

My Short List



By Mick Fleming

You may recall the strange but true stories last January about thousands of birds suddenly dying in Arkansas and Louisiana. I remember because of a conversation I had with Paul Harvel of the Fort Smith (AR) Regional Chamber, who claimed full responsibility for the mass deaths of birds and fish in Northwest Arkansas. He admitted his culpability and begged my forgiveness. The episode passed quickly into

my well-filled reservoir of goofy conversations until I saw *Time* magazine's January 5 cover story about "Timely and All-Time Best & Worst Lists." Yup, a ranked list of ranked lists, and one of them was "strange mass animal deaths."

Reading *Time's* supposedly newsworthy rankings increased my consternation about the ways such "We're Number One" evaluations of towns, states and regions are created, used and abused.

My interest in community scoring lists was piqued a few years ago when — and I'm not making this up — I traveled to a city in Virginia and another in Texas during the same month in which one of them was named the best and the other the worst place to live in America. I found things to like and dislike while driving around both towns. Mostly, however, with each passing mile through their streets, I realized that comparing the two places on the same "livability" scale was ludicrous.

The Texas city is a working border town, with a vibrant, politically engaged (judging by the election signs), Mexican-American majority population. Every kid working at McDonalds is bilingual, and everybody seems to know everyone else. After school, the streets are filled with families on their way to everywhere and tween-aged boys crisscrossing busy intersections on

bikes and skateboards. At the time of my trip, the downtown was working like so many cities to nurture retail, but the arteries in and out of the city bustled with life. Their minor league hockey games were packed, and the NAFTA parade of 18-wheelers was darn-near bumper-to-bumper.

The Virginia city is as preppie a college town as you can find. The "lawn" on the university campus is the heart of this picturesque community, and the traffic-free downtown mall includes coffee shops, book stores and lively offices. The streets and children are scrubbed, but the thousands of college kids affect the same slovenliness I displayed in the '70s. The region has iconic scenes and historical attractions. It is, however, awful darn quiet on any of the 24 Tuesday nights per year that class is not in session. It is also a long way from the nearest foreign country, body of water, or family with more than 2.3 children.

I love both places, but I could live happily in either one.

Best college? Best place to spend a romantic weekend? Worst place to start a business? Sexiest? Toughest golf course? Most intriguing people? Best place to retire? Most dangerous? Least attractive place to raise a family? What do these things mean? The best place to retire for most Americans is somewhere near their grandkids. If they move somewhere more affordable, it doesn't mean they think that the new place is the "best."

Each year, thousands of young adults relocate to Portland, Ore., even though the climate is (to be kind) moist, unemployment is high and the cost of living isn't low. It's a cool place; people want to be there. It takes some real creativity, however, to use statistical analysis to predict that new college grads should move there.

Back in the day, when I worked at the Business Council of New York State, our research arm published a book of lists called *Just the Facts*. This digest-size booklet displayed rankings of real-life facts about all 50 states that could help people (policy makers, taxpayers, investors, employers) make judgments about what was best and worst.

We didn't try to tell people what was the worst state in which to have a baby; we just reported the comparative infant mortality rates. It turns out that more people have more babies in the states (and countries) with high infant mortality rates, so I suppose a somewhat twisted analyst could determine that these would be the "best" places to have kids, since so many people choose to do so. It might be just as misleading to say they are "worst."

It's bad enough when pundits and publishers hype their opinions on the relative importance of generally accepted factual data. It is much worse when a seemingly authoritative source publicizes rankings of localities based on interpretations of raw data that almost everyone acknowledges are wrong. The cities or regions at the top of such a ranking take unjustified comfort in their high score, and the cities at the bottom receive an undeserved black eye. The annual publication of the "Most Dangerous Cities" list falls into this category. The FBI, the Conference of Majors, criminologists and other knowledgeable entities warn against the validity of using the specific crime data that is employed in producing this ranking. The biggest problem is that this publisher's "study" fails to account for the historical realities that created the jurisdiction we now call "city." Basically, a city that chose not to annex adjacent towns a century ago, will be forever disadvantaged when compared to sprawling communities that carry the same jurisdictional name, city.

This highlights the real problem with the media obsession with rankings — publishers, pollsters and pundits *know* that we don't really care to hear the rest of the story. We want the digested, synthesized and, above all short, versions of news and

analysis. I'm guilty. Chambers are guilty. Most of us scan, grab and use the headlines we can see "above the fold" when we open the CNN home page. In our daily skim through the papers, we're lucky to dig into perhaps four stories we actually need to absorb to do our jobs and take care of our families (plus a comic or two). We like having someone else tell us where our kids *ought* to apply to school and that our hospital (bridge, street, pool) is safer than the other town's death traps. For most of our working and personal lives, grab-and-go digested facts simply must suffice. We truly don't have time for personal evaluation of every issue, problem, opinion and proposed solution.

This brings me to my personal short list for today — just two important things to remember for all of us who are in positions of influence or authority. I'm talking about obligation and opportunity.

The obligation is that we keep our intellectual humility. We have a responsibility to understand that a lot of what we think we know is probably wrong.

The opportunity is that we accept the role of servant-filter, helping our members and other publics sift through the mind-numbing volume of information. We can play a serious role in establishing worthiness and importance of facts and ideas. Yes, we get to do some serious rankings of our own, from what blogger is worth reading, to what fishing stream is worth a new fly. ☐☐

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