

## **Research in Brief**

# **Public Opinion Monitoring by Provincial Governments: The Prevalence of Open Line Radio in Newfoundland and Labrador**

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**ABSTRACT** *This article advances an argument that within small polities local political talk radio may be treated as a barometer of public opinion. Survey research and media monitoring spending data were collected from provincial government departments across Canada. The data indicate that larger provinces turn to opinion polls, that the Quebec government is a heavy user of media monitoring services and that, in particular, government elites in Newfoundland and Labrador pay considerable attention to local open line call-in shows.*

**KEYWORDS** *Political talk radio (PTR); Open line; Political communication; Public opinion; Media monitoring; Access to information; Newfoundland and Labrador*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Cet article suggère que les gouvernements des petites provinces au Canada recourent parfois à la radio parlée locale pour mesurer l'opinion publique. L'auteur a rassemblé des données sur les dépenses en études d'opinion et en veilles médiatiques provenant de gouvernements provinciaux d'une part à l'autre du pays. Ces données indiquent que la plupart des grandes provinces ont tendance à recourir aux sondages d'opinion, tandis que le Québec utilise souvent les veilles médiatiques et que les élites gouvernementales de Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador portent une attention toute particulière aux tribunes téléphoniques diffusées à la radio parlée locale.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Radio parlée; Tribune téléphonique; Communication politique; Opinion publique; Veille médiatique; Accès à l'information; Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador*

### **Introduction**

This research brief assesses and compares the extent to which provincial governments in Canada purchase media transcripts and scientific opinion polls. Specifically, it seeks to place the unusual circumstances of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL)<sup>1</sup> in comparative perspective. Qualitative data and anecdotal evidence suggest

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that political talk radio (PTR) plays a significant role in the political life of Canada's most easterly province. It is widely believed that government treats open line radio banter as a barometer of public opinion. However, there are no quantitative data to support these claims.

Which provincial governments spend the most on media monitoring services? Which spend the most on public opinion surveys and on monitoring PTR? Does the Government of Newfoundland prioritize monitoring radio call-in shows and, if so, is this unique in Canada? This article presents the results of opinion survey data about PTR listenership in Newfoundland and the results of access to information requests filed with government departments across Canada. It confirms that the manner in which the Newfoundland government monitors public opinion is indeed a special case. This has implications for Newfoundland public administration because it indicates that public officials pay more attention to the concerns of the vested interests who lobby on open line radio than to the wants and needs of a much broader populace.

### **Context**

Governments monitor media discourse and public sentiments as a source of information. The political executive and civil service draw on such intelligence to formulate, communicate, implement and adjust public policy. They used to rely on media stories to measure public opinion, but it is well known that there is often a substantial gap between what the media reports and reality (e.g., Hayes, M., Ross, I., Gasher, M., Gutstein, D., Dunn, J.R., & Hackett, R.A. 2007; Levine, 1993), and it is now widely presumed that governments prioritize scientific opinion polls (Page, 2006, p. 11). However, Canadian governments have been slow to commission survey research because of the policy control exerted by central agencies, the rigidity of party discipline, and fears that freedom of information (FOI) requests will lead to public criticism (Page, 2006). It is easy to forget that the technological innovations that have made polling so accessible are a recent phenomenon and to overestimate how quickly a bureaucracy will change.

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador may be an outlier because of its apparent preference for monitoring local talk radio programming. Even in the age of opinion surveys and Twitter, Newfoundland's reporters, ministers, Members of the House of Assembly (MHAs), municipal politicians, and interest group leaders feed perceptions that public policy is influenced by discussions on radio town halls on VOXM-AM. The station runs three call-in shows on weekdays, totalling some 6.5 hours<sup>2</sup> of public affairs programming. The VOXM call sign is reputed to be an acronym for "voice of the common man" because moderators are "expected to provide information and advice on anything from emotional problems to dealing with bureaucracy" (Lovelace, 1986, p. 21) and to handle "personal appeals, public complaints and criticism of government services" (Verwey, 1990, p. xii). But Newfoundland politicians participate so frequently that it has also been dubbed by journalists as "voice of the cabinet minister." At times VOXM has promoted this democratic image by proclaiming that its programs are heard by the "politicians and bureaucrats holding power over our lives" and that callers' issues "find their way to the public agenda" (VOXM, 2008). Its only competition is the provincial CBC's (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) *Crosstalk*, a lunchtime program whose gardening and trivia days are popular. *Adler On*

*Line*, Canada's preeminent private syndicated PTR program, does not air in Newfoundland.

Talk radio is popular in Newfoundland and shows no signs of abating. The most recent data available indicate that Newfoundlanders listen to the radio for 18.6 hours per week, which is similar to the national average of 18.3 hours (Statistics Canada, 2008). Whereas the "adult contemporary" format is the most popular across Canada (attracting 22.7 percent of radio listeners), that format is among the least favoured options in Newfoundland (6.2 percent), and whereas the "talk" format is preferred by 26.9 percent of Newfoundland listeners, this compares with 9.8 percent of Canadian listeners. The significance of talk radio programming in Newfoundland compared with other provinces is shown in Table 1. Notwithstanding that Internet use has lagged in Newfoundland (Statistics Canada, 2010), the ability of consumers to access global media as well as the use of social media by local news operations may have implications for audience statistics. Conversely, the popularity of "hyper-local" political talk radio programming may be increasing as community newspapers are shut down and as media conglomeration reduces the availability of local content (Ewart, 2013).

Given its intense political function it is surprising that there are no quantitative data concerning the voting behaviour of PTR listeners in Newfoundland. To address this gap, information about Newfoundlanders' open line listening habits was gathered by the Canadian Provincial Election Project (CPEP) as part of an exit survey conducted immediately after the October, 2011 provincial general election.<sup>3</sup> Added to the usual gamut of demographic and voting intention queries were a selection of questions designed to further tease out Newfoundlanders' relationship with PTR.

The first thing to note from the public opinion data in Table 2 is that nearly one half (45.7 percent) of respondents declared themselves to be either an occasional or heavy listener of open line radio. Men were more likely to say that they listened than women were; listeners were far more likely to live in rural Newfoundland than in urban areas; and listeners tended to be older than non-listeners. Among those in the sample who voted in the 2011 provincial election, supporters of the incumbent Progressive Conservative (PC) Party of NL were marginally more likely to listen to talk radio than

**Table 1: Total population (2006) and percentage share of radio listening by format (2007)**

Jurisdiction	Population	Talk Radio Listenership (%)
Newfoundland	505,469	26.9
P.E.I.	135,831	0.1
Nova Scotia	913,462	1.4
New Brunswick	729,997	2.0
Quebec	7,546,131	13.3
Ontario	12,160,282	9.3
Manitoba	1,148,401	12.8
Saskatchewan	968,157	6.4
Alberta	3,290,350	10.3
British Columbia	4,113,487	6.0

Source: 2006 Census and Statistics Canada (2008).  
 Note: Talk radio listening is a percentage of all radio listeners in the province, not of all residents. It does not include CBC or sports format radio, both of which sometimes air call-in programs.

was the overall voting population as a whole. The difference in voting behaviour among listeners appears to have taken place with respect to the Liberal Party of NL and, to a lesser degree, the New Democratic Party (NDP) of NL. Among those who voted for the Liberal Party, 62.4 percent declared themselves to be open line listeners, whereas 42.6 percent of NDP voters reported that they listened. This is surprising given VOCM programming's ideological similarities with the NDP's principles, until we consider that party's support was concentrated in the urbanized St. John's area, where higher rates of employment inhibit radio listening during the daytime. The lower connectivity among younger citizens, non-voters and voters who did not support mainstream political parties points to the political activation and information role of local call-in radio programming.

In short, the results from the 2011 CPEP exit survey confirm what many in Newfoundland and Labrador believe to be anecdotally true: that a sizeable proportion of residents listen to open line radio, that open line listeners tend to reside in rural areas and that listeners tend to be older.

The survey also revealed a difference in the sample with respect to those who voted for the Liberals and NDP. The difference appears to roughly mirror the urban-rural political cleavage in Newfoundland and Labrador, which saw those open line-listening voters who did not vote for the Progressive Conservatives, and who already tend to live in rural areas, support the Liberal Party which ran on a rural platform.

Given the popularity of VOCM *Open Line* (9am–11:30am), *Backtalk* (2pm–4pm), and *Nightline* (8pm–10pm), it is sensible that Newfoundland government elites pay attention. The emotionally charged political discourse often frames provincial issues and so it is actively monitored by politicians, political staff, and public servants (Lovelace 1986; Marland & Kerby 2010; Verwey 1990). When a provincial Cabinet minister, political staffer and/or senior public servant is informed about a call of interest to VOCM or any other media story, they may decide to order a transcript for closer review (as occurs in other jurisdictions; see Routt, McGrath, & Weiss, 1978, p. 205). This entails placing a purchase request with a media company that is contracted to create

**Table 2: Profile of Open Line Listenership in Newfoundland and Labrador, October 2011**

	Listen to VOCM call-in shows (%)
<i>All respondents</i>	45.7%
Liberal voters	62.4
55+ years old	53.7
PC voters	50.7
Rural residents	50.1
Men	48.3
Suburban residents	45.5
35-54 years old	44.1
Women	43.5
NDP voters	42.6
Urban residents	37.9
18-34 years old	35.0
Non-voters	28.1
"Other" voters	25.5

Source: Canadian Provincial Election Project (CPEP) survey.  
 Note: Based on the CPEP survey question, "In the past week, approximately how many hours in total did you spend listening to VOCM radio's Open Line, Backtalk and/or Nightline call-in shows?"

and sell a typed verbatim account of the broadcasted content, which it delivers that day. This service is in heavy demand and there are no indications that it has been displaced by government monitoring of social media (e.g., CBC, 2010).

Public officials therefore recognize that open line radio can be a useful source of public opinion data, especially concerning rural perspectives. Opinion polls often simply confirm what public managers already thought they knew (Poister & Thomas, 2007), whereas calls to talk radio can be indicative of emerging public sentiments (Page & Tannenbaum, 1996). PTR discussions provide policy analysts with a rich qualitative understanding of callers' concerns and emotions (Hutchby, 2001) which is useful in a small community like Newfoundland where many of the calls are complaints about government services including fisheries management, health care, social service payments, taxes, transportation, and unemployment (Verwey, 1990). Nevertheless open line cannot be an accurate barometer of public opinion, for callers and their viewpoints tend to be unrepresentative of the general public (Bennett, 2002; Davis & Curtice, 2000), there is public pressure to conform to group norms (Barker, 1998), and political parties coordinate line-stacking to support their agenda (Marland & Kerby, 2010). Moreover, the hosts and switchboard operators are agenda setters and gatekeepers who promote controversy and decide which callers to put on the air.

### Data collection

To date, only anecdotal evidence exists to indicate that the Newfoundland government emphasizes the monitoring of open line radio over the commissioning of scientific opinion polls. Previous research reported that some Cabinet ministers had rarely seen government survey data, and that in May 2007 the government spent more on media transcripts than on professional opinion research (Marland & Kerby, 2010). Building on this, access to information requests were submitted in late 2009 to all provincial

**Table 3: Response rate to freedom of information filings, by province**

Jurisdiction	FOI Filings (n)	Responses Q1 (%)	Responses Q2 (%)	Responses Q3 (%)
Newfoundland	15	100%	100%	100%
P.E.I.	13	77	77	77
Nova Scotia	18	78	67	83
New Brunswick	22	95	59	95
Quebec	21	90	62	90
Ontario	25	60	64	64
Manitoba	19	100	11	100
Saskatchewan	19	95	47	95
Alberta	22	95	91	95
British Columbia	20	see note	see note	see note

*Note:* Questions for British Columbia were all directed to the Public Affairs Bureau for response.

government departments across Canada, requesting spending data on media monitoring generally, on monitoring of talk radio programming specifically, and on opinion poll surveys for the fiscal year 2008–2009. A total of 194 FOI requests were submitted; see Table 3 for distribution. The three questions were phrased as follows.

Q1. “What is the total amount that the entire government spent, before taxes, on purchasing media monitoring transcripts for the period April 1, 2008 until March 31, 2009 (inclusive)? This includes expenditures made by all departments and all agencies, but excludes any expenditures made by the governing political party (i.e., only public funds).”

Q2. “Of the total amount identified in Q1, how much was spent, before taxes, on purchasing media monitoring transcripts for talk radio programming known as open line (i.e., radio shows that listeners call in to chat with a host, guest or each other)?”

Q3. “What is the total amount that the government spent, before taxes, on purchasing opinion poll survey data for the period April 1, 2008 until March 31, 2009 (inclusive)? This includes expenditures made by all departments and all agencies, but excludes any expenditures made by the governing political party (i.e., only public funds).”

The responses produced an original dataset with some limitations. Government agencies, boards and commissions were not sampled, and data concerning a governing party’s use of its own private funds are not accessible. For those departments that reported expenditures there may be variances of scale between jurisdictions, meaning that expenditure amounts are not strictly comparable because the cost of services may vary. Due to the volume of requests that were compiled, only those data that departments were willing to provide for the fee of the initial FOI application were included in the study. This may incur some variance. In some cases, even within the same province, department personnel exercised discretion to treat the matter as routine questions. They chose to unconditionally grant full access to records and some opted to supplement official responses with friendly emails that provided the requested information based on “asking around.” In other departments, additional fees were required to pay for labour and photocopying before the data would be released, and no further attempt was made by staff to answer the questions. Paying for additional research services would have uncovered more information from those departments.

For the purposes of this research brief, the release of information from departments in the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is the most critical, and the entire universe of requested data was received. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the number of instances where data were received. That Newfoundland was the only government within which all departments provided dollar amount responses to all three of our questions speaks to their ability to easily isolate PTR transcripts. Alberta’s response rate was also strong. That other provinces experienced difficulties identifying PTR transcripts, notably Manitoba and Saskatchewan, which were otherwise forthcoming, indicates the relative novelty of the request to governments based west of St. John’s.

In many instances the departmental responses to the questions about media monitoring, talk radio transcripts and opinion poll use clearly stated that there had been no expenditures; the New Brunswick Department of Transportation simply wrote that it “does not conduct opinion poll surveys.” When departments reported that no records could be found this was treated as \$0 because it implies that there was no spending. However readers should be mindful that in all provinces except Newfoundland and Alberta there were instances of departments that stated their records did not allow them to distinguish between categories of media monitoring transcripts. As Saskatchewan’s Ministry of Finance explained, talk radio transcripts “are sometimes part of the media monitoring package, but only rarely. It is not possible to break out the amount spent on talk radio transcripts because they are just a small part of the radio newscast transcripts.” When departments indicated that open line monitoring may be among the other media transcripts, but that it was not possible to isolate them, this spending was treated as missing data for the PTR component.

It is clear from this research that the Newfoundland model of departments ordering media transcripts does not apply to all provinces. In some instances, media monitoring work was commissioned by a central agency on behalf of a department. In Nova Scotia, department communications budgets had been transferred to Communications Nova Scotia, which spent approximately \$113,000 on a corporate media monitoring service provided by Cision Canada Inc. In separate but identical replies, Alberta’s Aboriginal Relations (AR) and the Ministry of International and Intergovernmental Relations (IIR) advised that on behalf of all departments:

[The] government’s Public Affairs Bureau (PAB) maintains a contract with the Canadian Broadcasters Rights Agency (CBRA) for access to broadcasts of Alberta radio and television news, and certain current affairs programs. The licensing fee for this service (\$13,056.47) is paid by the PAB, which AR/IIR accesses on an “as required” basis – at no cost to the Ministry. (Government of Alberta, 2013)

Nevertheless many Alberta departments did commission media transcripts in addition to whatever support they received from the PAB. This contrasted with British Columbia where all departmental inquiries were directed to its PAB, which stated that it had no financial records because it performed media monitoring in-house. The responding manager wrote:

PAB [in British Columbia] has a department that provides electronic monitoring services. PAB advises that creating media monitoring transcripts is one of many functions of this unit. This internal creation of these transcripts means that PAB does not purchase media monitoring transcripts. Also, expenditures for this unit are reported as a whole and are not broken down by job function.

There were a handful of other instances of work performed in-house that was absorbed into regular operations expenses. Government statistics bureaus may administer targeted client satisfaction surveys on behalf of a department. One information coordinator advised that an employee with the Government of Prince Edward Island

is responsible for monitoring the media from home. As well some public servants remarked that support personnel are tasked with informal monitoring of media discussions, as they do in Newfoundland.

## Results

The first FOI question asked for departmental spending data on media monitoring transcripts. When information coordinators sought clarification, they were told that this was payment for typed transcripts of broadcast media content for matters of interest to the

**Table 4: Provincial government spending on media monitoring (2008-2009)**

Jurisdiction	All Transcripts	Per Capita Expenditure
Newfoundland	\$69,621	0.1377
P.E.I.	\$18,701	0.1377
Nova Scotia	\$36,488	0.0399
New Brunswick	\$26,566	0.0364
Quebec	\$2,026,806	0.2686
Ontario	\$75,734	0.0062
Manitoba	\$159,534	0.1389
Saskatchewan	\$239,271	0.2471
Alberta	\$74,655	0.0227
British Columbia	unknown	—

ministry or that referenced the ministry. Table 4 lists the spending data collected for all provinces and provides expenditures on a per capita basis using 2006 census population statistics for comparative illustrative purposes. Recall that spending for British Columbia is unknown because its PAB performs this service internally. The collected data show that, during the 2008–2009 fiscal year, the Newfoundland government spent more on transcripts than any of the Maritime provinces, but that on a per capita basis PEI's government behaved in an identical manner. In both dollar amounts and on a per capita basis the governments of Quebec and Saskatchewan were much bigger consumers of media monitoring services. By comparison spending on transcripts was proportionately lowest in Alberta and, even with its high number of missing cases, in Ontario. The finding that media monitoring is big business in Quebec is somewhat expected given its media system and national consciousness, but the higher importance attached to media monitoring in Saskatchewan is more difficult to explain. Nevertheless we have established the total amount of media transcript spending by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and have some comparative data to put this spending in perspective.

**Table 5: Provincial government spending on open line radio monitoring (2008-2009)**

Jurisdiction	PTR Transcripts	% of All Transcripts
Newfoundland	\$13,956	20.0%
P.E.I.	\$0	0
Nova Scotia	\$0	0
New Brunswick	\$0	0
Quebec	\$0	0
Ontario	\$613	0.8%
Manitoba	\$0	0
Saskatchewan	\$2,647	1.1%
Alberta	\$335	0.4%
British Columbia	in house	—

The dataset also indicates which issues were prioritized by provincial governments in their general media monitoring. While the analysis of line department spending is limited by temporal aspects, by the media sensitivities of individual ministers and by missing data, it nevertheless demonstrates the localized nature of regional government. What stands out is the emphasis that provincial governments placed on tourism media coverage in Prince Edward Island (92.3% of all PEI transcripts), Manitoba (75.3%), and Nova Scotia (72.3%). Elsewhere departments that ordered the most media transcripts were energy in Alberta (35.1%), health in Newfoundland (23.1%), social development in New Brunswick (19.1%), northern development in Ontario (18.8%), and employment in Saskatchewan (16.2%). There was very broad variation in Quebec across departments of which finance was the biggest consumer (9.3% of all Quebec transcripts).

The next FOI question sought to establish the proportion of a province's media transcript expenditures that was on PTR programming. Table 5 presents spending in each province and demonstrates that Newfoundland is indeed an outlier with respect to talk radio monitoring. Even though there was a high number of missing cases for Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and no data were available for British Columbia, we can see that a disproportionately high proportion (one fifth) of Newfoundland's media transcripts were for talk radio. Not only is PTR monitoring important for the Newfoundland government, but the data also show that it is unimportant in other provinces. This is intriguing given the popularity of localized talk radio in Quebec (Gingras, 2007), however may exclude the attention paid to PTR in British Columbia (Gunster, 2008).

Every one of the 15 Newfoundland departments reported commissioning PTR transcripts in 2008–2009. Among line departments this ranged from a low of \$124 in the Department of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development to a high of \$1,683 in the Department of Health and Community Services. The biggest consumer was the premier's office: Executive Council spent \$3,509 on PTR transcripts. The priority that the Premier's Office—which at the time was headed by Danny Williams—placed on open line was evident in that it incurred 16% of all media transcript expenses but 25.1% of all PTR transcripts. By comparison the health department accounted for 23.1% of all transcripts but just 12.1% of PTR transcripts. This can be explained by the preponderance of health issues in the mass media and the intensity of news coverage of the Commission of Inquiry on Hormone Receptor Testing (Cameron Inquiry) during that time. This finding adds weight to conventional wisdom that a major reason that VOXM matters in political circles is because of the importance that the Premier's Office attaches to the forum.

The final FOI question sought to establish how much money the provincial governments spent on scientific opinion research, which can provide a basis of comparison with expenditures on PTR. Table 6 demonstrates that survey research was important in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta. Proprietary public opinion research was least important in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, and especially in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick.<sup>4</sup> As before, data are presented on a per capita basis for illustrative comparative purposes and were not available for British Columbia.

Of foremost concern to this investigation is that Newfoundland and Labrador was the only provincial government to have spent more on PTR media transcripts than on opinion polling. Moreover the Premier's Office was the only organization within the Newfoundland government to commission any survey research; none of the line departments did so. At \$10,500, the spending by a central agency on polling was less than the \$13,956 that departments collectively spent on transcripts of PTR, and represents 15% of what the government spent on media transcripts overall. Putting this in comparative perspective it is striking that the five provinces with the smallest number of residents (the four Atlantic provinces and Saskatchewan) spent the least per capita on random sampling methods of opinion research.

A tangential finding of this undertaking is that centralization was most evident in Nova Scotia, Alberta, and British Columbia. Although details were not requested about the nature of the expenditures, an information coordinator advised that the \$223,431 spent by the Alberta Public Affairs Bureau spent on opinion research was for polling and tracking, for research into the Alberta brand, and to subscribe to the Ipsos Reid Interactive report. Details of these projects are available on a government webpage that archives publicly-funded public opinion research (Government of Alberta, 2013). By comparison Saskatchewan's website reveals that among its public opinion research outputs during the 2008–2009 fiscal year—which may differ from when the expenses were declared—were an omnibus survey, an awareness survey about research parks, a fire awareness survey, and a poll prepared for Executive Council about intergovernmental relations (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013).

## Conclusions

This research brief adds quantitative data to a small body of qualitative evidence about local political talk radio in Canada. It indicates that the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador prioritizes the monitoring of political talk radio (PTR) over scientific polls as a barometer of public opinion. Freedom of information requests were filed with departments in provincial governments across Canada to gather spending data on media monitoring generally, on PTR specifically, and on opinion poll survey data for the 2008–2009 fiscal year. The results demonstrate that the Newfoundland government spent more on media monitoring generally, and more on talk radio monitoring specifically, than it did on opinion poll research. Moreover, notwithstanding some data limitations and similarities with PEI, this was unique in Canada. These findings

**Table 6: Provincial government spending on public opinion survey research (2008-2009)**

Jurisdiction	Opinion Polls	Per Capita Expenditure
Newfoundland	\$10,500	0.0208
P.E.I.	\$0	0
Nova Scotia	\$69,800	0.0764
New Brunswick	\$1,050	0.0014
Quebec	\$1,422,373	0.1885
Ontario	\$1,797,308	0.1478
Manitoba	\$135,493	0.1180
Saskatchewan	\$40,169	0.0415
Alberta	\$936,221	0.2845
British Columbia	unknown	—

add to a limited body of literature about the provincial differences in political culture and media. Insights have been presented about the somewhat greater importance that smaller provinces place on media monitoring over opinion polling. This supports Page's (2006) concern that journalists and political scientists lack evidence to support their claims that governments draw extensively on polls for policy-making, or at least opinion surveys that are funded with public resources.

Future research should consider why the Newfoundland government has limited interest in publicly-funded scientific public opinion polls. It may be because Newfoundlanders tend to trust unscientific material and value the authenticity of local reference groups (Goldstein, 1991). Within the government, there is a culture of obtaining citizens' input through personal interactions including public meetings, roundtables, advisory committees, and written submissions. Advertising is used to generate public awareness of consultation "road shows" comprised of ministers, MHAs, and public servants who tour the province. These forums generate policy legitimacy by communicating that the government is listening and facilitate political efficacy by giving citizens an opportunity to voice their views in a formal manner. But public attendance is often low, the convenors tend to gather information from vested interests, and such events have scant influence on policy decisions (e.g., Culver & Howe, 2004). The cost of promoting these events suggests that they may be foremost a publicity vehicle to communicate to citizens that the government is concerned about their views (e.g., CBC, 2011). Conversely, the political executive and the public service are secretive about opinion survey research, to the point that the province's information and privacy commissioner initiated legal action against the Premier's Office for not releasing polls to local media. The government rationalized its refusal by arguing that disclosing survey data could harm the province's economic and intergovernmental interests (Newfoundland and Labrador Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, 2005), which contrasts with the online disclosure of publicly-funded polling reports in Alberta and Saskatchewan. This suggests that in Newfoundland's political circles there is sensitivity to the public being aware of government funds being spent on survey research but not on consultation tours.

Another area for further research is the partisan manipulation of self-selected voting in media polls. The VOXM "question of the day" is a tool to engage the listening community. However, the station's communication of the results can be misinterpreted as conveying an accurate reflection of the public pulse. This is alarming given that the results are skewed by political participants who coordinate supporters to repeatedly vote by phone and online (Bartlett, 2013). This indicates that low standards for survey methodology is a symptom of the media prizing infotainment, of political elites vexing about their public image, and of Newfoundlanders' lack of concern for the difference between biased and unbiased opinion research.

These findings, when coupled with previous work on the topic, suggest broad implications for Newfoundland society. Open line radio is a democratic forum because it empowers ordinary citizens to command the attention of public officials in a transparent manner. This creates tensions within a government system that is designed to be held accountable by elected representatives in the legislature, but which at times is

beholden to the infotainment programming of a private broadcaster. More significantly, vested interests use the hyper-local medium to draw attention to their cause, and they mobilize supporters to push an issue to the top of the public agenda. Thus, not only may the views of the silent majority be ignored, but the government may also be pressured to give in to the demands expressed by a narrow, partisan, and unrepresentative segment of society, including the overrepresentation of rural concerns. Moreover, Newfoundland political elites' interest in talk radio is not motivated by notions of democratic responsiveness, but rather is a function of image management. The commissioning of media transcripts is an intelligence gathering operation that is used to inform political strategies to shape and control the agenda. We are left to conclude that political communication in Newfoundland is indeed a curious case, given that the monitoring of views expressed by vested interests in public echo chambers takes precedence over more independent and representative methods of public opinion measurement.

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### Notes

1. For ease of readability the short form of "Newfoundland" is used interchangeably with the province's official name, "Newfoundland and Labrador" and the abbreviation "NL."
2. This was 8.5 hours per day at the time of Marland and Kerby (2010).
3. The survey was administered from October 12 until October 30, 2011, using a mix-mode survey designed by the CPEP team and deployed by Abacus Research. The sample consisted of 851 respondents in Newfoundland and Labrador; sample weighting was based on the 2006 Canadian census.
4. At times departments participated in pan-Canadian research. For instance in New Brunswick the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour paid \$499,937.50 as part of a national education research project. As this was not proprietary to the province the spending data were excluded.

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