The public funding of venues to host sport franchises and events remains a contentious policy issue in cities that seek to develop urban infrastructure in an increasingly competitive environment (Baade & Matheson, 2012; van Holm, 2018). Proponents argue that the presence of a new, state-of-the-art facility and/or sport franchise will increase the visibility of a city and generate tangible (economic development and tourism) and intangible (community pride, improved quality of life) benefits that justify the subsidy (Buist & Mason, 2010; Mason, 2016). Opponents argue that teams and venues do not generate the economic benefits that are claimed (Propheter, 2018), that there are opportunity costs to funding facilities and related infrastructure (Pereira, 2018), and that the intangible benefits, while present, do not match the amount of the subsidy (Johnson, Whitehead, Mason, & Walker, 2012). This latter problem is particularly prominent in North America, due to the bargaining leverage that major professional sport leagues have over cities, where leagues restrict the number of available franchises and allow cities to compete with one another for the opportunity to host teams. Unlike open league structures common in other parts of the world – where teams may play their way into competitive leagues based on athletic performance – North American professional sports leagues have a closed structure which allows leagues to play cities off of each other to extract lucrative public subsidies.

This has resulted in North American cities investing billions of dollars in new facilities in order to attract or retain teams from major sports leagues. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers (2017), US$32 billion has been spent on 83 new major league sports venues in the US since 1996, while independent research continues to debunk the economic benefits claimed by proponents (Ahlfeldt & Maennig, 2009; Harger, Humphreys, & Ross, 2016). In the absence of measurable benefits, whose interests continue to be advanced by the construction of new sports facilities? In a review of North American sports facility projects, Friedman and Mason (2004) found that where facility construction occurred, there was consensus amongst key stakeholder groups; in addition to the teams and league, the local business community, media, politicians, and proponent groups all stood to benefit from facility development and supported the projects. These groups fit the description of urban elites in an urban growth coalition model (Logan & Molotch, 2007), where the pursuit of land-based economic development occurs within a context of perceived pressures of increasing global competition. Thus, it should not be surprising that these same stakeholders emerge in the discourse surrounding the need for new sports facilities. However, as explained by McCann (2002, p. 395), “Analyses of the politics of local economic development that emphasize the power of discourse in constituting meaning-making/place-making processes are less common.”

Further, there is also evidence that, in order to gain support for funding, these elites are also adopting new arguments to garner support. For example, previous research has examined the discourse surrounding the funding decision in various cities and found a trend toward arguing for the intangible benefits of facilities (Buist & Mason, 2010; Sapotichne, 2012). While status arguments may be employed due to their difficulty in being contested by detractors (Sapotichne, 2012), the status conferred by the presence of a major league sport team appears to matter more to some cities than others, and discourse surrounding facility funding may evoke the negative image of a city to support facility construction. For example, Mason, Washington, and Buist (2015) found that in Cleveland, OH, proponents championed funding facilities by alluding to Cleveland’s (low) place in a hierarchy of cities, and how opposition to building new venues for the local teams would result in Cleveland further losing status in this hierarchy. This follows a similar logic to that proposed by McLellan and Collins (2014), who found that cities not in the top tiers of global rankings focused on quality of life factors (such as infrastructure and other urban amenities) in order to increase their status as desirable places to live. Thus, we contend that certain cities further down an urban hierarchy may be particularly susceptible to the use of appeals to the status (or lack thereof) of a city when proponents craft arguments to justify subsidies for the construction of these venues. In other words, proponents will use the negative image of a city in order to argue for the benefits of having a new facility and the team that plays there. In this paper, we explore this specifically by examining the status arguments made by proponents in one city— Edmonton, Canada— considering the construction of a new arena for its National Hockey League (NHL) team, and how the negative self-image of the city was evoked in local media to gain support for the project.

In doing so, the paper makes several contributions to the literature. Given that it appears that facility proponents are moving away from making economic development arguments to justify subsidization, it is imperative to better understand how these arguments are being crafted and who is making them. In addition, the paper introduces framing theory to explicitly show how local elites use their power and influence to shape their arguments through the media in an attempt to persuade audiences. As argued by McCann (2004), “the study of the relationships between media discourse and urban politics resonates with a more widespread attempt in urban studies to understand the power of discourse in the construction of urban economies” (McCann, 2004, p. 1910). In addition, it is critical to understand how local elites are able to do this; as explained by Flyvberg (2003):

…power defines what gets to count as knowledge. It shows, furthermore, how power defines not only a certain conception of reality. It is not just the social construction of rationality that is at issue here; it is also the fact that power defines physical, economic, social, and environmental reality itself” (Flyvberg, 2002, p. 361).

In Edmonton, how the discourse was framed in local media coverage helped to determine how local residents defined the need for an arena and the implications for supporting its construction. Finally, understanding how cities which may suffer from an inferiority complex value specific kinds of amenities – in this instance a facility designed primarily for use by a sports franchise – is important, as it helps to explain why certain cities may be more susceptible to the demands of land-based private interests (in this case sports teams and leagues) for public subsidies. The following provides a brief overview of Edmonton and its arena project for context, followed by an overview of framing theory.

**Edmonton: An Arriviste, Insecure City**

Edmonton is the fifth largest municipality in Canada, with a city population of over 900,000 and a metropolitan population of over 1.3 million. The city is the capital of the province of Alberta as well as the largest, northernmost metropolitan area in North America. It has traditionally served as a staging area for northern oil and mining development, with the local economy following a boom-bust cycle fluctuating with demand in the broader oil and gas industry. Historically, the city has been considered the gateway to the north and a major regional hub, and appears to be an ideal case to explore how (negative) city image and status has factored into infrastructure development, particularly land-based development projects. First, Edmonton appears to fit the profile of regional, second-tier cities that target sport facility development projects, and are “particularly vulnerable to viewing their place in the status hierarchy as being threatened” by the absence of a major league team (Mason et al., 2015, p. 542). Second, Edmonton and western Canada have a history of local boosters championing the advantages of the city and region (Hesketh & Swyripa, 1995; Whitson & Macintosh, 1993) and using sport as part of this strategy (Betke, 1983; Misener & Mason, 2008; 2009). As explained by Donald (2005), for Canadian cities, “One way that has persisted through the years is municipalities’ continued interest in land-based ‘booster’ approaches to economic development” (p. 266).

Meanwhile, Edmonton has historically struggled with its image, where an inferiority complex has led to frequent attempts to improve the city through various development projects, while making the city susceptible to the demands of specific developers (Leo, 1994). More recently, Zoeller (2016) claimed that the city falls short of expectations among residents and non-residents, affecting “the psyche of both the city and its inhabitants, while also revealing itself, often in derogatory terms, in larger national discourse themes” (p. 53). Similarly, Jones, Granzow, and Shields (2017) found Edmonton to be “characterised as ugly, cheap, homogeneous, blue-collar, industrial, cold, non-collaborative, isolated and shortsighted. Yet, these negatives were sometimes balanced by… its industrial successes, its youthfulness and its frontier and entrepreneurial spirit” (p. 10).

As explained by Hiller (2007), Edmonton has the characteristics of an *arriviste city*, which has grown in power and influence but perhaps “lacks general acceptance and respect” (Hiller, 2007, p. 56). This lack of respect has manifested itself in several high-profile cases where observers have made derogatory references to the city (Richler, 1985), which has led to widespread reaction by local stakeholders. In one example, a British journalist quoted an unnamed athlete attending the World Track and Field Championships, held in Edmonton in the summer of 2001, who dubbed the city “Deadmonton” (Philip, 2001). The comment led to widespread condemnation from local political leaders. It was within this context that in 2005, the Edmonton Oilers’ ownership group conveyed a need for a new facility as the franchise’s existing venue— Rexall Place— was one of the oldest in use by an NHL team, and that the outdated facility and its lack of amenities was hindering the team’s ability to generate revenue. The team was sold in 2008 to the Katz Group, a local, privately-owned company operating in film, sport and entertainment, and real estate development. The City of Edmonton and the Katz Group entered into talks concerning a proposed new facility for the Edmonton Oilers. In early 2013, the parties reached an agreement after a prolonged negotiation period. The new arena, Rogers Place, was projected to cost $480 million CAD, with an additional $124.5 million CAD for associated infrastructure. The City of Edmonton would contribute $279 million in total, with the remaining $39M would come from other forms of government. The following study uses media framing theory to explore the degree to which arena proponents leveraged Edmonton’s negative self-image in order to construct arguments in favor of the arena development project, and then discusses the implications of this for cities lower in the urban hierarchy.

**Media Framing**

Media framing has become a popular and useful theoretical framework for researchers in a variety of academic disciplines including communication, sociology, and political science (Simon & Jerit, 2007; Tannen 1993; Elliot & Hayward, 1998). Approached from a sociological perspective, framing is the process by which a particular perspective or ‘spin’ is promoted (Gamson, 1992; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). Viewed this way, framing is a powerful discursive strategy in which the media and its sources define and construct a political issue or public controversy (Gamson, 1989; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Nelson et al., 1997). In other words, frames can shape how audiences think and talk about controversial issues (Pan & Kosicki, 1996).

Several studies have concluded that the origins of public opinion tend to lay in elite discourse (e.g. Mondak, 1993; Lupia, 1994; Simon & Xenos, 2000). Given that the power to frame depends on access to economic and cultural resources, a store of knowledge, and strategic alliances (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Reese, 2001), it follows that *elites* are able to promote a particular understanding of a controversial issue. Elites are considered to be those persons who dedicate the majority of their time and activities to public affairs or politics and are the people “on whom we depend, directly or indirectly, for information about the world” (Zaller, 1992, p. 6). Examples of elites include, but are not limited to, the media, politicians, business leaders, city officials, and journalists. Elites exercise their social power by focusing on certain aspects of a controversial issue while excluding others, as well as promoting familiar media catch phrases in ways that are relevant to the framing of an issue (Gamson, 1992). In the case of a contentious issue such as subsidizing and building a new sport facility, there may be various elites (or frame sponsors) with an interest in how news audiences interpret and understand the issue (Gamson, 1984, Gamson & Lasch, 1983).

Mass media can serve as either conveyors of frames sponsored by elites or creators of frames themselves (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). According to Entman (1991), frames are made up of framing and reasoning devices. Framing devices include “keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images emphasized in a news narrative” (p. 7); which are often repeated by journalists to emphasize certain ideas and language. Reasoning devices provide a particular definition of the problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or recommendation. A frame can therefore be thought of as an intuitive structure or *interpretive package* (Gamson & Lasch, 1983, p. 2) which links reasoning and framing devices together (cf. Donati, 1992).

Entman and Rojecki (1993) proposed that if news frames influence audiences’ understanding of issues, these frames may, in turn, have an effect on policy decisions associated with those issues. Since frames are constructed to include certain connotations rather than others, analyzing news frames is essentially an examination of the ways concepts are associated within elite discourse. Thus, a framing analysis can elicit a better understanding of how media discourse, as a set of organizational voices, works to promote specific interests that support the dominance of particular groups and ideas in society. This is particularly important in an urban growth machine context:

Moltoch’s discussion of discourse and ideology can be seen as superficial insofar as it ignores a much deeper process: the power of machine language to shape everyday life that enables growth discourses to gain normalcy. Growth machines, in other words, speak not only to appropriate kinds of growth, but also about who should lead it, what their values should be, what the public’s values should be, and who are the locality’s potential civic and moral saviors. (Jonas & Wilson, 1999, p. 8)

For this reason in the case of Edmonton, the manner through which the negative image of the city was framed by proponents can shed light on how a city’s existing negative self-image can be used to further a land-based infrastructure development agenda, and reveal the power proponents wield to do so.

**Methodology**

Although quantitative content analysis is frequently used to examine media frames, we opted for a qualitative approach to our analysis since “a frame finds expression in latent meaning structures that are not perceived directly” (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 71).Further, in some cases the most important frame may not be the most frequently used (Reese, 2001). Thus, a qualitative approach avoids merely sorting media texts and counting their size and frequency. Specifically, we employed a *framing package* approach (Guo, Holton, Jeong, 2012, p. 1927), which uses both framing and reasoning devices (Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Van Gorp, 2007). Rather than simply highlighting themes or reducing frames to ‘story topics’ (Carragee & Roefs, 2004), the framing package approach allowed us to examine how city elites constructed and communicated status-based arguments around the negative self-image of the city. Importantly, we assumed that, like sport facility development projects in other cities (Friedman & Mason, 2004; 2005), elites in Edmonton had reached a consensus on the importance and need to build a new arena in Edmonton. Thus, our interest was in how city image was framed in order to justify/support the project, rather than to examine competing logics surrounding the value of such projects and how specific interest groups sought to influence the process (see, for example, Flyvberg, 1998; 2002; Flyvberg et al., 2003).

Early discussion of a new arena appeared in news coverage in 2005, and a tentative agreement was reached between the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Oilers in 2012. During the latter portion of this time period, social media were just beginning to gain popularity as a news source in developed countries (Newman, 2012; Newman & Levy, 2013; Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). Given that newspapers perform an important gatekeeping function as they: (i) serve as ‘a useful proxy’ for reporting in other forms of media (e.g. social media, new media, and broadcast); (ii) often set the agenda for these other formats; and (iii) are easy to access and search (Rooke & Amos, 2014), we limited our dataset to newspaper coverage of Edmonton’s proposed arena. Past studies have used either the print or online versions of a media outlet (Meraz, 2011a, 2011b); because digital editions of print and broadcast media are built on the traditional print versions and enhanced for online use (Singer, 2003), our primary source of data was the print version of the City’s highest circulating newspaper- the *Edmonton Journal.*

The *Edmonton Journal* is a broadsheet that is published daily and owned by Postmedia Network Inc[[1]](#footnote-1).According to data published by News Media Canada[[2]](#footnote-2), The *Edmonton Journal* had an average daily (print) circulation of 108,021 and a weekly average (print) circulation of 756,148 in 2010 (News Media Canada, n.d.) which is more than double its closest competitor, the *Edmonton Sun* (also owned by Postmedia Network Inc.). Articles were sourced from the Canadian Newstand Database and identified using a variety of keywords and phrases related to the proposed building of the new arena; examples include but are not limited to: arena. The search returned a total of 555 articles related to the construction of the new arena in Edmonton. These articles were arranged in chronological order and then copied into a word file.

In the first phase of analysis, each article was coded for basic characteristics such as date, staff reporter, section, and key actors quoted, mentioned, or discussed. Words, phrases, and sentences that spoke to the negative self-image of the city where then used as a guide for deductive coding by two coders. Three pre-coding training sessions were conducted to develop guidelines for coders, followed by a phase of pilot coding. This allowed two coders to refine and update the code list developed for the frame. Each coder was then assigned a portion of the data to determine if status-based arguments were present. Within the 555 articles collected, both coders found implicit and explicit references to status in 197 of those articles. The articles were then coded independently for status-based arguments related to appeals to Edmonton’s negative self-image.

In the second phase of analysis, a modified version of content analysis (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) was employed, which allowed us to examine the manifest content or surface structure of the message as well as a text’s latent content which can be defined as the “deep structural meaning conveyed by the message” (Berg, 1998, p. 226). This was done by identifying the framing and reasoning devices in the refined data set. In essence, these devices served as our coding scheme for content analysis and were used to develop a “signature matrix” (Gamson & Lasch, 1983, p. 399). This matrix served as an interpretive tool for sorting the varying idea elements and identifying the problem definition, cause, moral evaluation and recommendation as outlines by arena proponents. It also allowed us to explore how various idea elements were deployed and in turn identify and distinguish how differing frames were deployed to construct an interpretive package for the audience.

Although the decision to fund and build the City’s new arena did not involve a plebiscite, we also collected secondary data in the form of polls to ascertain residents’ opinions on the proposed arena to gauge broader public support for the project. While the majority of opinion polls were conducted online and appeared on the *Edmonton Journal*’s website, several were undertaken for local television stations (e.g. CTV and Global Edmonton) in conjunction with market research companies such as TeleResearch Inc. and Leger Marketing. We retrieved a total of eighteen opinions polls for the time period 2006-2012 by using the search function on the media outlets’ websites; twelve of these polls asked questions specifically related to the funding and/or building of a new, downtown arena.

**Results**

Following the work of Creed et al. (2002) and Van Gorp (2005), the results of our analysis are presented in the form of an adapted frame matrix (see Table 1). This matrix summarizes the frame package and includes examples of actual catchphrases, keywords, metaphors, and quotes which appeared in the newspaper articles. Appeals to the city’s negative image were identified in 77 of 197 newspaper articles that discussed the status of Edmonton related to the arena issue (see Figure 1) and were most frequently identified in the News, Cityplus, and Sport sections of the *Edmonton Journal*. Use of this argument was most prominent in 2011, dropping in 2012 after a tentative agreement was made in the Fall. In examining the reasoning devices, the main problem highlighted by the frame’s sponsors was that the city was suffering from a poor self-image. Proponents of the arena asserted that residents, as well as other cities hosting NHLteams, viewed Edmonton as a ‘second-class’ city. The city’s negative self-image was attributed to a lack of vibrancy in the city’s downtown core and the state of the hockey team’s existing facility—Rexall Place— often described as one of the smallest and oldest in the NHL. Appeals to principle involved highlighting the importance of building civic pride; residents were thus urged to support projects which were in the best interest of ‘their city’. In order to do so, supporters of the arena project recommended that funding and building a new arena in Edmonton’s downtown core would revitalize the area and improve the city’s overall image, thereby giving Edmontonians something to be proud of.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of Device** | **Summary** | **Examples** |
| **Framing** | Negative references to the city and the downtown core  Negative references to the existing arena  Comparisons to ‘higher-status’ cities  Comparisons to ‘lower-status’ cities | Stagnant; no-sex appeal; second-class; no taste; second-tier; bland; monuments of mediocrity; moribund  Smallest; second-oldest; antiquated; outdated; fossilized relic; alien spaceship; piece of dirt; middle-aged  Vancouver; Toronto; Calgary; San Diego  Winnipeg; Quebec City; Saskatoon |
| **Reasoning**  Definition of the problem/issue | Edmonton has a poor city self-image (and image) which is continuing to decline | “Edmontonians think others see their city as a second-tier outpost” (Staples, 2008 , p.A1)  "People say it [the city] is dead. That it lacks energy, which for Alberta is more than ironic -- it's unacceptable." (McKeen, 2010a, p. B1) |
| Causal interpretation | The city’s poor image is a result of its derelict downtown core | "If there's one thing right now that hurts Edmonton's reputation, it's the downtown" (McKeen, 2008, p. A10)  “…Edmonton's skyline remains stunted and gap toothed. Too many dusty, garbage-strewn parking lots still rim a downtown core that desperately needs more density” (Lamphier, 2006, p.E1) |
| Appeals to principle | Stakeholders must work together and commit to building a vibrant downtown to better the city as a whole | "We need to think big and then walk the talk,"; “the city is just too timid”; “we’re at a tipping point” (Pratt, 2010, p.A1)  "It's about the entire community and its needs. We have to do, not what's right for the Oilers or Northlands or the downtown, but for the city." (Simons, 2006, p. A14)  “I'm sad that people call it a hockey rink…I think there's more to it than just a hockey team. It's about a city and a great province. (Lamphier, 2008, p. E1) |
| Recommendations | Fund and build a new hockey arena in the downtown core in order to revitalize the city and improve its image | “If downtown is going to make a go of it, Edmonton needs a splashy new arena” (Lamphier, 2006, p. E1)  “A new downtown arena might well make people feel like they're living in a better, more impressive city” (Staples, 2009, p. E4) |

Table 1. Adapted Frame Matrix: Negative Self-Image

Residents’ poor self-image was underscored by journalists and key stakeholders who emphasized certain keywords and phrases in their descriptions of the city and its downtown core,

including: “bland”; “stagnant”; and “second-tier”. For example, *Edmonton Journal* staff reporter, Greg Lamphier, wrote that although Edmonton's economy “may have plenty of heft. But sex appeal? Forget it…We still look like Canada's boiler room” (Lamphier, 2006, p. E1). Further, another reporter stated that a city’s personality was reflected by its downtown and that Edmonton “looks like a shut-in on life support” (McKeen, 2010b, p. B1). Opposition to the arena development project was dismissed as a function of Edmonton being “a stubbornly small-minded, unimaginative sort of town” (Lamphier, 2007b, p. G1) and the outdated Rexall Place was portrayed as a glaring symbol of Edmonton’s continuing decline. Table 2 lists stakeholder groups and elites speaking to the city of Edmonton’s negative self image and their frequency in coverage of the arena issue in the *Edmonton Journal*, in order to to give a sense of which elites were the most salient in the discourse. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the newspaper section to illustrate how the issue was framed as a civic issue. The debate was salient across several different news sections, but was predominant as an overarching news item. Finally, Table 4 provides an overview of the specific journalists covering the topic, and the type of journalist (based on the section of the newspaper they predominantly wrote for). This gives a sense of how the newspaper and its journalists framed the debate as an issue germane to those interested in specific civic affairs.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stakeholder Group**  **/Elite** | **Example** | **Total # of persons** | **# of references**  **in *Journal* coverage** |
| Team Owner | Daryl Katz | 1 | 2 |
| Team Executives | Bob Black | 4 | 23 |
| Team Consultants | Matt Rossetti | 1 | 1 |
| Sports League | Gary Bettman | 1 | 4 |
| Politicians | Stephen Mandel | 4 | 18 |
| City Councillors | Bryan Anderson | 2 | 0 |
| Business Community | Ken Cantor | 5 | 15 |
| City Manager | Simon Farbrother | 1 | 0 |
| City Consultants | Mark Rosentraub | 2 | 3 |
| Other stakeholders (academics, architects, urban planners, interest groups) | Dave Onishenko | 5 | 11 |

Table 2. Stakeholder Groups and Elites referring to negative city image

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Section** | **Number of articles referring to negative self-image** |
| News | 23 |
| Citiplus | 12 |
| Letters | 5 |
| Opinions | 8 |
| Sports | 10 |
| Business | 8 |
| Ideas | 0 |
| Sunday Reader | 6 |
| Culture | 0 |
| City & Region | 5 |
| Insight | 0 |
| Total | 77 |

Table 3. Section of Newspaper reporting negative self-image

of the city

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Journalist** | **Newspaper Section** | **Number of references to negative self-image** |
| Gary Lamphier | Business | 26 |
| Paula Simons | Cityplus | 5 |
| Dan Barnes | Sports | 2 |
| Dawn Farrell | News | 1 |
| Scott McKeen | News | 6 |
| David Staples | City & Region | 15 |
| Fekete | Sports | 1 |
| John MacKinnon | Sports | 8 |
| Gordon Kent | News | 2 |
| Cam Cole | Sports | 1 |
| Chris Zdeb | News | 1 |
| Jodie Sinnema | News | 1 |

Table 4. Journalists Covering the Issue

Overall, the negative image frame can be considered a generic frame as it relates to “human interest” issues (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992), and “brings a human face or emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem” (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95). It is interesting to note that when negotiations between the City of Edmonton and the Katz Group reached a deadlock in 2011, the use of this status-based argument drastically increased, especially after rumors/threats of the team relocating to Seattle, WA, surfaced. According to these arguments, although Edmonton had made substantial progress over the past decade, it still struggled to equal (or better) the urban lifestyle offered by other ‘world-class’ North American cities. Hosting an NHL team (playing in a state-of-the-art facility) therefore bestowed status and as such, the team’s continued presence was crucial to the city’s ultimate goal of becoming a ‘great city’. Moreover, Edmonton’s image as a second-tier city was mainly thought to be a function of its ‘moribund’ downtown. Cal Nichols— then Chair of the team’s owner, Edmonton Investors Group— stated in 2006 that the arena was “about the entire community and its needs. We have to do, not what's right for the Oilers or Northlands or the downtown, but for the city” (Simons, 2006, p. A14). As a result, through the media, key players in the proposed arena project touched upon residents’ negative perceptions of the city, by positioning the arena as an opportunity to work together as a community to avoid the (further) decline of the city’s image.

In order to advocate for the project, supporters frequently employed references to “higher-status” cities when emphasizing the city’s negative image. References to these cities essentially served as exemplars; in other words, they functioned as one of several framing devices. One of the earliest sponsors of this frame included then-Mayor, Stephen Mandel. According to Mandel, “If there's one thing right now that hurts Edmonton's reputation, it's the downtown. You go to Calgary, Vancouver or Toronto – people there look at their downtown as the raison d'etre for the city” (McKeen, 2008, p. A10). Vancouver and Denver were highlighted as examples of cities where downtown sports venues had “helped rejuvenate city neighborhoods’ and spur development” (Lamphier, 2007a, p. F1). Moreover, proponents often recalled lower-status cities when advocating for the arena development project. Paul Douglas— President and Chief Executive Officer of Edmonton-based PCL Constructors Inc.— stated that “When Winnipeg lost the Jets, it lost much of its identity, excitement and status” (Mah, 2011, p. A1). Without a new arena, several proponents suggested that Edmonton was destined to become another Winnipeg (Mah, 2011).

Thus, a new arena was argued to be a signal to other cities that Edmonton should no longer be thought of as second-class. In order to emphasize the value of the project to the city, proponents regularly drew references to the 1970s when they viewed the city as more prominent on the world stage; the arena was thus positioned as a tool for returning Edmonton to its previously-held position within the hierarchy of (Canadian) cities. In order to position the larger urban development project that was to be built around a new arena in Edmonton, Columbus, Ohio, was frequently highlighted as a case where a mid-sized city established a successful arena district comprising residential, commercial, and entertainment and hospitality development (Rosentraub, 2014). This example illustrated how Columbus was able to redevelop its downtown and re-establish itself as a major-league city by virtue of now being linked to other great North American cities that host NHL teams. In addition, both journalists and other stakeholders (through their comments in coverage in the *Edmonton Journal*) referenced other higher-status cities such as Vancouver and Toronto in order to highlight Edmonton’s current ‘second-tier’ position in a hierarchy of cities.

While this study specifically focused on how proponents of building a new arena used the negative image of the city to support their arguments, city image – and the role of a new arena in impacting it – was also a part of the limited discourse in newspaper coverage that opposed the project. Where discussion occurred, it typically focused on what the city required in order to become world class, and whether a new arena would be effective in helping Edmonton to reach this status. For example, in one letter published in 2007, a resident argued that “We don't need features of other world-class cities foisted on us because the politicians think they will make Edmonton world class” (Phillips, 2007). Another opinion piece noted that “Doubtless, in principle, most citizens like the sound of an upgraded downtown, but that doesn't mean everyone agrees a 20,000- seat hockey arena is a good way to accomplish that goal” (Poor Forum, 2007).

Although the decision to build the arena in Edmonton did not involve a plebiscite, throughout the life of the arena debate polls were taken to gauge public support for the project in Edmonton. Table 5 summarizes the results of twelve separate polls conducted between 2006 and 2010. Generally speaking, public support for the project was underwhelming, which may speak to the need for supporters to play upon the negative image of Edmonton to try to garner support for the project.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Media Outlet | Question/ Topic | No. of votes | In Favor  % | Opposed (Unsure) % |
| January 12, 2006 | *Edmonton Journal* | Do you think the downtown arena is a good or bad idea | Not available | 39 | 61 |
| November 16, 2006 | *Edmonton Journal* | Opinion on proposed new, downtown arena | Not available | 52 | 48 |
| February 24, 2007 | *Edmonton Journal* Straw Poll | Opinion on proposed new, downtown arena | 1492 | 47 | 53 |
| June 2, 2007 | *Edmonton Journal* & Leger Marketing | Opinion if tax dollars used to fund the new arena | Not available | 33 | 67 |
| March 27, 2008 | *Edmonton Journal* Straw Poll | What's your reaction to the report recommending a new downtown arena? | 2199 | 44 | 56 |
| August 20, 2009 | Ipsos Reid for *Global TV Edmonton* | The City should provide taxpayer's money for a new Hockey Arena. | Not available | 24 | 76 |
| September 1, 2009 | *Edmonton Journal* Straw Poll | “What do you think of the ambitious arena project Oilers owner Daryl Katz seems to have in the works?” | 2705 | 43 | 57 |
| September 2, 2009 | *Edmonton Journal* Straw Poll | Opinion onusing taxpayers’ money to fund the new arena | 1431 | 42 | 58 |
| February 11, 2010 | *Edmonton Journal* Straw Poll | “What do you think of having the city build a downtown arena and recoup the costs through taxes on the Katz Group's surrounding development?” | 1122 | 28 | 41 (31% unsure) |
| February 23, 2010 | *Edmonton Journal* Straw Poll | “Mayor Mandel is proposing a ticket tax on all events at a new downtown arena as one way to help pay for the project. What do you think?” | 2682 | 47 | 53 |
| March 10, 2010 | *CTV/*ACCESS TVTeleResearch poll | “Should City of Edmonton build a new arena for Oilers?” | Not available | 22.55 | 55.45 (22% unsure) |
| May 8, 2010 | *Edmonton Journal* Straw Poll | “The Katz Group has released more information about its vision for a downtown Edmonton arena district. What's your reaction?” | 1264 | 37 | 31 (32 unsure) |

Table 5. Summary of Poll Data

**Discussion and Conclusions**

While this paper has focused on one specific city – Edmonton – and one specific type of land-based infrastructure development – a sports and entertainment arena – there are several important implications and inferences that can be drawn from this case. First, we will provide a brief overview of Edmonton’s history as an entrepreneurial, second tier city, before we discuss the implications of the study for city image, status, and the role of the media in this process. We conclude with a discussion of how evoking negative images undermines and city’s attempt to influence its status.

Coverage of the arena issue in Edmonton clearly showed that the notion of a hierarchy of cities existed for those involved in the debate surrounding the development of the arena, and Edmonton’s position within that hierarchy. This is not surprising given Edmonton’s position as an aspiring, arriviste city and its desire to improve its status. In a discussion of city branding, Anttiroiko (2015) noted that “the image of the city is always important, but active city branding is particularly critical for those emerging cities struggling to gain recognition as global players” (p. 247). Thus, discussion of the negative image of Edmonton was couched in terms of Edmonton’s position within a hierarchy of cities, and the ability of the arena development to elevate Edmonton’s position within said hierarchy. As explained by McLellan & Collins, (2014) “there is no universally accepted method of classification, nor any agreed-upon set of results, but rather a common recognition that an urban hierarchy exists (p. 205). In Edmonton’s case, a focus on a cultural and entertainment amenities as a means to compete is consistent with a broader pressure for cities to engage in competition beyond traditional economic measures (Anttiroiko, 2015), where “a city’s ability to compete in ‘non-conventional’ ways may now make a significant contribution to its image and reputation” (McLellan & Collins, 2014, p. 204).

Charney (2005) found that, in Canadian cities, “powerful developers including banks, insurance companies, and real estate firms perform a key role in the development of urban areas” (p. 309). In Edmonton, previous research has examined the entrepreneurial behaviours of civic leaders. For example, Leo (1995) described Edmonton as a corporate regime, where local political leadership has been historically subordinated by one or a few powerful developers, while being strongly influenced by broader economic influences, particularly in the oil and gas industry. Meanwhile, the hosting of sporting events and the construction of venues has long been a part of Edmonton’s history, as far back as the beginning of the 20th century. Even then, status seemed to be an important outcome of links to sport in the city:

To the extent, that sport entertainment was commercially organized, major financial beneficiaries were not to be found in pre-war Edmonton. Most promoters could not and did not expect to keep tangible benefits: civic pride, social status, and, perhaps, an oblique boost to one's political career were the only realistic rewards…Edmontonians did not have to be cajoled into acceptance: a significant proportion of the population wanted sport entertainment (Betke, 1983, p. 55).

However, what appeared to have changed by the 1980s was the need to try to use the construction of amenities to improve Edmonton’s position within a status hierarchy of cities, as “Edmonton had shifted from being a pioneer in modern master planning to a city that embraced neoliberal planning practices” (Rao & Summers, 2016, p. 100). Through the 2010s, Edmonton has continued to highlight “transformative urban development” through other investments, including furthering its involvement in the nanotechnology industry (Jones et al., 2017).

More recent investments have focused on the symbolic value of infrastructure development; in a study of sporting event hosting, Misener and Mason (2009) found Edmonton-based political and business elites “focused on issues of civic pride, economic development, and enhanced reputation in the national and global community” (Misener & Mason, 2009, p. 776), describing Edmonton as a progressive symbolic regime (Misener & Mason, 2008). Thus, it is not surprising that Jones et al., (2017) found that “a nascent nanotechnology industry was anticipated to attract a new class of high-tech workers and entrepreneurs, and to contribute to making Edmonton a ‘world-class’ city” (p. 2). Seen in this context, the proposed need for an iconic arena development project was consistent with both the ongoing entrepreneurial behaviours of city leaders, and ongoing concerns with Edmonton’s existing position within the hierarchy. Although these, and other projects, were seen as markers of success for the city, the value of a new arena for Edmonton, like other attempts to promote the city (Bunio & Wyly, 2014), was still contested.

While the issues described above are not necessarily surprising, the fact that proponents of the project leaned so heavily of the negative image of the city, is. In an examination of one specific stakeholder, Edmonton Mayor, Stephen Mandel’s, role in the arena debate in Edmonton, Foster, Soebbing & Seifried (2015), found that Mandel “was adept at countering criticism [to the project] by painting a picture of the current state of the city and how this was undesirable when compared to the future and the way the city would look” (p. 158). To articulate this, discourse often compared Edmonton unfavorably to other cities, or used examples from other cities that had undertaken similar developments. More specifically, the Arena District in Columbus, Ohio, was frequently offered as a case of exemplary urban development. When considering Edmonton’s efforts to advance in an urban hierarchy, this was somewhat perplexing; other research has shown that Columbus was also struggling with its own image and place within that hierarchy (McCann, 2004). This would suggest that, when discussing the importance of a new arena development project in improving the status of Edmonton, proponents focused narrowly on other, ‘peer’ cities with similar development projects. Thus, Columbus provided a good comparator for Edmonton; this is despite the fact that “a concern with Columbus’ image and its ability to be economically competitive permeates local business and political institutions” (McCann, 2004, p. 1923) in that city.

Interestingly, Jones, et al. (2017), found that, when discussing nanotechnology development in Edmonton, interviewees in Edmonton “contrasted Edmonton with places seen to be more aesthetically and culturally appealing. European centres such as Paris and Copenhagen featured in conversations, as did the research clusters in Boston and Silicon Valley” (Jones et al., 2017, p. 9). Thus, cities deemed competitors or aspirational peers in Edmonton were discussed in terms of success in the specific sector that that the city was alleged to be competing in – Silicon Valley in nanotechnology and Columbus for arena development projects. Further, Jones et al. (2017), found that Edmonton was also discussed unfavorably with other Canadian cities with regard to quality of life and attractiveness, attributed specifically to the lack of vibrancy of the downtown and the need for more amenities.

The discussion above suggests that the discourse surrounding the development project in Edmonton fit clearly within broader discussions of Edmonton within an urban hierarchy, and the entrepreneurial strategies of the city in the past two to three decades. The following discussion describes the importance of the media – in the current case a prominent local newspaper – in framing this discourse. Previously, McCann (2004) examined how normative discourses of interurban competition serve to perpetuate conformity amongst cities. To do so, the “best place” rankings in the popular media serve were examined. He argued that “that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the formulation of contemporary local economic development policy and the media’s production of these rankings” (McCann, 2004, p. 1912). While examining newspaper discourse in one specific city, the results of the current study support this assertion, and underscore the media’s role in shaping and perpetuating discourses of competition and the means through which local policy can engage in this competition. As McCann found:

media discourse clearly demarcates one city from another in its ranking process, defines each place as essentially and naturally competitive by placing them on a ‘league table’ and simultaneously draws upon and reinforces a highly problematic view of cities as socially and economically homogeneous …. The rankings also draw upon and reinforce what might be understood as ‘mainstream’ ideas of what constitutes the good life or well-being and therefore provide a firm foundation for growth discourse (McCann, 2004, p. 1926).

The statement above could just as easily be describing local newspaper coverage of the arena issue in Edmonton. Similarly, McCann suggested that “media discourse anoints certain cities as successful and worth emulating and specifying the extra-economic aspects of local economic development that are currently valorised in localities” (McCann, 2004, p. 1910).

Another interesting implication of the current study is the role that sport specifically plays in cities’ efforts to advance in the urban hierarchy. In a study of Edmonton’s sporting event strategy, Misener and Mason (2009) observed that “sport is used to promote and create a positive image of the city, attract tourists, and bring in more investment opportunities…. financial growth is not necessarily the end in itself, but rather, an activity that coincides with the regime’s broader values about what the city represents” (Misener & Mason, 2009, p. 773). The use of sport for this purpose began in earnest in Edmonton in the 1970s, which coincides with a broader shift to neoliberal development practices (Rao & Summers, 2016). “This strategy offers the city a chance to demonstrate not only to visitors, but also to local citizens alike that Edmonton is a vibrant and important city” (Misener & Mason, 2008, p. 621). Similarly, Bunion & Wyly (2014) acknowledged that “In Edmonton, sport has long been used as a means of promotion, a source of civic identity, and a means to establish prominence and respect from other cities” (p. 86). What seems to differentiate sport and sport-related development projects from other issues involving public investment in infrastructure is the degree to which they are salient as contested policy issues. For example, in 1998 Edmonton saw the opening of South Edmonton Common (SEC), at the time North America’s largest open-air retail centre. As explained by Rao & Summers (2016), “this occurred in contravention of the existing statutory planning documents, without support of the planning department and without any significant public opposition” (P. 100). As SEC grew, the city had to construct a large interchange to service the increase in vehicle traffic, at a cost of CA$261M. However, despite such a significant cost, a search of the *Edmonton Journal* revealed only sixteen related articles, many of which were letters to the editor protesting the public’s financial burden. In contrast, over five hundred articles appeared in the *Edmonton Journal* discussing the arena issue. This would suggest that the salience of a development project has less to do with its cost and more to do with its perceived value in furthering a city’s advancement in the hierarchy.

A final important issue identified in this paper relates not to the value of specific development projects to cities, or the salience of the issue within communities, but exactly how they are framed within local discourse (in this case, newspaper coverage). As we have shown, proponents of a new, arena-anchored downtown arena project clearly crafted arguments that played upon the negative image of Edmonton, and the role of the new project in making Edmonton “world class” or moving upward in a hierarchy of cities. However, this tactic may have consequences for cities that seek to improve their status and reputation. In their study of the nanotechnology industry, Jones et al. (2017) argued that “in an increasingly competitive marketplace for attracting talent, participants worried that Edmonton lacked a ‘wow factor’, or an ‘architectural identity’ that would enable it to compete globally” (p. 9).

However, in constructing arguments for what cities *could* be with the addition of new development projects, proponents of these projects are also discursively constructing and reinforcing an existing image of the city that makes it inferior and lower in status. In addition, the process of developing an identity for a city and its position in an urban hierarchy is not limited to elites who champion specific development projects. As explained by McCann (2002):

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the power to discursively construct commonality, whether around notions of community or locality, for political and economic ends, is entirely in the hands of business coalitions. Hegemonic ideologies are never complete and elements of the discourses that underpin them are often appropriated and reassembled in combination with other elements by opposing forces in order to present an alternative vision of the future of a place. This struggle can be conceived as a cultural politics, a set of discursive and material practices in and through which meanings are defined and struggled over, where social norms and values are naturalized, and by which ‘common sense’ is constructed and contested (McCann, 2002, p. 387).

Seen in this manner, arguments for building a new arena that employ negative images contribute to a broader understanding of what Edmonton is as a city and, importantly, what it is not.

McCann examined three US cities – Lexington, Kentucky, Austin, Texas, and Columbus, Ohio. The three cities share many common characteristics: they are mid-sized, US cities that have not suffered widely from deindustrialization, have grown rapidly in recent decades, are cites of primary regional universities, and are or are near seats of state government. However, when it comes to popular arguments and rankings of livability, Austin consistently ranks much higher, “while Lexington and Columbus are generally not examples used in the national conversation on successful examples of innovative economic development policy” (McCann, 2004, p. 1910). We would argue here that perceptions – popular or otherwise, local or beyond – of cities like Columbus or Edmonton are reinforced where local elites consistently play upon the negative image or low status of a city in order to gain support for specific development initiatives, and further makes them susceptible to pro-growth development initiatives.

When discussing city brands, Anttiroiko (2015) argued that great cities have brands that slowly develop due to certain sequences of events or historical/locational preconditions that allow them to develop. This should only underscore how large-scale urban development projects should not be treated as solutions to complex urban concerns, especially where the image of the city is questioned as part of the process of gaining support for them. As this paper has shown, the fact that they are presented as such in cities like Edmonton only underscores how cities, their residents, and local coalitions/regimes can get bound up in notions of competitiveness, hierarchy, and status, while simultaneously reinforcing their own (negative) views of where their cities fare in this competition.

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1. Postmedia Network Inc., is a wholly owned subsidiary of Postmedia Network Canada Corp. (TSX:PNC.A, PNC.B). It is the largest publisher by circulation of paid English-language daily newspapers in Canada. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. News Media Canada was created in 2016 when the Canadian Newspaper Association and the Canadian Community Newspaper Association agreed on a merger. Prior to this, the organization was known as Newspapers Canada. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)