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“I Am VOWR”: Living Radio in Newfoundland¹

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In a small Newfoundland outpost, a little girl in pigtailed goes to Sunday School, by radio. A fishing boat, rocking off the Gaspé coast, picks up schooner reports and news of Newfoundland sent by a radio announcer in a church basement in St. John’s. And, sitting in a wheel chair in the Capital City, an invalid has a warm little glow of pride because her small contribution has helped finance a service unique in Newfoundland and one that has gone a long way toward cutting down the lonelines [*sic*] of the outpost Newfoundlander — Wesley United Church’s unique station VOWR. (Adelaide Leitch, “Radio in a Church,” *Atlantic Guardian* [1951], 34)

I am your radio station. In the quiet moments of your life when Sabbath calm replaces the noise and strain of the week’s striving, I seek you across lakes and forests, over mountains and seas. I find my way into your homes, into your lighthouses, where you live lonely lives that others may pursue their course in safety: into your logging camps, into your ships as you sail along your rugged coast or hunt the seal on the ice floes. I seek you everywhere, regardless of your class or creed. I remind you of a love that is deeper than the deepest ocean. I sing you the songs of the spirit I am VOWR — your station! (*VOWR 800 Radio*, www.vowr.org, accessed 20 June 2006)

IN BROADCASTING HISTORIES, the import of church-affiliated stations has often been underestimated, perhaps because they are thought, erroneously, to serve a narrow spectrum of society. Their own publicity may contribute to this impression. For instance, depictions like those above of VOWR (Voice of Wesley Radio) as a community radio station faithfully serving the “lonely” of Newfoundland are com-

mon. By examining and contextualizing VOWR's mandate, procedures, and programming, however, it is clear that nostalgic portraits of the station as solace for isolated outpost residents are inaccurate. VOWR is not a simple romantic holdover from the past. Carefully negotiating both sacred and secular programming for contemporary listeners in rural and urban locales is a complex business, and an important consideration in this study.

I encountered VOWR 800 AM when I arrived in Newfoundland in 2003 and found that I was living a few doors down from the Patrick Street station headquarters at Wesley United Church. I was drawn to VOWR's musical programming, and fascinated by the intimacy that deejays shared with their listeners. How could a small radio station run entirely by volunteers continue to be viable through more than 80 years of existence? What enabled VOWR to remain vital, despite changes in Newfoundland, amongst its listenership, its volunteers, and its relationship to its governing body? How did the depiction of the station on its website relate to its day-to-day operation?

I followed station programming closely, paying attention to musical choices, song introductions, and advertisements, as well as pre-recorded programs brought in from elsewhere. In addition, I interviewed and talked to station volunteers, who were generous informants.² In this paper, I look at what makes VOWR more than a nostalgic stereotype of local community radio.

VOWR BACKGROUND

VOWR has played an important role in Newfoundland since the beginning of the radio era. The first broadcast was on 20 July 1924, when the station was called 8WMC (Swain 1999, xvii). The station was the idea of Reverend Joseph Joyce, minister of Wesley Methodist, later Wesley United Church [WMC], its object being to communicate "humanitarian and religious values to WMC and Newfoundland" (Swain 1999, xi). Earlier efforts to build connections with members of the congregation who could not attend regular services had taken the form of telephone hook-ups — home telephone lines connected to the church sanctuary made possible "the transmission of Sunday worship services to the aged, sick and shut-in members of his [Joyce's] congregation" (Swain 1999, 59). While these telephone hook-ups connected parishioners nearby, Joyce wanted to make services accessible to "the isolated people of the outports, the chronic invalids, the older folk of the island who found walking even a short distance a chore" (Leitch 34).

Not all members of Joyce's congregation were supportive of his "dabbling in this new-fangled contraption" (Pitt and Pitt 47), believing that "such activity must surely be the devil's own work" (Swain 2003). But over time, and given the station's success, VOWR became an important part of Wesley's ministry. It also pro-

vided information about local events, and in this way was typical of early religious radio in Newfoundland:

The religious radio stations carried an unusual number of public service programs such as death notices, emergency messages on local disasters, notices of itinerant ministers' speaking appointments, and news items that later were cared for by the newspapers and weekly journals. In short, the programming was geared to meet the unique spiritual and social needs precipitated by the widespread isolation of the period. (Knutson 102)

VOWR was not alone in using airwaves to build connections among Newfoundlanders. In the early 1930s, six stations were operating in St. John's, and the commercial broadcasters VOCM (Voice of the Common Man) and VONF (Voice of Newfoundland) were among the most important.³ The Commission of Government, which replaced responsible government in 1934, decided that independent commercial radio was not the best means through which to engage Newfoundland's population, and in order to "improve the quality of the commercial programming and to use broadcasting to foster social and cultural change that would make the people self-supporting" (Webb 1998) took over VONF in 1939 to form the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland [BCN]. BCN broadcast a range of programs deemed to have commercial, educational, and entertainment value (Webb 1998), and accepted advertising and locally produced material; for example, J.R. Smallwood's *Barrelman* program received daily play (Hiscock 1994). In 1949, BCN was taken over by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC].

VOWR is, along with VOCM, one of the survivors of pre-confederation radio broadcasting. No longer organized and supported solely by the church, VOWR is in its 82nd year of operation and still broadcasts from Wesley United Church in St. John's. The station uses a 10,000-watt transmitter housed on Mt. Scio Road, and has recently built an addition onto its Patrick Street headquarters. Within the past ten years, the volunteer-operated station has become a 24-hour broadcaster, using its airwaves to promote a mandate variously described as humanitarian, educational, entertaining, unifying, and ecumenical.⁴ Wesley United Church maintains the ownership of VOWR's broadcasting license, and the original station motto "We Serve" persists. Religious programming continues to play a role in station broadcasting, but VOWR is equally known for country music, "hits" from the 1950s to the 1970s, and local talent.⁵

THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND THE NEWFOUNDLAND CONTEXT

To frame this study, it is useful to consider current discourse on community and religious broadcasting in North America. While most analyses have been American-

based, their approaches, methodologies, and interpretive models provide relevant questions and offer points of comparison and contrast.⁶

Lewis and Booth's frequently referenced study, *The Invisible Medium: Public, Commercial and Community Radio* (1990), provides a basic structural framework with which to consider the relationship between VOWR and its constituents. Fairchild's (2001) comparison of Canadian and American broadcasting models takes this one step further, focusing on community radio, and bringing to light a series of relevant issues. Finally, Dorgan's *Airwaves of Zion* (1993) provides an overview of religious broadcasting against which VOWR's programming choices may be viewed.

Lewis and Booth identify an "invisible medium" comprised of three divergent models: "Free Market" (commercial), "Public Service Broadcasting" (public), and "listener supported, community, public, free or alternative radio" (4). According to these distinctions, both commercial and public service broadcasting models imagine their public(s) to comprise "the great audience" (58),⁷ perceiving the listener as an object to be "captured for advertisers" or "improved as citizens," respectively. Community radio, by contrast, treats the "audience" as both listener and participant in its broadcasting.

Within this framework, public and commercial stations maintain distinct identities. Making reference to the BBC's (British Broadcasting Corporation) public service radio, the authors note that the audience is here considered "clay to be moulded rather than a market to be exploited" (87) as the station presents an elite culture "with the avowed intention of converting the masses to it" (69).⁸ This notion of betterment through education is particularly pertinent in the exploration of radio development in Newfoundland, given the Commission's introduction of the public utility within five years of gaining power.

As several have argued, access to radio communication offered relief from the difficult conditions faced by Newfoundland's isolated coastal settlements: "In Newfoundland and Labrador radio met a multitude of tastes. The exposure to good music, education, cultural development, medical and religious services, telephone and postal substitution, and a direct link with the outside world [was provided]" (Swain 1999, 66).

Swain's emphasis on the radio as a medium for unification echoes the sentiments of numerous key figures in the development of Newfoundland radio. Perhaps the best known is J.R. Smallwood, who recognized the influence of his nightly monologue as "the Barrelman":

I had spent many years broadcasting and I knew the magic of it. The sheer, sheer magic, especially in a place like Newfoundland with so many isolated people. Radio, I've always contended, was invented by God especially for Newfoundland, and having done it for Newfoundland, He graciously allowed it to be used in other parts of the world. It was *meant* for Newfoundland. It was meant for a remote and isolated people

who never met. Who never saw each other. Radio was a great unifying thing. (qtd. in McNeil and Wolfe 34)⁹

Lewis and Booth's third model — community radio — takes the notion of an imagined unity across geographic space even further. Here, the listener exists as both subject and participant, with the station serving overlapping communities, and even working to mediate between them. The participation of volunteers, for example, “is not the result of cost-saving calculations but is an essential means of contact with the community or communities involved, ensuring that they are represented in the day-to-day running of the station” (9). Booth and Lewis stress that being “local” is not a primary defining principle. Instead, the ability to forge connections between disparate groups is central to a functioning community medium, as it is thus able to “break through the isolation of separate constituencies” (191).

In his recent book, *Community Radio and Public Culture* (2001), Charles Fairchild offers a comparison of Canadian and American models of community radio, contrasting specific case studies in the two countries. While maintaining a distinction between the two countries, Fairchild argues that the community radio station in North America is a “marginal institution.” With bell hooks,¹⁰ Fairchild connects this status to its potential as a locus for counter hegemonic discourse. Following the lead of Lewis and Booth, he distinguishes “community radio” from its commercial and public service counterparts, arguing that unlike public and commercial models, wherein audience and media are polarized (selling audience as a product, or educating a perceived “monolithic mass”), “the goal for most [community] stations is to create relations between and within the station and its constituencies that continually move towards the erasure of binary distinction between the media and the audience” (101). Noteworthy here is Fairchild's use of the plural “constituencies,” recognizing the variety inherent within any group of listeners. Basing his findings on a case study of community radio in the United States, Fairchild identifies four issues essential to the effectiveness of community radio policy:

1. The role and position of volunteers
2. Acceptable sources of income
3. Character and philosophy of program scheduling
4. Extent of local power in programming and decision-making (158)

The emphasis on forging connections between audiences described by Lewis and Booth, and the issues Fairchild identifies, offer useful frameworks for examining the manner in which VOWR acts within and among its listeners.

A VISIT TO VOWR

It is after 11:00 p.m. on a cool November night, and here I sit: in the control room of VOWR, eavesdropping with permission on the making of “Music for Relaxation,” a late-night show hosted this evening by Ted Rowe. To my left, I see Norma Zimmer smiling at me from her place next to the Victor label, about to sing the “Most Requested Songs from the Lawrence Welk Show.” To my right, Vic Damone’s “Towering Feeling” sits next to “Doctor” Denis Lepage, an LP bearing the telling orange sticker that promises the partial fulfillment of CRTC regulations for Canadian content. I look up a little and see a mammoth collection of Marantz “fully independent double cassette deck” players, ready to take over when the clock strikes 12:00 ... Voice of Wesley Radio on a Monday night.

The phone rings and Ted answers. First, a request for Elvis — I hear only half of the conversation: “(Chuckle) I’m afraid we’re not allowed to play any more Elvis around here —” The phone rings again, this time a request for Dick van Dyke. Moments later a regular caller: “Could you please play ‘I love Paris’ — the version by Doris Day?” Rowe doesn’t need to leave his chair, as the album is already at his fingertips. He plays the song, and generously receives the call that follows only minutes later from the same listener, wanting to discuss the performance.

1) The Role and Position of Volunteers

VOWR is a radio station without a payroll. With 80 volunteers, 40 of whom are “regulars,” the announcers, programmers, and operators represent “an amazing cross-section of people ... United, Catholic, Jewish — we don’t ask” (Tessier 2003). While the station remains affiliated with the United Church, John Tessier, who has been with the station since 1981 (acting as program manager for fourteen years), asserts that “religion is not a pre-requisite”; instead, a commitment to the station and its service to the community is required — volunteers “have to want to do it.”

Having spent much of his career in radio and television broadcasting industries, Tessier can attest to the differences a volunteer staff can make to an organization. He notes that whereas many paid workers do their job in order to “make a living,” the people at VOWR “want to be here. It’s a different scenario — I don’t have to fight with people to do their job!” As most volunteers are retired, ranging in age from 50 to 80 years, the turnover rate is also quite low, with the most common reasons for departure being a new job, a scheduling conflict, or death. During our interview, Tessier spoke sympathetically of the few volunteers who had died within the last year, at the same time realizing that their departure was part of the station’s natural rhythm. Interestingly, later conversations with volunteers brought to light the practical implications of volunteer deaths. As each contributes something unique to the station and its programming, positions are not simply taken over by a

new volunteer. The evangelistic ministry of the Reverend Currey's *Captain's Call* program, for example — relating shipwrecks and marine themes to gospel messages — has continued to be played, even after his death.

Furthermore, the fact that the radio station is volunteer-run means that the distinction between “us” and “them” — essential to the success of commercial radio marketing — is less easily determined. Each participant in the day-to-day activities of VOWR represents both media and listener, subject and participant, creating continuity in the life of the station.¹¹ The maintenance of this connection, between station operators and the constituencies they serve, is a significant element in the volunteer's position at VOWR and is reminiscent of the “community radio” model described by Lewis and Booth.

Ted Rowe, for example, volunteers for VOWR two evenings every month, and knows many listeners by name. He can tell you who will call when (nearly to the minute), for what reason, and whether to expect a follow-up “what-did-you-think-of-that-one?” call after a song request has been aired. Ted's interaction with listeners who call in to his show and his subsequent willingness to play requested tracks reflects not only a willingness to offer his audience the sounds that they want, but an interest in their stories as well. The intimacy identified here is not merely the sonic result of a closely placed microphone during his late-night segment, but of tangible interaction between deejay and listener. “We are different from most commercial stations where evening music is pre-recorded. Here you can call in ... For every one that calls, there are probably two to three hundred that don't.” While some listeners call with particular requests, others want the announcer's opinion of a track. Still others call simply to say, “Thank you for the beautiful music and God bless” (Rowe 2003).

2) Economic Viability: Acceptable Sources of Income

“We don't solicit for advertising — people come to us” (Tessier 2003). It took only a short time for my assumption that VOWR (a station with little advertising and no commercial jingles) would have a financial story of woe, to be entirely refuted. Most significantly, the volunteer staff at VOWR eliminates the need for an exorbitant yearly budget. Still, the station is dependent on advertising and fundraising campaigns to maintain economic viability. According to John Tessier, VOWR works with an annual budget of approximately \$100,000 and operates without a deficit.¹²

Bringing in approximately one-fifth of the station's yearly budget, says Tessier, are the annual radio auction and “turkey tea” dinner. The radio auction is something of an institution at VOWR, serving as the station's central fundraiser since its inception in 1947. The studio broadcasts three hours of phone-line bidding “on live air” for three consecutive evenings. Donated items range from massage therapy to cheese puffs, gasoline coupons to golf lessons. The items for sale are featured in a full-page ad in *The Telegram* on each day of the event. By using this

multi-media approach, VOWR is able to advertise the auction while giving credit to its sponsors in a creative and reciprocal manner. The real-time broadcasting of the event reinforces the living character of VOWR.

Significantly, VOWR also benefits from individual donations and corporate sponsorships. Individual donations often take the form of monetary contributions, but other gifts have also been offered: potatoes, fish, and coal were received “in the early days” (*VOWR 800 Radio*), and more recently, LP record collections (Tessier 2003).

VOWR is selective in the corporate sponsorships it will accept; it will not air pre-recorded advertisements deemed by management not to be in keeping with the station mandate. For example, VOWR will not air advertisements for drinking or gambling establishments. Despite this selectivity, corporate sponsorship is not unheard of, and several St. John’s funeral homes sponsor VOWR programs.¹³

In order to better understand the funding choices made by VOWR, it is necessary to consider the station’s philosophy for programming. While Fairchild describes the subtle (and not so subtle) influences to which community stations sponsored by external grant organizations are susceptible (45), a working alternative can be identified in VOWR. The station is able to determine the sources of income it deems acceptable. It is funded by its own constituents. Hence the philosophy, character, and financing of VOWR do not conflict with one another, making viable the maintenance of continuity between them.

3) Character and Philosophy of Program Scheduling

Religious Programming

Despite its geographic distance from VOWR, Dorgan’s *Airwaves of Zion* provides a useful starting point in examining the station’s religious programming. With his research based in the southern United States, Dorgan defines the *Airwaves of Zion* as “a genre of locally produced live religious broadcasting that emanates from the AM stations of Appalachia” (2). Characterizing the programming of these stations, Dorgan identifies a number of key features, aptly serving to distinguish rural evangelistic and emotional radio programming from the now familiar televangelistic networks. Most *Airwaves of Zion* networks, for example, do not hold ties to a main-line umbrella denomination, but operate as a conglomeration of interdependently working individual groups and sub-groups. Dorgan observes that most participants are not formally trained, and that an improvisatory “led by the spirit” tone permeates the programming.¹⁴ In many cases, programming serves station volunteers as much as it does listeners. Given the personal themes and messages that result, *Airwaves of Zion* stations forge a sense of mutual intimacy between listener and broadcaster; for example, listeners are mentioned by name during song dedications and hospitable greetings (10-11).

Airwaves of Zion might be usefully compared with VOWR. In each case, volunteers play a predominant — if not exclusive — role in the station’s functioning. Operators and announcers are given much independence in programming decisions, and formal training is not a prerequisite for participation. Significantly, the mutual intimacy described by Dorgan might also be attributed to VOWR.

I would argue, however, that while VOWR exhibits many of these surface features, its program variety is not the result of program improvisation, nor the fragmented conjoining of individual groups; instead it reflects a living radio organism. Whereas the stations Dorgan observes are independent of specific church affiliations, VOWR is directly linked to the United Church conference. While structurally, the station is financially independent of the church, its programming decisions are shaped to some extent by the statutes of the United Church of Canada, represented by six members of Wesley United Church on its board of twelve. The programming issues that result — centred largely around censorship, advertising, and church association — require careful negotiation between VOWR and its affiliates.

VOWR is not rigidly tied to the United Church, however. When asked about ecumenicism, Tessier responds: “I guess you could say that our programming is ecumenical — but I’m not supposed to use that word any more ... one of the churches doesn’t like it. I’m not sure why — ” going on to note: “half a dozen religions supply us [VOWR] with programs” (2003).

As suggested by Dorgan, there are many approaches to Christian programming. The unique character of VOWR’s programming is clear when juxtaposed with a second “religious” radio station in St. John’s, the Seventh Day Adventist broadcaster, VOAR. Forecasting necessary changes to religious broadcasting, Knutson writes in his 1969 study:

While VOWR and VOAR still have a large minority of the St. John’s listeners who are interested in the typical church service broadcast, it appears that if they are to hold their own in the broadcasting field, much of the religious programming will have to follow the larger stations’ adaptations to the short, segmented type of religious service. In addition, this programming will have to meet the competition of television by including additional topics (news, education, etc.) and a variety of approaches to Religious Radio Broadcasting. (110)

Both VOWR and VOAR include external programs in their schedules, however their respective approaches differ. Whereas VOAR gives much airtime to “Christian contemporary” artists, interspersing recordings with one-minute segments from *Back to the Bible*, VOWR maintains a daily schedule with programs that are both religious and secular. The programs range in length from 30 minutes to two hours. Religious segments such as *The Lutheran Hour*, *Sunday’s Hymns at Eventide*, or the Saturday morning *Country Gospel Hour* extend beyond the United Church community. One might suggest that VOAR has followed many of the steps Knutson

deemed necessary in order to ‘hold their own,’ utilizing short segments and sound bites to engage the listener. By contrast, VOWR — while maintaining its connection to the United Church conference — uses religious programming as *part* of a consistent but varied presentation that is primarily Christian and ecumenical but also includes some secular programming.¹⁵

What to Play?

There is ample evidence that a well-defined moral code governs decisions about what to play at VOWR. Succinctly paraphrasing VOWR’s programming philosophy and affiliation with the United Church, Tessier explains that “we don’t play any songs about drinking or gambling” (2003).¹⁶ Looking through the station library, one finds extensive evidence of this, as numerous CDs, records, and cassettes with questionable content have been marked with a black marker, (or carefully placed white-out), thereby eliminating potentially offensive tracks from song lists.¹⁷ Programming choices are also limited by the contents of the station library. For instance, Ted Rowe pointed out the “strange” absence of any Beatles albums. While the Beatles are one of many bands not represented in VOWR’s music library, the significance of their absence is augmented by their popularity during the 1960s and 1970s, formative decades in VOWR’s programming.

The issue of censorship in station programming is not new to VOWR, despite changes to its parameters. During the station’s early years, Reverend Joyce heard the “profane, if not immoral” foxtrot on VOWR’s airwaves, and was appalled to the point that he assumed programming veto power to avoid similar problems in the future (Pitt and Pitt 49-50). This example illustrates not only changes to the parameters of music deemed acceptable by the station (one would not be surprised to hear the foxtrot on VOWR today), but also the unilateral control held by Joyce in the station’s early years. While Tessier factors significantly in VOWR’s programming choices, the growth of the station has meant that volunteers also play a role in determining which repertoire is deemed acceptable.

The previous example ties in closely with a second VOWR programming guideline, which relates more specifically to the sound that VOWR emits than to lyrical content. In order to maintain a VOWR “sound,” the station does not use pre-recorded commercials, or any jingles “with the ‘bang bang bang’ music” — “it’s like hitting you over the head!” This implies an aversion toward musics with a driving rhythm. While most local businesses are aware of VOWR’s stance, Tessier turned away a potentially lucrative advertising campaign on the grounds that they insisted on the use of an imported commercial: “We turned them down ... we didn’t want to begin *that sound*” (emphasis added) (Tessier 2003).

But just what is VOWR's sound? Herein lies a tension between "individual" and "corporate" identities. Describing the benefits of a large volunteer staff, Tessier stresses that "each volunteer has a unique taste, even within the same age bracket." At the same time, he notes that a sense of accountability — a commitment to "our kind of music" — remains essential. "Generally speaking, our music is the music from the 50s to the 70s — but not all 70s music is our type of music ... We play ballads that have a *meaning* to them, a more relaxed type of music." On the one hand, station volunteers are offered freedom in choosing their respective repertoires; on the other hand, these choices are influenced by unwritten station guidelines.

Aware of the practical implications of maintaining the VOWR "sound," Rowe notes the unwritten rule that programming must follow a specific male-female-instrumental rotation pattern, and further that "We are supposed to play everything mellow, but I like to give it a little bounce every now and again. I'm a bit of a renegade that way." Rowe points out that the station is "fussy about not talking too much" as "people are listening to hear music, not to hear you talk." By adhering to this principle, Rowe is able to balance the incorporation of interesting tidbits about his program choices (often centred around what was popular "on this day" in another decade) with a continuous sound. Coupled with his integration of numerous song requests into a two-hour *Music for Relaxation* segment, the feat is praiseworthy.

What to Program?

The United Church, the program manager, as well as station volunteers and listening constituencies, all shape the programming choices made at VOWR. These forces influence, and are influenced by, the station guidelines outlined above and by the availability of various repertoires and pre-recorded programs. Even VOWR's music library embodies the interplay between station and listeners, as a listener's LP record donation may expand the station's library, or be rejected, depending on decisions made by the station manager and volunteers. How does this interaction/collaboration affect the VOWR sound?

VOWR's website describes its programming content:

Some 20% of the programming continues in the station's tradition of religious broadcasting, including live and taped church services from the City of St. John's area, taped programs from elsewhere, sacred music programs and programs of meditation. Other programming includes musical shows featuring classical, country and western, military march selections, popular music and music from the 1940's [*sic*] and 1950's [*sic*]; a guest interview show; a gardening show; a program for seniors; and a morning show of music, news and weather. (*VOWR 800 Radio*)

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Identifying program titles explicitly tied to “music” in VOWR’s program, we find the following: *Music, Music To Remember, Music Unlimited, Sunday Music, Words and Music, Matinee Variety Music, The Music Room, Music for Relaxation, Musical Moments, Music for Dreams, Music for Easy Listening, Music in the Night, Sunday Music,* and *Music and the Spoken Word*. These titles might be further broken down according to implied function, specific program content, and genre:

| Function | Content* | Genre* | Other** |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Music for Relaxation</i> | <i>Matinee Variety Music</i> | <i>Hymns of Devotion</i> | <i>Breakfast at 800</i> |
| <i>Music for Dreams</i> | <i>Words and Music</i> | <i>Country Light & Easy</i> | <i>On Parade</i> |
| <i>Music for Easy Listening</i> | <i>Variety</i> | <i>800 Country</i> | <i>Potpourri</i> |
| <i>Music to Remember</i> | <i>Music and The Spoken Word</i> | <i>Hymns at Eventide</i> | <i>Through the Years</i> |
| <i>Sing-Along Jubilee</i> | <i>Music of the Masters</i> | <i>Hymns for the Quiet Hour</i> | <i>50 Plus: The Radio Show</i> |
| <i>Evening Serenade</i> | <i>Melody Time</i> | <i>Folk Favourites</i> | <i>Lunch Break</i> |
| <i>Hymns for the Quiet Hour</i> | <i>Instrumentally Yours</i> | <i>Newfoundland Folk Sounds</i> | <i>Memory Lane</i> |
| | <i>Records at Random</i> | <i>800 Country Late Night Edition</i> | <i>Saturday at Six</i> |
| | <i>Guest Artist</i> | <i>Celtic Memories</i> | <i>Sunday Chorale</i> |

Figure 1. VOWR Program Titles.

*Titles in both the “Genre” and “Content” categories imply what will be played during their program slot. Those identified by “Genre,” however, go one step further, describing not only *what* will be played (i.e., “music,” “records,” “words”), but an associated genre/type of music as well (i.e., “country,” “hymns,” “folk”). Not all titles fit easily into one category or another. *Music of the Masters*, for example, may imply Western Classical repertoire to some listeners and not to others.

** Programs in this category do not refer to music in their title, but their content is nevertheless of a musical nature.

Religious programs are central to VOWR's schedule. In addition to the programming of hymns and country gospel music throughout the week, VOWR broadcasts a significant number of Christian programs on Sundays. These include pre-recorded shows broadcast from the station (*Captain's Call*, *Sunday Chapel*, *The Protestant Hour*), and live-to-air broadcasts from local churches (*Worship Service*). Weekday additions are found in Tuesday's *The Lutheran Hour*, and the Wednesday evening *Wesleyan Hour*.

A few programs do not fit into explicitly "music" or "religious" categories, such as *New Horizons*,¹⁸ *Guest Interview*, *Gardening Time*, *Consumer Report*, and *Search For Mental Health*.

An overview of VOWR's program titles reveals a myriad of music programs, extensive religious programming, and a few alternate (non-musical) segments. VOWR also broadcasts a mix of pre-recorded and live-to-air shows from both local and international sources.¹⁹ Pairing local religious programming with *Ecowatch*,²⁰ or local interviews with Radio Deutschwelle and *Music of the Masters*, VOWR acts as an extension of the many and varied audiences with which it connects and thus (to some extent), transcends the exclusionary elements of the "monodimensional media politics" identified by Fairchild.²¹

Local Content

VOWR's commitment to the breadth of its radio audience is shown in the numerous and particular public service announcements [PSAs]. In a single day, one might hear notices from the Alzheimers Association, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Canadian Blood Services, as well as announcements for community garage sales, fundraising recitals, or "soup & pie" suppers. The wide range of subject matter and the intimacy with which messages are relayed — both in delivery and content — suggest the participation of a specific but not necessarily Christian listening audience. Significantly, while PSAs directed to particular groups are not exclusive, diverse constituencies are represented.²²

VOWR also includes a substantial amount of music by local organizations and individuals. Each week, for example, VOWR records two church services in St. John's, broadcasting them during Sunday's *Worship Service* slot. Wesley United Church is frequently featured in these broadcasts, with Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, and Pentecostal denominations also represented. Further exemplifying a commitment to local content is the regular airplay given to folk musicians from Newfoundland. The *Lunch Break* segment — one hour in the centre of daytime programming — and early morning broadcasts of *Newfoundland Folk Sounds* serve as examples.

The Schedule

By looking more specifically at how this content fits into VOWR's weekly schedule, it is possible to get a sense of how this programming plays out:

| | Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 6:00 AM | ZMusic To Remember | ZMusic To Remember | ZMusic To Remember | ZMusic To Remember | ZMusic To Remember | ZMusic To Remember | ZMusic To Remember |
| 7:00 AM | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited |
| 7:30 AM | Instrumentally Yours | Breakfast At 800 | Breakfast At 800 | Breakfast At 800 | Breakfast At 800 | Breakfast At 800 | Breakfast At 800 |
| 8:30 AM | Captain's Call | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | On Parade |
| 9:00 AM | Sunday Chapel | | | | | | Records At Random |
| 9:30 AM | The Protestant Hour | | | | | | Country Gospel Hour |
| 10:00 AM | Hymns of Devotion | | | | | | |
| 11:00 AM | Worship Service | 50 Plus - The Radio Show | | | | | |
| 12:00 PM | Sunday Music | / | / | (12:45) Gardening Time | (12:55) Consumer Report | / | / |
| 12:15 | New Horizons | | | | | | |
| 12:30 PM | Melody Time | (12:55) Consumer Report | | | | | |
| 1:00 PM | Words and Music | Lunch Break | Lunch Break | Lunch Break | Lunch Break | Lunch Break | |
| 1:30 PM | Sunday Chorale | | | | | | |
| 2:00 PM | Guest Interview | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Music Unlimited | Potpouri | Music Unlimited | Matinee Variety Music |
| 2:30 PM | VOWR Variety | | | | Country Light & Easy | | |
| 3:00 PM | | | | | | | |
| 3:30 PM | | | | | Instrumentally Yours | | |
| 4:00 PM | | | | | | | Saturday At Six |
| 4:30 PM | | | | | | | |
| 5:00 PM | | | | | | | |
| 5:30 PM | | | | | | | |
| 6:00 PM | The Music Room | | | | | | |
| 6:30 PM | | | | | | | |
| 7:00 PM | Worship Service | | | | | 800 Country | Search For Mental Health |
| 7:30 PM | | Evening Serenade | Evening Serenade | Evening Serenade | Evening Serenade | | Evening Serenade |
| 8:00 PM | Hymns At Eventide | New Horizons | The Lutheran Hour | Guest Interview | Wesleyan Hour | | Music And The Spoken Word |
| 8:30 PM | | Music Of The Masters | Music Of The Masters | Music Of The Masters | Hymns For The Quiet Hour | Country Gospel | Music Of The Masters |
| 9:00 PM | | | | | | | |
| 9:30 PM | | | | | | | |
| 10:00 PM | Music For Relaxation | Music For Relaxation | Music For Relaxation | Music For Relaxation | Music For Relaxation | Music For Relaxation | Music For Relaxation |
| 10:30 PM | | | | | | | |
| 11:00 PM | | | | | | | |
| 11:30 PM | | | | | | | |
| 12:00 AM | Music In The Night | Through The Years | 800 Country Late Night Edition | Celtic Memories | Music Of Your Life | | Music In The Night |
| 12:30 AM | | | | | | | |
| 1:00 AM | Music For Dreams | Memory Lane | | Music For Dreams | Music For Dreams | Music For Dreams | Music For Dreams |
| 1:30 AM | | | | | | | |
| 2:00 AM | Guest Artist | Guest Artist | Guest Artist | Guest Artist | Guest Artist | Guest Artist | Guest Artist |
| 3:00 AM | Folk Favourites | Folk Favourites | Folk Favourites | Folk Favourites | Folk Favourites | Folk Favourites | Folk Favourites |
| 4:00 AM | Newfoundland Folk Sounds | Newfoundland Folk Sounds | Newfoundland Folk Sounds | Newfoundland Folk Sounds | Newfoundland Folk Sounds | Newfoundland Folk Sounds | Newfoundland Folk Sounds |
| 5:00 AM | Music For Easy Listening | Music For Easy Listening | Music For Easy Listening | Music For Easy Listening | Music For Easy Listening | Music For Easy Listening | Music For Easy Listening |

Figure 2. VOWR Program Schedule.²³

What might be observed by looking at VOWR’s program schedule?

The weekday morning schedule is consistent, with slight variations in the afternoons. Indeed, program titles relay a sense of continuity from one day to the next. Despite the apparent consistency of morning programming, however, daily shows vary due to specific content choices made by individual volunteer deejays. Further, while many program titles describe program content (see Figure 1), this is not always the case. *Breakfast at 800*, for example, is primarily about music and morning news.

Given these observations, what might station programming tell us about VOWR and its relationships to listeners? It would be easy to assume that the elderly “shut-in” audience is the specific target of VOWR’s programming, and to argue that VOWR participates in a sort of “narrowcasting” (Narváez, *Transforming Tradition*

248) that directs program content to a specific and homogeneous audience. Elaborating on the nature of narrowcasting, Narváez suggests that it

resists conventionalization (e.g., current musical fashions); it is elaborated, exhibiting specialist jargon [...]; and in narrowcasting, an audience anticipates enrichment from knowledgeable communicators. A successful narrowcast code, therefore, not only teaches, but it also cultivates elitism, in the dichotomous, insider-outsider, esoteric-exoteric sense of “we” know more than “they.” (248-249)

In a similar manner, Stephen Barnard refers to the exclusivity of “constructing communities” in his discussion of directed radio programming. Using “housewife-appeal music” as an example, he suggests that “to adopt a music policy calculated with particular audiences in mind ... enable[s] a kind of surreptitious targeting, effectively discouraging the older or younger sections of the audience from staying with the station” (96).

Both the narrowcasting described by Narváez’s and Barnard’s observations about target audiences and radio programming can inform this examination of VOWR. It is true, for example, that much of VOWR’s support comes from a “50-plus” audience (Tessier 2003), and that programming choices reflect this demographic. Further, the repertoire, announcement, and advertising choices of VOWR show an intentional resistance to the conventionalization of its programming; another narrowcast characteristic.

While a superficial look at VOWR’s programming may suggest a narrowcast code, the edges of the station’s programming philosophy are not so clearly cropped. Tessier admits that programming is aimed “mostly at ‘50 plus’,” but goes on to say that “realistically, that is going down — more like ‘40 plus’ ... although I recently got an email from a 14 year-old saying how much he likes the station, so — ” (2003). I would add that while a “20 plus” demographic has not yet been discussed in literature surrounding VOWR, the appeal of its old time country repertoire choices and intimate broadcasting style to alt-country audiences is worthy of further study.

VOWR’s recent addition of internet broadcasting also makes it possible for the station to reach audiences in new locations. Speaking to the presence of listeners across Canada, Tessier notes that VOWR has received positive feedback from people as far away as Alberta. This new listenership is engaged with the station in unique ways. While birthday announcements are often understood to unify a local constituency, the sending of birthday greetings to friends and family in Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta²⁴ point to VOWR’s expansion beyond local boundaries, to encompass national constituencies as well.

In much the same way, VOWR’s decision to become a 24-hour broadcaster reflects the recognition of an expanded local listenership. While the demographics of VOWR’s early morning audiences have not been studied, Ted Rowe says that VOWR

receives much airplay among cab drivers in and around St. John's during night and early morning shifts. Could it be that the programming of Newfoundland folk music at 4:00 a.m. has some correlation with this audience?

Throughout the station's expansion, VOWR has not forgotten the "mature" audiences that find meaning in its programming (Milne), nor have they lost sight of the station's numerous other listening participants. Through PSAs, careful sponsorship negotiation, and a commitment to the radio announcer as an active participant in station programming, VOWR is able to meet individuals and mediate groups, to speak and to listen, and, as a whole, to build the numerous bridges needed to meet and sustain its varied constituencies.

4) Collaboration in Programming and Decision-Making

Volunteer Deejays

Unique about VOWR is its commitment to the radio announcer. While many commercial disc jockeys (deejays, DJs) are given little latitude in music selection and programming, the volunteer announcers and operators at VOWR independently choose program repertoires from the station's extensive library of LPs, cassettes, and compact discs. Speaking to the value of this model in *Bluegrass: A History*, Neil Rosenberg describes the transition from the self-directed country music deejay of the 1950s to the dependence on pre-determined programming in country radio. Listing the multiple criteria for selection used by country music deejays in the 1950s, he states that "most important were listener requests ... then personal opinion ... and, quite a bit below that, the data presented in trade publications" (97). Referring to the "Club DJ" in the North American dance music scene, Brewster and Broughton identify similar criteria in the choosing of dance music. While they too describe the deejay's changing role, we discover here an inversion of the radio pattern: "Out has gone the idea of *introducing* records and in has come the notion of *performing* them. Today's deejay uses records as building blocks, stringing them together in an improvised narrative to create a 'set' — a performance — of his own" (8). While the two examples are admittedly divergent, their comparison in this context is apt. What is considered a new idea to the club DJ is a rare and treasured tradition on VOWR's late-night radio. That is to say, VOWR's late-night announcers have the deejay-like tasks of weaving together diverse recordings, while successfully integrating spontaneous (if at times, predictable) requests.

The active participation of volunteers in choosing program repertoires demonstrates their import in the running of VOWR; however, the participation of VOWR's listenership ought not be overlooked. Through phone calls and letters mediated by station volunteers, listening audiences affect what is programmed at VOWR, and participate in a collaborative model of radio.

In addition to listeners being given a say in station programming, this collaboration is evidenced in the promotion of local musicians. Known in St. John's to be

the foremost proponent of old-time and country music (with such deejays as Bill Kelly playing a significant role), VOWR includes local performers in play lists, and promotes their concerts on the air.

Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission [CRTC] regulations also encourage VOWR's programming of local musicians. Having experienced first-hand the trials of neglecting CRTC regulations for Canadian Content [CanCon],²⁵ John Tessier realizes the mutual benefit of this form of support, encouraging operators to aim for 35 percent CanCon in their programming, and marking albums, cassettes, and compact discs that meet requirements with an orange sticker. Despite these precautions, Tessier recognizes that a shortfall is possible, and goes on to describe the daily one-hour segment of "Newfoundland Music" as "putting a few cents in the bank every week." Here is a peculiar reciprocity, as VOWR is able to simultaneously meet the requirements of a national governing body and assist in the promotion of local musicians. While in the current schedule *Newfoundland Folk Sounds* has the 4:00 a.m. program slot, the prominence of Newfoundland folk music presented on programs throughout the day is noteworthy.

CONCLUSION: "WE SERVE"

When I approached the door to VOWR for the first time on 24 November 2003, I had no idea that my assumptions about the pleasant-looking radio station nestled into a church basement down the street from my house were about to be contested. I had immersed myself in books, articles, and theses about radio broadcasting in Newfoundland; I had listened to the "golden sounds" of late-night VOWR programming, to numerous church services, community interviews, and public service announcements, and I had become a keen VOWR listener and supporter. The program philosophy that I encountered in literature was uncomplicated: VOWR was a religious radio station with an ecumenical outreach, sustained by a desire to reach shut-ins. While I did not believe the station to be without variety, I felt great respect for the straight-ahead simplicity of this community radio station with a good, old-fashioned (though I would never dare to use such a word out loud) heart.

In some ways, I was right. The welcome I received at VOWR was extremely warm. It appeared that volunteers worked diligently and with smiles on their faces. Newly acquired compact disks sat next to LPs; cassette tapes of Rev. Currey's *Captain's Call* and reel-to-reel recordings of *Words and Music* were carefully shelved in various corners of the station. Indeed, the ministry of VOWR was one of reaching out in part to the 50-plus population, "supplying relaxing music to people" without the "bang bang bang" songs and advertisements of many commercial stations. This, however, was not their only mandate.

What I did not anticipate was the honest self-awareness of the volunteers and program manager. Not only did they speak openly about the changes in the station's

relationship to Wesley United Church since its inception, laugh about the black (or white-out)-listed tracks lurking in the library, and identify the voices missing from recent publications about the station, these active participants in the life of VOWR knew their way around the station, knew one another, and knew their audiences. The theoretical “overlapping of constituencies” I had read about was nothing new, and certainly nothing unusual, inside the station walls.

By embracing its volunteers and listeners, VOWR remains true to its mandate, “We Serve.” Radio auctions and phone calls from listeners serve as a vital part of station programming, as do station volunteers. By respecting and building upon this interplay, VOWR is able to remain both viable and relevant to its listenership, meeting individuals and mediating groups.

Challenging the traditional categorization of radio as exclusively public, commercial, or community, VOWR uses recordings and the spoken word to blur commonly understood boundaries between station and audience — “There’s no news, but plenty of public service announcements about community events” (Milne). Using a soundscape simultaneously varied and familiar, the station creates a sound experience that works to validate, reify, and match the aesthetic interests of its varied constituencies. Here, “constituencies do not exist to buy records, to be ‘educated,’ or to be sold to advertisers, but to participate within a context in which is implied the possibility for social action” (Fairchild 122). While the “good-natured civility and polite charm” (Milne) of VOWR has drawn many listeners to its airwaves, VOWR is more than a pleasant community radio station. It is an organism actively engaged in communicating *to*, communicating *with*, and communicating *because of* its myriad and diverse listeners.

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Notes

¹I would like to thank Professor Neil Rosenberg at Memorial University of Newfoundland, who encouraged me to pursue this study of VOWR, and whose ideas and feedback contributed to the project’s development.

²The bulk of this research took place in 2003, with follow-up contact in 2005 and 2006.

³Two of Newfoundland’s larger radio stations, VONF and VOGY, were amalgamated in 1934 to form VONF. Their owner at the time was R.J. Murphy, a Newfoundland telephone and electric power utilities tycoon (Webb 1998, Miller).

⁴While an emphasis on ecumenism (as contrasted with particular church affiliation) is evident in much of the written literature on VOWR’s history (Swain 1990, Pitt and Pitt 1984), descriptions of Joyce are, at times, contradictory. Describing Joyce’s outreach in the Centennial publication of Wesley United Church, *Goodly Heritage*, David Pitt and Marion Pitt note that while Wesley United Church was indeed the first in North America to have a radio station, its original 100-watt transmitter was not powerful enough “to fulfill its creator’s dream:

of making if not the whole world his parish, like John Wesley, then at least the whole island of Newfoundland” (47).

⁵A sampling of musicians played on VOWR includes Anne Murray, The Association, Petula Clark, Doris Day, John Denver, Andy Williams, Dolly Parton, The Staedtler Brothers, Elvis Presley, Simon and Garfunkel, Frank Mills, Peter, Paul and Mary, Lawrence Welk favourites, Patsy Cline, Bing Crosby, The Mercey Brothers, Celine Dion, Vera Lynn, Norma Zimmer, Vic Damone, Denis Lepage, Crooked Stovepipe, Mary Duff, the Ennis Sisters, Celtic Connection, Irish Descendents, Masterless Men, and Phyllis Silver Cavallini.

⁶One notable exception is Webb’s 1994 doctoral dissertation “The Invention of Radio Broadcasting in Newfoundland and the Maritime Provinces, 1922-1939.” Webb examines conditions of radio production in Newfoundland and the Maritimes on social, political, and intellectual levels.

⁷The myth of an homogeneous radio audience is not a new observation, as we see in Parker, Barry, and Smythe’s 1955 work. Observing that audiences experience a single program in myriad ways, the authors go on to suggest that “insofar as the term ‘mass’ connotes, therefore, a sameness or homogeneity as one characteristic of modern communication, it must be applied to the medium rather than to the audience reached by its content” (159).

⁸The BBC has changed substantially since 1990, now facing more competition for audiences, and responding with “downmarket” channels and a greater degree of informality.

⁹Smallwood’s belief in radio’s ability to unify a disparate people is discussed extensively in “The Broadcaster as Folklorist,” by Peter Narváez (1986) which explores the means by which Smallwood — via his radio monologue as “the Barrelman” — shared the folklore of various communities striving to “validate Newfoundland culture through a focus on successful Newfoundlanders” (Narváez 1986, 52). See also Hiscock (1994).

¹⁰Fairchild references and even quotes bell hooks on page 4. His reference is taken from bell hooks, “Marginality as a Site of Resistance” (*Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. R. Ferguson [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990], 341-343).

¹¹Notably, the central role of the volunteer at VOWR has not received attention in the literature about the station. Swain’s publication, *VOWR: The Unfolding Dream* (1999), is a case in point. While reference is made to interviews with the station manager for 46 years, Everett Hudson, little mention is made of the many other volunteer operators and announcers who have sustained the station for over 80 years.

¹²Hector Swain reports a markedly lower figure of \$30,000, stating that three-quarters is derived from the annual radio auction (*VOWR* 97). Tessier approximates a similar income from the auction (\$20,000), listing sponsorships, personal donations, and the annual “turkey tea” as other sources of income.

¹³While perhaps not immediately apparent, these funeral home sponsorships may be understood to reflect the ecumenical nature of VOWR’s audience. For example, the commercial for Caul’s Funeral Home, the tag of which reads “Caul’s — serving people of all faiths” (*VOWR*, 16 November 2003) initially implied to me a generic targeting of “the listening audience.” Long-time residents of St. John’s, however, still associate Caul’s with the Catholic population of the area. The two remaining, Carnell’s Funeral Home and Barrett’s Funeral Homes Ltd., are often said to serve the “wealthy” and “middle-income” Protestant populations, respectively.

¹⁴While this independent nature leaves *Airwaves of Zion* stations depending heavily on listener donations for survival, Dorgan stresses that the stereotypical emphasis on financial support characteristic of televangelism is not a valid characterization here.

¹⁵For this project, I listened to VOAR less systematically than to VOWR; however, the divergent paths taken by the two stations as religious broadcasters are evident.

¹⁶While the influence of the church is evident in this regard, most foundational programming decisions rest with Tessier as program director. The rules about musical choices are not always followed to the letter. While content monitoring occurs (by volunteers when new albums are acquired, and by listeners who call in if something is deemed offensive), exceptions do occur. On 27 November 2003, for example, I awoke to the sound of “Roving Gambler,” followed by a pre-recorded commercial for the Shriners, with a voice-over by Pat Sajak.

¹⁷Rowe brought to my attention that two tracks were crossed out of the playlist on a Crooked Stove Pipe album: “Moonshine Can” and “The Blue Star Song.” In each case, the song lyrics refer to alcohol consumption.

¹⁸*New Horizons* has been replaced by *Your Health*, a segment that educates listeners about various illnesses and treatments (Tessier 2006).

¹⁹International programs receiving airtime on VOWR include *Wonderful Words of Life* (Atlanta, GA), *Ecowatch* (Britain), and *Melody Time* (Germany).

²⁰*Ecowatch*, an environmental awareness program from Britain, is no longer circulated. VOWR continues to recycle the programs.

²¹Writing about the need for community radio stations to recognize and address simultaneously more than one listening “majority,” Fairchild warns against a station’s relating too directly with one group, to the exclusion of another (105).

²²While “message programs” (Hiscock 1986, 56) are no longer common, VOWR relays three PSAs every half-hour. Including specific details when relaying birthday wishes and meeting announcements (e.g., “use the side parking lot”) maintains the impression of an immediate connection between media and audience.

²³Schedule content is taken from VOWR’s June 2006 website (*VOWR 800 Radio*), and does not account for station programming in its entirety. Variation is not unusual, and in addition to regular PSAs, short programs or local “death announcements” are sometimes inserted between longer music segments. On Monday, 19 June 2006, for example, the *New Horizons* slot was instead filled by *Your Health*, during which time a woman from Newfoundland with Crohn’s disease was interviewed about the illness and her experience with it. Also absent from the website schedule was the subsequent program, *Wonderful Words of Life*, a Salvation Army broadcast made in Atlanta, GA. On the same date, the time between *Music Unlimited* and *Evening Serenade* was filled with two PSAs, a musical interlude, and the reading of death announcements.

²⁴The birthday wishes to which I refer were heard on 28 November 2003.

²⁵Since he has taken over as program manager for VOWR, Tessier recalls the year that he “had to go sit in the prisoner’s box” in Ottawa as a result of the station’s 16 percent CanCon rating.

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