do not have modern and up-to-date technical equipment and software, they will not support digital rehabilitation. Their commitment is, however, a precondition for the digital transformation process, as they act as gatekeepers in the prison system (Mufarreh et al., 2022).

Evidence from other countries provides insight into how such changes can affect prison governance and everyday practices. Experiences from Belgium show that when the features of PrisonCloud are fully implemented, staff–prisoner interactions are reshaped (Beyens & Geerts, 2026). Incarcerated people leave their cells less frequently and gain greater autonomy, which may reduce their dependence on staff. At the same time, however, this shift can lead to less interaction between officers and incarcerated people. Over time, reduced communication may weaken dynamic security and diminish officers' discretionary power and authority (Beyens & Geerts, 2026; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020). In this sense, digital technologies simultaneously create new opportunities for autonomy and rehabilitation while also generating new risks for prison governance and everyday security practices. Interestingly, research from Finland did not identify increased isolation or reduced social interaction associated with the use of ICTs (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2024). These contrasting findings illustrate that the effects of prison digitalisation are highly context-dependent and may produce both rehabilitative benefits and unintended negative consequences.

3.3. Information and Education, Preparation for Release

In the interviews with incarcerated people conducted as part of the initial needs assessment, the topic of education and information proved more important than we had originally expected. Interviewees reported that educational opportunities were scarce and that there was a general shortage of courses. We spoke with young incarcerated people who sought education to prepare for future careers, as well as older participants who expressed the need to keep mentally active as they felt they were beginning to forget names and facts, and missed the possibility to stay informed and look up things they could not remember, creating a feeling of being "cut off from the whole world." Those interviewees who expressed the wish to independently research spontaneous inquiries acknowledged the security issues arising from unrestricted access to search engines such as Google. However, they expressed a need for access to offline versions of platforms such as Wikipedia (Hofinger & Pflegerl, 2024a).

Interviewees also wished to have access to legal information, including digital legal resources and official information from institutions such as the public employment service or the probation service. General educational information on topics such as health, nutrition, and sports was also mentioned. Overall, respondents expressed a strong desire to stay informed and use their time in prison in meaningful ways rather than losing touch with society. Furthermore, the interviewees emphasised the importance of digital tools in preparing for release, particularly for accessing relevant information and establishing contact with service providers and authorities.

In particular, those interviewees who had been released after long prison sentences expressed concerns about their digital literacy. They described how they struggled to enter an increasingly digital society, a challenge also described in other studies (e.g., Sanders, 2025). One younger interviewee, for example, spoke of how she had difficulty using basic applications and programmes after being imprisoned for several years. Some individuals expressed concern that they lacked the necessary digital skills, especially for the labour market—once again, the comparison with the Stone Age is drawn: "I'm as clueless as someone from the Stone Age, as I have absolutely no idea." One of the interviewees who had been incarcerated for decades told us that, right after his release, he was unable to answer a call on a smartphone: "I didn't even know how to answer the phone, so it was really bad."

Like education, preparing for release was one of the areas in which the prison employees surveyed saw great potential in the use of digital services and ICT. Only about one-fifth of the respondents did not see any advantages in using digital services for preparing for release, learning digital skills, or accessing educational resources. This led us to the conclusion that the pilot project should start with areas that were the least contested, but which are nevertheless of great importance to incarcerated people.

During the pilot project, educational resources and information were provided via the *elis* platform as well as through an intranet containing house rules, legal information, and information on the probation service and on other relevant topics concerning life in prison and after release. These resources were accessible through in-cell devices and laptops. Most interviewees who had access to these services reported a high degree of satisfaction with these new opportunities. They particularly valued the continuous availability of the *elis* content, which included a broad range of materials, from study resources for exam preparation, dictionaries and language courses, to streaming content from the Austrian public broadcaster ORF, as well as health and fitness programmes and courses for learning to play musical instruments.

This achievement represents a major milestone of the pilot project, one that was not easily accomplished. While the *elis* content is very well curated, the platform is governed by a large monitoring committee that convenes twice a year and makes decisions collectively. As a result, implementing even small modifications within this system requires considerable effort. In contrast, the PrisonCloud platform offers more individualised forms of content provision, including tailored learning materials and targeted information for incarcerated people. Yet this flexibility introduces a distinct set of accountability and liability concerns: Who is mandated to provide such individualised content, and who is responsible if it is misused? The delivery of tailored materials would also impose additional demands on staff, who already report high workloads. In an institutional setting marked by risk aversion and an emphasis on clearly defined responsibilities, staff are consequently reluctant to assume responsibility for digital content provision.

During a workshop with staff responsible for training and education in prisons, participants emphasised both the vast potential of digitally supported learning and the equally vital need for genuine social interaction and human exchange in education (for the importance of "humane encounters" see also Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2026). Introducing digital services and using AI in prison education not only offers great opportunities for rehabilitation but also runs the risk of reducing the provision of costly but valuable in-person courses.

3.4. Entertainment and Shopping

Our needs assessment revealed that the issue of entertainment was considered less important than expected. Educational opportunities, communication with family and friends, as well as preparation for release from prison were prioritised over entertainment. However, respondents would welcome expanded access to a wider range of entertainment content via digital devices, given the long confinement periods and monotonous television programmes on offer. Despite the numerous television channels available, many were dissatisfied with the programme being "the same thing every day" and cellmates often dominating the choice of television programmes. The desire to be able to listen to one's own music for psychological relief was expressed particularly often. The need for privacy in shared rooms and the desire for peace and quiet were motives for advocating personal devices with headphones. Access to streaming platforms such as Netflix for films, series, and documentaries would be highly welcomed but considered unrealistic. While many respondents expressed the willingness to pay a monthly fee for streaming services, concerns were raised about affordability and unequal treatment based on the individual financial status of incarcerated people—underlining the concern that selective digitalisation can create regimes of digital inequality within prisons (Hofinger & Pflegerl, 2024a; Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016). This issue extends beyond entertainment: Incarcerated people are pointing to a core ethical principle for digital prisons, namely equality and fairness (Knight & Van De Steene, 2020; UNICRI, 2024). Unequal access to technology widens digital competence gaps and hampers reintegration.

As noted above, there is a high level of risk awareness among prison staff, despite their approval of the expansion of digitalisation for incarcerated people in certain areas. Concerns were principally expressed in the areas of entertainment (gaming, streaming) and online shopping. The high costs for the prison system that such an expansion would entail were seen as problematic, and a move in this direction was therefore considered unrealistic.

One area where staff supported digitalisation more strongly than incarcerated people was that of purchasing everyday items in the small internal prison shops. Most incarcerated people did not wish to replace their weekly in-person shopping with a digital ordering system. One interviewee explained that he looks forward to the shopping day all week long because "it's a bit like being outside." Another interviewee said he would feel "completely isolated" and "like a robot" if he could not do his shopping on site. In contrast, over half of the staff surveyed favoured the introduction of digital shopping within the institution, a position also endorsed by experts for reasons of efficiency.

In the pilot project, shopping was not replaced with a digital ordering system. However, presenting the interview findings to the prison administration prompted discussions on introducing internal digital shopping in the future, given the effort and cost of the current system. It is evident that efficiency and reducing the effort involved in organising prisoners' purchases are key factors that are driving digitalisation in this area.

Once again, it would not be the goal of rehabilitation but rather the imperatives of an iinstitution, facing staff shortages that influence the decision-making process.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we have presented the results of a research project on digital rehabilitation in Austria and reported the challenges that emerged during the pilot project on the introduction of digital tools and services for incarcerated people. Based on the empirical fieldwork, this article highlights the immense barriers to digital innovation in prison. Despite considerable efforts, only a small number of services were finally implemented during the pilot phase and only very few incarcerated people genuinely benefited from them. The pilot project was a valuable learning opportunity for the project team and the IT specialists within the prison administration. However, it remains unclear if and how the Austrian prison population will gain broader access to digital services in the near future. Although a catalogue of measures and a roadmap to digitalisation were drawn up as part of the project, substantial progress towards digitalisation in Austrian prisons remains limited.

While in some jurisdictions new technologies are increasingly central to rehabilitation strategies, the described challenges, barriers, and pitfalls, as manifestations of the contradictions and paradoxes, are inherent in many prison systems and go beyond the situation in Austria. Thus, our research addresses the need identified by Reisdorf and Jewkes (2016) to further investigate the challenge of balancing security concerns with the need to equip incarcerated people with the skills necessary for successful reintegration into a technologically advanced society. In contrast to Järveläinen and Rantanen (2024), we consider the obstacles to digital rehabilitation we observed in Austria not merely as "teething problems" that will resolve themselves over time. We acknowledge that some innovations just need time to become established and be embraced. However, it is the prison's fundamental tension between security and rehabilitation as well as deep inequalities and power imbalances that will continue to shape and often hinder the effective implementation of rehabilitative technology in prisons.

Our findings also suggest that digital transformation in prison tends to advance most readily in areas where it promises organisational efficiency rather than rehabilitative benefits. Across the domains we examined—administrative procedures, internal shopping systems, and selected communication infrastructures—digital innovations were primarily considered where they could reduce workloads, streamline bureaucratic routines, or compensate for staff shortages. Conversely, some services appear to face resistance precisely because their efficiency gains were seen as likely to intensify the pressure of work or expose organisational practices to greater scrutiny and accountability. Education was a notable exception: Here, there was broad agreement that expanding digital provision is both positive and necessary. By contrast, digital services aimed at facilitating communication were explicitly ruled out.

In many countries, digital transformation in prisons takes place in an environment characterised by scarce resources, overcrowding and staff shortages. Prison sentences are often served in old buildings without adequate infrastructure. Prisons tend to be highly stagnant institutions: Beyond material constraints, the institutional culture of correctional staff tends to slow down or impede digital transformation (Ross et al., 2024), even in more progressive and technologically advanced prisons, such as those of Finland (Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2024). Resistance from staff arises especially when there are concerns that digital transformation could disrupt established roles (Knight et al., 2024). This disruptive potential has been

observed in a Belgian prison where all cells are equipped with PrisonCloud devices: Ethnographic research revealed changing power relations between incarcerated people and correctional staff, resulting in a decrease of authority and discretionary power for the new "screen-level bureaucrats" (Beyens & Geerts, 2026; Robberechts & Beyens, 2020). Thus, the implementation of ICT creates further paradoxes, as the tools intended to modernise and humanise the carceral environment eventually increase isolation and undermine the "relational texture" and "dynamic security" that are essential for a truly humane prison (Pardon & Beyens, 2026).

Digital technologies therefore do not simply challenge the logic of the total institution but may simultaneously reinforce it. While ICT can expand access to information, education, and communication, it may also restructure everyday interactions in ways that reduce face-to-face contact between incarcerated people and staff. In this sense, digitalisation may both soften and intensify the institutional characteristics of prisons, altering the balance between autonomy, control, and relational governance within carceral settings.

The importance of correctional staff in the change process cannot be overstated—their collaboration and commitment are a prerequisite for successful digital transformation (Mufarreh et al., 2022). Even though digitalisation may, once successfully implemented, reduce the workload for employees, it is very challenging to gain their support for the change process. While other observational studies and pilot projects flourish in light of the Hawthorne effect, i.e., the phenomenon in which people change or improve their behaviour simply because they know they are being studied (Roethlisberger et al., 1939/1976), we observed considerable passive resistance by correctional staff and other factors slowing down the process. In spite of a motivated team, an available budget and the willingness to implement the PrisonCloud in the pilot project, why were only a few services ultimately implemented in Austria?

Beyond acute staff shortages, overcrowding and the institutional culture described above, the main obstacle to the introduction of any communication tools was the absence of a strategic commitment from the prison administration and political decision-makers. It is not sufficient for prison governors to express support for more ICT in prison during a group discussion. Rather, a clear strategic and political mandate is required to advance the digital modernisation of prisons, together with a strong commitment and the willingness to assume responsibility, particularly in the face of powerful trade unions and a public that is sceptical about spending money on people in custody (Ross et al., 2024).

Therefore, digital transformation in prisons cannot be understood as a purely technical process but must also be seen as political and normative decisions about the purpose of punishment. Decisions on which digital tools should be introduced inevitably reflect broader priorities within penal policy: whether prisons primarily aim to ensure security and control or whether they also seek to actively promote rehabilitation and social reintegration (Fedorczyk, 2024). In times of tight budgets and austerity, justifying investment in the prison system becomes even more difficult. In contexts where, as in Austria, there is no clear commitment to digital rehabilitation, security concerns, institutional inertia and the prevailing staff culture tend to obstruct reforms. Digital rehabilitation will only become established in practice if it is recognised as an integral part of rehabilitation and preparation for release, and valued at least as highly as safety, order, and control.

Even when a clear political commitment to digital rehabilitation allows for broader innovations, such as in Belgium, Finland, or Berlin, the introduction of digital tools and services in prison is in itself insufficient to

strengthen rehabilitation and social inclusion. On the contrary, research has shown that digitalisation in prison does not automatically reduce inequalities and barriers (Beyens & Geerts, 2026; McKay & Macintosh, 2024). Digital illiteracy is not spontaneously "cured" by introducing technology but may even impede incarcerated people from using the digital platform at all. Moreover, digitalisation itself may produce new forms of inequality within prisons. Access to devices, digital skills and financial resources varies considerably among incarcerated people, meaning that the benefits of digital services may not be distributed evenly. As a result, digitalisation may unintentionally create new forms of digital stratification within prison populations, reinforcing existing social inequalities rather than reducing them.

Finally, we should not succumb to technological solutionism and the belief that social problems can easily be resolved by using technology (Knight et al., 2024). A prison system that is generally not rehabilitation-oriented will not become so through technology. Instead of relying on technology alone, we should focus on creating the conditions for rehabilitation and inclusion. This aim should then be supported by all possible means, including technological measures. In this sense, digital technologies should be understood not as a substitute for rehabilitation-oriented prison policies but as one possible tool within a broader institutional framework that prioritises social inclusion, education, and meaningful preparation for release. Without such structural commitments, digital innovation risks becoming another layer of technological modernisation that leaves the underlying dynamics of the prison system largely unchanged.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to their sensitive nature and because data sharing was not covered by the informed consent obtained from participants.

LLMs Disclosure

Generative AI tools provided by the University of Innsbruck were used selectively for language editing and translation, as the authors are non-native English speakers. These tools were implemented as a secure on-premise solution, ensuring that no data were transmitted to external providers. All substantive content, analyses, and interpretations were developed by the authors, who take full responsibility for the manuscript.

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