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Media literacy behind bars

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A QUESTION TO START

Imagine spending years with almost no internet access.

On the day you are released, your phone shows you a viral video.

How would you know if it is real?

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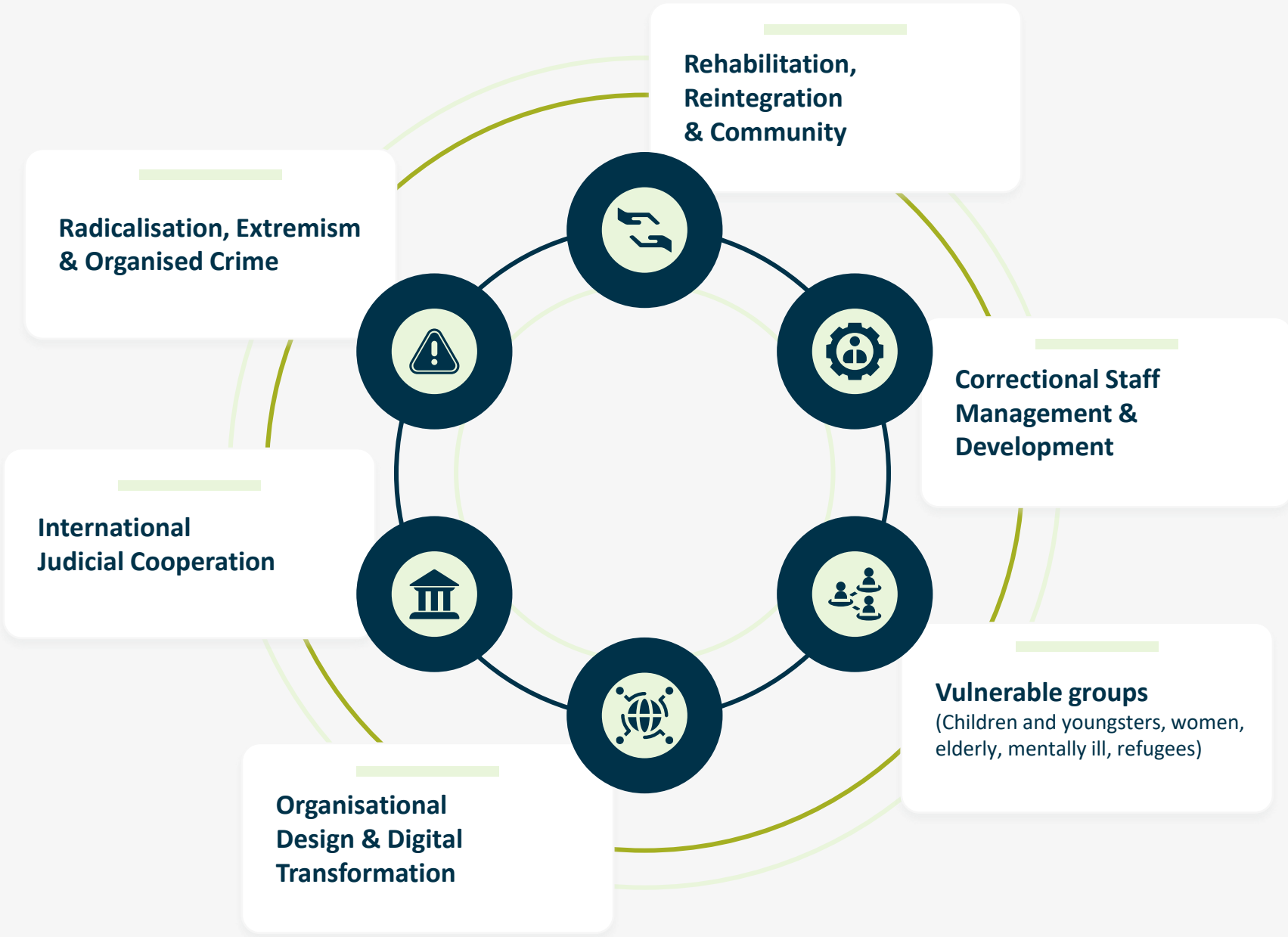
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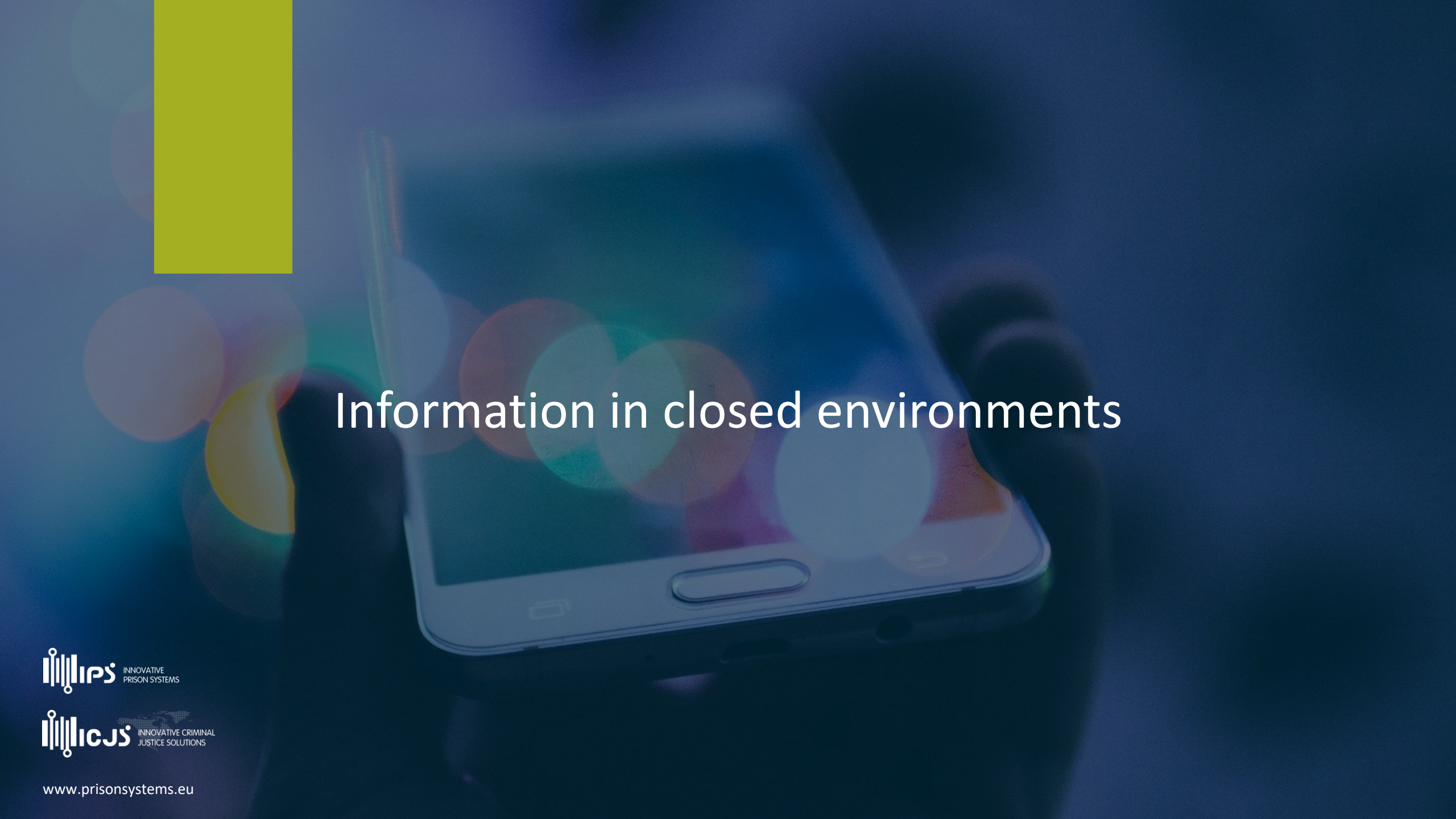
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Rehabilitation, Reintegration & Community
Radicalisation, Extremism & Organised Crime
Correctional Staff Management & Development
International Judicial Cooperation
Vulnerable groups
(Children and youngsters, women, elderly, mentally ill, refugees)
Organisational Design & Digital Transformation



Information in closed environments

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Closed settings

Restricted · curated · monitored

In custody, access to information is restricted, curated and monitored, and this shapes how people learn to judge what they read and hear.

People in prison establishments tend to have limited access to information and low levels of media literacy, critical thinking and digital skills. This means they often cannot check claims made by other incarcerated individuals or by outside contacts (Abrams, 2006; Mears & Travis, 2004; Rayme, 2018).

After release, the situation reverses: there is less monitoring, more internet access and more unreliable sources. This leaves people who have just been released, especially young people, highly exposed.



INSIDE: restricted internet access

INSIDE: limited digital education

INSIDE: few ways to verify claims

AFTER RELEASE: sudden, unfiltered exposure to online content

AFTER RELEASE: stigma, education gaps and a fast-changing media landscape

The evidence

- Young people
- Online risks
- Credibility
- Access in custody

Young people receive online information every day, yet many struggle to judge its credibility. In custody, the gap widens.

97%

of young people in the EU are online

50%

of 15-24s do not cross-check doubtful posts

¾

of young people could not assess online veracity

Digital deserts

How youth detention centers are described (Portugal)

Sources: Eurostat (2025); Eurobarometer Social Media Survey (2025); UNICEF (2021); Brites & Castro, Media and Communication (2022).



Digitalising prison education in Europe

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Europe: from offline to online

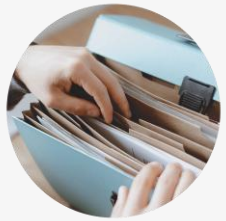
TRIANGLE (PT · NL · BE)

Secure digital platform for vocational and digital skills for young people in closed institutions; piloted at Navarro de Paiva Educational Centre, Lisbon (IPS, 2024)



Smart Prison (Finland)

Personal laptops, whitelisted internet, e-learning and video calls, based on the principles of normality and equality (JUSTICE TRENDS, 2021)



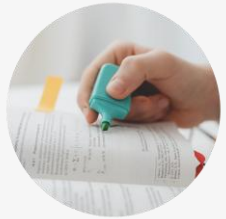
BLEEP (European prisons)

Blended learning environment to build basic digital skills for prisoners and ex-prisoners, linked to employability (IPS, 2022)



UNICRI ‘Digital Rehabilitation in Prisons’

The core challenge is cultural, not technological: tools need to fit prison values, workflows and real user needs (JUSTICE TRENDS, 2024)



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RESILIENCE

Why media literacy?

- Critical thinking acts as a protective factor against misinformation and radicalisation, especially in information-scarce settings.

1

Radicalisation goes mainstream

Extremist narratives now shape the speech, humour and emotional tone of youth culture (Polizzi, 2025).

2

Synthetic content

AI-generated audio and video make it harder for young people to judge credibility (Anderson, Faverio & Teens, 2023).

3

Fertile ground

Traits linked to conspiracy and disinformation narratives are present in criminal justice populations (Pan et al., 2021).

4

An ‘inoculation’ effect

Media literacy, taught early, can protect against harmful media influence (Chen, 2010; Kupersmidt et al., 2010).

5

A route to reintegration

It supports informed choices, adaptation to modern life and lower recidivism (Zamoșteanu et al., 2022).

6

Still a gap

Juvenile justice programmes prioritise behavioural and vocational training over media literacy (Contreras-Pulido, 2022).

APPROACHES

What works?



Lessons from our research

1

Learn through play

Gamified formats build engagement, teamwork and critical thinking, and let people fail safely (Nicholson, 2015; Cho et al., 2023).

2

Tell stories

Podcasts and storytelling reach young people where they are; two-thirds of young listeners want to explore topics further (Infinite Dial, 2021).

3

Train the professionals

Detention and aftercare staff need tools and confidence to facilitate media literacy themselves.

4

Link to community

NGOs and aftercare services sustain progress made in detention and reduce the risk of exclusion (Hobbs, 2010; UNICEF, 2021).

RIGHTS & ETHICS

Navigating the tensions

- *“Decisions should be driven by human needs rather than the enticement and promise of technology.”* UNICRI (2024), in JUSTICE TRENDS



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Security vs access

Security and privacy concerns keep the internet “a distant utopia” for most detained young people (IPS, 2023).

How much access is enough to learn?

Curation vs agency

Whitelists protect, but people leave prison into an uncurated information world.

Can a curated environment teach people to judge uncurated information?

Surveillance vs trust

Digital rehabilitation “can do good but also … create or exacerbate various forms of digital inequality and harm” (UNICRI, 2024).

How do we encourage open questioning when use is monitored?

Protection vs participation

Young people have the right to education “designed to prepare them for return to society” (UN Havana Rules, 1990).

Who decides what is safe to learn, and with whom?

TO TAKE AWAY

Conclusion

Media literacy is not an add-on to digital access. It is what makes access safe and meaningful, inside and after release.

1. **Media literacy is part of the right to education, and of preparing people for release.**
2. **Digital access without critical skills shifts the risk to the day of release.**
3. **Engaging, social and game-based formats suit information-scarce settings and the youth target group.**
4. **Continuity matters: connect custody, aftercare and the community.**

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THANK YOU

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