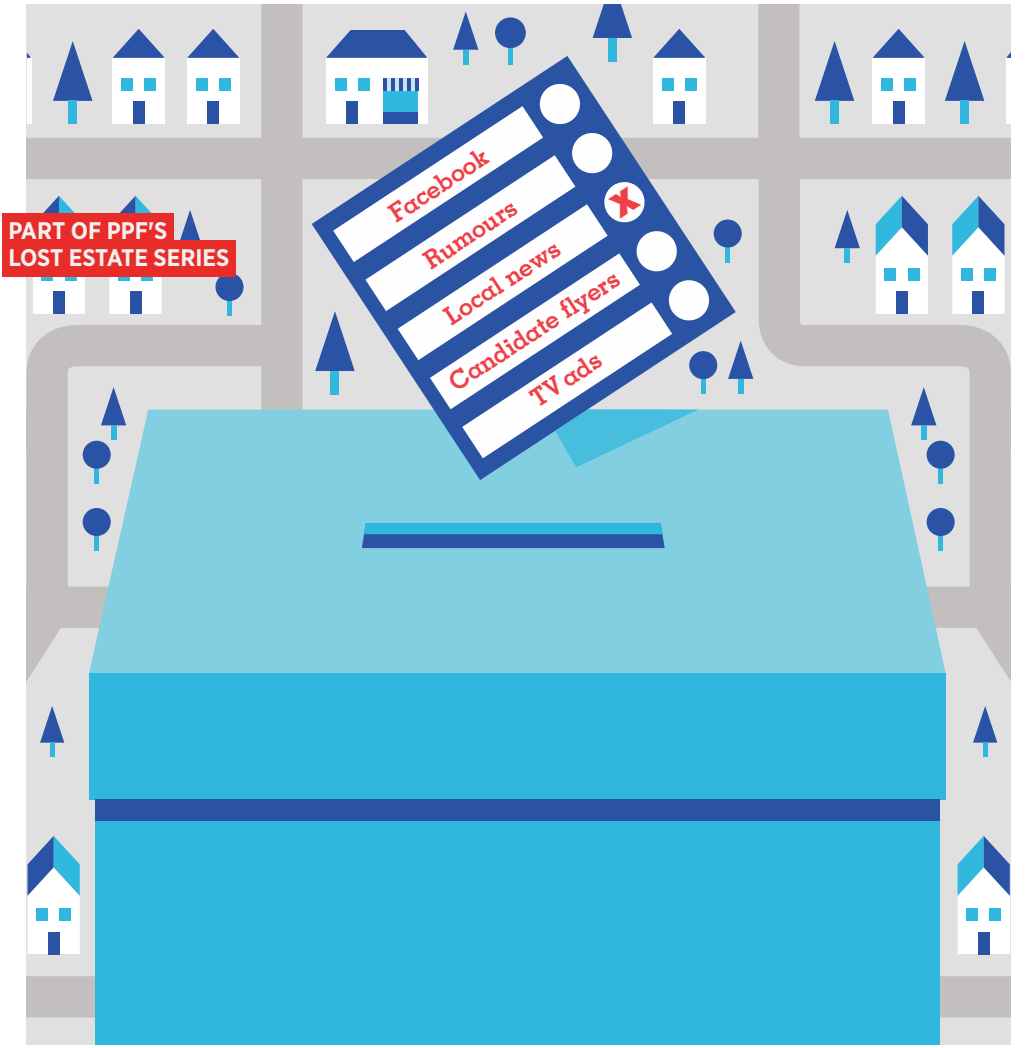
PUBLIC POLICY FORUM

Uncovered

How to build back election coverage for a better democracy

BY TIM HARPER, SARA-CHRISTINE GEMSON AND ALISON UNCLES



JULY 2025

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

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DIGITAL EDITION
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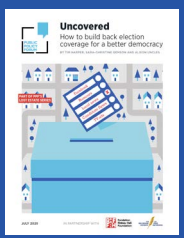
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Preface

On March 25, 2025, the day after Canada's federal election call, Joyce Webster published the last issue of the *East Central Alberta Review*.

She admitted to a "roller coaster of emotions" as she published the final edition of the 114-year-old *Review*, succumbing to the same forces that have buried news outlet after news outlet over recent years. There would be one less local news outlet covering the election; one more community not getting the essential information it needed.

"I can't tell you how sad I am for 'community' because I know community newspapers are the glue that keeps communities informed, connected and engaged, unlike social media, which seems to fragment communities," Webster wrote in her final publisher's note.[1]

Signing off after a 44-year career at the newspaper, Webster listed advertising, distribution challenges and "online media giants using our hard-earned stories to further their success" among the strains she said have been placed on small newspapers and communities.

But the short-term impact of a disappearing local media on a pivotal election campaign was creating an urgent situation: Some journalism enterprises, particularly small and medium-sized ones, simply could not afford to travel to cover candidates and campaign events, or to spend the time necessary to delve into deeper policy issues.

Traction began to form around an emergency election fund for journalism.

André Beaulieu, chairperson of PPF's Board of Directors, and Greg David, executive chair of the Rossy Foundation, found themselves deep in conversation about it. Given the stakes, they agreed that responsible, fact-based reportage was more important than ever. How could Canadian democracy be strengthened by increasing reputable coverage of the federal election campaign? An election fund to help small and medium-sized outlets could be a quick, Band-Aid solution, but how?

"We had almost no time — our conversation happened the Friday before the Sunday election call," remembers Beaulieu. "We knew that if we were to have any impact at all, we had to move at lightning speed."



"We knew that if we were to have any impact at all, we had to move at lightning speed."

Six business days after the initial Beaulieu-David conversation, the Covering Canada: Election 2025 Fund was launched.[2]

"There is simply no way we could have pulled this off so quickly without extreme trust, and even an appetite for risk-taking, on both sides," says Inez Jabalpurwala, president and CEO of the Public Policy Forum (PPF), which partnered with the Rideau Hall Foundation and the Michener Awards Foundation on the project.

The Rideau Hall Foundation set up an application process and co-ordinated a panel of Michener judges, who volunteered to judge the submissions. Criteria were quickly set, including a guideline that the outlet be a registered Qualified Canadian Journalism Organization or equivalent, to establish a bar of quality and professionalism.

"Enabling a better-informed citizenry is a non-partisan priority that benefits all Canadians," said Teresa Marques, President and CEO of the Rideau Hall

Foundation. "The goal of this project was to help cover community stories that otherwise might not have been told, and to distribute the funds quickly and efficiently. We hoped to support smaller local newsrooms, public service journalism, and Canadian democracy all at the same time. All of which are important priorities for the RHF."

PPF took the lead on fundraising, with support, advice and expertise from the Rossy Foundation. Everything was supercharged and take-up from foundations was generous and immediate.

In the end, five foundations — Donner, Echo, Gordon, Metcalf and Rossy — donated a total of $525,000. Seventy-nine applications from across the country were received in the first three days and grants ranging from $2,500 to $35,000 were quickly issued to 40 media organizations.

Ambitious journalism blossomed almost immediately, including:

- The *Nunatsiaq News* in Iqaluit sent a reporter to Grise Ford on Ellesmere Island, Canada's northernmost community;
- *La Liberté* in Manitoba quickly hired three journalists for the campaign and produced 32 stories, including on-the-ground reporting from Churchill and expansive coverage of all 14 of the province's ridings;
- *The World-Spectator* in Moosomin, Sask., published 22 stories it would otherwise not have been able to produce, including an initiative to interview every candidate in each of its four riding coverage areas;
- *Energeticcity.ca*, which serves Fort St. John and northeast B.C., sent reporters hundreds of kilometres to cover all-candidates meetings in Prince George and Fort Nelson;
- *The Logic* sent reporters across the country, from Prince Rupert, B.C.,

to St. John's, Nfld.; from Saint-Georges, Que., to Iqaluit, Nvt.; from Eabametoong First Nation in Kenora, Ont., to Halifax, N.S.; and

- For *The Local*, a non-profit online magazine that describes itself as "unabashedly Toronto," the fund allowed for more in-depth coverage of under-reported ridings within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) with national implications.

  "As a digital magazine, we normally take a slow and deliberate approach to stories, leading to deeply reported features and investigations on matters of public interest," says Tai Huynh, publisher and editor-in-chief of *The Local*. "With the unplanned federal election and its short campaign period, we've had to supercharge our production cycle."

In total, *The Local* produced 10 election features about issues across the GTA, including a major feature about how politics in Mississauga's and Brampton's South Asian populations are shifting, how accusations of foreign interference played out among voters in Don Valley North, a rematch in St. Paul's, and a look at how Canada's diplomatic breakdown with the Indian government played out among Indo-Canadians. "The injection of funding from the Covering Canada: Election 2025 Fund was absolutely crucial," Huynh says, "as it allowed us to bring on freelance contributors to augment our newsroom resources."

Despite the fund's important proof of concept, it only scratched the surface of a colossal need. To apply for funds, after all, local news outlets had to exist in the first place.

INTRODUCTION

A national vote with a local blindfold



“All politics is local.”

It is a maxim popularly attributed to an American politician, the legendary U.S. House Speaker Tip O’Neill, alternately derided as an outdated bromide and revered as a golden rule of politics. It has stood for almost a century and, although American in origin, it is a much more fitting political description of politics here in Canada.

Unlike Americans, who vote directly for presidents, Canada’s parliamentary system means we vote for local representatives. And while tariffs and annexation threats from U.S. President Donald Trump dominated the discourse in Canada’s 2025 federal election — along with concerns revolving around affordability and housing — a pan-Canadian election at its best means, in effect, 343 local elections. Local federal candidates should be challenged on how to make city streets safer, to strengthen the social safety net for townsfolk in need, to support a community industry struggling for survival, to protect the lake that offers summer solace.

But what happens during a federal election when the local prism fades away?

A study[3] by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) tracked the carnage on the local news landscape since 2008 and found that 2.7 million Canadians have one or no local media outlets. It created a news deprivation index for 45 cities with a population over

140,000 (and all capitals) and found that three of every five communities studied had a net loss of local media since 2008. Newfoundland and Labrador suffered the most, losing three-quarters of all its media outlets outside St. John's.

The study also found that the suburbs of the three largest Canadian cities had the worst ratio of local news to population, with the Greater Toronto suburb of Vaughan scoring the worst, while cities and towns that acted as regional broadcast news hubs for the rest of their territory or province — such as Yellowknife, Whitehorse, Saint John, St. John's and Charlottetown — scored the best.

We know from previous studies[4] that a dearth of local news holds serious consequences for democracy, that communities become less trusting of one another and more polarized when they lose a local news outlet, and that the vacuum created by a lack of reliable local information is filled by social media and national news, which is typically more divisive. In fact, an exclusive IPSOS poll commissioned by PPF



14% said Facebook most contributed to their vote decision-making, despite no news being present on Facebook.

Source: Ipsos online survey. (July 2025). 25% of the 1,000 respondents (Canadian residents aged 18+) lived in communities with populations of less than 10,000, 25% lived in communities with 10,000 to 99,999, while the other half of respondents lived in communities with populations of 100,000 or more.

showed that 70 percent of Canadians[5] said greater availability of local news in their area would have made them better informed about the election.

This was the first election fought with news banned on Meta platforms. In August 2023, Meta banned news from Facebook and Instagram after the federal government passed legislation requiring it to compensate Canadian news organizations for use of their content. Remarkably, 70 percent of Facebook users and 65 percent of Instagram users still say they are using those platforms to get their news, even though there was no news on them.[6]

A lack of local news can also lead to a susceptibility to misinformation. Aengus Bridgman, director of the Media Ecosystem Observatory, explains it this way: When you have news, over time you develop a general sense of politics, even if you don't follow it closely. But without it, you have less and less political knowledge. "When you don't know as much over time, things that are incongruous to somebody who is informed could convince you," he says.

"This is what happens with lack of data. Over time, people lose their ability to discern truth and reality," Bridgman says. "So, every time you come across a new piece of political information, you're naïve in the sense that you have no previous understanding of that thing, so it sounds plausible." (See the appendix for more on misinformation during the 2025 federal election campaign.)

For this report, we studied five communities across the country, with varying access to local news, to document what happens when failing local news business models meet an all-important federal election campaign — as well as what can be done to help support more responsible journalism through campaign periods in the future. In choosing which communities to profile, we were guided by the CCPA's news deprivation index. Our goal was largely to examine what happens when very little local media is available.

With the complete absence of local news in the Bonavista area of Newfoundland and Labrador, information — or more often, disinformation — was gleaned through word of mouth and from Facebook. It was the closest riding in Canada on election night, triggering an automatic recount that ultimately delivered the riding to the Conservatives with a 12-vote margin. What might have happened if a local news reporter had asked tough questions of the candidates in an area of the Terra Nova–The Peninsulas riding that was deprived of a local voice?

Voters in Yellowknife, N.W.T., had access to the best election coverage of communities we studied. In Vaughan, Ont., voters had sparse local coverage but visits to the ridings from both the

Conservative and Liberal leaders. With that national attention, turnout exceeded the national average, despite the lack of local news. In Laval, Que., two local news outlets did their level best to cover four ridings, but no all-candidates meetings were held and candidates instead took out advertising to reach voters and publicize their promises. In Richmond, B.C., local media has not kept pace with huge population growth to the extent that even elected officials are decrying a lack of press accountability.

Often, this lack of local coverage was exacerbated by candidates who aggressively avoided it by not responding to local news inquiries or attending local all-candidates meetings.

The election became a two-party battle, with the Liberal and Conservative vote combined at 85 percent,[7] the first time two parties had dominated to that extent since 1958,[8] with many voters left looking for the local candidate in either the red or blue column, retreating to partisan corners and basing their decisions on national issues.

The "all politics is local" adage leaned heavily, instead, to "all politics without local."

57% of Canadians said they could have used more info from the media to make an informed choice, or that they simply didn't have enough information.

49% of Canadians said they voted primarily for the party.

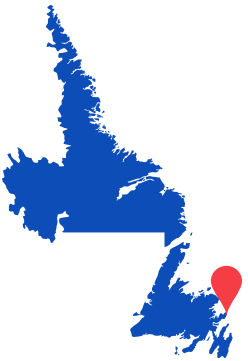
32% voted primarily for the party leader.

Only 19% voted primarily for the local candidate.

Source: Ipsos online survey. (July 2025).

CHAPTER 1

Cans and string in Bonavista, Newfoundland and Labrador



There was a rumour afloat on the Bonavista Peninsula of Newfoundland and Labrador. Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre was going to cut funding for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), leaving the province devastated. There didn't appear to be any evidence Poilievre had ever vowed to touch the regional development agency, although a former Liberal minister had made the charge in Ottawa, based, it seemed, on a 20-year-old newspaper column written by a New Brunswick Conservative MP.

That's how rumours start. And Bonavista is an example of how they thrive. What did the local Conservative candidate, civil engineer Jonathan Rowe, have to say about this incipient controversy? Well, no one in Bonavista knew because no one asked him — there is no trusted local news in the towns of Bonavista or nearby Clarenville. No local news at all, actually.

Bonavista is part of Terra Nova–The Peninsulas, a sprawling riding of 76,000 residents and the closest race in Canada on election night after 41,000 voters cast ballots. Some 65 percent of voters in the riding exercised their franchise, slightly below the national average.[9]

Terra Nova–The Peninsulas became a strange democratic exercise marked by 12s. On election night, no winner was declared. The following day, Liberal

Anthony Germain maintained a 12-vote lead over Rowe. A judicial recount began on May 12 and was spread over, of course, 12 days (slowed by, among other things, water being shut off in public buildings in Marystown, where the recount was taking place). When it was over, Rowe had won — by 12 votes.

Rowe, like many Conservatives across the country, campaigned solely on social media (he has 2,800 Facebook followers), declining even an interview for a CBC television riding profile. That ended after election night when Rowe made himself available to Newfoundland and national media, including an appearance with Germain on CBC's *As it Happens*, lamenting his lack of sleep while awaiting the recount results.[10]

Both men are able communicators, but there was no media to communicate with in the Bonavista-Clarenville area. It's not like there aren't local issues in Bonavista, where the future of the fishery and tourism are local concerns, along with issues surrounding aquaculture, mining, oil and gas, ferry prices, energy policy and industrial carbon pricing.

"Oh, we would have been all over this election," says Barbara Dean-Simmons, one-time editor at Clarenville's *The Packet* and former managing editor at more than a dozen other then-SaltWire Network publications throughout Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia.

Locals would have turned to Anne Barker for answers. Barker began her journalism career at age 55 after the death of her husband and spent 13 years doggedly reporting in Bonavista for *The Packet*, covering everything from municipal politics to residents' personal victories and setbacks.

"People still stop me at the supermarket or the hospital or on the street and tell me they still miss the newspaper," Barker says. "You have a sense of community when you have a newspaper. News from the school, sports news, somebody having a 100th birthday. It keeps a community alive. It is very, very sad."

A recent report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives noted that areas outside St. John's in Newfoundland and

Labrador have lost three-quarters of their news sources since 2008. There has been a 100 percent decline in print newspapers in small towns in the province. Overall, Newfoundland and Labrador lost 73 percent of its news sources in the past 16 years, the greatest loss in the country, although small towns with populations under 30,000 have been particularly hard hit, the report found.[11] Since 2008, Newfoundland and Labrador has seen 23 news media outlets close, 20 of those newspapers. Even the 146-year-old St. John's *Telegram*, purchased by Postmedia from SaltWire Network in 2024, announced last year it was cutting its print edition from daily to weekly.[12]

The beginning of the end for *The Packet*, founded in March 1968, came in March 2020, when SaltWire stopped publishing all its holdings during the pandemic. By June, SaltWire said it had permanently cut 109 jobs, including 25 in Newfoundland and Labrador. On March 31, 2021, *The Packet* was among 12 Atlantic Canada newspapers to permanently close.[13]



Areas outside St. John's in Newfoundland and Labrador have lost three-quarters of their news sources since 2008.

The Packet was published in Clarenville, and Barker wrote for the pages dedicated to Bonavista (an hour and a half drive up the peninsula), pumping out three to four stories each week. During the 2025 campaign, residents said they didn't see any of the federal candidates, let alone read any information about them. "You can watch the national debate on TV, but there's no local of anything. We don't get to see a candidate. You can find a lot of stuff on Facebook, but that's not politics," says Barker, who, at the age of 85, is retired in nearby Open Hall. "Some of this stuff you read on Facebook is terrible. If you had a newspaper, you had a reporter who wrote it, an editor who edited it and if anything was wrong, you'd have a correction the next week. Who is going to correct the garbage on Facebook?"

The answer: Dean-Simmons. She and a group of friends are taking it upon themselves to try to correct disinformation on Facebook. She posted about a recent report with a pretend *Toronto Star* banner, telling them it was bogus and identifying it as fake news. She has counseled friends to do their own research and take Facebook links with a grain of salt. "Unfortunately, some believe these things," she says. "It's tough. They don't have a trusted local news source with local journalists to provide insights."

Bonavista Mayor John Norman stresses the value of ACOA, but at the time of this report's writing, he had never met the Conservative candidate. In fact, he says, he hasn't met his local MP for two years. His priority is regular meetings with his provincial representative, who plays a more pivotal role on local issues than the federal MP. He laments the demise of local news and the rise of disinformation but, beyond social media, he has another strategy for getting information out about council doings.



"It's tough. They don't have a trusted local news source with local journalists to provide insights."

"If I want to make sure people know things in the town of Bonavista, Gina is one of the five or six people I text it to and say 'please disperse this information,'" he says. "She will disperse the facts. I've also got a few hairdressers and a barber on my list." Gina is Gina Little, a local entrepreneur who owns businesses ranging from an auto parts distributor to a year-round Christmas store and, besides channelling the mayor, she fights back against disinformation presented to her by customers and friends.

"I try to straighten them out. I tell them to take a second and think about it," Little says. She has had to tell them to 'think about' claims that Poilievre will take away abortion rights and she combats misinformation on LGBTQ+ rights or carbon taxes — or ACOA. When she speaks, the locals do 'think about it,'" Little says.

"Everyone has the right to make their choice," she says, but it should be an informed one. "I had never been so invested in an election in my life."

The Packet once published 30 pages of news per week. "There's nothing out there anymore. It's a wasteland," says Dean-Simmons. But old habits die hard and Dean-Simmons, who now writes for *Undercurrent News*, a U.K.-based outlet that covers the seafood industry, still sends over news tips to friends at the CBC, which still offers radio, TV and web coverage based in St. John's.

Edith Samson is another of the region's residents pushing back against misinformation. Samson is the executive director of the Sir William Ford Coaker Heritage Foundation, a volunteer organization that dedicates itself to the preservation of nearby Port Union, North America's first and only union-built town.[14] Many in the region know her — or she knows them. "Everyone here is going to Facebook and unfortunately there is a lot of fake news there." Indeed, Newfoundland and Labrador has the highest rate of Facebook usage in the country, with 82 percent of residents using the platform.[15]

Samson challenges friends about where they get their news and whether they checked the source. "The majority can't tell the difference between real and fake. That's pretty scary. There's a lot of word-of-mouth going around, too, but that word-of-mouth is based on Facebook."

Samson pushes them to use Google for research, but sometimes they say they don't bother and accuse Samson of peddling "BS." She concedes she finds it frustrating. "They're reading 'Carney is going to take this [or that] away.'"

In the end, it appears ACOA emerged unscathed; Facebook says so.

CHAPTER 2

Opportunity lost in Richmond, British Columbia



Eve Edmonds is clear-eyed about today's fraught news landscape, where lifelong journalists like her can see a future clouded by despair with little reason for optimism.

"It's not like we're selling pink bellbottoms here," says Edmonds, a Kwantlen Polytechnic University journalism professor in Richmond, B.C. "We are selling something that is needed and wanted, but the financial model is broken."

The former editor of the *Richmond News*, a one-time print publication now turned completely digital, quarterbacked the paper during what she calls its "heyday," a mere two years ago, when it had six reporters, including two bilingual reporters to monitor Chinese media in a city where more than half of residents are foreign-born, with the majority of those coming from China.[16]

"There is something about local news," Edmonds says. "We live in a place and we are connected to that place and our neighbours.... We can talk about the greenbelt behind our houses or someone's car got broken into. We build this sense of community, and the community newspaper is absolutely instrumental in that, being rooted in where we live. We will then take responsibility for where we live. We become more invested and involved, and we show up to vote at election time."

"This is being frayed in Richmond."

Why? In part, local news in Richmond is roiled by the same pressures faced everywhere, including plummeting advertising

and disappeared Facebook audiences. But as part of the Vancouver suburban sprawl, it faces the same challenges of suburban media outlets in Greater Montreal and Toronto where population has steadily grown, but access to media has not kept pace. These suburbs are part of the Census Metropolitan Area of the large cities, with high commuter integration, and it has been argued they benefit from news coverage from larger big city media. But those smaller communities are thriving cities in their own right, with municipal councils and school boards that are not properly scrutinized.[17]

According to the CCPA study on news deprivation, Richmond has had three local news outlets since 2008, but with its growing population, it has only 1.4 news outlets per 100,000 people — the sixth worst among 45 cities studied.[18] It ranks slightly ahead of other suburbs of our main cities such as Surrey, Vaughan or Mississauga, but far behind regional media centres in Fredericton, Saint John, Whitehorse or Yellowknife.



Richmond has had three local news outlets since 2008, but with its growing population, it has only 1.4 news outlets per 100,000 people — the sixth worst among 45 cities studied.

With a population of about 230,000, Richmond is swamped by Vancouver media, but it has a couple of unusual characteristics — 80 percent of its population is racialized, the second highest in the country (behind only Markham, Ont.) and 54 percent is ethnic Chinese.[19] It has also already been touched by foreign interference and disinformation in elections.

Both played a role in the 2021 defeat of Conservative Kenny Chiu in the riding then known as Richmond East–Steveston, according to the commission of inquiry into foreign interference headed by Justice Marie-Josée Hogue.[20] Social media, chat groups and Chinese language posts painted Chiu as anti-China, someone encouraging anti-Chinese discrimination and racism that sparked fear of retribution from the Chinese government should Conservatives take power in Ottawa. Chiu had proposed legislation that would have established a public registry that

tracked foreign influence campaigns in Canada. When he approached Chinese media in Richmond for a chance to fight back against the allegations, Chiu said he was ignored and he eventually lost to Liberal Parm Bains. A Liberal incumbent defeated in Richmond, Wilson Miao, also faced unsubstantiated charges that Beijing had helped his 2021 campaign. A man was arrested after posting a video on Facebook of himself shooting a rifle at a political pamphlet picturing the Hong Kong-born Miao, calling him a Communist and saying the Liberal MP would "get what's coming to him."[21] Miao represented the former riding of Richmond Centre and was defeated in this year's election in Richmond Centre–Marpole.

There has been no evidence of interference in the 2025 campaign, but there was also very little evidence of local coverage of either of the two Richmond ridings. Conservative Chak Au won Richmond Centre–Marpole, where 59.2 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot, up from the 46.2 percent turnout in 2021. In Richmond East–Steveston, Bains was returned to Ottawa in a riding with a 63.5 percent turnout, up from 52.8 percent in 2021.[22] Turnout comparisons are imprecise because of the redistribution of both ridings but, in 2025, both ridings had turnouts below the national average.

Richmond media is often roiled by accusations leveled at the Chinese-language media. In testimony to the Hogue commission, former Richmond journalist Victor Ho said the outlets are controlled by the Communist government in Beijing. Ho, a former editor of *Sing Tao Vancouver*, said Chinese media consumers are fed propaganda and misinformation that seeks to shape pro-China policies in Canada. Beyond traditional media, the government also uses Chinese social media as a tool of political indoctrination.[23] Following Ho's testimony, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) promised more scrutiny of the Chinese-language outlets.[24] Hong Kong has issued an arrest warrant for Ho, offering a reward for information leading to his arrest.

Beyond any debate on Chinese propaganda or misinformation, the presence of Chinese-language media in Richmond makes it more

difficult for local English-language media to make inroads with readers or advertisers. *Sing Tao Vancouver*, *Ming Pao* Vancouver and *World Journal* are major Chinese-language media available in Richmond.

"I've been in this business 35 years," says *Richmond News* publisher Alvin Chow, a man with an easy laugh, even as he lays out a litany of local news woes. "I continue to see restructuring. I continue to see mergers. I continue to see challenges that are not going away."

The digital product he publishes has been a mainstay in the community for almost half a century. The *Richmond News* was founded in 1977 and competed at that time with two other dailies in the city, both of which have folded. It says its mandate is to provide coverage of Richmond news, arts, community and sports events: "We investigate questionable practices, follow contentious debates, support important community projects and profile unique characters in our neighbourhoods."

Much of the upheaval in the Richmond media has come in the past decade. Glacier Media Group purchased the *Richmond Review* from Black Press Media in 2015, then closed the 83-year-old paper.[25] In 2017, the non-profit *Richmond Sentinel* was founded by local Intelli Management Group, providing print and online content and promising "local and relevant stories that connect the people who make up our community."[26] Fairchild Radio also provides Chinese language news to the community.[27] *The Richmond News*, meanwhile, ended its 45-year print run and went fully digital in 2023.[28] The publication currently employs two reporters, although only one lives in the community.

Chow's site receives an average of 500,000 unique visitors each month, but he has had difficulty bringing "old school" readers along on the digital ride, he says. After the 2023 move to digital, the *Richmond News* sponsored workshops in seniors' homes to help them migrate. It didn't work. "They missed their crossword puzzles," Chow says. He was still getting calls six months after the digital move with people complaining their paper hadn't been delivered.

There's a sense among some readers that there was more gravitas holding the

newspaper in their hands, Chow says, "not so much holding the website because the story is changing and if people don't search, they do not get the information they want." He also tried to attract Richmond's immigrants from China as readers, to little avail — he says they rely on social media because they have so few other options. Believing the *Richmond News*' best bet for the future is the children of newcomers, the publication covers events like high school track and field competitions, local soccer tournaments, and bowling and Taekwondo championships in Richmond. Chow believes the *Richmond News* may just survive, "but it is certainly not in a growth mode."

Immigrants and international students settling in Richmond have no incentive to engage with mainstream media because they have outlets in their own language, Chow says. But those outlets rely on translation of local news reports, including from his own paper, when they bother to cover anything local, he says. He believes Chinese speakers in the city uncritically accept what they see on their social media feeds — and he believes social media usage in his city is quite high. "Nobody is policing or monitoring those sites," he says.

Even with dwindling resources, Chow says the *News* can still hold its own in coverage of local elections, which larger Vancouver-based media do not cover. But Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie, who has been re-elected seven times since winning office in 2001, has had a front-row seat to the decline of local media and has a different view. "Part of our problem is we used to have a community paper," he says. "The *Richmond News* used to be a newspaper, but as an online publication it just doesn't have the same impact. People get their news from social media. We are definitely impacted by the loss of these community papers."

Voters relying on Facebook for news can be dangerous, Brodie says, and he's seen content he believes is a detriment to the community. These days, sometimes there is no local reporter covering city hall meetings. "We no longer have investigative reporting at the community level. People report what's given to them. I'm not being critical, I realize it is what it is, it's just very unfortunate," he says.

"Nothing that we have now is as effective as the written word. None of it."

CHAPTER 3

Spread too thin in Laval, Quebec



Election day dawns in Laval, Que., as a beautiful, sunny spring day — a perfect day to vote, an exciting day to be a journalist and a day where things seem possible.

Courrier Laval, the only French-language news outlet left standing in the third biggest city in Quebec, has been busy preparing. The strategy, with a small editorial team of five, will be "trying to be like tentacles a little bit everywhere," explains Patrick Marsan, vice-president of 2M Media, the Lavalois company that owns *Courrier Laval*. "We have truly made it our mission to help the population as much as possible to become more informed and to go out and vote," he says.

The small team does, indeed, sprout tentacles to cover the large suburb north of Montreal, where four ridings occupy Île Jésus and Îles-Laval. A special landing page has been built, a local antidote to the wave of national coverage to show residents how voting unfolds in their city. Over the course of the day and as results start rolling in, *Courrier Laval* coverage flows: three video interviews with candidates, eight articles, pictures from the different party headquarters. The next day, there's an article with the final results and another with the mayor's reaction. It is a trove of coverage for the 50,000 weekly readers.

Meanwhile, *The Laval News*, the English-language bi-monthly print publication that serves the city's growing population of English-speaking residents, has two journalists covering the election. Each one heads to the headquarters of a candidate likely to win to conduct

interviews and capture the mood. In two days, 34,200 copies of the edition will be delivered throughout the region.

"We don't have as many resources as we used to, to cover this type of thing," explains Martin C. Barry, the veteran political journalist at *The Laval News*. "We had a short space of time and fewer published pages than ever."

Details in the print edition are sparse — it's what's possible.

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Campaign coverage presaged its ending; too few media, so many misses.

There was no local debate or town hall. Some candidates sent mailouts to publicize their platforms. Unverified information circulated on social media. Aggregator sites pulled content from the web, like press releases, and spit them back out as "news." Several sites, like *Info de Laval* and *L'Écho de Laval*, published word for word a press release issued by Action Laval, a municipal political party, about their meeting with Liberal candidates. Neither site indicated it was a press release, but rather gave the byline to the "newsroom."

"It was a sad campaign," laments city councillor Christine Poirier. "We discovered the candidates through their lawn signs."

For Poirier, there is no substitute for local media. "Of course, journalists have a neutral point of view on elections, that's something. It's very important because if the information is only partisan, it's tainted; it's not so reliable."

She worries about the long-term effect of the dearth of quality local information on civic life, noting that only 12 percent of residents aged 18 to 35 voted at the last municipal election, with a 28 percent participation rate overall — 10 percentage points lower than the provincial average.[29] At a recent meeting with the municipal youth committee, she says young constituents hungered for neutral information.

Laval used to have a more dynamic media sphere, including its own magazine, the now-defunct *Laval en Famille; L'Écho de Laval*, which is now part of NeoMedia, a Quebec-based news aggregator site; and even a hyper-local publication, *La Voix de Saint François et Duvernay Est*, which used to cover the island's east end. Even remaining outlets like *Courrier Laval* don't boast the circulation numbers they used to command. As recently as 2017, the publication had a circulation of 133,000, compared to 50,000 today.

Both *Courrier Laval* and *The Laval News* added federal election coverage to their usual coverage mix of fires, bridge closures, high school sports results, the local Bay store closing, a new St-Hubert opening. But an election that was touted as an existential threat to the future of Canada found little resonance when pitted against a stray cat problem in Laval and the victorious Laval Rocket, the Montreal Canadiens farm team that finished the season at the top of the American Hockey League. On the front page of *Courrier Laval*, other than an almost weekly advertisement featuring a Liberal candidate, the election only appeared once over the six editions that were published during the campaign. On the front page of *The Laval News*, there was also a Liberal advertisement, but no mention at all of the election in the two editions that were published during that same period.

And so, coverage was shallow. Even in better-resourced news outlets based in neighbouring Montreal, like *Radio-Canada* and TVA, the third biggest city in Quebec barely got noticed. The only mention of note is a story by TVA, also published in partner newspaper *Le Journal de Montréal*, about a real estate scandal involving one of the Conservative candidates running in Laval. *Courrier Laval* mostly offered essential information about the campaign and civic explainers — who the candidates were in each riding, how and where people could vote. Some of the coverage consisted of the horse race, highlighting which local candidates were ahead based on the latest polls.

Courrier Laval's political journalist, Stéphane St-Amour, flagged the candidates' reluctance to engage. "To date, none of the 17 candidates running in Laval have officially announced their priorities," he shared on day 31 of the 36-day campaign. Journalist Martin C. Barry stresses that this has been consistent over his 28 years as a journalist. "The candidates never seem to have much of a focus on the local; they adhere to party allegiance, promote national policies. Local is only for municipal politics."

Indeed, Liberal leader Mark Carney's rally in Laval late in the campaign gave citizens only a high-level idea of what the party was promising, repeating previous announcements on housing, trade and taxes without referring to local issues such as public transportation, managing growth and social housing. The Liberals swept all four Laval ridings.

Throughout the campaign, discussion of local issues mostly took shape in the coverage of municipal leaders' priorities and demands of the federal government. Laval Mayor Stéphane Boyer met with local candidates to ask for support for local businesses impacted by the threat of U.S. tariffs, investment to extend the subway line that connects Montreal and Laval, greater protection for a local wildlife habitat, and to voice concerns around public safety. Action Laval, the municipal opposition party, also met with candidates, garnering further coverage of local priorities. But there was little response from the federal candidates on how they might support those priorities, nor comparative analysis of platforms on Laval's pressing issues.

A compounding factor was that this was the first federal election since the Online News Act passed in 2023, leading to Meta's decision to turn off access to news for Canadian users. For news outlets like *Courrier Laval*, reaching their audience, including with election coverage, has become a huge challenge. "We built up a big audience, and then overnight that audience is no longer with us," says Marsan, whose publication lost its 35,000 followers on Facebook and Instagram. A new app has gone some distance in addressing that problem, connecting directly with readers. "We have been able

to increase our network, our performance, which means more banner ads, which means more revenue," he explains.

The federal government's Local Journalism Initiative funds the work of one journalist at *The Laval News* and two at *Courrier Laval*. The latter, which turns 80 in September, has applied for another English-language reporting position to cover the fast-growing and increasingly cosmopolitan city — so far, without success. "We want to deliver credible information," Marsan says.

Local outlets did afford candidates the chance to communicate directly to voters through advertising. The Conservative candidates in particular ran detailed half-page ads that relayed their campaign promises in *Courrier Laval*. The Liberal candidates also took out ad space in the two local papers; the messaging mostly highlighted the candidates' names and party affiliation, with the odd half-page ad offering more details on their collective platform. For Barry, this creates its own challenge. "They are advertisers with us. It makes us perhaps less critical, especially when it's difficult to find advertisers; the level of criticality is subject to be eroded a little bit."

For its part, the municipality produces a quarterly magazine to bridge the gap. Called *Vivre à Laval*, it is distributed to 193,000 households and includes news, events, services and public education. While offering citizens an avenue to learn about their neighbours and what's going on in their community, councillor Poirier stresses that it is no substitute for actual journalism. "[We need] a neutral source outside of electoral periods — media could play that role," she says. "Organize debates, be neutral, a way of informing the population."

CHAPTER 4

Losing the signal in Vaughan, Ontario



The City of Vaughan lives in the shadow of Toronto and its big city media; media that residents will ruefully tell you only pays attention to the city to its north at times of murder and scandal.

While there is truth to that, the deeper truth is that Vaughan lacks the media to pay attention to itself.

Vaughan is an independent city of 341,000, making it the 17th largest city in the country,[30] nestled close to Canada's biggest city. It has its own municipal government and has experienced some of Canada's most rapid population growth over the past 20 years. It has also seen the biggest average loss of news outlets per population since 2008, according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. It has one local news outlet and when that it is analyzed against the backdrop of a growing population, the CCPA says that represents 55 percent fewer media than in 2008, giving it a news deprivation index of 0.4 news outlets per 100,000 residents.[31] That represents the second-lowest ratio of media outlets per 100,000 population in the study. It lost one of its local papers with the closure of *Vaughan Today* in 2013 and endured a decrease in service at the other, the *Vaughan Citizen*, with Metroland's bankruptcy in 2023.

Vaughan Today died along with a chain of newspapers serving Toronto neighbourhoods when its owner, Multimedia Nova Corp., went into receivership in 2013, also killing the long-serving Italian-language newspaper *Corriere Canadese*.[32]

Ten years later, the *Vaughan Citizen*, which has served Vaughan since 2001, was one of 70 titles that published their last print editions after Nordstar Capital, the owner of the Metroland Media Group, moved them all to digital, seeking bankruptcy protection and eliminating 600 jobs, including 70 journalists.[33] *The Citizen* is part of *YorkRegion.com*, the site of 10 former weekly newspapers, all of which are now community-specific pages. The shift to a digital-only business model left the website with one-third of its previous staffing level, a level that remains today, says Ted McFadden, the managing editor for Metroland News in York and Durham regions.

According to the CCPA, local news deprivation is highest in cities such as Vaughan in Ontario and Langley, Surrey and Richmond in B.C. because being just outside the large cities means the smaller city is subsumed by bigger media. In Vaughan's case, Postmedia and Toronto Star Newspaper Ltd. brands have fewer resources to cover the suburbs, hence coverage of mostly murder and scandal.



Vaughan has experienced some of Canada's most rapid population growth over the past 20 years. It has also seen the biggest average loss of news outlets per population since 2008.

Despite scant local attention to Vaughan candidates in locally based election coverage, the two ridings that comprise the city received plenty of national attention because of the political battle for voters in the 905 belt (named for its area code). Both Mark Carney and Pierre Poilievre campaigned in Vaughan. Poilievre released his platform at a large rally and Carney hit Vaughan to announce his housing policy early in the campaign, as well as blitzing the region on the final weekend, making stops in nearby Newmarket, Markham and Aurora, where he took a question from a *YorkRegion.com* reporter. The website did provide regional coverage of issues and covered the controversy over the candidacy of Liberal Paul Chiang.,[34] who resigned after suggesting voters

should turn in a Conservative candidate to the Chinese consulate which had offered a reward from Hong Kong police for his arrest. But there was no coverage of how national issues would reverberate at the hyper-local level in Vaughan. Regardless, in the two ridings, King–Vaughan and Vaughan–Woodbridge — both won by Conservatives — turnout was high, at 70.6 percent and 71.2 percent respectively.[35]

So, did any of these candidates need local media? And does anyone in Vaughan care about local media? "How else do we make politicians accountable?" asks Elvira Caria. She is Vaughan's Woman of Excellence for 2025, a former journalist, broadcaster and a community leader who has lived in Vaughan for 25 years. And she cares about local media. "You can't rely on Facebook," Caria says. "Who's writing that post? Who's responsible for its content?"

She says some candidates purposely stayed away from local media. "Our problem lies in the fact that nobody understands the importance of local media," says Caria. "You don't make politicians accountable because nobody is watching. It becomes a free-for-fall. We're not keeping our people accountable or making them fearful that they will have to answer to someone. And that becomes a problem."

Debra McLaughlin, the former head of CBC research who is now co-owner of a local radio station, says people were invested in the national campaign and voters wrongly assumed they didn't need to bother with local candidates. She heard a lot of fearmongering and found herself in political debates while standing in local checkout lines.

McLaughlin's 105.9 The Region[36] launched in late 2013, with big plans.[37] She knew from her CBC research that listeners coveted local radio. Before applying for a licence, McLaughlin and her partner researched the local region and found that half the community couldn't name their local mayor and had no idea what their school trustees did. She made the case to the CRTC that markets like Vaughan were underserved. When she assigned reporters to local campaigns and highlighted local issues — in nine languages — voter turnout in local elections went up. "When

people knew who was running and what they stood for, people came out to vote."

McLaughlin is not optimistic The Region can continue. If the station dies, it will be the 46th to close in Canada since 2008.[38]

Agreements between her station and regional councils in the area — air time for public service announcements in return for political promotion — fell apart when new politicians arrived "who believed that social media was the answer to everything." She had an agreement that 105.9 would be the station of record in case of emergency; regional council believed it could just use the internet. Council was spending money advertising on social media — sending money out of the country — and not on local advertising, and that advertising shortfall became a weight on her ability to stay alive. She and her business partner are paying to keep the business afloat, "two individuals subsidizing York Region."

Earlier this year, she was joined by Jim Lang, an author and well-known radio host at 105.9, as they asked York Regional Council to support local news by placing paid advertising on her website. "There's so many people in York Region who don't know what's happening in their own backyard," Lang said.[39] Less than a month later, he and the rest of staff were laid off.

While the council overwhelmingly backed the initiatives and Lang's layoff proved temporary (he is back in his morning spot at the time of writing), it could be too late for McLaughlin. Hers will not be the only voice lost. Humber Polytechnic, which provides a radio service from its Vaughan campus, has suspended its radio broadcasting program after 50 years because of declining enrolment.[40]

That would leave the *Vaughan Citizen*, which is part of *YorkRegion.com*, available on a drop-down menu that provides news items for Aurora, East Gwillimbury, Georgina, King, Markham, Newmarket, Richmond Hill, Stouffville, Thornhill and Vaughan. Seven journalists cover the region.

Election coverage was scant. For example, a search of Michael Guglielmin, the Conservative who won the Vaughan–Woodbridge riding, turned up four references: a five-paragraph riding "profile," a *Vaughan Citizen* piece written on election night, a wrap-up of regional voting the day after the election, and another regional wrap-up published days after the election. Anna Roberts, the Conservative returned in King–Vaughan, received the same treatment, even though she was one of only two candidates (along with the People's Party of Canada candidate)[41] who responded to a *Citizen* questionnaire on diversity (Guglielmin ignored the questions).

"Our team's coverage of the snap federal election was informative, timely and relevant to our readers and voters in Vaughan and throughout the region," Metroland's McFadden says. "However, it wasn't without its challenges."

McFadden understands the value of local journalism and knows mounting pressures on the industry have created areas of news poverty across the nation. A lack of resources can result in surface-level coverage lacking depth and context, he says, and an inability to break through political parties' own strategies, pointing to local Conservative candidates who made a concerted effort to avoid local questions and debates, even going so far as to withhold contact information in some York Region ridings. Politicians posting to social media may believe they are getting their message out, but McFadden says that does little to provide residents with fact-based reporting on which to make informed decisions.

He calls for the continuation of funding for the Journalism Labour Tax Credit and the Local Journalism Initiative, as well as earmarked advertising from local governments.

"Is Vaughan, strictly speaking, a news desert?" McFadden asks. "No. But is one full-time reporter able to fully cover the issues that impact this booming community and its residents? Also no."

CHAPTER 5

Splendid isolation in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories



It is a fiercely independent and resilient city, this capital of a territory with 25 percent more land area than Ontario but the population of a downtown Toronto neighbourhood. And yet Yellowknife has thriving local media that would be the envy of most big Canadian cities. Its highly engaged population has a voracious appetite for news, and plenty of local news outlets to sate it.

Residents say this need for news is fueled by the dominance of government in Yellowknife, coupled with its isolation and an attitude that if the community is not covered from within, no one else will do it.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives points to seven local news outlets in Yellowknife, 17 percent more than in 2008, meaning that the city has 33.6 news outlets per 100,000 people, tying it with Whitehorse as the best per capita rate of all Canadian communities surveyed.[42]

There are as many as 60 people working in local journalism in a community of 20,000. Yellowknife boasts:

- *Cabin Radio*;[43]
- Black Press-owned NNSL, which publishes the *Yellowknifer*[44] and *News/North*;[45]

- L'Aquilon and Radio Taïga (French), run by Médias ténois;[46]

- My True North Now[47] radio and CKLB Radio,[48] run by the Native Community Society of the N.W.T., which touts the most Dene language broadcasting in the world; and

- Local CBC radio.

The newest — and most successful — outlet on this menu of local news is *Cabin Radio*, established in 2017 by five local co-owners, two native Yellowknifers and three transplanted northerners.

"Yellowknife might be the most immune community when it comes to local news disappearing. I'm more worried about suburban Ontario than I am the North," says Ollie Williams, *Cabin Radio*'s editor-in-chief. "My message to the rest of Canada is 'worry about where you live, don't worry about the N.W.T.'"

Cabin Radio really hit its stride with its 2023 coverage of the territorial wildfires and was nationally recognized with a Canadian Association of Journalists award for daily excellence in reporting, a non-stop 30-day odyssey of reporting on evacuations caused by the fires. For that award, Cabin beat out entrants from three CBC newsrooms in Toronto, Montreal and Manitoba, as well as the *Hamilton Spectator*. In addition, *Cabin Radio*'s Caitrin Pilkington was short-listed for her use of Access to Information legislation to probe turmoil at the N.W.T.'s Status of Women Council and the station was recently awarded one of two $125,000 Norman Webster Fellowships to produce a groundbreaking story, or series of stories.

Cabin Radio boasts 10 million page views per year and it survives — thrives, even — with two reporters, Williams and an assistant. All told, it has a staff of 11 and is largely dependent on advertising revenue, together with reader donations that total about $70,000 per year. It also accepts federal government Local Journalism Initiative funding, grants from the Canadian Race Relations Foundation for hiring a young Indigenous broadcaster, Canada Summer Jobs funding for a summer intern and, most recently, a $20,000 Covering Canada:

Election 2025 grant from the Public Policy Forum, Rideau Hall Foundation and the Michener Awards Foundation that was used to send a reporter out on the road with local candidates during the federal election campaign.[49]

"We didn't have $20,000 for that, but they did, so I'll take it," says Williams, who is proud of finding funding wherever it lies. The money was approved April 9 and reporter Claire McFarlane hit the road April 14. Over the final two weeks of the campaign, she travelled to Inuvik, Norman Wells, Fort Simpson, Hay River and Whatì, talking to voters in those small communities (all with populations under 3,000) and reporting on candidates meeting with voters and Indigenous leaders. The voices of those voters are rarely heard. "We had never been able to report beyond Yellowknife during a federal election in the past and this time we had voices from all six regions of the N.W.T. appearing in our web copy, on the air and in podcast form," Williams says.

It would be flattering to describe *Cabin Radio*'s editorial budget as shoestring: if Williams needs $3,000 to commission a freelance piece, he goes to the advertising department and asks if it can sell enough to pay for it.

There is also more trust in media in the N.W.T., says Williams, who formerly worked at the BBC before arriving in the Canadian North. "We're a bit behind the south here, and I mean that in a good way. The media is seen as less toxic up here," he says.

Black Press-owned NNSL publishes both the *Yellowknifer* twice a week and *News/North* (with more territorial coverage) weekly, with a print run of about 2,000 copies for the former and just under 4,000 for the latter, says NNSL publisher Mike Bryant, a long-time Yellowknife resident. The *Yellowknifer* has been published since 1972, and *News/North* began its life in the late 1970s. It is the former News of the North, which for years had a legendary reputation for enterprising journalism.

Why does local journalism thrive here? "Government kind of rules everything here, so there is a real

appetite for news and information," Bryant says. "And we're isolated."

Scott Robertson, a Yellowknife health consultant who was instrumental in the 2023 wildfire evacuation, believes *Cabin Radio* was most responsive in getting information out in a timely fashion. "The response from the government was 'wait until we tell you,' so there is always a lag. It was the same issue during COVID. Information has to go through translation, then through cabinet, then through the MLAs. By the time the information comes out, it's old news."

In an election campaign, there is usually some room for context when compared to news updates on a spreading fire. That gave *Cabin Radio* time to probe local issues more deeply and give a more nuanced portrait of candidates.



"Yellowknife might be the most immune community when it comes to local news disappearing."

"Overall, there is a very respectful attitude between government and media in the Northwest Territories," says Robertson. "The media wasn't an ally but seems more interested in telling the story to the public instead of playing 'gotcha.'"

Nancy Vail, a local artist and social activist, gave the Yellowknife media high marks for coverage of the candidates, but she felt there was a shortage of good analysis of the issues. She has written op-eds for NNSL publications and says that while the outlets will occasionally "stick (their) necks out" — and did a good job of covering candidates — "the papers haven't stopped and written about reconciliation or underrepresentation, or ask why did the Liberals have a white person running? Columns and analysis pieces are supposed to be taking critical looks at what's going on. That hasn't been done, so you have the public talking among themselves and trading misinformation and fake news. There are holes in what is happening up here."

Robertson agrees opinion columns and editorials are in short supply.

"People trading opinions back and forth on Facebook isn't the same as someone putting in the thought for an 800-word column, he says.

Still, when it comes to straight information, Yellowknifers have it much better than most other smaller communities in Canada. *Cabin Radio* did detailed interviews with all candidates in the riding (not just emailed questionnaires), travelled to events and organized an all-candidates debate, making everything available on multiple platforms. NNSL also interviewed the candidates and provided value-added commentary on electoral reform, the need for a cabinet seat for the territories and a lack of attention on environmental issues in the campaign. It also provided breaking news alerts on election night.

Almost 55 percent of Northwest Territories voters cast ballots in the April election — up more than seven percentage points since 2021 — but well below the national average. Voters were rewarded with their first cabinet minister in 20 years when former Yellowknife mayor Rebecca Alty was named minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations.

Despite media coverage, appeals from the Assembly of First Nations, and efforts to increase turnout by all candidates, voter turnout in the North continued to trail the national average. Those reasons go well beyond access to local news and analysts have pointed to a lack of attention to Indigenous issues in the national campaign as one factor that may have kept voters home in 2025.

CHAPTER 6

Recommendations



The democratic fulcrum of an election has a way of bringing society's biggest issues into sharp relief, and no more so the issue of disappearing local news coverage.

We know local media is stretched thin at the best of times. With no additional resources, the added civic responsibility of adequately covering an election campaign (see chapters 1 to 5), with its attendant travel, long hours, additional storytelling and topsy-turvy news cycle can be a bridge too far. And that's if a local news outlet even exists at all.

Earlier this year, PPF, the Rideau Hall Foundation and the Michener Awards Foundation produced a local news report with recommendations for governments, philanthropists and consumers to help ensure a resilient future for local news in Canada.[50] Those recommendations, rooted in PPF's original work in its ground-breaking Shattered Mirror report in 2017,[51] focused on helping to sustain access to reliable information, whatever the distribution channel or business model, and without the need for perpetual government funding. Those recommendations stand, including stepping up community foundation involvement in local news, reconceiving the Local Journalism Initiative, mandating a sales notice period for local news outlets, and creating a local advertising tax credit.

But a devastated local news ecosystem requires additional scaffolding at election time — and will for the foreseeable future. While it is our most fervent hope that a rejuvenated local news landscape will eventually render these recommendations obsolete, hope is not a strategy, and we cannot surrender our most important institutions to it.

We recommend:

1. Creating a non-partisan election coverage fund

Our experience with the Covering Canada: Election 2025 Fund illustrates demand on the part of media outlets, but also a supply of willing donors (see preface). A $5 million philanthropically funded endowment, with pooled funding across a range of donor foundations, would conservatively generate $1 million in interest every four years (assuming five percent growth) that would be available to allocate to small and medium-sized outlets across the country for ambitious federal election coverage. The fund must be fiercely non-partisan and independent. Key to the fund's success is top tier application judging that is beyond reproach and includes sufficient time for deliberation. Importantly, a percentage of the fund should be earmarked for Indigenous-run media, and a separate advisory panel of Indigenous journalists should be tapped to help allocate those funds, as well as engage in targeted outreach to attract applicants. Ideally, as more donations flow, the fund would be expanded to help fund coverage of provincial and municipal elections, which resonate strongly for local communities.

In PPF's consultations with industry and foundations, we heard some concerns that targeted funding such as an election fund would cannibalize other efforts to provide much-needed operational funding for local news outlets of the sort that Toronto-based Inspirit Foundation is pulling together. (Inspirit, a charitable foundation that promotes pluralism, is spearheading a pooled philanthropic fund to provide ongoing support for journalism in service of underserved communities. At last count, Inspirit had pulled together four foundations to support the effort, and has a goal of $5-8 million to fund a five-year pilot program.) We argue there will always be donors who prefer discrete, time-stamped efforts such as the election fund we propose, and that a greater share of donor philanthropy overall will begin to shift towards journalism in the years ahead. This should lift all boats.

2. Directing government advertising to local media

Overall, we know that the 44 Government of Canada institutions that feed into its annual advertising audit spent $60.75 million[52] on "media expenditures" in the 2023–2024 fiscal year. The federal

government spent more on LinkedIn advertising ($2.68 million) than all of Canadian radio ($2.49 million); more on Snapchat and Pinterest (a combined $1.84 million) than all of Canadian print ($1.38 million). In our previous work on local news (which by its nature leans to radio and print), we recommended the federal government, and provincial and territorial governments, follow Ontario's lead of channeling some advertising dollars to local news: Ontario requires that 25 percent of government ad budgets, including spending by four large provincial agencies, be directed to "Ontario-based publishers."[53] The government of British Columbia has hinted at interest in this scheme — others must follow suit.

This recommendation is particularly relevant for Elections Canada, whose spending is not captured in the advertising audit. Advertising spending for the 2021 federal campaign, the last election for which data is available, was about $16 million. Elections Canada told PPF that a breakdown of what was spent on community news outlets in total is not possible, given the way their ad agency buys digital ads. Given that Elections Canada's spending is designed, it says, to "reach all Canadian citizens (18+) and ensure they have the information that they need to register and vote," we recommend it should be doing so with a targeted local news spend of 25 percent.

3. Giving citizens some journalistic tools

Fighting election misinformation requires all hands on deck, and in some cases that means journalists lending their expertise directly to citizens. Projects and sectors that would benefit from funding, particularly around election time, include:

- **The Documenters:** Inspired by a similar organization in the United States, a group called Documenters Canada[54] has sprung up to train — and pay — Canadians to document community public meetings. Their notes, after fact-checking, are made available to all. A pilot project, in partnership between Concordia University and The Green Line, is documenting public meetings in Alexandra Park, Toronto, with plans to roll out across the country.

- **Get Fact:** A lack of local news can lead to susceptibility to misinformation, no more so than during an election. Volunteers have created Get Fact[55] (see Appendix), a non-partisan fact-checking organization, to "verify what's being said online about Canada and its people." The organization has designed free, downloadable fact-checking AI to better equip Canadians' decision-making.

- **Verified:** The Samara Centre for Democracy monitored online conversations about the 2025 federal election conversation "to help Canadians understand how politics is playing out across digital spaces."[56] During the campaign, they produced reports for Canadians about chatter on Reddit, anti-Canadian sentiment in videos by Indian media, and the most oft-referenced Canadian media on social media.

- **Community radio:** Community broadcasters are an important part of the local news ecosystem. According to the Community Radio Fund of Canada, more than 2.4 million Canadians tune in regularly to the 235 CRTC-licensed community and campus radio stations across the country, including 54 licensed Indigenous stations. Their licences require that they are not-for-profit organizations and are guided by a locally elected community board of directors, so they are ripe for philanthropic donations, particularly catalytic training dollars.

4. Getting an industry prepared for its opportunity

Local news outlets must do their part to not only fuel innovative entrepreneurship but ready themselves for philanthropic and government support. Luck, after all, is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. The Elections Canada 2025 ad campaign had to deal with 120 different display ad sizes for print and digital local news outlets across the country — this is clearly unworkable. An industry rooted in a healthy competitive spirit has been hobbled by the erosion of provincial local news associations; it must find ways to work together to make itself attractive to support in all its forms, as well as creating a network for media leadership to exchange ideas about best practices. This

can take many forms, but a standardized training program across the country is a good place to begin. Local news outlets could benefit from learning strategic planning, as well as ways to track and monetize audience to create real, sustainable and well-documented impact that would in turn be reported back to funders.

5. Improving data collection

Undermining these recommendations is a glaring lack of data. Throughout this report, we have referenced the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives news deprivation index; a helpful new resource based on the long-term work of professor April Lindgren's Local News Initiative project at Toronto Metropolitan University. That data is the best we've got, but it's not good enough. As Lindgren wrote recently, it is not possible to search municipality-specific lists of radio, TV, newspaper and online news outlets — no single, searchable database exists. As governments and philanthropic organizations explore ways to support local news, how are they to identify areas of greatest need? Researchers, and dare we say think tanks, are stymied as well. Although new data-tracking initiatives are popping up to help track local news in Canada, there are drawbacks to all of them. Instead, Lindgren suggests an annual census where local librarians across the country — that most precious of resources — list local media in their communities. "The directory won't be perfect," Lindgren writes[57]. "But at a time when local news coverage is becoming increasingly scarce and more difficult to find online, it will be much better than what we have now."

CONCLUSION

Twelve voters in Terra Nova–The Peninsulas decided the fate of their riding in Canada's 2025 federal election. Twelve in a riding of 76,000 residents.

The razor-thin victory brings the collapse of local news into sharp relief: when all that remains of local news in Bonavista, NL, is John texting Gina, who calls Anne, essentially we're left with a 3D version of Facebook. And we know where that ends; citizens retreat to their partisan corners, misinformation flourishes, distrust grows.

Elections are too important to leave to the slow-moving re-invention of the local news ecosystem. In the recent federal election, as we've documented in this report, despite the highest voter turnout (68.7 percent)[58] since 1993,[59] millions of Canadians cast ballots with little or no real knowledge of their local candidates. There was scant coverage at the local level, with candidates using their own social media channels rather than have their information filtered through local reporters. It is no hyperbole to argue that given the collapse of local news and the Facebook ban on news on its site, the federal election of 2025 was most likely the most poorly covered election in modern Canadian history.

Outlets desperately needed help covering the federal campaign — much more help than we were able to provide — and they'll need it again in 2029, if not before.

Local news outlets must do their part as well, creating a diversity of funding for themselves that includes advertising, subscriptions, events, tax credits — and philanthropy. They must give philanthropy a clear role in this nation-building project and build attractive vehicles for them. A permanent, non-partisan election journalism fund is a start.

Would things have been different in Newfoundland had voters had access to robust campaign coverage from a range of news outlets, long-form interviews, op-eds, all-candidates meetings and fact-checking? It seems probable that a flow of reliable information would have tipped the balance more firmly in one direction or the other. But without a local news outlet asking questions about those questions, we'll never know.

APPENDIX:

Misinformation

Even the most imaginative conspiracy theories that floated across social media during the 2025 federal election failed to gain much traction: No, the pencils provided by Elections Canada to mark ballots were not being erased, and polls showing the Liberals in the lead were accurate, not a bid to create a false electoral narrative. An aggressive bot campaign outlandishly attempting to link Mark Carney with Jeffrey Epstein was easily debunked.

Those pushing back against misinformation believe the pencil campaign was the most effective, setting the stage for claims of a stolen election and forcing a rebuttal video from Elections Canada and coverage by a handful of mainstream media outlets. The original meme about the need to bring pens to the voting station came from online posts by "content creator" Mario Zelaya, whose warnings were then amplified thousands of times on Facebook.[60] Many made reference to the lies about a "stolen" U.S. presidential election in 2020.

"There is a ton of misinformation out there," says Aengus Bridgman, director of the Media Ecosystem Observatory and the Canadian Digital Media Research Network,[61] although he says there was anticipation that the 2025 campaign could have been much worse.

There was coverage of misinformation in other elections recently and "in many ways, people were very concerned about the scope and scale of this issue. In many ways, we were primed, through the Hogue commission on foreign interference and local attention to this stuff. We expected it to be bad and, looking back on it now, we can say 'well, it was sort of bad.'"

This federal election played out against a worsening number of news-deprived areas in Canada.[62] Although polls show

a drop in trust for big Canadian legacy media, both online and television, 72 percent of Canadians say they are concerned about the disappearance of local news, which, at 85 percent, has the highest level of trust of all media, including national and international news.[63]

Veteran journalist and anchor Kevin Newman and a team of 100 volunteers have launched Get Fact, a non-partisan social media effort to tackle misinformation head on where it thrives best.[64] The trigger for Newman's endeavour was U.S. President Donald Trump. "He clearly had us in his sights and I had seen elsewhere in the world where information warfare had been a prelude to more serious, physical warfare," Newman says. "I was concerned that we as a country didn't appreciate what was going on, how sophisticated it had become elsewhere, and we really didn't have much of a defence."

Canada has never had a national campaign to raise awareness of misinformation, he says, "and no one sees it as their civic duty to verify information. There is a lot we could do to get up to the level of awareness in Europe, especially in our news deserts." We talk about this during elections, but "what happens after the election?" he asks.

There was activity during the election that should concern Canadians:

- The Samara Centre for Democracy found a preponderance of activity on YouTube from the Indian media during the early part of the campaign, much of it peddling disinformation about the Canadian government.[65]

- A network of at least 60 bots spread misinformation about now-Prime Minister Mark Carney's firm, Brookfield Asset Management, allegedly profiting from the Liberal leader's "net zero policy," according to a study by the D.C.-based Climate Action Against Disinformation. One YouTube post, purporting to highlight a financial "whistleblower," was viewed more than 300,000 times.[66] Warnings

from the "whistleblower" that Carney could not be trusted were featured on two Canadian YouTube sites: One by Jasmine Laine was viewed 124,600 times;[67] and another on Northern Perspectives was viewed more than 248,000 times.[68] (Both YouTube sites have been endorsed by the federal Conservatives.)

- AI-generated fake photographs were circulated showing Carney with convicted sex traffickers Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell — one featured a clearly visible watermark from Grok, the AI tool developed by Elon Musk's X.[69] A photo of Carney, Maxwell and Tom Hanks posted on X by American conservative @GioBruno1600 was viewed 767,000 times but was flagged as a fake by X users.[70]

- The Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections (SITE) Task Force also found interventions from Chinese influencers on the Liberal leadership campaign of Chrystia Freeland and, more notably, against Joe Tay, a Hong Kong democracy activist who ran for the Conservatives in the Toronto riding of Don Vally North and lost.[71]

- There was also an uptick of AI political ads generated by "news ingestion bots" that put out material based on topics that receive more news coverage. They are run by international crypto scam operators that Meta cannot police, Bridgman says.

The dominant fear of misinformation coming from the U.S., a global leader of exported misinformation, did not materialize. Despite Trump's continued comments about the 51st state, Musk and others remained quiet.

Newman is aiming to help people verify what they are receiving in their social feeds by demonstrating how reputable journalists verify. GetFact is trying to occupy a space that other media doesn't. His team has created a bot, named Laura, in honour of Canadian heroine Laura Secord, that puts a verification tool in the hands of consumers and introduces them to the fact-checking environment.[72]

"This may be a way to punch through in those news deserts. If they are not able to discern what is a crypto scam on Facebook from CBC News, if they have a tool — and a little skepticism — they can use the tool to learn that they are being scammed."

Increased awareness of the threat of disinformation did not necessarily lead to trust in the results, however. A Leger post-election poll found 77 percent of Canadians felt misinformation had some impact on the final election results and only 65 percent trusted that those results were accurate — 13 percent had no trust at all.[73]

Both findings should be red flags, particularly because we don't know what pieces of misinformation did meaningful damage during the election. No one claimed the election was stolen by erased Xs, "but we don't really know what is gaining traction because no one is analyzing this and releasing data publicly," Newman says.

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