Cities, Status Hierarchies, and Arena Development

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Political and business leaders in cities and regions of all sizes have sought to develop and build various infrastructure amenities that include sport and recreation facilities (Gratton et al. 2005; Long, 2012; Rosentraub, 2009). The use of public funds for the construction of sports facilities remains a contentious issue in North American cities. Although independent academic research continues to question the tangible (Crompton, 1995) and intangible returns (Crompton, 2004; Johnson & Whitehead, 2000; Johnson, Groothuis & Whitehead, 2001) cities receive for their investments, restrictions on the number of available franchises allows leagues to leverage the presence of a team in a city to exact significant subsidies. The financial burden placed on cities and other levels of government can be significant; Long (2012) estimated that in major league facilities built in the late 2000s, the amount of public investment averaged US$334 million. Thus, the decision to contribute to a new sports arena is a significant – and expensive – decision for cities. In the United States and Canada, this involves arenas built to host National Hockey League (NHL) teams.

The use of public funds for sports infrastructure is typically justified for various reasons, including, but not limited to: economic, tourism, and/or community development, attracting new businesses and skilled workers; and providing improved quality of life for local residents (Baade & Dye, 1988; Chalip, 2006; Coates & Humphreys, 2008; Crompton, 1995; Eisinger, 2000; Florida, 2002; Misener & Mason, 2006). In addition, the desire to build new arenas and host NHL teams is also bound up in a form of inter-city competition for amenities, where possessing a new venue and team is viewed as impacting the status of a city (Mason, 2010). Status is the perception shared by a collection of organizations regarding each other’s social standing (Podolny & Phillips 1996; Washington & Zajac 2005). In the case of cities, civic leaders are aware of the importance of their standing within a hierarchy of cities; discourse surrounding the construction of arenas and related infrastructure often revolves around the role of the arena and team as a status signal that may alter a city’s place within the hierarchy (Authors, forthcoming).

The purpose of this paper is to examine how discourses of status manifest in media coverage of the potential decision to fund a new facility for an NHL team. To do so, we examine the recent decision to fund a new, CA$480 million arena to host the Edmonton Oilers. To facilitate analysis, we adopt a media framing approach. Media framing constitutes a process whereby a particular interpretation of an issue is developed. The way the media select, filter, and disseminate information regarding an issue (or event) may in turn influence the public’s understanding, thinking, and discussion of that topic (Tuchman, 1978). Media frames can therefore be considered ‘organizing principles’ which provide context and meaning for an audience (Entman, 1991; Reese, 2007). Journalists as well as other elites (e.g. city officials and political leaders) may engage in media framing, as such, frames can have multiple sponsors (Gamson, 1989). Frame sponsors may use various framing and/or reasoning devices which serve to condense information and offer particular interpretive package of an issue (Gamson & Lasch, 1983). For this study, we employ a holistic “framing package” approach (Guo, Holton, Jeong, 2002, p. 1927) which relies on both reasoning and framing devices to guide our qualitative analysis of frames.

Newspaper articles were collected between 2005, when coverage of a new arena first emerged, and 2012, when the team and city reached an agreement on terms for a new facility. Articles were obtained from two local print media sources— The Edmonton Sun and the Edmonton Journal— using the Canadian Newsstand Database. Each article was coded for basic characteristics including: newspaper source, date, staff reporter, article type, and key players/actors. Framing and reasoning devices related to the arena and city status were examined, with keywords, metaphors, catchphrases, and problem definition/s then identified. These devices were subsequently used to construct a signature frame matrix (Gamson & Lasch, 1983) which served to sort the idea elements and identify the
status frames most salient in the print material.

This study is currently ongoing; for this reason, results cannot be provided here. However, the results of this study will shed some critical insights on the funding of major league sports facilities more generally, and Canadian cities and NHL teams specifically. First, results will inform our understanding of how sports facility development projects are embedded in a larger discourse of cities and urban development, and how facilities and teams become tools to meet this broader development agenda. Second, results should provide evidence of the sophistication of arguments made by pro-facility interests (Buist & Mason, 2010; Sapotichne, 2012) and how city status becomes part of these arguments.