CREATIVE ENCOUNTERS

Creativity at Work:

"Copenhagen is hot, Denmark is not". On the authority and role of place brand image rankings

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Abstract

This paper discusses the practice of ranking linked to the issue of place branding focusing on two cases from Denmark, one the national level, the other on the local level, namely the city of Copenhagen. Rankings of places have increased, and – as we shall argue – so have their influence on identity negotiation and public policy. Drawing on experiences with rankings in other fields (corporate reputation and higher education) and critical work on polling, we examine their growing influence, unanticipated consequences and claims to represent places and people. We analyze how media and various audiences represent and use place image survey results.

Keyword

Place Branding, ranking, Copenhagen, Denmark

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Introduction

“Copenhagen is hot, Denmark is not”, exclaimed Denmark’s leading marketing trade publication in late November 2010. The country had not managed to climb from its 14th spot in the Anholt Roper GfK Nation Brand Index, and since the government’s nation brand action plan had set the goal of moving the country into the top 10, this lead to a sense of failure. The country’s capital city, on the contrary, could pride itself not only of the number 5 spot in New York Times’ feature, “The 31 Places to Go in 2010”, but had made the top spot of the European Consumers’ Choice Awards’ list of ‘Places to visit in 2011’ (“København er hot, Danmark er not”, Markedsføring 24-11-2010). Moreover, Copenhagen “maintained a worthy second position in the third annual Monocle magazine Quality of Life survey of the world's best cities to live in” (Isherwood 2010).

While the relative qualities of Denmark and its capital are a matter of debate, there is no doubt that rankings of countries and cities are on the up. Rankings of places have proliferated (see Stöber 2008; Ooi 2010), and – as we shall argue – so have their influence on identity negotiation and public policy. Not all rankings are meant to be taken too seriously, it would seem. Some are devised mainly to entertain, flatter and raise circulation figures. Others are aimed as guides for tourists, investors as well as mobile labor and companies. With growing visibility and popularity, place rankings have sparked and shaped efforts to alter the reputations of cities, nations and other spatial entities. Now we find that place brand indexes have become integral parts of communication and (re)development strategies and tools for policy evaluation and feedback. As rankings advance from entertainment products to devices to justify substantial public investment and guide policy measures, it is perhaps time assess how seriously they deserve to be taken. In the following we will gauge their power and effects place rankings and indexes, interrogating the agencies and methodologies behind them as well as the ways they are mediated and received or consumed.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly present our understanding of the practice of place branding, following we survey the landscape of place branding rankings. Then, we introduce the practice of ranking, here we focus on rankings in higher education since we can see a reflexive and lively discussion in the literature. Drawing on critical work on public opinion and polling, we will then raise questions about the claims of opinion polls to represent the public, its views and, in this case, its images of other places and people. In the following, we will turn to an analysis of how media and various audiences, particularly, policymakers, represent and use place image survey results. Here two cases will be presented with focus on different geographical levels and approaches to rankings. Both cases are from Denmark, while the first case focuses on the attempt to brand the whole country and the role of a particular brand index (the Anholt-GfK Roper National Brands Index), the second case concentrates on the city of Copenhagen. The paper ends with some critical notes on the role and impact of rankings for policy and decision makers.

About place branding

The practice of place branding appears in many states, regions or cities in the last couple of years. Municipalities, regional and national governments not only in Western European countries invest in and make use of private expertise in order to pit themselves against the alleged forces of globalization such as growing competition between cities, regions and nations. One of the strategies to stand out and get attention is "to reduce the complexity of countries to simple, one-dimensional ´brands´" (Anholt 2010, 52).

We understand place branding as management practice and strategy that has its roots in reputation management and "spindoctoring". Place branding "aims at generating overall economic and political advantage for the location in question by attracting people and money from the outside. On the other hand, it aims at stimulating a sense of belonging amongst citizens working and living there. (…) Once a particular place brand has been forged, its distribution goes via media such as magazines, newspapers, posters, film or television. From this perspective, then, place branding takes the shape of identity projects, relying heavily on mediation and with a strong focus on "imagineering" (Teo 2003) specific locations and generating exciting experiences and stable patterns of loyalty." (Stöber 2008, 180) "Place branding can be considered an effort to use strategies developed in the commercial sector to manage, if not necessarily wield, the soft power of a geographical location", as van Ham (2008, 127) notes. All in all, we understand place branding as an ongoing, holistic process among a broad range of stakeholders rather than a quick and fixed task of a few place branders developing visual markers or verbal messages. To Andersson, who reflects on the efforts to brand the Baltic Sea region "place branding is both about communication and behaviour" (Andersson 2010). Here Anholt disagrees, since "reality is more complex; national images are not created through communications, and cannot be altered by communication" (Anholt 2010, 5) Rather these images can only be earned, but they cannot be constructed or invented (see Anholt 2010, 11).

Anholt is credited as a pioneer in the field and regarded by many as the "guru" of the nation branding movement (Aronczyk 2008). Despite his strong involvement in the issue of place and nation branding – he is among others publishing the only existing journal within the field ("Place branding and Public diplomacy") - , Anholt starts his recent book[1] with the following sentence: "Let me be clear: there is no such thing as ´nation branding´. It is a myth, and perhaps a dangerous one" (Anholt 2010, 1). Though, Anholt admits that "´nation-branding´ campaigns are effective in (...) creating awareness" (Anholt 2010, 3), he questions the campaigns´ influence to change people´s opinions towards particular countries. "Nations may have brands" (Anholt 2010, 2) and "the brand images of places are indeed central to their progress and prosperity" (Anholt 2010, 3), but it is public opinion that shapes these rather stable brands that are mostly prejudices and clichés and not strategic visions.

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[1] "A large part of the book is policy recommendations based on the author's personal consulting work and show a deep understanding of his trade. It is an interesting mix between a Do-It-Yourself tool-kit and why-I-still-need-a-consultant manual." (Kalandides 2010)

However, whether nation branding exists or not, "The Country Brand Index" does exist as well as Anholt GfK Roper National Brands Index and the Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index. These and a couple of other indices will be described and discussed in the following section.

The landscape of place brand rankings

The Country Brand Index made by the global brand consulting firm Future Brand, the Anholt GfK Roper National Brands Index and the Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index, The City Brand Barometer created by Saffron Consultants, the Euromonitor International's Top City Destination Ranking with focus on international tourist arrivals, The liveable cities index by Monocle, the Mercer´s Quality-of-Living Report or the Global liveability report by the Economist Intelligence Unit - this list of place brand rankings is not exhaustive, but shows only the most prominent ones. All they have in common is that they are a phenomena of the 21st century, apart from that they differ a lot.

Looking at the city brand rankings, Saffron Consultants survey 72 cities with focus on the city´s asset strength and its brand strength, Monocle only looked at 25 different cities in their survey in 2010. Euromonitor International's Top City Destination Ranking has 100 cities on their ranking list, Mercer scrutinized over 220 cities and for the Global liveability report by the Economist Intelligence Unit 140 cities were screened, from Vancouver (rank 1) to Harare (140). Indeed, "recent years have seen a veritable mushrooming of ranking exercises" (Stöber 2008, 179). Very regular, both consultants and the media initiate and publish rankings which are then used by government institutions and international organizations in different contexts and for several purposes. In the case of positive ranking, we often see the implementation of rankings in branding strategies.

One of the strengths of rankings is the possibility to communicate and mediate very complex information in multiple contexts and across distances. It is clear that there is a market for rankings and politicians, consultants and businesses consider these rankings of strategic value (see McCann 2004). “Both, the producers of rankings and those who commission and pay for these rankings, can exercise considerable power. Rankings establish a discursive frame that facilitate and legitimize initiatives on ‘objective’, ‘factual’ grounds. To Hansen and Salskov-Iversen (2005:146) these kinds of rankings are part of particular governance techniques, namely the techniques of performance that “present themselves as ways of restoring trust, […], and enhancing innovation and change”.” (Stöber 2008, 179)

Thinking critically about rankings

Prior to reflecting further on the present and potential power and impact of rankings on place branding through the case of Denmark and Copenhagen, it is instructive to look to fields in where rankings have been around longer and have sparked change, debate, controversy and scholarly investigation. We look first at corporate reputation and then, at more length, at higher education. Subsequently, we turn to critical scholarship of public opinion polls raising questions about methodology and very construct of public opinion, which might be extent to place brand image.

Corporations find themselves constantly being rated and ranked by one group or another (Chatterji & Toffel 2010, Fombrun 2007). In 2007, Reputation Institute, itself a player in this field, compiled and examined a catalogue of 183 public lists from 38 countries around the world that regularly provide rankings of corporate reputations (Fombrun 2007). The lists all were based on clearly identifiable criteria and had a subjective component, in the form of some measure of the perceptions of specific stakeholder groups, whether consumers, managers, CEOs, analysts or other such groups. The survey found a multitude of other corporate rankings, but these were based on narrow financial data and criteria (including size, accounting results or stock market performance). So while they impact on corporate reputation, they do not purport to measure it and hence fell outside of Reputation Institutes focus.

Most lists sought either to establish an overall measure of reputation (61) or the quality of the company as a workplace (73), while a few addressed corporate citizenship (15) or financial performance or prospects (11), innovation (6) or governance (5). Only two lists addressed the quality of products. This is a domain where awards, rather than list, are used to conferring honor and establish status (Fombrun 2007, 145). Fombrun asserts that lists of reputation do matter since they call attention to the company and its activities and so influence consumers and other stakeholders, including specialist that rate the company. As Fombrun (2007, p.145) puts it: "They can turn ordinary companies into 'celebrity firms' and also topple the famous into infamy". Evidence suggests that companies share the view that the power of lists can sway stakeholders, and act accordingly. Chatterji and Toffel, in a recent study of the impact of an independent environmental agency's ratings on corporate behavior, argued that organizations responded to poor ratings by improving their environmental performance in an effort to mitigate the threat of stakeholder sanctions (2010, 932). Fombrun suggest that companies seeking manage their reputation effectively, must learn to take stock of and track different reputation rankings and lists. This involves evaluating the quality of the list, the criteria it uses, the audience it is likely to influence, and the visibility and legitimacy of the media publicizing it. Understanding how list and rankings work will assist corporations in deciding where they should focus their communication efforts to improve ranking performance and build reputation. While Fombrun and Reputation Institute's seek to explain the significance of corporate reputation rankings and device strategies for 'managing' (through communication), accounts of the experience of rankings in higher education express a greater concern with the wider implications of rankings for the field.

Comparative rankings of higher education institutions took off in the US in 1983 with US News & World Report's survey, and have been followed by lists of the best global universities, including Shanghai Jiao Tong University's "Academic Rankings of World Universities" first issued in 2003 and The Times Higher Education Supplement's "World University Rankings" which debuted in 2004 (Marginson & Van de Vende 2007, 319). Particularly business schools have felt the surging influence of rankings. According to one dean, when Business Week issued its first annual rankings of US full time MBA programs in 1988 it sparked a "rankings frenzy that has escalated every year" (Policano 2005, 26). This frenzy has given rise to a growing body of literature which documents, analyzes and usually laments the adverse effects of rankings on the higher education (Morgeson &

Nahrgang 2008, Hazelkorn 2008, Marginson & Van de Vende 2007, Policano 2005). Studies harbor no illusions: comparative ranking will not disappear and institutions of higher education have no choice but to learn to live with them (Hazelkorn 2008) or seek to influence them and push for more open, transparent and nuanced methods of assessment (Marginson & Van de Vende 2007). They constitute "potent devices for framing higher education on a global scale" (Marginson & Van de Vende 2007, p. 326), and do have a positive influence, or at least positive intensions, assisting students in making choices, guiding the allocation of public funds, etc. However, many – probably the majority of investigations are fueled by concerns about the unintended, negative and "potential perverse" consequences of rankings and the obsession with them (Ibid.). The studies identify a number of themes, of which we shall highlight a few of the chief concerns and issues of particular relevance to place branding.

As Marginson & Van de Vende poignantly observe, "any system of rankings is purpose-driven, with outcomes shaped by the assumptions and values built into the methods of comparison and calculation" (p. 308). Ranking agencies usually allow a certain degree of openness concerning how their numbers and lists are compiled, and rankings do receive scrutiny and criticism. Yet, their appeal tends to crowd out concerns about the foundations and agenda behind rankings. Global university rankings tend to favor and legitimize a certain model of – and set of ideas and ideals of – institutions of higher education (comprehensive, science and research-oriented, English speaking). Business school rankings display different in-built biases. Whatever reason (Is it the persuasive power of lists and numbers? Did they escape early critical attention because their consequences were not anticipated or otherwise not taken fully serious? Did media shield and nurture them for circulation purposes? Have those who benefit from them, managed to discredit critics?), rankings in the field of higher education have not yet been challenged to the extent that their authority has suffered, so the premises behind them tend to be neglected.

Studies also point to serious methodological problems in rankings in the field of higher education. These problems include lack of methodological transparency (that prevent examination of methodological choices in collection of survey data e.g.), the use of dubious indicators, and the arbitrariness of weights.

Obviously, rankings emphasize vertical differentiation. They suggest that highly diverse organizations in widely different contexts lend themselves to measurement and stratification according to the same yardstick. By insisting on ranking institutions, placing some on top of others, might impute difference in cases of virtual parity, or at any rate exaggerate vertical difference. The problem is that a comparative ranking may produce its own effect over time. Investigations note a remarkable stability of rankings in higher education (Morgeson & Nahrgang 2008). Part of this might be attributed to inadequate methodologies, and especially survey based rankings tend to reproduce reputation. But it also reflects the fact that resources and skills gravitate towards universities placed at the top. In this way, rankings create and reinforce disparities among universities – with harmful effects on the overall quality of education. This has lead Policano (2005) to suggest that ratings are a more constructive means of representing business schools than rankings.

But perhaps the greatest source of concern in critical inquiries of the nature and impact of rankings in higher education is the tendency towards gaming rankings. Studies suggest that particularly business schools have moved to allocate resources towards activities aimed at improving their rankings, often at the expense of activities that might improve the learning environment. While there are winners in the ranking games, the aggregate effects of them are highly problematical. As Marginson & Van de Vende (2007) ask, "Do ranking systems serve the purposes of higher education or are purposes being reshaped as an unintended consequence of rankings" (p. 326). Some rankings are based on statistical indicators, while other reflects the perceptions and opinions of various groups of experts or stakeholders. Rankings based on surveys rely on similar methods as public opinion polls, which we will now turn to.

"Public opinion does not exist", as Pierre Bourdieu bluntly puts it in his critique of the functioning and functions of opinion polls. He restates and clarifies this in his conclusion, "I'm simply saying that public opinion in the sense implicitly accepted by those who carry out opinion polls or those who carry out opinion polls or those who use their findings…simply does not exist (1993, p. 157).

Does brand image exist, then? In the sense implicitly accepted by those who carry out brand image measurement or those who use their findings, we have our doubts. Simon Anholt has addressed the connection between place branding and public opinion. He distinguishes between public opinion and nation brand image, implying that the latter is extremely stable (2007, p. 46-47), but elsewhere suggests that public opinion might determine a national image, if left unmanaged: "I have often said that the alternative to managing national image isn't not managing it: it is allowing somebody else to manage it for you. This "somebody else" is most likely to be public opinion" (2007, p. 41).

But the national brand index is – like other survey-based rankings – generated from a poll of ordinary people's opinions about other countries, so it seems reasonable to apply some of the critical questions that have been raised about public opinion polls to place branding image surveys.

Although they overlap, we might distinguish between objections to polls based on technical issues (including the representativeness of samples, question ambiguity or bias, the influence of question form, wording and context) and more fundamental, epistemological critique (challenging very assumptions and premises behind polls). Challenges of opinion polls on technical grounds usually points at pour polling practice, but may still insist that properly conducted surveys can produce a reasonable picture of public sentiment. The fundamental criticism rejects public opinion as an illusion, artifact or, as Herbert Blumer would have it, "an untenable fiction" (quoted in Bishop 2005, 1).

Bourdieu does address certain technical issues, but suggests that even if polls are conducted with the utmost methodological rigor, they still produce a number of distortions. Answers tend to be induced by the way questions are asked, questions reflect the problems defined by the polling institutes and their clients, which have certain political preoccupations and represent particular political interests. These interests then, "govern both the meaning of the answers and the meaning given to them on publication of the finding" and use polls to legitimize their power (Bourdieu 1993, 150). George F. Bishop, in a recent survey of American public opinion polls, largely concurs, finding that "polls today often create a misleading illusion of public opinion as a result of the ambiguous way in which survey questions are worded and the way in which poll results are reported and interpreted in the mass media" (Bishop 2005, xvi). Furthermore, he documents that polls frequently give the impression that "a definitive public opinion exists on political and social issues, "when there is, in fact, widespread public ignorance and poorly informed opinions on such issues at best" (ibid.).

If public opinion is equated with whatever opinion polls measure, polls become powerful tools for shaping collective consciousness, cultural identity and political action. If they are granted this power and authority, it seems that more attention should be paid to their methodological deficiencies. Or perhaps, as Bourdieu suggests, the very concept of public opinion – and perhaps nation brand image – should be challenged more directly. We now turn to the cases of place branding rankings in the Danish context.

Measuring the effects of nation branding

"Given the growing importance of the field, it's no longer good enough to venture opinions about which nation's brand image is stronger than another, which is declining and which is on the rise; and, more importantly, it is not acceptable for governments to be spending taxpayers' and donor's money on an exercise which can't be measured, tracked, or made accountable. "

Simon Anholt (2007, 43)

It looked like a dubious move when the Danish minister of trade and industry announced that the government half way through its high-profile action plan for nation branding had decided to abandon one of the program's main success criteria, namely to attain a spot in the top ten of the Anholt Roper-GfK Nation Brand Index (NBI) by 2015. Denmark had failed to climb upwards in the rankings despite a host of initiatives and what the media described as massive public spending, and remained at number 14 just as at the start of the program in 2007.

The external report commissioned by the government to evaluate the program made certain observations on NBI and similar indexes. Hinting at Denmark's lack of progress, the report suggested, "The method entails that it is difficult to move significantly in the index, especially over short time spans without very special events or the occurrence of felicitous circumstances." (Økonomi- og Erhvervsministeriet/Pluss Leadership 2010, p.38, our translation). Such methodological issues had implications: "indexes of this kind have a limited capacity as a measurement tool, and should not be accepted without great reservation" (ibid.). The verdict on brand indexes seemed quite clear: "As a performance indicator for the action plan's overall effect the index thus has very little use value" (ibid.).

At first glance, abandoning the target of reaching top ten looked like a ploy to conceal the failure of government initiatives to improve Denmark image abroad by altering the criteria by which success was judged. The Danish press ("Halv millard spildt på branding…") jumped at this explanation. The report's justification of the decision hints at certain problems and limitations in Anholt's scheme and place branding indexes in general. But at closer inspection the evaluation report, rather than critically reviewing the methods for measuring and ranking nation brands, it actually endorses them. The report observes that the Danish government's action plan was conceived without reference to Anholt's conception of nation branding as formulated in his nation brand hexagon-model. As a result, the Danish action plan's initiatives did not cover all aspects Anholt's hexagon. The Danish program did not address "Government" nor "People" directly, and only to a certain degree dealt with "Investment & Immigration" and "Culture" in Anholt's scheme. Since the NBI was based on all six dimensions, a mismatch existed between the Danish government's actions and the performance measure it had chosen. However, the report concludes that those of NBI's six sub-indexes which cover the areas targeted by the government's branding initiatives could be used as benchmarks to monitor performance in these areas. Moreover, the report actually suggests that the government's future policies might be aligned further with Anholt's nation brand hexagon-model to ensure a greater impact on the NBI.

So the external review offers neither a thorough examination of, nor challenge to the assumptions and methodology of the NBI. One might have expected further scrutiny, since the review endorses the NBI and recommends that its sub-indexes matching existing Danish strategic focal areas be used as policy benchmarks.

We do not have full access to Anholt and GfK Roper's methods and data, however the information they make available does provide a fairly good picture of how the index is compiled (GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media 2009, Anholt 2010, Anholt 2007, Økonomi- og Erhvervsministeriet/Pluss Leadership 2010). So while we are not able to engage in comprehensive review of the NBI, we offer a brief description and make a few observations on how it is devised.

The Anholt-GfK Roper National Brands Index is produced by a partnership between Simon Anholt and global market research giant GfK's North American Public Affair and Media division. Based on an annual survey, it seeks to determine the image of 50 nations. These nations are included either for their global economic and political importance, to ensure sufficient regional representation or diversity of political and economic systems, or to satisfy the interest of index's subscription members. The private and commercial nature of the index, obviously, shapes the survey in certain ways and imposes certain constraints on our review of it.

The 50 nations are rated by pre-recruited on-line panels in 20 countries, weighed to reflect the age, gender, educational and, in some cases, racial or ethnic composition of the panel nations' on-line population. The panel countries represent the world's largest developed and emerging nations. Anholt and GfK Roper suggest that the survey aims for a balance in its representation of regions and different levels of economic development. Nonetheless half of the panel countries are either North American or European (though Russia and Turkey of course expand beyond Europe). Africa and the Middle East are represented only by Egypt and South Africa (Turkey is listed under Europe). The survey has three Latin America panel countries (Brazil, Argentina and Mexico) and four from South and East Asia (India, China, Japan and South Korea), meaning that Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Pakistan – all among the world's 15 most populous nations – are not in.

The survey asks approximately 1050 respondents in each panel country to rate 25 of the 50 nations. Respondents are requested to report on their awareness of, experience with and attitude towards the randomly assigned nations from the list and then answer questions on the six dimensions of Anholt's nation brand hexagon-model (Anholt 2007). These are: Exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, and immigration & investment. Each of these are covered by 3-5 questions to be rated on a 7-point scale (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and a final question which requires a word association response (adjective to describe dimension).

The method entails each respondent is asked to answer more than 750 questions (at least 30 questions on each of the 25 countries), except from in Egypt, where, according to the pollsters, "online surveys are still relatively new and respondents are less willing to complete relatively long surveys" (GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media 2009, p.6).

Many issues raised in critical reflection on opinion polls seem to apply to the NBI. The sheer number of questions that respondents are flooded with makes it unlikely that all of their answers are particularly thoughtful. Anholt in explaining what the brand index aims to uncover, suggests that people's real reasons to buy something are "those instantaneous, emotional, deep-rooted good or bad feelings that we all have about places" (2007, 43). One would expect a 750+ question-questionnaire to produce "instantaneous" responses, but it is doubtful whether these are anything but 'snap judgments' that fail to convey any deeply felt and rooted sentiments about countries. One understands that Egyptian respondents are reluctant to complete surveys of this length, and wonder how the polls motivated or compensate all other panel country respondents to do so.

The survey asks entry questions concerning respondents' knowledge of and prior experience with the country's they are asked to assess. However, we are not informed about how respondent self-reported familiarity is factored in to the results. We do not know, in other words, whether a respondent who professes ignorance about a country, still is asked to rate issues such that countries contribution to innovation in science and technology. At any rate, the survey can only rely on people's self-reported knowledge of a country and does not allow for differentiated knowledge about a county (one might have extensive tourist experience, but no knowledge of investment opportunities). Furthermore, they survey does no allow for, or at least account for how it deals with, "no opinion, don't know or no answer"-responses (Bogart 1967). If people's relations to foreign countries range from ignorance and prejudice to multi-faceted, multilayered and intricate, it is clear that the statistics, let alone simple rankings, can capture them satisfactorily. And if a survey is based the responses of ordinary people, who might even themselves confess lack of knowledge about a country's governance or industry, we might question how useful such a survey can be in guiding policy and investment priorities.

What kind of authority does a lifestyle magazine have? The case of Copenhagen

"Copenhagen, probably the best city in the world"[2], was the headline of an article published by British newspaper The Independent in early summer 2008. The article was referring to a report made by "Monocle", a London-based magazine, that was launched in February 2007 and "developed for an international audience hungry for information across a variety of sectors" (see http://www.monocle.com/Other/About-Monocle/, retrieved Dec. 8, 2010). Monocle appears ten times a year in print; once a year it enquires and ranks the liveability of over 20 cities worldwide and publishes its own city ranking called "The liveable cities index". The result of the exercise in 2008 was a top positioning for Copenhagen, because of its quality of life and status as a cutting-edge design centre.

The Danish media picked up the good news that came right in the beginning of June, the start for the silly season for journalists. In the course of the two summer months June and July, Danish print media mentioned seventy times "the respected and influential magazine Monocle" (ugebrevet A4, 1.12.2008) and Copenhagen´s prominent positioning in "the liveable cities index" (see Infomedia). Among a couple of short articles the newspaper Politiken also printed a longer interview with Monocle´s editor in chief, Tyler Brûlé, explaining his choice of Copenhagen as unique and most liveable city. In order to celebrate the award Lord Mayor of Copenhagen travelled to London and participated in Monocle´s award ceremony reception together with representatives from the Danish embassy in London (see Politiken 8.6.2008). Two days later, on June 12th, the Copenhagen´s Mayor herself invited Monocle´s editor in chief, Tyler Brûlé, for a reception at Copenhagen Town Hall and a little street festival in front of the Town Hall for the residents of the "world best city to live in", which gave some critical repercussion in a couple of Danish media.

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[2] http://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/copenhagen-probably-the-best-city-in-the-world-842782.html, retrieved Nov. 24, 2010. Obviously, the headline is playing with the known marketing slogan of Danish beer company Carlsberg ("Probably the best beer in the world").

A year later, in the beginning of June, Monocle released “the liveable cities index” 2009, this time Copenhagen was awarded a second rank. “Monocle's researchers have spent the past months putting the world's leading cities to the test to find the best places for you to make your base. Last year Copenhagen was the winner of our survey but in 2009 the award goes to Zürich.”[3] All in all, looking through the Danish media database Infomedia we found five articles dealing with Monocle and the 2009 award. Danish newspaper Politiken quoted Tyler Brûlé as follows: “For a brief moment, we thought of being diplomatic and posting a tie, but we don't fancy ourselves as civil servants, so this year we're giving the top spot to Zürich"(Isherwood 2009). And he further explained: “What pipped Copenhagen at the post was the ongoing development of Zurich airport combined with the transformation of the city's Hauptbahnhof” (ibid).

Also in 2010, Copenhagen had to be satisfied with being called the second “most liveable city”, this year placed after Munich and before Zürich on the Monocle´s ranking list. In the course of two days (June 18 and 19, 2010), that message was disseminated through whole Denmark. We can find around 56 contributions both in regional and local newspapers mostly with the direct reference to the news agency Ritzau´s input. However, hardly anyone in Denmark was able to avoid the news that Copenhagen “maintained a worthy second position in the third annual Monocle Magazine Quality of Life survey of the world's best cities to live in” (Isherwood 2010).

However, this second place positioning seems not to diminish the delight among the city´s decision makers and politicians. In late summer 2010, for instance, at his first meeting with one of the city´s think tanks the new Mayor of Copenhagen, emphasized his pleasure of living in and working for a city that recently got the title “second best city worldwide” by the lifestyle magazine Monocle. “It is nice to get this kind of affirmation”, the Mayor said. This reference astonished some of the meeting participants, some were shrugging, and some were complaisant smiling. All in all, most of the participants seemed used to this reference, since it is not only the Mayor who is using it. In a budget proposal for the year 2011 we can find the reference to monocles 2008 survey where Copenhagen was ranked “best city worldwide” as well as in a brochure published by the technical and environmental administration. Looking through a couple of documents from Copenhagen Municipality we can find the reference to Monocles ranking exercise several times, both as illustration and as support for the argumentation to invest furthermore in order to hold the prominent position.

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[3] https://www.monocle.com/sections/affairs/Magazine-Articles/The-Worlds-top-25-most-liveable-cities/ retrieved Dec. 9, 2010

These official documents are perfectly consistent with the preface of the recent Monocle ranking issue. Here we can read that “no mayor should be resting on last year´s performance” (Brûlé and Davis 2010, 22) in the light of the shifts in the rankings from year to year. This advice to the city mayors written by two British journalists resembles rather a warning and gives the impression of a ranking exercise with a strong authority and impact.

There are a couple of other players exercising city rankings with focus on quality of life as for instance the Mercer´s Quality-of-Living Report or the Global liveability report by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The motivation for Mercer to conduct the ranking is “to help governments and multi-national companies compensate employees fairly when placing them on international assignments. The rankings are based on a point-scoring index, which sees Vienna score 108.6 and Baghdad 14.7. Cities are ranked against New York as the base city, with an index score of 100.” (see http://www.mercer.com) In the 2009 Mercer´s Quality-of-Living Report Copenhagen was ranked 11th out of 215 cities. In April 2009, Danish Jyllandsposten was the only newspaper that informed about Mercer´s Quality of Living study and Copenhagen´s positioning. In the Global liveability report, Copenhagen is not among the first ten cities either. The fact, that none of these reports awarded Copenhagen a prominent positions on their ranking list so far, might be an explanation for their little awareness level among Danish journalists and the public in general.

However, the Monocle ranking has achieved a rather prominent role within - at least - the Copenhagen city discourse. Therefore, we are interested in scrutinizing the background and detailed content of the ranking and its outcome, “the liveable cities index”.

According to one of Monocle´s editors, Andrew Tuck, “this isn’t a ranking of the most exciting places to live, or the grittiest, or the best place to be an artist, or the best place to become a millionaire” (see Hadfield 2008). “It really is about liveability — so it’s about public transport, the green city, the ease of being able to set up a small company. Those are the kinds of things that matter” (ibid). Hours of sunshine matters, too, according to the metric behind the ranking. Moreover, the metric includes factors such as crime rates and education, international flight connections and the number of chain stores (e.g. “Starbucks” or “Zara”). While a high number of hours of sunshine or international flight connections helps to clamber up the ranking ladder, a high number of chain stores or crime rates is seen as negative and results in a poor ranking. When looking for details of the ranking formation or weighting of the metric´s categories - between thirteen and nineteen -, the accessible information is sparsely. “Each year we send researchers to urban centres that we´ve heard good things about, or that have been included in previous surveys” (Monocle, issue 35, vol. 4, page 34), is one of the few informations from behind the ranking exercise. Regarding the categories´ composition process we get to know that “it took just one trip to the kiosk up the beach (accompained by another tray of beers) to decide that we should add a special section to this year´s liveability survey that celebrates the cities that may not be the cleanest, safest or most perfectly planned but are still incredibly liveable - if you accept them on their own terms” (Brûlé and Davis 2010,22). Against the background of the rather little knowledge about the ranking´s origin and its seriousness, the ranking´s awareness level (at least in Copenhagen) is remarkable. That the magazine´s makers know. According to the magazine´s editor, Monocle has become “very central to a debate” on liveability (see Hadfield 2008). As proof can be mentioned, that the editors are “regularly contacted by city halls around the world looking for advice on how to up their game” (Hadfield 2008).

In that context, we have to comprehend (the meaning of) “the Monocle fix”. An advice in the end of the ranking list that is directed towards city fathers, inhabitants and others. In the case of Copenhagen, the Monocle fix 2010 says: “clean up Tivoli Gardens, they´re becoming a bit seedy; the city also needs a couple of new, up-scale hotels”.

Conclusion and discussion

Our paper examines different place brand ranking activities both on national and city level, in the light of developments on the Danish scene. While some (Anholt Roper-GfK Nation Brand Index as well as Mercer´s Quality-of-Living Report or the Global Liveability Report by the Economist Intelligence Unit) claim to be based on solid evidence based on reliable indicators or surveys, others (such as Monocle´s liveable cities index) acknowledge more or less directly admit not to be. As Monocle´s editor in chief, Canadian Tyler Brûlé, implies, the magazine's ranking is, "…only a little bit subjective" (Ifversen 2008). Instead of laying claim to scientific authority, the latter rely on a kind of aesthetic authority.

We have illustrated how rankings, regardless method of data collection and claim to authority, are gaining ground in policy-making and public life. On the national level, Anholt Roper-GfK Nation Brand Index is an important point of reference for the high-profile action plan for nation branding. On the local level, Monocle´s "liveable cities index" is widely reported in the media and mentioned in political speeches, reports and strategy papers both as illustration and as support for the argumentation to invest furthermore in order to hold Copenhagen´s prominent position on the ranking list. As Stöber has suggested, "[b]y availing themselves of the services of independent and professional ranking experts, governments and other public sector institutions invest their own authority with that of external expert knowledge. In this sense, we can speak of a mutual recognition and shared production of authority" (Stöber 2008, 179ff).

Regardless of what issues one might have with how they are produced and presented in the media, it is difficult to ignore them. They command attention and obviously fill a demand. Part of their appeal is no doubt liked to their capacity to produce a sense of order in the evermore complex array of accessible information and places, people are faced with under globalization. As Van Ham has suggested, "Images and reputation have been important throughout history, where available media channels have been used as modes of communication. Until quite recently, it was the lack of information that shaped people's image of other places, rather than information overload" (2008, 133).

More significantly, however, rankings fill a growing demand for accountability and transparency in government and public policy. Drawing on inquiry into the impact of rankings in other sectors (corporate reputation and higher education), we question whether rankings in fact contribute more transparency and equitable decisions and greater quality in the domains they assess. In other words, do rankings ultimately contribute to improve life in a city or even represent quality of life or the perceptions of relevant stakeholders adequately? We have pointed to some of the unintended consequence of rankings and questioned their capacity to meaningfully capture or represent the diverse qualities places possess. Of particular concern is the tendency to accept the values and premises behind rankings uncritically and engage in "gaming the rankings". What is most important for politicians, decision makers and other relevant stakeholders: improving quality of life or improving the position in a ranking list? Over time, as rankings become institutionalized, they will not only shape how places are communicate and developed, but the very ways we think about cities, countries and regions.

With the media appeal and other close ties to media, rankings tend to be presented and without much critical reflection to the way they are produced and they values and positions (social, cultural or political) they represent. Media and politicians tend to wallow in the praise and ignore or agonize over unfavorable rankings of the places, they represent. If they are taken so seriously, that they get to shape policy, investments, images and self-images, at least we might demand more accountability and transparency from rankings themselves – and perhaps call for more nuanced and policy-useful forms of evaluation.

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