'Second city syndrome': media reportage of urban rankings


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'Second city syndrome':
media reportage of urban rankings

DEB VIERHOEVEN, School of Communication and Creative Arts,
Deakin University
BRIAN MORRIS, School of Communication and Creative Arts,
Deakin University

This paper investigates the popularly reported phenomenon of city rankings and, in particular, the category of the 'second city' that regularly features as part of this prolific evaluative discourse. Our paper proposes that the category 'second city' has a specific analytical value that has to date been underestimated in academic accounts (particularly in the confusing, interchangeable use of 'second-tier', 'secondary' and 'second cities' in the dominant urban studies literature). Instead, we are interested in how second city identifications permeate popular forms of urban comparison in some places.

The example of Melbourne (Australia) is used to investigate how second city identities are historically sustained through evaluative media representations. In particular we examine how, through their reportage of various world city rankings, metropolitan newspapers reveal and articulate a 'second city consciousness'. How do media institutions, and more specifically, media reports, frame these urban rankings in such a way to confirm Melbourne's similarity to other globalised places (i.e. proposing its status as a 'world city'), yet also as a city also marked by a particular historical specificity? And how do they draw on already existing popular and political traditions of urban comparison? This article will identify and analyse the role of newspapers in perpetuating both formal and informal urban comparisons.

Introduction: City ranking mania –
a Melbourne perspective

Each year, the release of Mercer’s ‘Quality of Living’ and the Economist Intelligence Unit’s ‘Liveability’ rankings – both organised to rank world city locations – inspire a groundswell of public discussion in the Australian city
of Melbourne. That discussion is most intensely and publicly registered in the city’s two largest and oldest newspapers, *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* – though commentary inevitably spills over into a range of other communication spaces in an age of proliferating social media. Over recent years Melbourne has experienced both lofty and lesser heights in these (and similar) surveys of the world’s cities, and its fluctuating fortunes within the rankings mean that their release is of enormous interest for the public and policy-makers alike.

Bernard Salt, a prominent Australian demographer, has responded to Melbourne’s fascination with city ranking surveys. For Salt, Melbourne is defined by an intense level of ongoing interest in its relative ‘place’ in the world, its apparent desire to be measured through other’s eyes (Dowling, *The Age*, 14 Jun, 2008). According to Salt, Melbourne is afflicted with ‘second-city syndrome’, a pathological compulsion to compare itself to other cities, and most pointedly, to its northern neighbour Sydney. This ‘syndrome’ is articulated through repeated references to significant historical examples of Melbourne’s perceived ‘second’ status in a litany of urban comparison and rivalry. Sometimes these comparisons are positioned within a national frame and at other times within an international context. But what is most notable about the tenor of these comparisons, is that the evidence of Melbourne’s relative success or failure is rarely based on the economic indices that typically dominate city taxonomies and rankings.

This article will identify and analyse the role of newspapers in perpetuating formal and informal urban comparisons. In particular we will examine how popular news reportage of Melbourne’s relative position in the Mercer and EIU indexes contributes to a ‘second city consciousness’. We will argue that this second city syndrome reveals a ‘metageography’ (Lewis and Wigan, 1997); a perceptual horizon based on a collectively imagined sense of placement within a national and global urban geography.

1. Approach and methodology

The empirical focus in this paper is on daily metropolitan newspapers and the discourse of urban difference and identity they produce through their reportage of various world city rankings and indices. Daily newspapers in
Australia continue to decline in terms of their reach (particularly with younger demographics), and are in the midst of responding to the challenges of an increasingly convergent media landscape. Nevertheless they can be argued to have an historically privileged relationship with the formation of modern urban identity and consciousness, the legacy of which continues to be prominent. An indication of this relationship can be seen in the ways in which newspapers leverage their brand identities off the cities they claim to be a voice for (e.g. The [Melbourne] Age) – even though the reality of ownership structures is such that the one organisation may own several capital city papers within a national market.

Newspapers have long been recognised as playing a significant role in articulating imagined communities and place, particularly that of the nation (Anderson, 1983). Following Anderson, and writing about Australia’s reaffirmation of its national identity during its bicentenary celebrations, Mercer (1992) observed the following about the press: “The newspaper – the use of the form, its techniques and genres and characteristic popular idioms, its ability to handle heterogeneity – is primarily a technology of affiliation. It is one of those devices which secures, in Edward Said’s definition, ‘the range of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases belonging to or in a place, being at home in a place’”. (Mercer, 1992: 31)

But globalisation as experience and process has arguably complicated, or at least bought to light, the range of complementary belongings that citizens experience. Among these, a sense of belonging to an urban culture, that is global/not global and the same/locally different, has become a crucial dimension of being in place for much of the world’s population as the considerable media discourse around the various annual city rankings attests.

But what kinds of affiliations do urban comparisons – such as world city rankings – point towards? Here the daily nature of newspapers remains significant. As Mercer (1992: 26) puts it, “newspapers have historically defined, classified and constituted ‘a certain texture of the ordinary’. Their implicit and explicit representative work is to delineate this culture rather than that.” Newspapers highlight the particularity of ordinary and everyday senses of belonging as much as official or market-driven ones.

Newspapers are also useful to analyse because of their promiscuous mixing of quantitative and anecdotal accounts in their representations of city identity – every issue contains a mix of “hard news” and “soft” lifestyle pieces that contribute to the discourse of metropolitan life and identity. To analyse newspapers and their content provides a means of uncovering the
components of a constantly performed urban imaginary – in this case one which we would argue articulates a specifically second-city consciousness.

An important conceptual assumption employed in our study is that the wider media sphere is not an isolated island where cultural imaginaries find themselves marooned from the ‘real’ world of urban policy and politics. Instead, media can be understood as a crucial relay point through which the desires, strategies, tactics and perceptual horizons of different urban actors – such as local authorities, brand designers, as well as ordinary inhabitants – momentarily encounter each other in a shared space. More pertinent still, in terms of newspaper readerships, the media rhetoric around city ranking and identity is part of what Greenfield and Williams (2003), drawing on Latour and Foucault, have usefully framed as a process of the inscription and conscription of audiences to particular dominant ways of thinking about a topic. Examining such rhetoric helps us show, as Latour puts it, how “someone convinces someone else to take up a statement, to pass it along, to make it more of a fact” (quoted in Greenfield and Williams, 2003: 282). We are concerned to trace how newspapers function as cultural technologies that persuasively communicate understandings of Melbourne as internationally competitive, in a relational global system measured by complex quantitative indices, while simultaneously (re)inscribing it, explicitly and implicitly, as a ‘second city’ for better or for worse. How do these media institutions, and more specifically, media reports, frame these urban rankings in such a way to confirm Melbourne’s similarity to other globalised places (i.e. proposing its status as a “world city”), yet also as a city also marked by a particular historical specificity? We argue this simultaneous proposal of sameness and difference is explicitly expressed through the Melbourne media’s frequent reportage of global city comparisons and which implicitly draws on a tradition of endemic city comparison in Australia. In other words, the Melbourne media’s coverage of the EIU’s rankings, can be seen as part of a wider interest in urban relationality that has its origins in a long and ongoing preoccupation with intra-national rivalry. On this basis we argue that a discomforting “second-city” consciousness always already underlies and disarms Melbourne’s success in global ranking exercises. Even when Melbourne is on top of the world, it reveals a characteristic “second-ness”.

To substantiate these arguments we have compiled an extensive dossier of materials from The Age and The Herald Sun that report on or address city rankings and we draw upon these for repeated as well as exemplary instances of the types of rhetorical strategies used to convince a wide local audience of the grounds of Melbourne’s distinction as a world city. While we focus
here on materials from 2011 we also contextualise the analysis within collected reportage dating back to 1990 when the Washington-based Population Crisis Committee ranked Melbourne as first-equal in a liveability index comparing the world's one hundred largest metropolitan areas.

2. Background

2.1 Urban rankings

Recent times have seen the emergence of a multitude of rankings providers, ranging from scholars to national and international organisations, to private think tanks and media organisations. The comparative lists of cities they produce make use of a range of overlapping methodologies. For example, scholarly taxonomies of city types (see GAWC, 2009; Anholt, 2007), provide a snapshot of a changing global urban order through their production of comparative economic indexes that distinguish smaller (sometimes described as second-tier or secondary) cities from leading global cities. The influential Global and World Cities research network (GAWC) was established in 1998 at Loughborough University in the U.K. and coordinates the research of scholars globally interested in “the external relations of world cities” based on an “alpha”, “beta” and “gamma” ranking. In a formative article, Taylor (1997) identifies the measurement of degrees of interconnectivity between cities in a world network as the key determinant of their place in this overall hierarchy of city types.

Running parallel to the GAWC’s formulation of an economic algorithm of urban comparison has been a popular concern with city comparison that takes “quality of life” or “liveability” (instead of interconnectivity) as the determining variable in the ranking of cities. Prior to the GAWC’s extensive work on city comparison, popular place ratings and an interest in measuring the elusive “quality of life” can be traced back to the 1981 U.S. publication of Boyer and Savageau’s Places Rated Almanac (see Rogerson, 1999). This paper is particularly concerned with those rankings that receive attention in the wider media sphere.

In the contemporary moment, the discursive frame of “liveability” is dominant in this arena of popular urban debate (although Monocle Magazine have interestingly added the term “loveable” to their Quality of Life index).
In his inquiry into the genealogy of the term “liveability”, Kaal (2011) notes research pointing to its earlier use in the late 1960s and 1970s in Canada and the U.S. – for example, in the 1970s Philadelphia International Airport welcomed travellers with a sign “America’s Most Liveable City”.

But it is in the post-2000 period that a stronger proliferation of these broader comparative liveability lists and an accompanying intensification of popular interest in them has occurred. The Mercer Consulting and Economist Intelligence Unit (and more recently Monocle Magazine) global city rankings receive regular attention in terms of public debate following their yearly update of city rankings. These rankings analyse the relative liveability of cities but are specifically aimed at international companies seeking to provide their employees with comparative information about the cost of living. The evident popularity of these listings beyond the global companies who rely on them has inspired a swathe of global city rankings for just about any niche interest. Other popular newcomers to the field of annual urban ranking include: AskMen Magazine (ranking cities for their appeal to men); Arkeports (ranking the top major event city); Sports Business International (the ultimate sports city); RMIT University’s Global University City Index; Conde Nast Traveller (a survey of tourist destinations), various Forbes/Milkin Best Places lists (which include best cities for singles); the Anholt City Brands Index and so on. It is possible to argue that there are now so many popularly published rankings they constitute a distinct cultural form that deserves more serious consideration.

Kaal (2011) notes that critics have seen the liveability discourse as “reflecting the interests of elites who pursue an agenda of urban growth and are representing upper and middle-class interests” (p. 534). For some of these critics this would also appear to be a fundamentally neo-liberal discourse in that it “privileges consumption and individual choice over collective responsibility and civic morality” (McCann quoted in Kaal, 2011: 534). Alternatively, we would argue that it provides a useful media juncture at which to consider dominant modes of urban distinction and expressions of belonging in a global city system that is increasingly understood by public and policymakers alike within the limited discursive frame of liveability.

2.2 Other systems of city ranking: first and second cities

Whilst there is now a well founded literature on global (or “primate”) cities, scholarly studies of second cities are less established. Currently there are no
agreed criteria for determining a second city. A second city is usually thought of as being the second most “important” after a country’s first city, but this is not an official designation in any sense. Nor is it necessarily accurate to define a city’s “second” status in purely economic terms. For example, for much of its nineteenth and early twentieth century history Melbourne was Australia’s largest city and a powerful centre of financial and corporate control. Yet it did not necessarily achieve the status of “first” city during this period. Similarly, Umback (2005) has argued in a comparative study of Hamburg and Barcelona, that second cities in the nineteenth century often rivalled the first in terms of economic resources and population size and were frequently more experimental in terms of political autonomy (also see Ruble’s [2004] comparative study of nineteenth century Moscow, Chicago and Osaka).

Second cities are also differentiated from the “secondary” and “second-tier cities” which have emerged as city categories within the global cities framework. Both secondary and second-tier cities are primarily defined statistically: by demographic measures (as either a set population size or a size that is relative to a “primate” city); by their economic structure and purpose (they are usually defined as centres of commerce and as providing services to a “primate” city); geographic factors (their proximity to the “primate” city and their topographical position); and by the fact that they are often multiple in nature (there can be many in any given nation-state).

Florida (2006) has argued that a key current urban trend is the emergence of cluster formations of megalopolises in which secondary cities are not marked so much by their difference from “first cities” but their supporting role in the formation of a networked urban geography. In this regard a nation or region can support multiple second-tier cities. In this way, these seemingly similar categories can cover a range of urban types; for instance, “secondary cities” are usually defined as industrially and financially powerful in global terms but are still economically smaller than the leading urban centre of the nation (e.g. Osaka vis-à-vis Tokyo), while the notion of “second-tier” cities allows scholars to attend to rapidly developing urban centres in expanding economies such as China (e.g. Chengdu).

On the other hand, previous research by Morris and Verhoeven (2004) argues that second cities, unlike secondary or second-tier cities, are uniquely singular. Intrinsic to the definition of the term is the implication that there can only be one second city within the nation (even if there is rivalry for the title among a number of “second-tier” contenders). As Morris and Verhoeven (2004) propose, second cities are governed by logics of seriality and
competition. To be a second city is to simultaneously aspire to be first, as well as to live with the fear of slipping into third place. It is to exist in a state of vigilant self-consciousness over a city's relative positioning (both in global rankings and in local rivalries). We describe this state as a defining sense of "meta-relationality" (the comparison of various city comparisons).

A study by Hodos (2002) comparing Philadelphia and Manchester from 1790 to the present usefully defines second cities as possessing a characteristic politics and ideological orientation, including the growth over time of a second city self-consciousness or identity. The fierce contestation between rivalrous cities manifests itself across diverse spheres ranging from political and business cultures to architecture, sport, high and low art forms.

To date, the majority of studies examining second city syndrome (such as Ruble, 2004; Umbach, 2005; but with the exception of the unpublished Hodos, 2002) have cordoned off their inquiry within the nineteenth century and have not considered the influential legacies of the second city imaginary within a newly globalised urban network. As a result the question of how an historically embedded second city self-consciousness informs current senses of belonging experienced by inhabitants and observers remains unanswered. Instead, the common thread of these second city historical studies is that they alert us to the "ambiguous relationship between city and nation-state [that] is particularly acute in the case of 'second cities'" (Umbach, 2005: 660; also see Newton [1976] for a more contemporary example). So although historical accounts of selected case studies frequently mention the "second city" status in passing, or the associated rivalry with a first (or third) city, there is an absence of analysis of the cultural and mediated dimensions of this characterisation.

This distinguishes the scholarship of second cities from the prevailing global cities literature which limits definitions of secondary and second-tier cities to purely economic terms. For instance, the identification of a network of "second-tier" cities (e.g. Markusen, 1999) as cities that don't quite satisfy the statistical measures for first-tier cities but are nevertheless industrially and financially significant, continues to emphasize the predominance of economic modelling as the key determinant of city definition and position. O'Connor (2002) challenges the narrow range of economic indices employed by Markusen and argues that a better recognition of the economic contribution of second-tier cities such as Melbourne can only occur from a rethinking and broadening of the commercial ranking measures associated with the global city perspective. We go further and suggest that it is not just a broadening of economic indices that is required but the inclusion of non-economic factors also.
The release of popular urban rankings is useful in this context not only because they are hierarchies based on a combination of economic and cultural measures but because the public debate they foster has itself become part of the articulation of second-cityness. The reportage of these rankings is a striking example of the "meta-relationality" characteristic of second-city consciousness. Contemporary newspapers are a useful source for evaluating these broader public debates as their online versions incorporate contributions from a wide range of citizen-commentators.

3. Case study: release of the 2011 EIU global liveability survey and 2010 Mercer worldwide quality of living rankings

The empirical materials studied here consist of news articles about the 2011 EIU City Liveability and the 2010 Mercer Quality of Living rankings, as well as associated reader responses in the form of online comments or letters to the editor. Reportage of rankings such as these have a long history, and are a yearly staple of local newspaper and television news coverage. This year was particularly significant from a Melbourne perspective as the city overcame its regular status as perpetual runner-up to topple Vancouver from the top spot.

Firstly, it can be observed here that the worldwide reporting of the ranking results follow a fairly consistent template (as evidenced by comparison of news reports obtained from a range of worldwide locations). This reporting relies heavily on press release material from the EIU. Most of the reports, for example, cited the same quote from the EIU survey editor, Jon Copeslake, that Australian cities were well placed in the survey ranking due to the "low population density and relatively low crime rates". Other key elements of the extremely consistent framing of the rankings release include a discussion of the winners (top 5–10 cities), discussion of aspects of methodology of the ranking and some of its indicators, and a reference to the bottom-ranked group. Depending on the location, these basic elements are sometimes then locally inflected by quotes from local government stakeholders and/or expert commentators. Journalistic interpretation or framing only appears to occur, in the Australian context, in accompanying or subsequent editorials.
and opinion pieces written by figures tangentially linked to the media (such as academic commentators on urban life, etc).

Perhaps the most discernable and clear-cut theme relating to second-city consciousness present in the reportage we analysed, was that of pride (and its potential pitfalls). This less tangible aspect of urban identity has been a central strand in comparative accounts of Melbourne from its nineteenth century colonial origins (see Morris and Verhoeven, 2009), with a number of celebrity international visitors ranging from Anthony Trollope to Mark Twain remarking on the city’s propensity to “talk itself up”. This capacity to brag is frequently characterised by observers as a compensatory mechanism, an anxious self-assurance that the city does have significance and distinction as an urban location despite not being able to lay claim to being Australia’s “first” city in a chronological sense.

A feature article following in the wake of commentary around the BDU rankings similarly pointed to this longer historical trend: “We – Melburnians that is – have been wrapped up in it for years, wearing our liveability like some self-styled but earned adornment, like a medal. When we talk about our town we seem to lean back with folded arms, chin out, as if beaming at some imaginary trophy cabinet: Cultural Capital, Sporting Capital, and, recently, being named World’s Most Liveable City by The Economist.” (Marshall, The Age, 24 November 2011)

Similarly the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Robert Doyle, was quoted in The Herald Sun as commenting that: “For most people it will be a quiet sense of satisfaction and then saying, ‘Look, I already knew that’”. Doyle was likewise quoted in The Age (Dowling, 30 Aug) as saying “… but I don’t think we’re boastful about these things, we’re very proud”.

How then was that pride expressed in the reactions to the 2011 rankings? In an opinion piece in The Age (September 4, 2011) written by Bruce Guthrie, a former editor of The Age and The Herald Sun, the author takes the opportunity to comment that “Perhaps the best thing about winning the top spot is that Sydney must be smarting” before once again addressing the consequences of a potential influx of residents to the city over the coming decades. This opening framing of the discussion is significant because it positions his commentary and the significant of the ranking results within a much older discourse of comparison and rivalry between Melbourne and Sydney that has existed ever since Melbourne came into being.

An attendant undercurrent within the broader coverage was related to some of the consequences of Melbourne’s success, of becoming too visible
internationally. This was perceived as potentially happening through attracting more inhabitants whose arrival might jeopardize aspects of urban life and infrastructure, such as public transport, already at capacity or under stress. Even the art critic for *The Age*, Robert Nelson, weighed in with a lengthy opinion piece on the ranking result with a piece entitled, “Welcome to the world’s most liveable delusion” (*The Age*, 3 September). The rhetorical frame of this piece attempted to pierce a perceived veil of smugness, to see through the “swagger and deceit” liable to result from attributing the results too much validity. For Nelson, Australian urban policymakers are already too inward-looking and not interested in non-Australian urban models – this result gives them the excuse to further ignore comparative international cases. For him, Melbourne’s success is based on a central conceit and contradiction: a notion of liveability premised on the city population “spreading out over unsustainable hectares of automotive space”.

It is necessary to contextualise here that a staple of some of the more recent coverage of Melbourne’s future have been focussed on a set of demographic predictions released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that show rapid population growth over the past decade compared to other Australian cities. As one report put it (Colebatch, *The Age*, 2011), the city’s population is within 500,000 of Sydney for the first time in 30 years and if current trends continued would overtake it in 2028 (each city would then have a population of around 5.6 million).

Finally, we’d note here the substantial and telling reader discourse in response to the key newspaper reports on the BRU rankings release in the *Herald Sun* and *Age* – each online edition generated over 130 reader comments. Considering the *Herald Sun* comments (as an indicative but not representative sample) we note the following: 31% of comments were unambiguously celebratory of Melbourne’s top ranking; 5% contained references to the “ongoing” Sydney rivalry; 22% made their own anecdotal liveability comparisons to Sydney or other cities; 63% were critical of the survey’s findings – in particular Melbourne’s result.

It is the degree of criticism of the findings relating to Melbourne that is most telling. Notably, the majority of these comments came from actual Melbourne residents (suburban or city affiliations of those commenting are noted alongside their name/pseudonym). What seems common to these criticisms is a perceived discrepancy between the actual everyday conditions of city life (e.g. in terms of available healthcare, crime and safety, the public transport system and so on) and the fact that Melbourne could be rated the
relative “best” in the world. In this disbelief, it is possible to see an unconscious expression of the historical tradition of Melbourne’s perception of itself as a, “not-quite-good-enough” second city.

Conclusion

An examination of the news coverage of Melbourne’s perceived successes and failures in different rankings from the beginning of the current century reveals that this discourse is often only minimally concerned with the methodological determination of the city’s position and the factors that may have played a key role in establishing that result. Instead, the communication of these results is consistently marked by the opposite tendency to which the rankings typically aspire (scientific reliability and consistency); that is, they are often an opportunity to generate appeals to “irrational” emotions such as envy, pride and jealousy reminding us that the affective experiences of place are constitutive components of city psychologies and identities.

In Melbourne’s case, its second city identity has been strongly linked to the notion of “quality of life” and the perceived liveability of the city (itself a source of exaggerated pride over past decades when a survey in early 1990s named it as the world’s most liveable city). High results in subsequent rankings and surveys have firmly fixed the notion of liveability into the city’s contemporary myth of identity and branding strategies to the point where the term is rhetorically central to key urban institutions and everyday accounts of the city.
Appendix: tables of rankings

Table 1: Economist Intelligence Unit Global Liveability Survey – table of top 10 cities.

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Table 3. Criteria: Mercer & Economist Intelligence Unit Economist Intelligence Unit

According to its website, the EIU assigns each city a score for over 30 qualitative and quantitative factors across five broad categories: 1) stability; 2) healthcare; 3) culture and environment; 4) Education; 5) Infrastructure

(Source: <http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=NEW_August_livableity_PDF.pdf&mode=wp>)

According to its website Mercer evaluates local living conditions in the 420 cities it surveys and these are analysed according to 39 factors, grouped in
10 categories: 1) political and social environment (political stability, crime, law enforcement, etc); 2) economic environment (currency exchange regulations, banking services, etc); 3) socio-cultural environment (censorship, limitations on personal freedom, etc); 4) health and sanitation (medical supplies and services, infectious diseases, sewage, waste disposal, air pollution, etc); 5) schools and education (standard and availability of international schools, etc); 6) public services and transportation (electricity, water, public transport, traffic congestion, etc); 7) recreation (restaurants, theatres, cinemas, sports and leisure, etc); 8) consumer goods (availability of food/daily consumption items, cars, etc); 9) housing (housing, household appliances, furniture, maintenance services, etc); 10) natural environment (climate, record of natural disasters) (Source: <http://www.mercer.com/press-releases/quality-of-living-report-2010# City_Ranking_Tables>. Accessed 28 November 2011.).

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