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The construction of auditing expertise in measuring government performance

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Abstract

Accounting research has increasingly been concerned to investigate professional expertise. This paper contributes to this interest by examining the process by which state (or government) auditors may become recognized as possessing expertise relevant to guiding and implementing new public management reforms. We analyze this process in the Canadian province of Alberta to understand the construction of a claim to expertise, drawing on theories in the social study of science and technology. Specifically, through our study of the development and consolidation of a network of support, we examine how the Office of the Auditor General of Alberta anchored its claims to expertise in the corpus of knowledge on measurement of government performance; the various devices that the Office used to sustain these claims; and the ways in which government and public servants reacted to them. In particular, our paper provides insights into how standards of “good practices” develop through a process of “fact” building, which involves the undertaking of local experiments by practitioners, the production of inscriptions in reports, and their subsequent validation by other practitioners. The production of inscriptions in sites of occupational practice such as those operated by government audit offices, and the collective process of validation that subsequently takes place in the practitioner community, are significant aspects in the construction of networks of support around claims to expertise.

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Introduction

The evolution of government is now one where accountability is the thing. So, who is in charge of accountability? The Auditor General. And so, now where is the power

of control in the Provincial Government? It rests with the Auditor General. Everybody is very, very sensitive about the Auditor General. Who was getting more staff when everybody was getting cuts? The Auditor General. Whose department got salary increases when everybody else got cut? The Auditor General's department. Who got new furniture when everybody didn't? The

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Auditor General. These are little things but they are indicators of larger things. Now, the manager meetings that I go to, there is very rarely a discussion that doesn't include some sort of sentence like "The Auditor General might not like that", or "We will have to do this for the Auditor General." I have been in government for twenty years and prior to three years ago you would never have heard that. There was no reference to the Auditor with the programming I was involved in. Now you can't go to a meeting without there being a discussion of the Auditor and the performance [efficiency] audits and all the various things that are going on. It is interesting to watch the power shift around. (Division manager, October 1997)

This statement made in the context of the introduction of new public management (NPM) in Alberta, alerts us to the important links between professional power, constructions of expertise, and discourses of accountability. These links have relevance for many jurisdictions, and for analyses of professions, expertise and the role of auditors. The quote indicates that the Office of the Auditor General of Alberta (hereafter the Office) is perceived as a central player in the operationalization of the broad discourse about NPM. It is seen as possessing relevant expertise, perhaps *the* relevant expertise, in reforming the administration of the Province, particularly through performance measurement and managing by results. Such perceptions have also been observed by numerous commentators in other jurisdictions (see the special issue of *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 2003, on government accountability and the role of the Auditor General; Pollitt et al., 1999). Although accountancy has been affected by significant jurisdictional movements and segmentation (Rosenberg, Tomkins, & Day, 1982) throughout its history, little is known about the processes by which accountants and auditors come to be recognized as possessing legitimate expertise to operate in new domains (Power, 2003). In this paper we seek to better understand these processes, and thereby contribute to debates about NPM, performance measurement and professional expertise.

This paper attends to the specificity of the Alberta situation, not to celebrate a particular story, but to explore general issues of the relationship between expertise and discourse. Specifically, it aims to contribute to a better understanding of the process by which ideas about performance and efficiency become increasingly influential through their translation in specific contexts and their re-embedding in a general, context-free and portable discourse. Pressures to perform and to account for performance have become particularly salient in the public sector, where NPM and its focus on measuring performance play a key role in restructuring government activities in a number of jurisdictions (Power, 1997a; Watkins & Arrington, forthcoming). In this context, government activities are conceived of as spaces of manageability between inputs, outputs and outcomes. Those spaces seem to call for expert management, and a central concern of this paper is how and why expertise becomes associated with accounting and auditing.

Ideas about performance and efficiency need resources and allies to be implementable within organizations (Latour, 1987). The deployment of NPM is often related to the growth of a particular group of experts, with accountants and state auditors (also known as government auditors) often being prominent (Guthrie, Humphrey, Olson, & Jones, 2005; Hood, 1998). For example, Power (1997a) maintains that NPM has contributed to the spread of state auditing due to its emphasis on the use of audit as a mechanism for control. State auditing, especially efficiency auditing, has also played a role in legitimizing changes in government controls in accordance with NPM – for example by promoting the idea that governments should be more accountable in terms of results.¹ Current knowledge is scant, however, on the process by which state auditors' claims to expertise in guiding, influencing and making NPM reforms practical, are developed and legitimized. While the literature on governmentality (Foucault,

¹ Reflecting its relatively high degree of vagueness, efficiency auditing has also been called comprehensive, effectiveness, operational, performance, systems, and value-for-money auditing.

1991; Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose, 1997) examines technologies of government and their relation to programs such as NPM, less attention has been paid to the role of expertise in stabilizing linkages between programmes and specific technologies (one exception being Radcliffe, 1999).² The central feature of our paper is to investigate the process by which the Office of the Auditor General of Alberta became recognized as a legitimate expert in the domain of performance measurement. How do accountants, who typically have been seen as bean counters (Freidman & Lyne, 2001), come to speak with authority about the performance of government programs and ministries? How do auditors link the general ideas of NPM with validating specific performance measures? We pay attention to the ways in which the Office promoted and consolidated its claim to expertise, and how targeted audiences responded to this.

A second inter-related feature of this paper consists of examining how the Office acquired expertise in measuring government performance. “Acquiring” refers to the process by which the Office anchored its claims to expertise to discourses sustained by a network of accountants and other stakeholders involved in producing and validating a portable set of “good practices” concerning the measurement of government performance. Using inscriptions produced by accountants and auditors in other jurisdictions to justify local inscriptions, constitutes a key element of this process and illustrates how collective bodies of practices and inscriptions, which underlie claims to expertise, develop through a process of “fact” building between the local and other, more remote, practices and discourses.

The legitimization of claims to expertise is a project of fact building that involves the construction of networks of support (Power, 1996a). Drawing on actor-network theory (Latour, 1987), our examination stresses three features of fact building,

namely, laboratories, networks, and the observation that the fate of a factual claim rests in its reception by others. We rely on these features to examine how the Office acquired expertise, how the Office’s claims to expertise were promoted in an attempt to consolidate them into networks of support, and how these claims were rejected, modified and/or taken-for-granted by relevant audiences.

Previous research has sought to better understand the process by which accountants and auditors become recognized as possessing expertise, highlighting how inter-occupational competition around work jurisdictions has enabled accountants to be able to control areas of work because they could attach their claims of expertise to perceived problems (Abbott, 1988; Armstrong, 1985; Fogarty & Radcliffe, 1999; Miller, 1992; Power, 1995, 1997b). Our research contributes to this literature in several important respects. First, there has been limited research on the process by which state auditors’ claims of expertise are legitimized in the public sector, where claims to auditor independence are an established element of democratic accountability. Second, studies on the construction of expertise tend to be historical, focusing on general trends and events.³ However, our study examines the fabrication process in “real time” and enables in-depth examination of accounting and auditing in action. Third, most studies focus on the ways in which accountants’ claims of expertise are exhibited, but do not deal significantly with parties’ reactions to these claims. To understand how expertise is produced, we should look both at the ways in which proponents promote their claims of expertise, and the way in which target audiences react to them.

Our research is based on over 140 interviews conducted between 1994 and 2000 with Alberta public servants. The focus has been to trace a political initiative as it has been articulated and developed, and to discover its impact on managerial practices (Oakes, Townley, & Cooper, 1998; Townley, 2002; Townley, Cooper, & Oakes, 2003). Our semi-structured interviews were with representatives from central government agencies (including

² Our analysis is, of course, predicated on the idea that expertise is important in legitimizing claims over an area of work. While we would seek to avoid making such general claims, we show that being seen as an expert was crucial for the auditors in our study in order to justify the expansion of their work to include the assessment of performance measures.

³ For example, Power (1992) studies the historical construction of audit expertise by focusing on the role of a specific technique, statistical sampling.

Treasury), department managers having primary responsibility for the development and introduction of their respective department's business plans and performance measures, and managers responsible for day-to-day operations.⁴ The interviews usually lasted between one and a half and two and a half hours, and almost all were recorded and transcribed. From the transcripts, we constructed a database of all of the instances in which the Office is mentioned by interviewees and the importance of paying attention to its recommendations. Over the period, public servants increasingly mentioned the Office and its expertise, from almost no mentions in the first two years to many in the later years. Our analysis was also supplemented by two interviews with four auditors of the Office – each of which lasted about three hours. These were loosely structured and centred on the history of efficiency auditing in the Office. We also interviewed three individuals involved in the Alberta Financial Review Commission, and two program evaluators working in the Albertan public sector. Finally, we examined documents published by the Office and Treasury over the period of the research, as well as observing annual, half day, presentations between 1992 and 2005 by senior members of the Office to senior public servants about the role of the Office and its views on accountability, audit and performance measurement.

The remainder of the paper comprises six sections. In the first section we discuss auditing expertise and develop the theoretical underpinnings that underlie our analysis. We then present background information about the Office and describe how it came to be involved in performance measurement, as well as the extent of scepticism that the Office's initial involvement generated in the eyes of government managers and within the Office itself. The third section examines the process by which the Office acquired expertise in measuring government

performance. In the next two sections we analyze the promotion and consolidation of the Office's claims to expertise, and document how the audiences received these claims. In the conclusion, we bring these points together and elaborate the implications of our study for inter-professional competition and the conceptualization of expertise. We highlight the instability of claims to expertise, thereby emphasizing the contingent nature of the state auditors' role in performance measurement.

Auditing expertise

In Alberta performance measurement emerged as a relatively vague intention in 1993 when the newly elected government endorsed the recommendations of the Alberta Financial Review Commission to review the government's financial position and reporting procedures. Performance measurement was formalized in 1995 with the adoption of the *Government Accountability Act*, which requires all government departments to produce three-year business plans outlining their objectives and performance measures, and an annual report of results based on these measures ([Government of Alberta, 1995](#)). The Office's involvement is not specified in the Act. The Office does not provide a complete audit opinion on departments' performance disclosures and does not measure departments' performance. Yet, over time, the Office became central to the operationalization of the performance measurement project, and established its ability to speak authoritatively on the matter. The Office's claim to expertise is that it is qualified to intervene in the domain of performance measurement by providing advice on the implementation of the government's performance measurement project, and by evaluating the credibility of departments' performance measures disclosed in annual reports. This claim was articulated in a number of ways, for example through the production of guidance documents and the issuance of recommendations in the Office's annual reports. Our analysis focuses on these articulations and how audiences responded to them. Expertise is judged through an examination of the plausibility and persuasiveness of the Office's claim.

⁴ Interviewees were asked about the rationale, espoused and understood, for the introduction of business plans and performance measures, and what these plans and measures were hoped to achieve. Interviewees were also asked how they specifically tried to develop public sector business plans and measures; what guided the design of templates for civil servants; what particular difficulties were encountered; what responses these initiatives generated; and how the measures were used.

Networks, laboratories and claims to expertise

Network refers to the webs of support of people and resources around knowledge claims (Callon, 1986). Claims are understood to be widely accepted and taken-for-granted when they are supported by stable and solid networks. Translation consists of the ongoing process by which claims are transformed as proponents seek to enrol other actors into networks of support for claims which may (dependent on interests) be accepted, rejected or modified.

Networks of support around particular knowledge claims connect with other networks of support. Knowledge claims do not emerge out of the blue, purified from any outside influence (Latour, 1999). Proponents more or less consciously draw from other networks of support when developing and promoting their own claims. The emergence of the Office's claim to expertise inter-connected with the development of multiple networks supporting the development of performance indicators in government. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s a variety of organizations, including large accounting firms, professional bodies, and public policy groups, both national and international, became interested in the measurement of government performance and published books and reports on the matter. Various political parties also became active supporters of performance measurement.⁵

Equally, the strengthening or weakening of a particular network of support around a claim to expertise may also influence other networks. The notion of "jurisdictional contests" as developed by Abbott (1988) may be conceived of as conflicts among proponents of different occupational groups, which compete over a given area of work to secure networks of support around their respective claims to expertise. We examine the ways in which Office auditors and other occupations in government, most notably program evaluators and general managers, struggled and cooperated

in trying to legitimize their expertise in measuring performance.

We conceive of networks of support established in specific settings, such as the network surrounding the Office's claim to expertise in measuring performance of government, as local networks. Collectively, local networks of support around a (more or less) common object like performance measurement constitute a global network of support. For example, although each local network considers and translates performance measurement in a relatively unique way, those distinctions often get blurred in the eyes of diverse audiences, thereby allowing a network of networks to develop around the idea of performance measurement. Reciprocal relationships take place between local and global networks. We are particularly interested in examining how the Office anchored its claims to expertise to a network of literature that seeks to produce and validate a set of "good practices" about the measurement of performance in governments generally. We also consider the influence that the documents and reports issued at the local level by the Office had in influencing this literature.

Claims to expertise are more persuasive when they are linked with what appears to be objective facts (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Latour, 1987). Laboratories are often crucial in producing facts and claims to expertise. There is a lively debate in science studies about the relative roles and meanings of experiments and laboratories. For most of the paper we follow Latour (1987) and Knorr Cetina (1992, 1999) in stressing the importance of laboratories as legitimizing devices in knowledge production. Latour (1987) sees laboratories as sites where actors experiment with nature through a chain of instruments (including binoculars, pencils and sheets of paper) that produce graphical inscriptions and other visual displays – which are ultimately integrated in documents and reports conveyed to others. Knorr Cetina's (1999, p. 27) definition of laboratory practice as "the detachment of objects from their natural environment and their installation in a new phenomenal field defined by social agents" emphasizes that laboratories can encompass not just the activities of science, but also the production and legitimation of knowledge produced in fields not

⁵ Large accounting firms played a role in the process under study, notably through the presence of several of their partners on the Alberta Financial Review Commission. In addition, the position of the Auditor General has, since 1995, been held by retired partners from KPMG and PwC.

typically seen as scientific. By discussing psychoanalysis, cathedral building and war games, Knorr Cetina (1992) stresses that in knowledge production, laboratories and experiments take place in everyday life as well as in self-consciously scientific sites. She illustrates this argument with intriguing analyses of the psychoanalyst's couch, the medieval cathedral and war games where objects in these different sites for the production of knowledge are configured as signs (in psychoanalysis), as procedural manipulations (in cathedral building), and as real events (in war games).

Knorr Cetina (1999) further argues that laboratories, as contextually dependent and dispersed sites of experiments, are particularly important in the modern “knowledge society” and vividly analyzes two very different laboratory sciences. In the world of high energy physics, thousands of physicists from around the world operate a “post romantic communitarian structure”, in which they conduct experiments in their own locales, as well as sharing results, proposals and ideas for developing and extending experiments by e-mail and at CERN (European Laboratory for Particle Physics). In contrast, molecular biology is a world of small individualized and competitive laboratories, in which scientists conduct competitive experiments, often applying trial and error rather than systematic theory. Although we do not attempt the detailed ethnographies of such studies, our research on the production of audit knowledge can hopefully contribute to our understanding of epistemic culture, and again emphasizes how experiments, networks and laboratories are central to an understanding of how claims to legitimate knowledge are made and become taken-for-granted facts.

The above writings conceive of laboratories in a much broader sense than the popular image of bench laboratories, of a single physical site populated by scientists conducting experiments. Accordingly, we argue that government accountants and auditors practise in laboratories, where they (among other things) experiment with the notion of performance measurement – through carefully executed and controlled manipulations of key variables or small scale activities that are to be treated as limited trials. The inscriptions resulting from these experiments (including audit

criteria, audit findings, performance measures and corresponding methodology) are then disclosed either in the auditor's report or in various other reports. Importantly, every report is subject to a collective knowledge validation process, in which auditors and other audiences in multiple jurisdictions can accept, ignore, or reject the report and its inscriptions. A network of literature emerges as local inscriptions are taken up by other actors. Of course, the nature of the validity criteria that prevail in a given professional community exerts influence over the type of knowledge produced in its members' laboratories.⁶

Historically, accountants have developed, through experiments and inscriptions, discourses sustaining a particular set of practices, which make various claims, such as objectivity and universality. For example, accountants have specified a set of “good practices” in relation to performance measurement. Here, we would include knowledge about controllability, quantitative measurement, and the value of comparing against a standard or norm. In contrast, competitor occupations such as program evaluators have sought to anchor their claims to expertise to a literature that emphasizes the development of tailored measures of performance. Accountants' claims can also be contrasted to the tacit and un-formalized claims to specialized knowledge and experience that managers may make about how to assess performance.

The construction of local networks of support around claims to expertise involves establishing legitimacy. Fig. 1 illustrates the networks involved in claims for legitimate expertise that we focus on in our analysis. The two boxes at the bottom of the left side of the figure identify the networks of support around evaluators and program managers. These two networks are assembled around a contextualized and restricted field of expertise. Consistent with arguments that restricted fields of

⁶ Because these networks are fragile and rely so heavily on documents and reports, we build on Latour's and related ideas of inscriptions (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Latour, 1987; Robson, 1992) to describe the products of laboratory practices. Knorr Cetina prefers to emphasize laboratories as sites of practices (1999), but our research could only focus on inscriptions, not the detailed ethnographies used by Knorr Cetina.

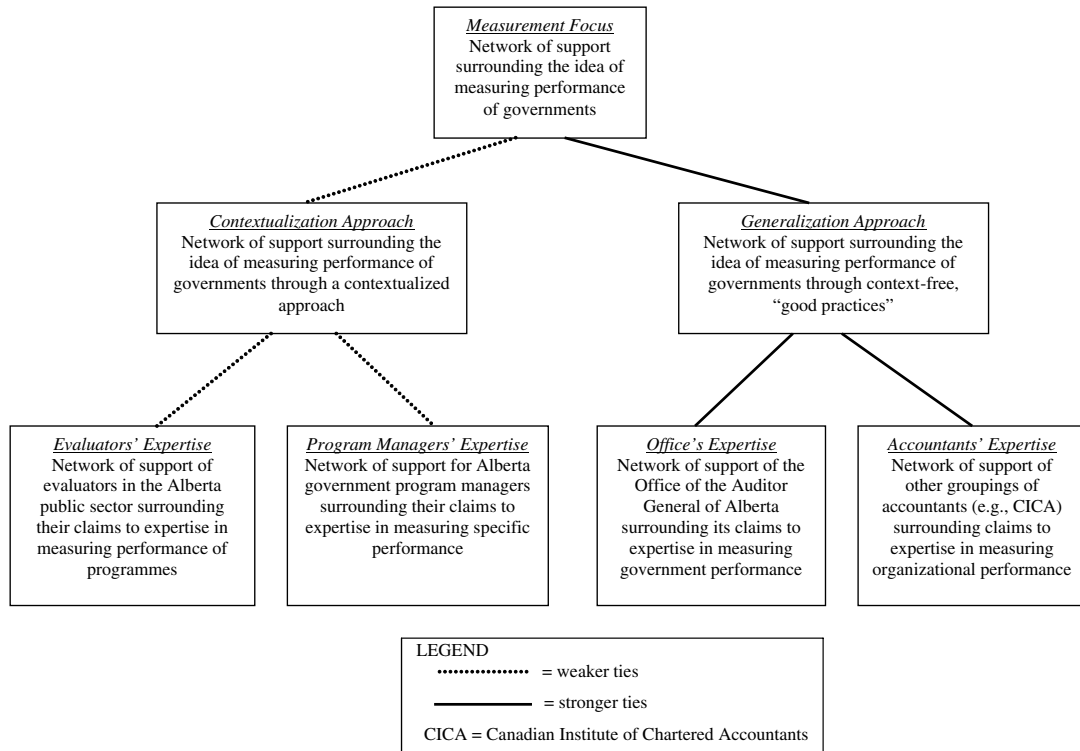


Fig. 1. Some of the networks surrounding the Office's claim to expertise in measuring government performance.

production are less legitimate and powerful in modern government discourse and management practice, we suggest that evaluators' and managers' networks involve relatively weaker ties.⁷ The two boxes at the bottom right identify the networks of support for the claims of accountants and auditors. In contrast to evaluators and managers, accountants are supported by networks that emphasize what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as wide-scale production, a view of knowledge as general and appli-

cable to all circumstances (Oakes et al., 1998). Such views are a product of strong ties, in the sense that actors in the network are legitimate and possess considerable social, cultural and economic capital. While all of the above-mentioned networks are significant in supporting the idea of measuring government performance, networks of government auditors have been more securely linked to bodies of established practices than have the networks of evaluators and program managers.

⁷ While we accept Granovetter's (1973) definition of the strength of ties as "a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (p. 1361), we suggest that his argument that diffusion processes are facilitated by weak ties does not hold for the production of knowledge through dispersed laboratory processes. Our analysis of the production of expertise follows Latour, Knorr Cetina and other sociologists of science and technology in suggesting that knowledge is seen as secure and stable when networks are strong.

Setting the stage for the Office's involvement in measuring government performance

The Office

The mandate of the Office of the Auditor General of Alberta includes financial, compliance, and efficiency auditing. It reports to the Legislative Assembly and receives its budget from it. Several

Table 1
Professional designations held by the Office's staff^a

Dimension	Financial year ended on	
	March 31, 1997	March 31, 2002
Professional accountants		
Number of staff with only one or a combination of professional accounting designation(s) (i.e., CA, CGA, CMA or CIA)	47	61
Number of staff with both the CA and CMC (Certified Management Consultant) designations	1	
Number of staff with CA, MBA and lawyer designation		1
Non-accounting professionals, with at least one (non-accounting) designation	2	7
Total number of staff with at least one professional designation	50	69
Other staff without any professional designation	60	47 ^b
Total number of staff	110	116

^a Data is excerpted from the Office's 1997 and 2002 annual reports.

^b Excluding students working over the summer or completing a co-op work term.

key features of the Office led us to conceive of the Office as a relatively homogeneous organization. From 1998 to 2002 the Office's average staff complement was 110 staff positions. Most professionals rise through the ranks within the Office, with a notable exception that the last two Auditors General were retired partners from large accounting firms. The Office's senior personnel are predominantly professional accountants – 21 out of the 25 most senior staff are professional accountants (Office, 2003).⁸ Table 1 indicates that the Office has been mainly staffed with professional accountants.

Table 2 provides information on the annual expenditures of the Office. It shows that the Office's expenditures increased from year to year, except in 1988 and from 1994 to 1997. In the latter period, total expenditures decreased by about 30%, after the government ordered significant budget cuts throughout the public sector.⁹ However, expenditures subsequently increased steadily.

⁸ The higher-ranking individuals (i.e., Auditor General and Assistant Auditors General) are all professional accountants. The credentials of the four principals who are not professional accountants are as follows: Certified Human Resources Professional; Certified Fraud Examiner; Lawyer; and Master of Science (in program evaluation). The latter principal was hired in the financial year 2001–2002; previously the Office's staff did not include any program evaluators.

⁹ Data in Table 2 contradicts the assertion made in the opening quote of the paper regarding increases in the Office's staff and salaries. However, what matters to us are actors' perceptions.

The data in Table 2 concerning agent services indicates that in the last 20 years the Office has used private sector accountants to carry out some portions of audit work (mainly related to financial auditing). Office auditors have therefore been exposed to discourses in public practice and developments occurring in this domain.¹⁰

In addition, the Office is now one of the most significant government audit offices in Canada. In 2002 Alberta was the provincial jurisdiction with the second highest audit expenditures (\$15,188,083), although it was the fourth largest in terms of government expenditures. In 2002 Alberta spent more than \$5 of audit expenditures per citizen, which is significantly higher than in most provinces and more than twice the corresponding amount at the federal level (\$2.26). Such comparisons can only be suggestive, since the mandate (and nature) of state auditors varies quite considerably across Canadian jurisdictions. These statistics however suggest to us that Office members had sufficient resources available to innovate and extend the Office's areas of work. A less resourceful state auditing office may not have been able to conduct research, carry out experiments and draw from other networks to establish its expertise in measuring government performance.

¹⁰ For example, in its 2002 annual report the Office justifies the development of links with private sector auditors as "gaining a point of reference for comparing our methodology and costs". (Office, 2002, p. 265).

Table 2
Annual expenditures of the Office of the Auditor General of Alberta^a

Year ended March 31	Total expenditures (\$)	Agent services ^b		Assurance services ^c		System audits ^c	
		(\$)	(% of total)	(\$)	(% of total)	(\$)	(% of total)
1979	3,815,739						
1980	4,681,753						
1981	5,641,508						
1982	7,155,905						
1983	8,126,216						
1984	8,773,917	1,063,263	12				
1985	9,086,508	1,394,491	15				
1986	9,676,814	1,655,338	17				
1987	9,862,813	1,533,113	16				
1988	9,738,202	1,838,742	19				
1989	9,800,367	1,893,472	19				
1990	10,524,774	2,035,906	19				
1991	10,891,885	2,450,516	22				
1992	11,134,982	2,295,164	21				
1993	11,679,377	2,449,147	21				
1994	11,210,318	1,098,380	10				
1995	9,407,973	1,612,144	17	7,575,049	80	1,918,898	20
1996	8,857,656	1,642,003	19	6,589,383	74	1,758,537	20
1997	8,102,534	1,604,283	20	6,129,291	76	1,626,335	20
1998	9,720,472	2,014,385	21	7,137,449	73	1,937,180	20
1999	11,711,479	2,092,776	18	8,369,755	71	2,989,810	26
2000	12,697,748	2,496,012	20	10,477,325	83	1,940,669	15
2001	13,828,167	2,645,947	19	11,482,595	83	1,927,280	14
2002	15,188,083	3,036,121	20	12,354,498	81	2,833,585	19
2003	15,707,463	2,920,441	19	12,551,883	80	3,155,580	20

^a Data is excerpted from the annual reports of the Office. Blank cells indicate no information in the annual reports.

^b Agent services represent the cost of the work performed by persons not employed by the Office (e.g., work contracted out to public accounting firms). The criteria used by the Office to determine the level of agent services (columns 3 and 4 in this Table, from the left) are different from those employed to determine the level of assurance services and system audits (last four columns of this Table).

^c Assurance services basically relate to financial auditing. System audits refer to efficiency engagements, that is to say engagements that aim “to produce recommendations [...] for improved government management of, and accountability for, public resources.” (Office, 2002, p. 275) The proportions calculated for “assurance services” and “system audits” need not add up to 100% due to a third type of expenditures (not disclosed in this Table), named “other client services”.

Our interviews indicate that performance measurement has been supported by the most senior levels in the Office but has not been dependent on any particular individual. This generalized support, together with the large number of professional accountants working in the Office, justifies our treatment of the Office as a relatively homogeneous organization.¹¹ We now turn to the examination of the process by which the Office came to

be originally involved in the area of measuring government performance.

The Office's initial forays in the area of performance measurement

The 1977 Auditor General Act provides the Auditor General of Alberta with the formal powers to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of government activities.¹² Yet prior to the 1990s the bulk

¹¹ Of course, in considering the Office as a relatively homogeneous group, we may neglect tensions and divisions within the Office.

¹² An excerpt of the 1977 Act which defines the Office's efficiency audit mandate is reproduced in Gendron, Cooper, and Townley (2001).

of the Office's work was focused on "regularity" auditing, aimed to ascertain whether transactions and payments contravene laws and procedural rules (Normanton, 1966). There were, however, several recommendations regarding the measurement of government performance, as indicated in the first annual report issued by the Office:

It is recommended that studies be undertaken to determine which indicators are appropriate and reasonable for each program, that subsequently such indicators be included in the Program Estimates of the earliest fiscal year which is deemed to be practical, that systems be put in place to measure actual performance during the fiscal year, and that Public Accounts reflect the degree to which programs achieve the effectiveness forecast at the time the budget was approved. (Office, 1979, p. 57)

The government responded negatively to the Office's recommendation, and stressed the arbitrariness of performance indicators:

The Government is not prepared to implement this recommendation at this time. Departmental managers, Ministers, and the Legislative Assembly continually review the effectiveness of programme delivery. The Government is not convinced that this review process would be improved significantly by introducing rigid and potentially arbitrary "performance indicators". (cited in Office, 1980, p. 160)

The Office issued similar recommendations in all its annual reports until 1982, but the Alberta government continued not to accept these recommendations.¹³ Yet the Office began to construct a claim that performance measures were important in the management of government, and that auditors had relevant expertise relating to such measures.

¹³ From 1983 to 1985, the Office discussed its views on performance measurement in a section of the report called "Matters subject to recommendation in previous annual reports that were either rejected or are not completely resolved". In these three reports, the Office mentions that program effectiveness has gained in popularity and acceptance in many jurisdictions, especially in the United Kingdom.

Building networks

The 1980s saw an expansion of discourses and practices that promoted the importance of performance measurement in the private and public sectors. Accountants were significantly involved in building a network of people and resources to support the idea of the value of performance measurement. Papers urged accountants to expand their domain to include non-financial measures of performance (e.g., Kaplan, 1984). Associations were formed to organize the profession's efforts at expanding accountant's jurisdiction in the measurement of government performance, such as the Canadian Comprehensive Auditing Foundation (CCAF).¹⁴ Around the same time, legislative bodies in a number of jurisdictions became increasingly interested in the ideas that came to be known as NPM. For example, in 1985, Western Australia required government organizations to report on performance indicators (CCAF, 1996), and the USA introduced the National Performance Review legislation in 1993 (National Performance Review, 1993; Thompson, 2000). But, it is only after the mid 1990s, that a general interest in managing for results moves the further step towards requiring accountants to provide credibility to performance measures, and necessitates the construction of a legitimate claim that auditors have the expertise to verify measures of pollution, health status, satisfaction with government services, and so on.

The Auditor General of Alberta monitored the early developments in NPM and managing by results. Learning about them, building relationships with others with similar interests, and promoting such developments to yet others, further persuaded Office auditors that measurement of government performance was relevant to Alberta:

It is believed that the ever present need to allocate proposed budgetary expenditures more effectively, and the advances taking place in some jurisdictions in program evalu-

¹⁴ Formed in 1980, the CCAF is a think tank whose objective "is to serve as a center for collecting and disseminating comprehensive auditing knowledge and experience with respect to public sector auditing." (Flesher & Zarzeski, 2002, p. 100).

ation methodology, will *inevitably* combine to promote the establishment by the Province of systems to measure program effectiveness. (Office, 1983, p. 62, *emphasis added*)

At this time, the Office considered program evaluation as a useful ally in trying to legitimize the emerging project of measuring government performance. However, in spite of the development in the 1980s of a professional and political network devoted to performance measurement, the Office (as well as other networks of accountants) had not yet fully constructed the types of problem that government or public servants would resolve, or avoid, by measuring and reporting on performance, or the relative roles of auditors, program managers and program evaluators.¹⁵ Callon (1986) refers to this construction as a process of problematization, the ways in which proponents seek to make their claim indispensable by defining or underlining the problems with which an audience is (allegedly) confronted, and by presenting as necessary, solutions advocated for these problems.

From 1986 to 1991, the Office stopped discussing performance measurement in its reports. Nevertheless, Office auditors continued during this period to be interested in the notion of performance measurement. As mentioned by one auditor:

Between then [1986] and the 1990s we might have flirted with it [performance measurement] a bit. It is tough to avoid, so you drift into it when you are doing some of the systems [i.e., efficiency] audits. (Office auditor, January 1998)

The issue of performance measurement re-emerges in the 1992 report of the Office – issued on January 29, 1993. Performance measurement is presented as a key to solving what was emerging as a central political issue, namely, the size of the Province’s annual deficits and debt. This political issue became crucial in promoting NPM, performance measurement and the Office’s expertise. Indeed:

I believe that, wherever possible, those managing public resources should deal with facts, and not opinions, on the effectiveness of programs. Timely information that is focused on results achieved, and their cost, is crucial to Members of the Legislative Assembly when setting future policy. Information on the results of government programs and their cost is needed to make sensible decisions to deal with Alberta’s annual deficit. (Office, 1992, p. 3)

In this excerpt, performance measurement is presented as an “obligatory passage point” (Callon, 1986) for reducing the Province’s deficit. As shown below, the expansion of the network supporting performance measurement in the early 1990s provided the Office with a more persuasive and powerful basis for its arguments than previously.

The Alberta Financial Review Commission: legitimizing initial claims to expertise

In contrast to the 1980s, the government favourably responded to the Office’s views in the 1992 report (AFRC, 1993, p. 6). At the end of 1992, the new Premier of the Province emphasized reduction of the deficit and reinvention of government through NPM to differentiate his government’s policies from those of the prior government (Cooper, 1996). These two themes are central in the report issued on March 31, 1993, by the Alberta Financial Review Commission (AFRC), established on January 21, 1993, by the new Premier “to review the government’s financial position and reporting procedures” (AFRC, 1993, p. 1).¹⁶ Once set, however, the

¹⁵ For example, CCAF only issued a few research documents between its creation in 1980, and 1986.

¹⁶ In addition to the AFRC report, our interviews indicate that government’s interest in implementing NPM was stimulated by the growing international network sustaining the measurement of government performance in the early 1990s. In particular, publications such as Osborne and Gaebler’s (1992) *Reinventing Government* and Douglas’ (1993) *Unfinished Business* were influential, as were several OECD reports (OECD, 1993, 1994). Both Gaebler and Douglas made presentations in Alberta in 1993, and at least one senior Treasury official was seconded to the OECD on performance measurement projects.

Commission's mandate was interpreted broadly by its members: "The job was to find out what the Province's financial situation was, how it had got there and how it was going to get out of it." (Commission interview #1, March 2003) Although performance measurement was not part of the Commission's mandate, it "emerged from the discussions of the committee" (Commission interview #3, April 2003). In its final report, the Commission advocates the development of performance measures as a way to improve the Province's financial condition, and identifies the Office as a key player in the restructuring of government activities. The AFRC report is perhaps the first document that articulates a significant link between performance measurement and the Office's expertise.

The AFRC was created as a body independent from politicians and government bureaucrats, to ensure its perceived credibility. Rituals of independence were meticulously carried out in trying to confer legitimacy to the work of the Commission. The only interim reports to politicians informed them that: "We are on time; we are on target; we are on budget." (Commission interview #1, March 2003) Further, Commission members decided not to quote extensively documents issued either by the Office or by Treasury; we were told that the Commission felt that such quotation would have "undermined" its independence and the persuasiveness of its claims.

In spite of the independence aura that surrounded the Commission's internal processes, Commission members were not free from the influence of ideas sustained in networks in which they were involved in their daily life. Given that five (out of the nine) members of the Commission were senior members of Big Six firms and that two others were Chartered Accountants employed as corporate executives, Commission members were aware of, and receptive to, the views of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Alberta (ICAA), which was at the time vigorously recommending the government to focus on performance measurement as a way to overcome the Province's deficit (ICAA, 1992). Also, Commission members who were corporate executives relied significantly on their business experience in making sense of the Commission's mandate. As mentioned by one of them:

I think early on people [i.e., Commission members] had the feeling that, you know, why should a government or a municipality or an accounting firm or a city be any different than a kind of corporation in terms of financial reporting? (Commission interview #3, April 2003)

For Commission members, managing government activities like businesses necessarily translates into positive outcomes, such as departments being more pressured to meet budget targets, public servants being prouder of their work, and units being more efficient. Further, when reflecting about the achievements of the Commission, one participant underlined that the Commission basically translated ideas promoted by the Office of the Auditor General and a few deputy ministers (the most senior civil servants). Commission members interviewed the Auditor General and used the Office's reports as input – especially the 1992 report issued at the beginning of 1993. They also used a few former or current deputy ministers to "educate" them and "test" ideas.

The AFRC emphasizes in its final report that the annual deficit is "serious and is getting worse" (p. 2), and that a plan to eliminate annual deficits completely should be adopted. For Commission members it was inconceivable that the Alberta government was not committed to managing by results like the private sector and the report made it clear that this was an important part of the solution to improve the financial position of the Province (p. 1). The Commission also stated that the Province's financial reporting should be made more understandable and timely, and that management control and accountability systems "should be more effective" (p. 4). With regard to the latter:

To be effective, financial statements must operate in concert with an organization's goals and objectives. [...] One of the Commission's most significant concerns is the provincial government's lack of an overall plan for establishing long-term goals and program objectives, and then developing the required budgets and financial reporting systems to measure performance against the

plan. [...] [Management control and accountability systems] should identify goals and measure performance not only through the financial statements, but also by reporting on the achievement of intended results, productivity and the protection of assets. (AFRC, 1993, pp. 23–24)

Importantly, the preamble to the AFRC report notes, with approval, that many of the Commission's recommendations had already been made by the Office in its 1992 report, issued a few days after the Commission was appointed. The AFRC identified the Office as being helpful in "reinventing government":

[The Commission recommends to] [c]harge the Audit Committee, established under the Auditor General's Act, with the responsibility of monitoring and reporting to Albertans on a yearly basis the government's progress in implementing these [i.e., AFRC] recommendations. The Auditor General would be requested to assist in this responsibility. (AFRC, 1993, p. 9)

The government positively responded to the AFRC Report, stating:

The Auditor General will be asked to assist [...] in establishing benchmarks to help all government departments and agencies compare their performance against that of the best equivalent organizations in the world from both the public and private sectors. We will ask the Auditor General to conduct sector-based audits [...]. These audits will compare performance to costs. Findings will be reported to the Legislative Assembly on an ongoing basis. (Government of Alberta, 1993)

The government's commitment to implement the recommendations of the AFRC and to place the Office at the centre of performance measurement was further reinforced by the speech from the Throne in August 1993,¹⁷ and implemented through the Financial Administration Act of 1995. In short, the AFRC and its strong support

for the claims that Alberta was both facing a fiscal crisis and needed to be managed along the lines previously suggested by the Office, significantly strengthened the network of support for performance measurement and identified the Office's expertise as central in restructuring government. The job now was to convince others that the Office possessed the necessary expertise and legitimacy.

Initial scepticism

The government's initiative to implement NPM generated significant uncertainties among public servants, who worried about altering established accountability routines and expertise (see Townley et al., 2003; Townley, 2002 for examples). Government managers, familiar with explaining performance, were now told in discourses stimulated by Osborne and Gaebler (1992), that input and process measures were largely irrelevant. The new measures were to be results oriented, even where managers had little control over them.

Though many managers were initially positive about the NPM reforms (Townley et al., 2003), they recognized that they were predicated on a new vocabulary of accountability, results, efficiency, inputs, outputs, outcomes and process measures, some of whose meaning was highly ambiguous. While some managers felt they had always focused on outcomes and were already accountable, others saw the changes as significant. As a divisional manager commented: "[We had] to break out of the mode of just reporting on what we did in each of our little units [...]. It was a big change in thinking." (May, 1996) Moreover, for some, the reforms also implied that public servants had not been paying attention to issues of performance. This undermined what managers had been doing previously and made it difficult for them to claim that they knew how to measure performance.

For their part, program evaluators employed in the Albertan public sector were highly uncomfortable with the government's project of restructuring management of the Province:

Then comes 1993 when the government changed and we get into performance

¹⁷ This introduces the government's legislative programme.

measurement and that is the time when you almost wake up the next morning and it seems evaluators are no longer needed now. “We [i.e., government] are only interested in performance measures.” [...] So I think as evaluators we went through an awakening of how do we fit in using the skills and expertise we have built up over ten years, fifteen years? How do we fit into this new world of performance measurement and business planning? (Evaluator #2, April 2003)

The network of support surrounding evaluators’ claims to expertise was considerably destabilized by the government’s initiative. In contrast to members of the Office of the Auditor General, evaluators could not claim an interest in the measurement of performance of broad entities like ministries, government, or perhaps most crucially, business firms. Rather their focus was in assessing the impact of specific government programs through a detailed analysis of relationships between program objectives, inputs, outputs and outcomes. Government showed little interest in relying on the expertise of evaluators in implementing performance measurement control systems.

However, the opportunity to expand the Office’s jurisdiction presented a significant challenge to auditors since it was not obvious that public servants would perceive auditing expertise as helpful or relevant in dealing with the implementation of NPM. A large number of public servants initially had significant doubts about the ability of the Office to contribute to performance and efficiency measurement:

When they [i.e., Office auditors] come around as they always have, rather than just looking at the books they are going to look at our efficiency and effectiveness measures. “Now, you said that you are going to reduce the [...] costs from \$1.20 to \$1. Now did you do that and if not, why not? And what is the plan for doing that?” [...] Whether the Auditor General’s Office has the resources to do that, I don’t know. (Division manager, June 1995)

How does a person who is trained as a CA all of a sudden become an expert on how to

evaluate every kind of damn program under the sun? (Division manager, May 1996)

Nor were Office members initially very comfortable with the possibility of becoming further involved in performance measurement. Office members were notably uncomfortable with the possibility that they would directly assess the performance of departments:

See, there the government was trying to do something differently and they were trying to get people to do things in government differently. The reason we got involved in that is interesting. Because the very first budget speech [i.e., in 1993] [...] made a reference to our office doing direct assessments. [...] We said, “whoa.” [...] We never knew that Provincial Treasury was going to say this. It was a complete surprise to us. (Office auditor, January 1998)

As Latour (1996) notes, proponents at the beginning of a project are neither very convinced nor very convincing, often suggesting ideas to try to make projects more concrete. In addition to demonstrating to public servants that the Office possessed expertise to assess performance, auditors also had to develop this expertise – or at least become confident that they had. Initial attempts to develop and implement performance measurement in Alberta were largely a trial and error process. Assessing performance was seen as presenting significant challenges, in terms of the direct assessments of performance and the standards that would be used to measure and audit performance. In particular, auditors were not clear about how performance should be measured in departments whose activities are “soft and advisory” (e.g., inter-governmental affairs); whether measures of outputs could be linked to dollars; and the extent to which specific measures would be relevant to users.

The Office’s claim to expertise progressively developed from the government’s vague intention of adopting a performance measurement system, and from the Office’s efforts to develop and promote views about the way to implement performance measurement in Alberta. However, the

success of the Office's endeavours depended on the auditors' ability to gain self-confidence in their capacity to deal with issues related to the implementation of NPM reforms, as well as to establish the Office in the eyes of public servants as an obligatory passage point for NPM implementation.

Developing expertise

Office members sought to develop their expertise by examining mechanisms of inscription (e.g., standards, measures, guidelines) in other jurisdictions that were also experimenting with performance measurement. These were assessed as to whether the Office could rely on them to create its own performance standards. The Office's assessments were influenced by the perceived impact of performance inscriptions on citizens, and constructed the public as active participants in improving performance measures:

[The city of] Boston did a big fancy report [with a lot of measures] and put it in the library and nobody looked at it. It was too long – it was this thick. So [other jurisdictions] are able to do it [i.e., to develop performance measures and report on them], so you have all that stuff happening. So people I think, the citizens are starting to expect people to do that, they expect government to do that. So it is a bit of an education process. Provide people with the information and they react to the information. Now you provide it they expect it, and then they are seeing how much better it could be too. And they give you feedback, so it is an iterative process. (Office auditor, January 1998)

Further, since the Office expected that it would eventually have to audit performance measures, Office members examined the nature of the work on performance measures conducted by state auditors in other jurisdictions. Through this examination Office members found that experiments carried out by state auditors on performance measurement may generate negative reactions:

We don't want to start commenting on the relevancy of the measures until there is some

stability to it. Otherwise you are ending up qualifying the [auditor's] report and that is viewed as non-constructive. New Zealand's experience was that it was a very destructive process. So [the state auditor in] New Zealand went into this with the view of issuing a full-blown report on all aspects of performance measurement. And they hit the relevancy issue. Apart from trying to understand what that means, they found that they qualified every report that they issued, and they had a very big negative reaction to that. (Office auditor, January 1998)

The New Zealand's experiment (Pallot, 2003; Boston, Martin, Pallot, & Walsh, 1996), however, impacted the state auditing community since auditors became more aware that dealing with the relevance of specific performance measures was very challenging, and that having to qualify government performance reports may be detrimental to their legitimacy. Experiments elsewhere taught the Albertan Office auditors that relevance was too difficult an issue, since it required auditors to have detailed expertise in individual programs and the work of specific departments. This led them to defer consideration of whether specific measures are "relevant", and to predicate their claim to expertise on their skills in financial auditing, namely, to check the work of others.

One factor that influenced the Office's acceptance of standards (other than relevance) produced elsewhere was that they were already used in several other jurisdictions, especially in other Commonwealth countries and at the state level in the USA:

So you get it [i.e., information on the nature of work carried out by other state auditors] from New Zealand, you get it from Australia, Minnesota. So there is a Minnesota auditor who did some good work on looking at performance measures. So there is no generally accepted standard out there, but there is a lot of commonality in the criteria that auditors are working with and you can get that information. So that gives us a basis. (Office auditor, January 1998)

This quote indicates how good practice standards are constructed. A state auditor carries out an initial engagement to evaluate whether performance measures disclosed by the auditee are in accordance with some socially constructed standards, however fragile the construction might be. The auditor then reports the standards that she/he used and the results of her/his empirical investigation. A collective knowledge validation process subsequently takes place, in which auditors and interested others in other jurisdictions examine whether these standards “make sense” to them. If so, these actors may decide to use the same standards, thereby reinforcing them and contributing to their spread. Insertion in a network of documents, practices and beliefs results in the standards becoming progressively perceived as universal, rational, fundamental, and eventually even “natural” dimensions of performance (Porter, 1995). Once the global network is sufficiently developed, the validated standards provide frames of meanings for auditors and may be used to represent the profession to the outside world (Power, 2003). It is through this collective process of knowledge production and validation that auditors become increasingly convinced, and are perceived increasingly by others, to speak authoritatively about government performance measurement.

The Office auditors also became involved in knowledge-producing institutions (Latour, 1999), established to sustain the production of facts and maintain their durability. The Office and several other Canadian state audit offices provide financial support to the CCAF, and are involved in the Canadian Council of Legislative Auditors, which organizes conferences on performance measurement. These conferences allow auditors to share information on the standards used by their peers, and assess the extent to which they are used across jurisdictions.

In sum, the Office becomes one element in the network of auditors and other actors who collectively are involved in developing and validating knowledge on the measurement of government performance. This network in effect operates international “laboratories”, providing inscriptions of government performance and audit practices. Sim-

ilar to the dispersed laboratories of high energy physicists studied by Knorr Cetina (1999), state auditors network and develop their knowledge and expertise through e-mail exchanges, downloading, and then referring to, reports from each other’s jurisdictions, and occasionally meeting at conferences. However, like the microbiologists and cathedral builders but in contrast to the physicists studied by Knorr Cetina (1999), audit experiments are a matter of trial and error, of sharing what worked (or not) elsewhere, and are not guided by an explicit theoretical framework. It is through this large-scale laboratory of dispersed experiments that auditors (and other interested others) developed standards of performance measurement and gradually became self-confident that they are qualified to intervene in the performance measurement domain. The Office was thus equipped with a relatively solid, networked, background to which it could attach its claims of expertise. Dissenters to the Office’s claims would not only have to dispute the Office’s views but also what numerous other actors through experiments around the world had thought and asserted about performance measurement.

In contrast to the increasingly stable and self-confident network that supported the claims of the Office’s expertise in performance measurement, other occupations (notably program evaluators) had significant difficulties in trying to anchor their claims to expertise to a laboratory-sustained body of practices and inscriptions. Because it is mainly carried out within government settings, evaluation lacks the legitimacy of being based on business practice. It also tends to be more time-consuming and costly than auditing given the basic methodological differences between the two disciplines:

Evaluators do a lot of things. They might send out [written] interviews [. . .], a satisfaction survey to see how satisfied are you in the program, how would you improve it, a mixture of closed ended and open-ended questions. Now, do auditors do that? They don’t really interview people. To me what auditors deal with is they deal with much more hard data. What auditors look at they really want to look at what are the inputs

to the program, what are the outputs, those kinds of things. That is what they are looking at. They want the hard data. [...] They don't really go out and interview the public, "Are you happy with this performance measure?" They won't do anything like that. [While] in evaluation there is a combination of both the qualitative and the quantitative aspects to it. [...] So there is that qualitative component and that is very important because you can't get certain things just straight with quantitative data. [...] I don't know how an auditor would do an audit of something that has very little quantitative data. (Evaluator #1, March 2003)

Whereas evaluators consider that performance can only be grasped through a detailed examination of program specifics and by taking into account qualitative dimensions of performance, auditors focus on the measurement of quantifiable inputs and outputs, reflecting a background in financial accounting (see also Power, 1997a).¹⁸ The Office, for example, was sceptical of non-quantitative measures and customer satisfaction surveys.

Program evaluators in Alberta experienced turbulence following government's adoption of a performance measurement agenda (Bradley, 2001). A significant number of the people who were involved at the beginning of the 1990s in program evaluation had to reorient their career into business planning and performance evaluation or leave public service. One evaluator described the evaluation community as navigating "blindly", especially since evaluators could not rely on a large-scale network of resources like that sustained by accountants, dedicated, among other things, to the

construction of expert knowledge in performance measurement.¹⁹ Also, the reports of program evaluators were then not issued publicly, which made it more difficult for evaluators to be informed of experiments carried out by their peers. In contrast, the effectiveness of state auditors' laboratories is crucially connected with auditors' ability to publish and widely disseminate the successful accomplishment of their performance measurement and value-for-money experiments, both federally (where the Federal Auditor General has a tradition of publishing extensive value-for-money reports) and in each of the Canadian Provinces. Politicians and media widely use their reports, and in so doing reinforce the claims of auditors to expertise in these fields.

Also, auditors' laboratories are ultimately aimed at the development of quasi-universal measures and standards of performance, which, like generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP), are presumed to facilitate users' comparison of performance across different settings. Auditors' claims to expertise were therefore more likely to appeal to Alberta politicians and public servants, especially given the institutional emphasis on cost containment and short-term efficiency. Although the evaluators generally viewed performance measures as "very superficial" and "very shallow", we suggest that de-contextualized measures like those advocated by auditors possess a key rhetorical strength, generalizability (Latour, 1999). Evaluators appealed to restricted fields of production and specific expertise, in contrast to the auditors' appeal to fields of wide-scale production and generalized expertise (Oakes et al., 1998). As a result, it is not surprising to find that program evaluation remains a marginal practice in the Alberta

¹⁸ Of course, auditors regularly conduct interviews during audit engagements. Efficiency auditing in Alberta is no exception (Radcliffe, 1999). We argue, however, that auditors' input-output focus reduces significantly the breadth and scope of interviews in auditing settings – as compared to interviews carried out by evaluators. For example, auditors are inclined to only interview and survey people within the organization, whereas evaluators often obtain the views of clients. Furthermore, it is only recently that financial auditors have begun to recognize that interviews can be used as a reliable means of obtaining audit evidence (e.g., CICA, 2000).

¹⁹ Membership of professional associations provides a rough indicator of the strength of networks of resources and laboratories – although these networks comprise other elements such as journals and communication channels. In 2003, the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants had about 68,000 members (CICA, 2003) while the Canadian Evaluation Society comprised about 1800 members (CES, 2003). Within the Province of Alberta, approximately 7700 individuals were members of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Alberta (ICAA, 2003) while the Alberta Chapter of the Canadian Evaluation Society comprised only 155 members (CES, 2003).

government – although there are a few “strong pockets of support” around it (Bradley, 2001).²⁰

Promoting and consolidating the Office’s claims to expertise

Building a claim to expertise is a continuous process. As Office auditors were developing expertise in measuring government performance, they made claims to promote their emergent expertise in documents and verbal statements on how performance measurement should be implemented in Alberta. As argued by Abbott (1988), claims of expertise are indissociable from prescriptions on how specific tasks (here, to measure the performance of government) should be conducted. This section examines the elements of the emerging and increasingly stabilized network in Alberta by which the claims of audit expertise about performance measurement were consolidated.²¹

Further, the consolidation of the auditors’ expertise was facilitated by undermining the legitimacy of the expertise of alternative providers of performance measures. In our case, this was partly achieved by drawing on general discourses about the untrustworthiness of government managers. This is a fundamental point. Undermining the claims of program managers and other professionals employed in government (teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers, historians and so on) regarding the assessment of performance is important in providing space for auditors to claim expertise in performance measurement. As we elaborate below, it is not that managers and other professionals are unable to measure performance, but rather that their measures need to be checked by a person seen to be objective and to have an expertise in assess-

ing measures, the auditor. Politicians and the media, influenced by an implicit understanding of agency theory with its view that managers use information strategically and are not constrained by professional ideals, complained about the self-interest of public servants and distrusted their judgments. Auditors could draw on general scepticism about the objectivity of managers’ own measures of performance and offer to provide a more “independent” point of view on proposed performance measures, to the extent that government managers often failed to recognize that their prior practices could be interpreted as providing judgments of performance. By the end of the period most managers presented their judgments as legitimate only when sanctified by the procedures associated with the Auditor General.

Removing a troublesome role definition

One of the first prescriptive moves made by the Office to promote its expertise and views about performance measurement involved arguing against the direct assessment model, which had been initially suggested by government as the role for the Office in the 1993 Budget Speech. Under the direct assessment model, auditors measure and report on the performance of the organizations that they have audited (CCAF, 1996). Office members were not comfortable with this model, perceiving it as too distant from their traditional role of providing credibility to financial statements prepared by management. Office auditors preferred an approach that other state auditors increasingly were advocating, namely, the indirect assessment model – in which auditors provide credibility to measures developed by management:

We [Office members] all buy into the idea of it [i.e., the indirect assessment model] because there is some wonderful logic to it and it is that management should be responsible for measuring its own effectiveness, if you like, and they should be making assertions. So we took the view that management is in the best position to measure and report on their effectiveness. And the auditor would

²⁰ Our most recent observations suggest that program evaluation is being re-evaluated by the Office and many program managers. It is increasingly seen as offering a potential to explain program performance, not simply to measure it. This does not undermine the claims of auditors as indeed it can be seen as a self-confident move to further expand the expertise available to the Office.

²¹ Although we discuss each element in turn, there is no sequential ordering implicit in our presentation – many elements overlapped and occurred simultaneously.

then come along and lend credibility to that. (Office auditor, January 1998)

The indirect assessment model implies a division of responsibilities that increased confidence in the Office's ability to deal with issues related to performance measurement. For example, the indirect model reportedly helped auditors overcome criticisms related to their lack of expertise in measuring performance:

Auditing [predicated on the indirect assessment model] is easy because it is 20/20 hindsight all the time. Everybody else has done the work and all you do is come along and criticize. It is easy to be an art critic, but it is hard to paint. And an auditor is an art critic by definition, since accounting is an art form. Auditors are critics. So that is a lot easier than the doing. The management is doing the doing, if you like, selecting the measures. We are coming along and critiquing them so we are not stressed in terms of needing to understand [for example] the Department of Transportation systems. (Office auditor, January 1998)

The metaphor of the art critic is instrumental in developing the auditor's self-confidence in the Office's expertise. It implies that auditors' expertise, as critics, can be easily exported to a wide sphere of activities. Having a detailed knowledge of a given activity is not crucial for auditors to assess performance; what is crucial is generic auditing knowledge (Power, 1997b).

To consolidate its claims to expertise, the Office needed to enrol the government in the indirect assessment model. One auditor described the argument to persuade the Provincial Treasury about the appropriateness of the model:

Now the big advantage of that is all management is doing it, all the time, as opposed to if auditors are doing the direct assessment stuff then we can only do so many a year. [...] If you [government] rely on us to do it we could only do one [measure] a year. So it would take us how many years to do all the post secondary institutions, it would take twenty years. So where is the value added on that?

So let's face it, if management does it then they are going to be more serious about the results. (Office auditor, January 1998)

The indirect assessment model would quickly produce a more comprehensive set of measures than the direct model. Further, as the quote highlights, involving managers in learning to develop performance measures is likely to have pedagogical effects (Oakes et al., 1998). By getting managers to struggle with attempts to measure performance, they would learn how and what to measure, and become committed to the measures. This way, the auditors could focus on their pre-existing expertise – for example, demanding better evidence about attendance records for Provincial cultural and historical sites, ensuring that departments use consistent definitions of water and air quality, and requiring that departments accurately transpose and calculate measures from one source to their own records. The indirect assessment model enabled auditors to comment on non-financial measures using the same techniques as had been developed in financial audits. At the same time, auditors used inscriptions and guidance notes from other jurisdictions to learn about the assessment of customer surveys, ensuring not simply that surveys were consistent over time, but also that the questions asked and analysis conducted (e.g., to form scales) seemed consistent with “best practice”. Thus in 1998 the Office produced its own guidance on conducting client surveys (Office, 1998), and more recently has produced guidance for “Preparing an Integrated Results Analysis”.

Publishing “Government Accountability”

A further means of consolidating the Office's claim to expertise was the publication of *Government Accountability*, “a framework for evaluating and improving existing accountability relationships” in government (Office, 1994a, p. 3). *Government Accountability* offers a set of practices that are claimed to be descriptive of healthy accountability relationships, namely, to set measurable goals, monitor progress, report on results, and evaluate results. The document argues that performance information should be assessed using the

same general standards by which financial information is evaluated, that is, understandability, relevance, reliability, comparability, and whether the cost of providing the information is lower than the expected benefit. This influential report was even presented at an academic conference, as a contribution to accounting knowledge.

Several devices to make the Office's views and claims to expertise more persuasive are found throughout the document. First, the text draws on the network of support – the performance measurement framework is presented as being based on the thought of multiple (unidentified) “experts”. The voice of the Office is tied to that of a web of experts involved in the collective project of developing universal standards of performance measurement. The Office also seeks to enrol its readers by pointing out how their interests will be satisfied (Callon, 1986). For example, through performance reports government and citizens will be able “to decide if they are getting value for money” (Office, 1994a, p. 1), and government and public servants will be able to take actions “before emerging problems become serious” (Office, 1994a, p. 16). These manoeuvres constitute a pedagogical tool; readers are provided with statements that specify what they are expected to accomplish with performance information.

Further, *Government Accountability* specifies two role definitions for the Office in reforming government – as auditor and advisor. The auditor role implies the ability to provide credibility to performance information disclosed by government and departments. The advisory role implies using the framework to identify opportunities for improvement. Readers of the document could therefore be reassured about the Office's help in implementing NPM. The Alberta government reacted positively to *Government Accountability*:

The government took it [*Government Accountability*] and used it as one of their tools for change. And I think they used that. The thing is a number of the concepts that I think the government ultimately came through were fleshed out in that book. The idea of ministerial reporting, this is not necessarily our original idea, but we put a bit

more meat to it. The idea of legislating it, I think [the Provincial Treasurer] wanted to do that, but he needed some leverage and we provided the leverage. [...] We provided leverage for things that were sort of on a mutual agenda. (Office auditor, January 1998)

In sum, *Government Accountability* translated ideas already conveyed in some networks but integrated them in a new way, customizing them to the context. As seen below, Treasury then acted upon the Office's translation.

Working closely with Treasury

Office members consulted the Treasury when producing *Government Accountability*. But the process also worked in the other direction – Treasury called upon, and thereby consolidated, the expertise of auditors in performance measurement in developing its own documents. The enrolment of the Treasury Department, and the latter's increasing recognition of the claims of the Office, was important given the powerful role of Treasury in Alberta. Its power is not simply due to government traditions in Alberta, but reflects the centrality of Treasury in a massive expense reduction program across all government departments in the mid-1990s, and the high status within government of the then Treasurer. In addition, Treasury had to play a significant role in operationalizing the reform – for example in providing directions to departments on how to report performance measures and develop business plans.

Thus, in contrast with the Office's claim that it is not involved in policy-making (Office, 2000), Office members and Treasury staff collaborated closely when the Treasury produced *Measuring Performance – A Reference Guide* (1996).²² Being peppered with quotes from NPM proponents and gurus (notably Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), the document offers directions and illustrative examples about the selection of performance measures.

²² A 1995 draft indicates that the document was produced in consultation with the Office.

The Treasury document provides significant support to the Office's claims of expertise. It specifies that departments' measures of performance should meet the standards proposed by the Office in *Government Accountability*. The Office's claims of expertise are further legitimized when Treasury quotes the Office's definition of the key notion of accountability, and the Office's views regarding the benefits of performance measurement:

"The moment that managers start measuring performance, it will improve. As soon as performance is reported, it improves further. We know that measuring and reporting performance will save a great deal of money and improve service." Alberta Auditor General (cited in Alberta Treasury, 1996, p. 8)

This quote treats the benefits of performance measurement as a self-evident fact. Treasury and Office members also made joint presentations at various meetings and seminars that public servants attended. Members of both organizations emphasized the perpetual and inescapable nature of the performance measurement project. Importantly, Treasury constantly deferred to the Office – describing the auditors as the "experts".

Making formal recommendations in annual reports

The Office issued recommendations in its annual reports to promote both its claims to expertise and its views about performance measurement.²³ The 1994 annual report of the Office is the first to contain a sustained argument on the value of measuring performance. The report was issued in October 1994, the same month as *Government Accountability*, creating momentum around the Office's claims of expertise. It especially recommends that each department measures key performance outputs, and discloses them in its financial

reports to "bring together" information on costs and results (Office, 1994b, p. 11). On several occasions the Office uses the credibility of financial accounting to enhance the legitimacy of performance measurement and thereby its expertise. Further, the Office seeks to anticipate readers' possible objections by specifying that it wants to encourage the development of simple performance measurement systems:

[T]he last thing my Office wants to encourage is an army of accountants and evaluators measuring everything in sight and reporting in mind-numbing detail. [...] Simplicity, clarity and candour are the essence of good accountability. These attributes separate systems that work from those that complicate and clog. (Office, 1994b, p. 2)

The 1994 report also appeals to "experiments", suggesting the Office's openness to new ideas and drawing on the appeal of science (Power, 1996b). It recognizes through an "insurance policy against the unknown" (Latour, 1987, p. 56) the possibility that the Office will eventually be criticized for its promotion of performance measurement:

The idea of including performance information in public sector financial reports is new. The accounting professions in Canada and other countries are wrestling with the issues involved. We recognize that a period of *experimentation* is necessary before appropriate standards can be developed by the accounting profession. (Office, 1994b, p. 4, *emphasis added*)

The messages of the 1994 report were repeated in subsequent annual reports.

Becoming involved with public servants

In *Measuring Performance – A Reference Guide* (1996), the Office suggests it should provide audit opinions on departmental performance measures.²⁴ However, Office members feared that conducting audits of performance measures before the related

²³ Gendron et al. (2001) compare the Office's recommendations between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s to document a shift in the Office's role in the public sector, and to question the extent to which the Office can sustain its claim of independence. In contrast, in this section of the present paper, we examine the role played by the Office's recommendations in enrolling audiences in the Office's claim to performance measurement expertise.

²⁴ Departments began to produce annual reports containing performance measures in 1995–1996.

knowledge base is sufficiently developed could tarnish the Office's emergent reputation. They felt that they had to consolidate their expertise. As one auditor stated: "We wanted to do something. We wanted to do it in a way that didn't compromise our standards and we wanted to do it in a way that supported without being too critical of the various activities of government." Hence in 1996–1997 the Office started to "assess" the performance measures disclosed in departments' annual reports. These assessments mainly consist of making sure that calculations within the measures are arithmetically correct and that the information provided in the measures is in accordance with the internal reports from the departments' systems or other statistical sources. The standards under which assessments are conducted are therefore easy to meet. Results of the assessments are disclosed in an Office report that is included in the annual report of every department. These assessment reports, entitled "Report of the Auditor General on the Results of Applying Specified Auditing Procedures to Key Performance Measures", signal that commenting on the measurement of government performance is within the purview of the Office.

Further, in 1997 the Office started to perform (if requested by departments) "non-audit assessments," which consist of providing private feedback on performance measurement systems and the measures they produce, especially to assess whether they are adequate and representative of the department's objectives and critical risk areas. Giving help to departments on how to implement the performance measurement project provided further opportunities to show that the Office is knowledgeable in measuring performance of government units. Similarly, the Office sought to develop a cooperative relationship with auditees when developing recommendations on performance measurement to be disclosed in the Office's annual report:

We work more now with the various clients group, the deputy ministry level [...] in terms of selling our recommendations. We try to get management buy in. [...] So we are doing things [...] that help market the suggestions and also help in terms of framing the recommendations so they are more palatable if you

like. [...] So we are getting better input from the client and so there is a better working relationship. (Office auditor, January 1998)

To us, the use of the word "client" is consistent with the Office playing – or at least striving to play – a major advisory role in Alberta. Meetings with "clients" to discuss audit findings allowed Office members to avoid irritating public servants by issuing unexpected recommendations, and to explain in detail their views.

Arguing for the indirect method, publishing a booklet on government accountability, and working with government departments represent conditions of possibility for a coherent claim to expertise. It is by constructing multiple connections with the network of literature on performance measurement, and by conducting their own experiments to solve local difficulties and problems, that Office members progressively produced their claim to expertise and "enacted" their new role in government. In the next section, we examine how Alberta public servants reacted to these claims.

Responding to the Office's claims to expertise

Recall that initially, when the Office and the AFRC pushed for performance measurement and a central role for auditors, public servants initially had serious reservations about the Office's expertise, and many felt threatened by the Office's potential powers:

There has been a lot of talk over the last two years [i.e., 1994 and 1995] or so that the Auditor General was going to be the performance measurer with a big stick. And that there were going to be all sorts of efficiency auditors, for lack of a better term, who were going to come in from the Auditor General's Office, and they were going to not only audit the financial side of things, they were going to audit performance measures and everything. [...] And you were going to be held accountable on the spot, if you said you were going to do this, and you had not done it, why had you not done it. And right down the line.

And right down to the individual employee. And that was the rather draconian view of the world coming from some quarters, that the Auditor General would have that kind of scope. (Division manager, March 1996)

The fear was that the Office would have the powers to audit “everything” and make visible any deficiency in the performance of departments. In particular, there was initially very strong objection to the role of the Office on the basis that auditors did not have the detailed and context-based information that would be required to make any effective judgement about performance measurement. Public servants considered performance measurement to be more in the expertise domain of local managers or program evaluators than that of accountants:

Look at the credentials of the people in the Auditor General’s Department. They are trained as bean counters. Well, how does a bean counter come in and determine whether this program is effective with its clients or not, what the social value is. How do they compare apples and oranges? How can they compare a social program with an economic program or a science program against a social services program? I question the qualification of those people to do that work. (Division manager, October 1997)

Our interviews suggest that resistance from public servants to the Office’s claims progressively decreased, however, and that a significant number of them became enrolled in its claims. This occurred for several reasons. One was relief that audits of performance measures would not be as powerful as initially expected. Indeed:

[In] the session they [Office members] [...] said: “The only involvement we’re going to have in performance measures is to audit the validity of the measures themselves and their application. We’re not going to be coming into your offices, and doing efficiency audits and making sure that you’re toeing the line and doing absolutely everything that you said you’re going to do. We’re simply going to be expressing an auditor’s opinion on the validity and consistency of the mea-

asures themselves.” So, that was, I think, a major hurdle that was finally jumped. (Division manager, March 1996)

The Office’s presentations on *Government Accountability* on the general theme of performance measurement also helped to enrol public servants. Once enrolled as early adopters, they would then promote the performance measurement project and the Office’s expertise. As mentioned by one auditor: “Some of them [public servants] buy into it and say ‘yes I see the logic’. So it does create the impetus.” One of these early adopters described the benefits of performance measurement to her/his department:

The acting Auditor General pushed very hard that government departments and their agencies and commissions identify what it truly cost the public to deliver their services. And we took this on board, and internalized it because it was going to help us make the tough decisions on how we would emerge three years down the road as an organization. We would know what it cost to process a payroll cheque. We would know what it cost to process a grant to a library, and we would know what it cost to deliver a day’s service through a historic site. (Department manager, April 1996)

This manager sees a value in financial measures of performance and activity-based costing, mainly in the support of department activities. In addition, the Office’s non-audit assessments of performance measures, as well as its formal assessments of performance measures, significantly contributed in establishing the Office’s expertise:

The Auditor General did a very preliminary audit for us this year with the data in the annual report. [...] They [Office members] are asking really good questions. [...] Just based on the kinds of questions that were asked by the Auditor General this last time we are expecting some good high questions to come up for next time. That is great. I think it is wonderful having an external body that is going to help us with that. (Department manager, September 1997)

Through interactions that help dispel negative associations, auditors are able to demonstrate their value as supportive critics who will help to improve a department's performance measurement system. As one auditor put it:

We go out to where the information came from and we can see things that the manager doesn't see. [...] And because of that we are able to be successful in getting a lot of things. (Office auditor, January 1998)

Being perceived as asking "relevant" questions was important in establishing auditors' self-confidence in dealing with public servants and with this the acceptance and consolidation of claims of expertise. Further, the Office's claims to expertise were affected not only by direct interactions but also as government managers recounted their experiences and views to other actors.

The extent to which the Office has successfully established itself as a centre of expertise is reflected in the fact that managers mention the Office in managers' meetings, even when no Office members are physically present. In meetings, enrolled public servants argue for the Office in absentia through remarks such as "The Auditor General might not like that." The Office intervenes from a distance in departments' activities and its views and claims of expertise are now reported as self-evident and matters of fact. Indeed managers in our more recent interviews refer, unprompted, to the Office when being asked to comment on the performance measurement project; highlighting for example that measures need to be "auditable" and "defensible to an auditor" (Division manager, April 2000). Increasing numbers of Albertan managers have integrated an auditing vocabulary into their interpretive schemes – thereby securing more firmly the Office's role in the performance measurement domain. However, this does not necessarily reflect an uncritical acceptance of the new régime: "As a result of the business plan model, the accountants have proliferated like rabbits. Auditors are all over the place." (Site manager, September 2000).

Increasingly, auditors' skills, knowledge and relevance are not questioned by managers. The role of the Office in performance measurement seems now to be self-evident. Of course, the exper-

tise of the Office in relation to performance measurement can always be challenged and made problematic. But dissenters will have difficulties rebutting inscriptions and results from a globalized network of literature that sets universal standards of good practices concerning the measurement of government performance.

Conclusion

The literature on the accounting profession has undergone something of a resurgence in recent years, stimulated not just by recent concerns about independence, but also by detailed historical and ethnographic examinations of practice, and theories of inter-professional competition (Cooper & Robson, *forthcoming*). The present paper contributes to this literature through the development of a better understanding of the processes by which accountants and auditors come to be recognized as possessing relevant expertise in new domains. In so doing, we contribute to debates about professions and the production of professional expertise. Specifically, we have explored the claim making and networking involved in conducting new forms of work. Below we review and extend our observations about the construction of expertise in auditing performance measures (both financial and non-financial), and the more general view that government auditors are experts in crucial components of NPM.

Although the Albertan government's initial intention to reform public administration created a potential space for the involvement of the Office of the Auditor General, the latter had to overcome important obstacles to occupy this jurisdictional space. Constructing expertise took place in a climate of scepticism and self-doubt. Further, the Office's actions should not be conceived as thoroughly planned – as if the Office had developed a detailed strategy to become recognized as central in performance measurement. Its involvement in the area was made possible when politicians started to push for a "new approach to government" (Government of Alberta, 1993). The involvement of the Office also necessitated the existence of an Office with sufficient resources to explore and

experiment with its potential roles in that new approach. Office auditors also needed to develop an interest in being involved in performance measurement – an involvement whose specific nature was then unknown to them. Other changes, seemingly trivial at the time, took on a significance in the production of audit expertise. For example, the Office decided to adopt a more open style in its relationship with government departments and to stress what public servants would see as a helpful rather than negative attitude.

To alleviate their own concerns, Office members reviewed the practices of other governments and state auditors. This review increased the self-confidence of Office members in their ability to operationalize performance measurement, and provided them with a knowledge base with which they could attach their own claims of expertise. An extended network of inscriptions (audit reports, conference papers, reports of the reception of performance measurement elsewhere) could be drawn on by the experimenters in Alberta who were learning to assess and provide advice on performance reports. Auditing both imports and exports legitimacy (Power, 2003). Here, the Office imports legitimacy from the developing corpus of knowledge on performance measurement, and exports legitimacy through the support that it provided to government's performance measurement project – which can then be taken up in other jurisdictions.

Our analysis suggests that Office members effectively consolidated their claims to expertise. With allies such as the CCAF and the AFRC, the Office linked audit expertise with the political problem of eradicating government deficit and debt, and of managing government in a more “businesslike” manner. A significant number of public servants came to perceive the Office as possessing expertise that could help them to cope with the uncertainties inherent to the implementation of the performance measurement project. Sites of ambiguity in an organization become pockets of receptivity for the intervention of areas of expertise that allow professional groups to expand their jurisdiction (Llewellyn, 1998).

The Office consolidated its claims to expertise by presenting its views on the ways in which the performance measurement project should be

implemented. In Alberta, government auditors were not only supportive of value-for-money audits and results management, but claimed that the assessment of performance measures would add legitimacy and credibility to the whole NPM process. Promotion of auditor expertise and endorsement of the performance measurement project were strongly linked; acceptance of the former was accompanied by acceptance of the latter. State auditors can therefore play a crucial role in the accomplishment of one of the most pervasive effects of NPM, namely, the alteration of public servants' ways of thinking, talking and acting (see also Oakes et al., 1998; Kurunmäki, 1999). With their strong link to finance and corporate business, accountants and auditors are prime movers in the blurring of boundaries between public and private sector organizational practices.

In particular, our analysis indicates that occupational laboratories (such as those operated by government audit offices), as sites of inscription production and validation, play a significant role in the process by which networks of support develop around claims to expertise. Inscriptions in the form of reports and manuals of audit practice circulate and are validated (or not) through the community of state auditors and those enrolled in their project of professionalization. Experiments in one jurisdiction are used to support experiments elsewhere, and political support in one jurisdiction is a resource to obtain political support elsewhere. We observe the emergence of a group of (more or less mutually aware) practitioners developing knowledge and claims to expertise, what Knorr Cetina (1999) refers to as an epistemic community.²⁵ Yet unlike most scientific laboratories, there is rarely any systematic review of the success of these audit and NPM experiments. Uncritical, self-reports circulate and may overwhelm sceptics;

²⁵ It is important to acknowledge that our analysis of laboratories and experiments relies heavily on the ideas of Latour and Knorr Cetina. Latour views inscriptions as the core characteristic of experiments and laboratories, but Hacking (1992) regards this view of experiments as limited. Knorr Cetina denies an a priori distinction between everyday life and scientific work, a position contested by many scientists, as well as some philosophers of science. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Pickering (1992).

surely this is a candidate for serious academic analysis.

Moreover, our paper shows that the ability of a profession to hold and expand a jurisdiction depends especially upon the profession's capacities to anchor its claims to expertise to a literature whose premises resonate with those of its audiences. For example, accountants' laboratories aimed to produce and validate a portable, context-free set of "good practices" concerning the measurement of government performance. These practices imply that government performance can be quite swiftly assessed through a limited set of indicators, which can be un-problematically used across different settings. In contrast, evaluators' and managers' laboratories emphasized the production of tailored measures of effectiveness. In an institutional context emphasizing NPM and performance measurement models and practices developed in the private sector, accountants' fact-building laboratories benefited from a competitive advantage in establishing the legitimacy of claims to professional expertise. This supports Reed's suggestion (1996) that those professions in contemporary society committed towards abstract and generalized knowledge bases may have a significant advantage in jurisdictional contests over professions committed to the production of knowledge specific to an organization (like evaluators), given a contemporary emphasis on generality, mobility and flexibility.

However, neither Office auditors nor program evaluators consider that they have been involved in jurisdictional contests around the measurement of government performance. Evaluators and auditors showed paradoxical attitudes about their respective relationship. For example, at times evaluators saw Office auditors as competitors supported by significant allies in establishing and sustaining claims to expertise. Yet, evaluators also mentioned having "no sense of auditors taking over" – that a "collaborative" relationship had developed between evaluators and the Office, in which each party keeps the other informed of its plans and initiatives concerning the audit and measurement of government performance. The concept of jurisdictional contest (Abbott, 1988) neglects to take into account that professions often

cooperate in developing markets for their work. Jurisdictional encounters may involve cooperation as much as "turf battles" (Dezalay, 1995; Dezalay & Garth, 2002).

In spite of its apparent stability, the network of support surrounding the Office's claims to expertise in performance measurement should not be construed as permanent and un-problematic. Enrolment in a claim is not perpetual (Latour, 1999), and subsequent trials of strength will affect the stability of the Office's claims. In our last interviews, several public servants still considered performance measurement to be more in the expertise domain of evaluators than that of accountants. Also, Canadian evaluators in the last few years have published in their association journal a growing number of articles that report on experiments carried out by evaluators in the area of performance measurement.²⁶ In spite of its lower membership, program evaluation might in the future produce a network of literature persuasive enough to strengthen evaluators' claims to expertise in understanding government performance, which could destabilize or reinforce the Office's network of support. In 2001–2002 the Office employed a senior program evaluator in the expectation that she will, inter-alia, affect how it assesses performance measures.

A further threat to the stability of the Office's claims to expertise arises when its claims to independence are challenged (Gendron et al., 2001). Our research adds to the doubts that state auditors are not involved in policy-making (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Svava, 1985). Formally, legislation frequently prevents auditors from commenting on policies (CCAF, 1996) and state auditors are keen to stress that they do not comment or report on public policy (e.g., Office, 2000). As Funnell (2004) points out, state auditors in Westminster type governments historically worried that value-for-money and operational auditing would threaten their claims to be objective and non-political. Although they present themselves in a manner

²⁶ For example, in 2001 *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* published a special issue on provincial evaluation policy and practice in Canada, including several articles on the measurement of government performance.

similar to scientists, denying the political dimensions of their activities in shaping public policy and instead emphasizing facts and evidence, auditors, however, are active in the elaboration and translation of policy (Latour, 1999). The Office worked closely with Treasury when the latter issued a reference guide on how departments should measure their performance. Further, by actively and effectively promoting the government's NPM reform, and actively trying to contribute to its legitimacy by assessing performance measures, the Office can also be regarded as providing prestige and legitimacy to government's policies. The claim of not being involved in policy-making is a ceremonial myth (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) aimed to provide legitimacy to state auditors – even though this might belie actual practice. Our paper therefore contributes to the growing body of evidence in political science that shows extensive contributions being made by administrators to policy (Harney, 2002; Svava, 1985, p. 221), undermining the traditional distinction between policy-making and administration. The two are crucially inter-connected, and this inter-connection has implications for idealizations of auditors' independence and for understandings of expertise in performance measurement.²⁷

The relation between policy and scientific knowledge and procedures has been discussed extensively by Latour (1983, 1999). Latour (1983, p. 165) argues: "The politician has no laboratory and the scientist [and we argue the auditor] has one." We have stressed the importance of laboratories and experiments in constructing knowledge and expertise, enabling the auditor, like the scien-

tist, to appear disinterested and rigorous. The multi-site laboratories of auditors enable them to appeal to (apparently) robust, experimentally based, and contextually free, knowledge. No wonder, then, that the auditor appears as an expert. However, we suggest that the scientist and the auditor are always politicians, working hard to claim that their knowledge and expertise are relevant and important, driven not by self-interest, but by universal truths and the public interest. Yet expertise is always interested, with intended effects. It is produced to support the aims of some members of society, and not others.

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²⁷ When Office members read an earlier draft of this paper, they were most upset about the suggestion that they were involved in policy-making. Their concern reflects a popular view that scientists (and, we would add, auditors) are objective whereas policy-making is subject to politics biased by interests. The strained relationship between the Office and us impacted the development of the paper. Although we felt a need for a more comprehensive investigation of the production and validation of inscriptions within the Office, it is unlikely that we would have been allowed to carry out any additional interview with Office members. Researchers with better relationships with government auditors may wish to extend our work in this respect.

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