

<b>The Telegram (St. John's, NL)</b>				Order/Commande
				<b>125647</b>
Date <b>24.11.2010</b>	Circ. <b>27412</b>	Page <b>A1</b>	<b>1 / 3</b>	

**MEDIA/POLITICS**

# Controlling the frequency

*MUN professors examine influence of open-line radio on public policy*

By **ROB ANTLE**  
THE TELEGRAM

As many as one in every four residents of Newfoundland and Labrador tune in to hear the dulcet tones of Randy Simms as he moderates calls to VOCM's morning open-line radio show.

The numbers drop for the station's other two call-in shows — "Backtalk" and "Nightline" — but are still significant, according to recent ratings, with tens and tens of thousands of people tuning in.

Much of the chatter on the airwaves deals with politics and provincial affairs.

That led two Memorial University professors to ask a question: what impact does talk radio have

on public policy in Newfoundland and Labrador?

MUN political scientists Alex Marland and Matthew Kerby began their research into the local open-line phenomenon nearly three years ago.

"Good research involves taking a look at things that maybe people aren't looking at, and talking about hot-button issues," Marland explains.

See **TEAM**, page A3

*Team conducted in-depth interviews*

... Continued from page A1



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Date <b>24.11.2010</b>	Circ. <b>27412</b>	Page <b>A1</b>	<b>2 / 3</b>

“This is naturally a thing that is a huge part of life in Newfoundland and Labrador, a huge part of governance, and yet nobody is researching it. Nobody is looking at it. So it kind of begs the need for somebody to do it.”

Their findings?

Open-line has little impact on the formation of big-picture public policy, but does have a strong effect on government behaviour, with political actors paying “considerable attention” to what is said on VOXM.

That has translated into partisan efforts to control the frequency, as it were — intense monitoring of open-line programs for rapid reaction to issues that may arise; promoting party positions through stacking the lines to suggest grassroots support; and using the airwaves to avoid answering difficult questions from other media outlets.

As part of their research, the **MUN** duo conducted 23 in-depth interviews between December 2007 and May 2008.

Among those they invited to speak were current and former politicians (including party leaders), senior party officials, bureaucrats, cabinet ministers and journalists, including talk radio hosts.

#### **Premier didn't participate**

Premier Danny Williams and his communications adviser declined the invitation.

Williams has bristled in the past at suggestions that open line is playing an important role in government decision-making.

Most notably, a former deputy minister of health told the Cameron Inquiry in 2008 that open-line shows influenced how the Williams administration handled botched breast cancer tests, with staffers manipulating the medium to deliver key messages to the public.

The premier reacted by calling that suggestion “offensive and stupid.”

The researchers concluded that, despite those protestations, talk radio can have an impact on public policy decision-making in the province.

“Given that the results were not overly surprising — given that the results effectively confirmed that there is an elephant in the room — it was surprising that the premier's office was reluctant to talk to us at all,” Kerby told *The Telegram*.

“The results are not incendiary; they are not overly controversial. They more or less confirm what we already know, but they con-

firm (this) in a systematic manner.”

Many of those interviewed by Marland and Kerby expressed frustration at open-line radio's perceived importance at the government level.

The focus on talk radio began during the Tobin years, and continued through the Grimes and Williams eras.

One respondent, the researchers found, felt the government was “paying someone to monitor 8.5 hours of crap” every day.

#### **Caller pool limited**

Marland and Kerby found the limited pool of callers to open line presents “a very serious credibility gap,” with line-stacking so prevalent it is believed the lines are monopolized by a pool of just 30 to 100 callers.

“The prevalence of political calls questions whether the openness and spirit of talk radio is supplanted by parties' efforts to control the shows' content,” the **MUN** researchers note in their paper.

However, there are also “unfiltered” calls from communities that provide local information politicians and bureaucrats may not know about.

While broader policy issues are not changed by open-line, they found, smaller problems can be resolved.

Those can include simple things like repairing potholes or fixing cheque-processing errors.

But cabinet ministers interviewed by Marland and Kerby felt that open-line chatter has only a “finite impact” on government policy.

“I can't say that we've ever made a policy change. ... I don't know of any time that we've had a policy decision that's been driven by open line,” they were told. “I really don't.”

The exception is when the premier steps in.

“Unless the premier is involved, most ministers are powerless to effect major policy change unilaterally, in part because of the length of the cabinet process and any resulting legislative activity,” the **MUN** professors note.

While it happened after their research period, a recent example illustrates this point.

This summer, the premier announced on open line he was personally opposed to online casino gambling. His announcement effectively short-circuited the cabinet process and became government policy.



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The two **MUN** profs also found that open-line radio is a bastion of what has been dubbed patriotic correctness.

“Certain words or expressions are publicly unpalatable; critics are marginalized, and information-based dissent is treasonous to the premier and therefore to Newfoundland,” they wrote.

One party official told them that callers feel “we always get (screwed).”

Even a VOXM employee bemoaned the tone.

One told the researchers “it’s just a given that Ottawa treats us badly, or that foreign fishermen raped the fish stocks off the coast of Newfoundland. It doesn’t go beyond that.

They don’t want to hear about our own culpability. They don’t want to hear how we failed to take responsibility for our own actions.”

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#### **Paper published**

Marland and Kerby’s paper — titled “The audience is listening: talk radio and public policy in Newfoundland and Labrador” — has just been published by the academic journal *Media, Culture & Society*.

The journal can be found online at [mcs.sagepub.com](http://mcs.sagepub.com).

Marland and Kerby plan to expand their research in the area, focusing next on line-stacking, and the government’s media presence when pollsters are in the field.