Dissemination of international rankings: characteristics of the media coverage of the Shanghai Ranking in the French press

Christine Barats

ABSTRACT The number of university rankings proliferated in the 2000s against a background of reforms in higher education (HE) and the development of a discourse on academic ‘excellence’. The analysis of the emergence and treatment in the French press of the so-called ‘Shanghai ranking’, the first international ranking to originate in the world of academia, makes it possible to objectify the characteristics of its dissemination in France from June 2003 when it was first published in China. Although there was no intention initially to have this ranking circulated in France, it ultimately became more widely known owing to its status as a useful resource for different actors working against a background of HE reforms in France. This article discusses the intensification of media coverage from 2007 onwards, as well as the role played by certain media organisations and players (analysis of French press corpus and interviews). It highlights the importance of depreciative framing for French universities to ‘create a buzz’ along with the co-construction of the process by different players. The ranking has become a journalistic resource, as well as a political argument for reforms and a communication tool for certain university presidents.
Introduction

International academic rankings have proliferated since the 2000s in a context marked, especially in France, by reforms in higher education & research (HE&R) (Musselin, 2009, 2017; Ravinet, 2011). While research on rankings has chiefly focused on the methodologies (Eloire, 2010; Vught and Westerheijden Don, 2010; Docampo, 2013; Docampo et al., 2015; Werron and Ringel, 2017) or their impacts (Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Hazelkorn, 2007, 2011, 2014, 2015; Brankovic et al., 2018), less work has been carried out on the conditions governing the dissemination of, and the debate about, academic rankings.

The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), better known under the name of Shanghai Ranking, is the first international ranking to originate in the world of academia. This ranking of the world’s ‘top’ 500 universities was drawn up by four researchers from Shanghai Jiao Tong University who published it on their university’s website in June 2003. The designers of this ranking began by conducting a benchmarking exercise on existing league tables and types of indicators selected from 1999 to 2001. They designed and produced this ranking with limited resources using databases accessible online. The ranking criteria are based on the number of Nobel laureates and Fields medallists in addition to bibliometric data, notably the number of citations in the journals Nature and Science (Liu and Cheng, 2005). Two thousand educational and research institutions were included in the review out of the seventeen thousand institutions listed worldwide; the designers of Academic Ranking of World Universities chose these institutions because they satisfied the ranking criteria (Nobel Prize winners, Fields medallists, publications in certain journals, etc.) (Liu and Cheng, 2005, p. 2) (Fig 1).

Since 2009, the ranking has been compiled by Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, an educational consulting firm working independently of the university with a staff of about 30, three of whom are in charge of updating the ranking, a sign of the team’s greater professionalism and the depth of interest generated by the rankings. Initially, the researchers responded to a domestic Chinese demand related to the reforms of higher education in China carried out in the 1990s (Charroin, 2015; Soulsas, 2016). The aim of this ranking was to help the Chinese compare their universities with their international counterparts (Liu and Cheng, 2005; Billaut et al., 2010) and this information prepared for a domestic audience was not intended to be circulated outside of China. Accordingly, no communication or press service contributed to its media coverage. The ranking did, however, spread through various channels, notably in France (via the European Commission’s Cordis website, various symposia, the press, etc.), and has been referred to in a large number of publications as the archetype of academic rankings that, ultimately, resulted in a non-desired yet successful communications campaign for Jiao Tong University.

In France, the interest given to the Shanghai ranking invites to examine the modalities of its circulation and focus attention on the specifics of its dissemination. Indeed, this ranking has occupied—and still occupies—an atypical place in France compared with other rival academic rankings, such as the World University Rankings published by The Times in the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) since 2004 (Barats, 2018). This interest is also anomalous if the frequency and volume of publications devoted to this classification in France is compared with the lack of coverage received in the United States. The Shanghai ranking has produced little reaction in the USA dominated by a tradition of national rankings, despite the fact that North American universities have ranked high in the Shanghai league table since it was first compiled. Harvard University, for example, has been ranked No.1 for the past fifteen years but has made no comment about the regularity of this performance.

To explain this situation, I have developed and tested a number of hypotheses: firstly, that this ranking, which was not initially intended for press coverage, ultimately attracted the media’s attention in France because its co-development by a variety of different actors revealed the plurality of concurrent rationales, secondly, that the development of this process (i.e., the time when the ranking was covered by the press and by which newspapers) illuminates the different logics of media coverage in France; and, thirdly, that the profiles and discourses developed by the different actors reflect the arguments and power relationships existing at the very heart of the media coverage process.

In order to understand the distinctive features of the dissemination of the Shanghai rankings in France, I examined how these league tables have been covered in the print media since 2003, considering the news media as places dedicated to the

---

### Criteria and Weights of ARWU

| Criteria                  | Indicator                                                                 | Code | Weight |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|--------|
| Quality of Education      | Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals           | Alumni | 10%    |
| Quality of Faculty        | Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals            | Award | 20%    |
|                          | Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories                   | HiCi | 20%    |
| Research Output           | Papers published in Nature and Science*                                  | N&S  | 20%    |
|                          | Papers indexed in Science Citation Index—expanded and Social Science Citation Index | PUB  | 20%    |
| Per Capita Performance    | Per capita academic performance of an institution                        | PCP  | 10%    |

* For institutions specialized in humanities and social sciences such as London School of Economics, N&S is not considered and the weight of N&S is relocated to other indicators.

Fig. 1 Ranking criteria.
ranking), and using different spellings for published each year on 15 August (national or regional daily to complete the corpus, using online noti-
As the use of textual statistics tools implies that the documentary 
more than one million hits, 119 different print media outlets, and 
hypothesis needed to identify press agencies and newspapers to 
tors, etc.). It is also a semi-of 

research, notably higher education managerial staff (establish-
source of information for people involved in higher education & research (Fridenson,2010, p. 53) because they 
their link with the debates on higher education & research. The analysis of the discourses and interviews enabled to highlight the plurality of the different concurrent rationales: the rankings as a journalistic resource making it possible to create a ‘buzz’ and attract attention; the rankings as a judgement tool capable of shaping the prestige enjoyed by higher education institutions; the rankings as a political argument for reforms and a communica-
tion tool for certain university presidents. Given the scope of 
these issues, the criteria chosen to constitute the documentary 
corpus have not favoured any predetermined type of print media 
outlet, thereby enabling us to list all statements related to the 
rankings and to identify the newspapers and news agencies at the 
forefront of this media coverage. Several databases have been 
searched to be sure to analyse all the articles, interviews, opinions 
diffused over the period (Factiva, Europress, the archives of Le 
Monde, Libération and AEF, a press agency specialising in edu-
cation) using full-text searches with different terms (in French): ‘classement mondial’ (world ranking), ‘classement international’ (international ranking) and ‘classement de Shanghai’ (Shanghai ranking), and using different spellings for ‘Shanghai’ (‘Shanghai’, ‘Shangai’, ‘Shanghai’). AEF5, a French press agency specialising in 
education, as well as AFP, Agence France Presse, the generalist 
French press agency have been selected because AEF is a key 
source of information for people involved in higher education & 
research, notably higher education managerial staff (establish-
ment directors, training managers, academic component direc-
tors, etc.). It is also a semi-official source for the media. The 
hypothesis needed to identify press agencies and newspapers to 
analyse the panoply of media motivations. 
The press corpus tends towards exhaustiveness, representing 
more than one million hits, 119 different print media outlets, and 
1520 documents, including 90 opinion pieces from June 2003 to 

September 2014. Textual statistics tools have been used for a 
 systematic corpus analysis and observe discursive characteristics. 
As the use of textual statistics tools implies that the documentary 
corpus is closed, monitoring work since 2014 has been carried out 
to complete the corpus, using online notifications and systematic 
collection of references to the ranking when the results are 
published each year on 15 August (national or regional daily 
press, magazines)6. The analysis of the press corpus (press and 
press agencies) has been combined with the analysis of interviews 
with journalists and individuals active in higher education & 
research to be able to understand what the journalists’ sources 
were and what goals they were pursuing in their articles. Inter-
views of individuals active in higher education & research were 
also precious to understand the wider context of the media 
coverage process. 
The press corpus provides access to a variety of data relating to: 
the type of media outlets, the deployment and intensity of media 
coverage over time, the profile of the individuals cited or of those 
who expressed themselves in opinion pieces and the discursive 
characteristics of the statements. The qualitative interviews’, on 

the other hand, enabled to verify certain hypotheses related to the 
reasons for this media coverage. The longitudinal and mono-

graphic perspective adopted allowed to objectify the media cov-

erage process and, in particular, to focus attention on the role of 
the media outlets and the profiles of the players who have referred 
to the rankings without, however, viewing this process as linear 
and continuous but, on the contrary, driven by multiple colliding 
or intermingling rationales. This is why I have adopted the notion of ‘co-construction’ to capture the rationales and power rela-

tionships exercised in and through discourses delivered during the 
media coverage process. The notion of co-construction makes it 
possible to avoid an over-interpretation of the different media 
approaches: in this case, a form of media-centricity potentially 
induced by the use of a corpus of news publications. 
In order to examine the different actors in this co-development 
process and test the hypotheses, I will start by focusing on the 
species of its dissemination in the press from 2003 to 2014 
before examining the profiles of the different players who have 
referred to this ranking in order, ultimately, to highlight the 
socio-discursive practices to which it has given rise.
A derogatory framing and two-step media coverage process: 
the critical juncture of 2007
Seven months were to elapse between the publication of the 
ranking in China in June 2003 and the first reference to these 
league tables in the French media. The study of the data derived 
from the documentary corpus and, in particular, an analysis of the 
temporal distribution of references show that the media 
coverage process occurred in two stages. In an initial phase, 
running from December 2003 to May 2007, the media coverage 
was confidential, i.e., limited to a small circle of newspapers and 
players who presented the ranking in a negative light questioning 
the positions accorded to leading French academic institutions, 
thereby using the ranking as a resource to create a ‘buzz’ and 

attract attention: a subject reported in the press because of the 

positions of leading French academic institutions, which included a brief reference to this 
ranking in a press review published in December 2003 (taken from The Australian newspaper) and, subsequently, in the 
form of a news bulletin published in January 2004. The interview with the journalist who wrote this bulletin66 revealed the role 
played by indirect sources of information—in this case a news-
letter to which the journalist was subscribed published by Paris 
Diderot University (also known as the University of Paris VII), 
which caught her attention on 9 January 2004—and not the 
extract from the Australian newspaper.
Journalist interview, AEF, 29 March 2011: ‘I was the first in 
France to talk about it. I came across it in an academic 
newsletter—La lettre de Jean Grisel—published by Paris Diderot University, which included a brief reference to this 
ranking. I was surprised that it came from China. At that 
time, we tended to look down on Chinese universities’.

AEF journalists have subsequently dealt with the ranking on a 
regular basis and enjoy a leading position in the media coverage 
process (Fig. 2). In comparison, the mainstream media paid little
attention to the ranking until 2006, with 2007 marking a turning point in the media coverage process, especially for the non-specialised press (as opposed to the economic and financial press).

Over the period studied, 86% of the corpus was created post-2006. This result highlights the role played by AEF, the press agency specialising in education and Les Echos at the beginning of the process. In the case of AEF, it represents an indicator of the interest expressed by different HE actors, in France and more widely in Europe, in the rankings as shown by a survey of university presidents worldwide conducted in 2006 by Hazelkorn (2007). The role of Les Echos, a daily economic newspaper, confirms the affinity between this tool and the economic domain, where league tables are frequent.

Starting in May 2007, the media coverage process grew in intensity, characterised by diversification of the media outlets. The regional daily press and magazines as varied as Le Point, l’Express, Marianne, 01 informatique et l’Usine Nouvelle all covered the academic ranking against a background of reforms and disputes in higher education & research (demonstrations, calls for strike action, etc.). The growing number of media outlets covering the university ranking, as well as the diversity of these news organisations starting in 2007, emphasises the importance of the socio-political context, notably the mobilisation that followed the adoption of the so-called LRU Law11 (LRU for Libertés et responsabilités des universités, or ‘Freedom and Responsibilities of the Universities’ Act), promulgated in August of that year.

Starting in 2008 and up until 2012, Le Monde was the daily newspaper that most frequently addressed the university ranking (in opinion pieces, interviews, articles) and competed with the place occupied by Les Echos at the beginning of the process. Unlike Les Echos, Le Monde made no contribution to the media coverage at the beginning of the process and, as in the case of La Croix, its articles focused on the methodological limits of these league tables and qualified their true impact. The positioning of the media outlets—in this case, their close relationships with individuals active in the academic and political communities—as well as their status as competitors explain the interruptions in their coverage of the rankings, and the specific characteristics of this coverage. For example, Le Monde, which enjoys close ties with the academic community, distinguished itself from Les Echos by only addressing the ranking through opinion pieces starting in 2006, before beginning to publish the results as of 2007. Routine professional behaviour, notably journalists’ reading of bulletins published by AFP (Agence France Presse) and their consultation of rival newspapers, would drive the diversification of news organisations interested in the league tables from 2007 onwards, leading to an intensification of media coverage.

Interviews with journalists reveal that they anticipated the publication of the annual ranking results (news monitoring activities and instructions given in the event of the journalists’ absence). Various factors helped to give routine status to the coverage of the Shanghai ranking: the regularity of the publication date (usually 15 August, except in 2009), the impact of circulation between media outlets, the shortage of newsworthy events in the summer months, as well as the way the results were framed by the media. The monitoring work we have carried out since September 2014 both complements and confirms these findings. The academic ranking is now the subject of regular reporting in the press. The announcement of the results in August 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 triggered extensive coverage in the French national and regional daily press and confirmed their front-page newsworthiness. To illustrate this, we could quote the headlines of Les Echos, which confirm the importance given by this daily newspaper to the ranking: 16 August 2016, Palmarès des universités: les raisons du déclin français (‘University rankings: the reasons for the French decline’); 16 August, 2017, Universités: pourquoi la France cède du terrain (‘Universities: why France is losing ground’) and 15 August, 2018, Universités: La France résiste dans le classement de Shanghai (‘Universities: France is holding its own in the Shanghai ranking’).

It should be noted that the legitimacy and scientific value accorded to the quantified data, as well as the plasticity of the ranking format chosen to satisfy the illustration-related constraints required by the production of data, encouraged the media to cover the ranking, in this case as a journalistic resource for creating an ‘event’ (Champagne, 1991). As such, the rankings viewed as a simplification technology (Espeland, 2015, p. 29), based on the listing technique as a spatial distribution of information (Goody, 1999), constitutes a semio-cognitive condition favourable to its coverage, notably in the media.

These initial results on the characteristics of the media coverage have been supplemented by an analysis of the discursive dimension of its treatment, notably by an analysis of the ways in which the event was framed. The analysis of the framing of the event (Goffman, 1991) is understood in this article as the way in which the event is constructed and how some aspects of it are emphasised at the expense of others. In order to reveal the salient discursive features, we used textual statistical tools (TextObserver12 and Alceste13) to identify the terms most frequently used in the press corpus (more than one million hits from 2003 to 2014). The textual statistical analysis of the corpus revealed the importance of derogatory framing, i.e., the emphasis placed on what is presented as the underachievement on the part of French institutions with the use of terms such as traine or retard, both expressing the idea of ‘falling or lagging behind’. The first articles
devoted to the ranking in 2004 focus on what were considered the ‘bad’ academic results of French institutions, with a preference for metaphors such as choc (‘shock’ or ‘trauma’) or électrochoc (‘electroshock’). As shown in the examples below, the newsworthiness (or ‘buzz’) is created by the angle given to the presentation of the poor academic performance of French institutions.14

Les Echos, 15/11/2004: ‘France lags behind in the new world ranking.

Shanghai’s Jiao Tong University recently completed its second world ranking: France only comes in a No.41’.

AFP, 29/09/2005: ‘[…] The highly feared ‘Shanghai ranking’ gives France a very poor score every year: the top French university is ranked 46th in 2005’.

Les Echos, 01/04/2006: ‘What are our universities still worth?

[…] Underfunded, overcrowded, fragmented, French campuses pale into insignificance on the international scene: the top university only comes in 46th position in the now celebrated ’Shanghai ranking’ and the top grande école… in 93rd position. This ranking, designed by a university (Jiao Tong) hitherto unknown in the world of academia and now enjoying the status of an international benchmark, came as quite a shock. This speaks volumes about the French decline’.

Le Figaro, 27/02/2008: ‘Universities: a world ranking shows how far the French have fallen behind

Higher education: The Shanghai ranking of universities per discipline relegates French institutions to a position of mediocrity.

The 2008 edition of the famous ranking of world universities published by Shanghai Jiao Tong university, scrutinised by academics around the world, was recently published per major discipline (medicine, mathematics, computer science, social sciences and earth sciences). […] The 2008 ranking is as mediocre as last year’s: only one French university is included in the Top 100 medical schools’.

Le Monde, 03/05/2012: ‘[…] When, in 2003, the ’Shanghai shock’ challenged the assumptions of French higher education, the right deemed it necessary to look at what had proved successful elsewhere and to draw inspiration from it to avoid demotion’.

Les Echos, 26/08/2013: ‘The message from Shanghai

It’s a somewhat humiliating ordeal but we’ve got used to it! As has been the case every year since 2003, the worldwide ranking of universities, known as the ’Shanghai ranking’, confirms France’s mediocre position: only 20 of our institutions of higher education are in the top 500—placing us well behind the United States, China, Germany and the United Kingdom—and just 4 in the top 100. French academia takes solace by challenging the appraisal method; their arguments are valid but they miss the essential point.

While the vocabulary used (quotations above) confirms the emphasis on underperformance (‘poor score’, ‘mediocre’), the syntactical structures reinforce this framework with the use of the adverb phrase ne... que (‘only’) or the repeated presence of the adjective seul(es) (‘alone’) or the adverb seulement (‘only’) to express the notion of restriction.

Interviews with journalists highlighted that the simplicity of the ranking criteria—chiefly bibliometric data (taken from the Science Citation Index (sci) and Arts & Humanities Citation Index databases), as well as success in obtaining awards enjoying strong international recognition such as the Nobel Prize or Fields medal—were considered a guarantee of recognition and credibility. If the performance of French institutions, qualified as ‘poor’ became a journalistic resource to create an event, the No.1 position enjoyed by Harvard University was considered to be axiologically consistent with representations of academic prestige and reinforced the legitimacy given to the results of the ranking.

It should be noted that the desire to create a ‘buzz’ (i.e., create an event and increase media attention), linked to the framing of the results in terms of underperformance, confirms the results of other studies, such as those conducted by Frédéric Pierru on the media coverage of hospital rankings (Pierru, 2004) or those conducted by Xavier Pons on the OECD PISA survey (Pons, 2015), underlining the importance of the derogatory framing in how the event is construed, as well as the seriousness of debates and reforms in the areas concerned. The use of the ranking by political players, notably in 2007, would amplify this process, as would the reactions and behaviours of members of the academic community.

Ranking as an argument for political players to justify reforms and as a communication tool for certain institutions

The systematic survey in the corpus of stakeholders cited or who expressed themselves in the case of interviews or published opinion pieces indicates that a wide range of different players have made use of the ranking. An analysis of their profiles15 reflects their specific characteristics: they are mainly representatives of a political nature, notably the regulatory authorities, university presidents, heads of grandes écoles16 or research bodies (public research organisations such as the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique17)). In France, higher education and scientific research is characterised by the coexistence of three systems: universities, public institutions that have an open admissions policy, a non-university sector, grandes écoles, which have a highly selective admissions policy and scientific research bodies like CNRS, not taken into account by Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) because of their status as research bodies18. ARWU’s criteria are not favourable to the French system: the grandes écoles are widely regarded as prestigious, as well as the CNRS, both have produced most of the scientists and executives in France, but the Shanghai ranking neutralises French representations of academic prestige. This constitutes a political opportunity to justify reforms. This background of the French system helps to explain the specific characteristics of actors reacting to the ranking.

The analysis of the profiles of individuals who expressed themselves reveals that the intensification of media coverage in 2007 is linked to the frequency of its use by Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the Republic, and by Valérie Pécresse, Minister of Higher Education & Research (2007–2011) to the effect that the ranking was used as a political argument to justify reform. Although not explicitly mentioned in the letter of appointment addressed to Valérie Pécresse, ‘improving the position of our higher education institutions in the international rankings’ was one of the objectives set for the Minister by the President of the Republic19.

Nicolas Sarkozy regularly refers to the academic ranking, which he uses in his speeches as an argument justifying reforms, taking a name and shame approach.
Nicolas Sarkozy, excerpt from the speech delivered on 28/01/2008 during a ceremony in honour of Albert Fert, quoted in *Les Echos*, 30/01/2008: "Nicolas Sarkozy’s hard-punching speech on research triggered strong reactions yesterday. On Monday, in Orsay, the President of the Republic outlined the avenues for a major reform of this 50-year-old system that penalises us’. Drawing up a depressing diagnosis of the ‘difficulties’ facing French research at the international level (in terms of publications, the Shanghai ranking, brain drain, etc.), he undertook to increase research funding to 3% of GDP by 2012. But he also warned: ‘This massive effort will go hand-in-hand with reform’.

With regard to statements published by her ministry, Valérie Pécresse refers to the ranking in two main contexts: to pursue projects aimed at the merger of universities with a view to improving their ranking and also to promote the production of a European ranking system, to compete with the Shanghai ranking.

Interview published in *Le Figaro*, 27/02/2008, Valérie Pécresse, Minister of Higher Education and Research: ‘The problem with the Shanghai ranking is its very existence. It cannot be ignored because students all over the world refer to it. France must enter this global battle of knowledge, even if we preserve certain specificities of the French system, notably the low admission fees. But we must also establish our own ranking at a European level’.

*Le Figaro*, 02/07/2008, Valérie Pécresse, Minister of Higher Education and Research: ‘Competing with the now very famous ‘Shanghai ranking’, in which, year after year, French universities occupy a mediocre position: this is the objective stated yesterday by Valérie Pécresse. The Minister for Higher Education wants to take advantage of the French Presidency of the European Union to draw up a European ranking system’.

Valérie Pécresse quoted in *Les Echos*, 26/06/2008: ‘The first meeting of the board of directors of PRES recently validated a symbolic decision by welcoming in its midst Jean-Monnet University and the Saint-Étienne School of Mining. In addition to a single signature under the name ‘Université de Lyon’ to identify the second-largest French scientific hub when awarding doctorates or attributing scientific publications, ‘this hub will enjoy greater prestige while the university of Lyon does not currently appear in the Shanghai ranking’, noted the Minister of Higher Education, Valérie Pécresse’.

If the ranking is a central political argument to justify university mergers, it would also allow the Minister to argue for the production of a European ranking system, supposed to compete with the Chinese ranking. She would promote this initiative at the European level during the French Presidency of the EU Council. The discursive uses of the ranking lie at the heart of the communications released by the President and Minister and confirm the symbolic and argumentative dimension of this ranking, a tool for justifying and legitimising the projects drawn up for higher education & research during N. Sarkozy’s presidency. The two peaks of media coverage noted in 2008 and 2011 (Fig. 2) correspond to periods of contestation and reform in higher education & research. As such, the use of the ranking as a political argument contributes to the co-construction of its media coverage outside the periods when the results are announced. Figure 3 illustrates the coverage peaks in August at the time of the announcement of the results (third quarter, or Q3) and also shows that it was used outside this period.

In 2011, Valérie Pécresse, Minister of Higher Education, frequently refers to the ranking when she launched the first call for ‘excellence initiative projects’ (projets d’initiative d’excellence financed with the framework of the ‘Investment Programme for the Future’ PIA), which fuelled debates on higher education & research. The 2011 peak can also be explained by the visit to France in July 2011 of the designers of the Chinese ranking. This context proved favourable for the diversification of the media outlets that dealt with the ranking at the moment the results were published.

Every year, the publication of the results is announced in a press release by the Minister of Higher Education & Research. It should be noted that in May 2017, a report from the General Inspectorate of National Education and General Inspectorate of the Administration of National Education & Research (Inspection générale de l’éducation nationale, or IGEN, and Inspection générale de l’administration de l’éducation nationale et de la recherche, or IGAEENR) on international rankings was sent to the Minister of Higher Education & Research and the Minister of the Economy, indicating continued interest in academic rankings and, in particular, in the Shanghai ranking. In February 2019, the Minister of Higher Education, Frédérique Vidal, sent a letter to the President of the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) requesting that the most internationally cited researchers, according to the highly cited researchers (HiCi) database, should highlight their university affiliation in their first signature rather than that of the CNRS because account is only taken of the medium term. The variety of profiles, particularly of academic
The analysis of the profile of the academic players who have discussed the ranking (examined by listing citations, interviews and published opinion pieces) shows the importance of their positioning and the challenges within the world of higher education & research. The positions on the ranking thus reflect the historical specificities of the French education and research system, where universities, *grandes écoles* and research organisations coexist and reveal internal hierarchies regarding the representation of academic prestige. Thus, there emerge power relations between the different institutions: between universities, between universities and *grandes écoles*, and between universities and public research organisations, as well as between scientific disciplines, such as physics, mathematics... (Fig. 4). It is chiefly university presidents, directors of *grandes écoles* or research bodies who react to the ranking. From the point of view of scientific disciplines, several studies have focused on the varying degrees of appropriation of quantitative assessment tools, depending on the disciplines and internal hierarchies of the French higher education & research system (Pontille and Torny, 2010, 2012; Gozlan, 2016). The presidents of scientific universities (mathematics, physical sciences, biology, etc.) have taken advantage of the ranking to strengthen their communication and to counter their reputation deficit overshadowed, as they are, by the prestige of the *grandes écoles*. It also appears that the comments on the ranking have contributed to enhancing the role of the university presidents, revealing the plurality of rationales involved in the dynamics of the process.

Interviews with journalists highlighted the complexity—and, sometimes, the ambiguity—of interactions with university presidents or directors of higher education & research institutions who, on the one hand, are contacted by journalists as sources of information and comments and who, on the other hand, themselves enter into contact with editorial staff or send press releases in response to the publication of the ranking, expecting their comments to be picked up and repeated. If the ranking functions as a judgement tool, leading to a revision of the reputations of institutions, it will also provide an opportunity to strengthen positions poorly valued by society in the scale of French academic prestige, either in terms of the type of institution (*grandes écoles* versus universities) or the discipline (specialists in literature compared to physicists, mathematicians, biologists, etc.), as indicated by the significant proportion of enunciators who hold the position of university president, in particular specialist in sciences such as physics, mathematics... i.e., almost 45% of academic enunciators.

Anita Bersellini, quoted in AEF, 12 July, 2004: 'Strategic alignment of the development policies of Paris-XI, Paris-XII, Versailles-Saint-Quentin, Evry and the Cachan ENS (Ecole Normale Supérieure)

The universities of Paris-XI Sud, Paris-XII Val-de-Marne, Versailles-Saint-Quentin, Evry Val-d’Essonne and the Cachan ENS are considering a “strategic alignment of their development policies”. (...) The “trigger”, says Anita Bersellini, was the publication of the ranking of the 500 best universities in the world by Shanghai Jiao-Tong University: Paris VI was the first French university in the ranking in the 65th place, followed by Paris-XI, ranking 72nd (AEF dated 12 January, 2004). "Legibility in research is necessary", she adds, also referring to the White Paper on an "ecosystem for growth" (AEF dated 28/04/2004)".

*Le Monde*, October 1st, 2008: Better to be ranked low than ignored

‘2008 Shanghai ranking: Joseph-Fourier University, the sixth largest university in France, retains its place in the “Top 200” world universities’. Starting on 15 August, the date when the ritual benchmark ranking of world universities is published, universities, like Grenoble-I, have become accustomed to immediately sending out their self-congratulatory press releases. It’s a matter of prestige. From Pierre-et-Marie-Curie (Paris-IV), first French university in the Shanghai ranking, to Rennes-I, 23rd and last representative (ranked between the 402nd and 503rd establishment) of the French delegation, all the establishments are delighted to be among the happy few. ‘We entered the ranking in 2005. That was an important moment for us, showing a degree of recognition for our work,’ says Albert

Interview *Les Echos*, 27 April 2011: ‘The ranking was paradoxically useful to university presidents, all the universities in France had to have their own micro lab. But it was not a lab that was ranked but an entire university. It put the university presidents back in control of guiding research, a fact that explains the interest expressed by the university presidents’.
Marouani, president of the University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis. When he arrived in 2004, the brand new vice-chancellor announced his intention to quickly enter the 'Top 500’. (...) This ranking has the merit of existing and of not being based on ‘auto-reporting’, a fact that guarantees a minimum quality’, says Anita Bersellini, President of the University Paris-Sud (Paris-XI), the second French university in this ranking. ‘All the criteria are objective: the number of Nobel Prize winners, Fields medal winners, publications in Science & Nature, researchers cited, etc. […]. On the other hand, Alain Beretz asserts, ‘In Strasbourg, I don’t base my policy on the results of the rankings. I follow them, but as a general trend. Since the creation of the Shanghai ranking, we’ve been placed at about No. 100. Our ambition, above all, is to improve our quality, not to improve our position. That must come naturally. Moreover, if we followed that approach, we would never have agreed to create a single university. On the contrary, teaming up with a university teaching human and social sciences and a university specialising in law would make us lose places in the next ranking.‘

The Shanghai ranking viewed as a judgement tool is used in the definition of the strategies devised by the establishments but it also functions as a communications tool, notably in the case of institutions included in the ranking, such as the University of Paris VI—Pierre et Marie Curie (UPMC).

The University of Paris VI is strongly represented among the academic bodies expressing themselves about the ranking with 39 occurrences (quotations, interviews, opinion pieces): 25 in the press corpus and 14 in the AEF corpus. The successive university presidents, Gilbert Béréziat, Jean-Charles Pomeroï and Jean Chambaz, were to communicate on the results from the very outset of the media coverage process, Paris VI being consistently the top-ranked French university, except in 2011 and 2012 (in 2011, Paris XI was 40th and Paris VI, 41st and in 2012, Paris XI was 37th and Paris VI, 42nd).

In September 2004, after the publication of the second edition of the Shanghai ranking, the University of Paris VI purchased advertising space in two national daily newspapers to promote itself. This intention is clearly underlined in an article published by the weekly Nouvel Observateur on 16 September, 2004. While the emphasis is placed on the underperformance of French institutions and Gilbert Béréziat’s comments advocating a merger between grandes écoles and universities, the reference to the ranking contributes to the revaluation of university education in the so-called hard sciences in the scale of academic prestige.

Article from the Nouvel Observateur, 16 September 2004: ‘When Jussieu advertises itself—Get involved… in science'

The famous Parisian university has decided to use advertising to get scientific studies out of the doldrums. […] Paris VI’s advertising, of which the ads published in Le Monde and Libération represent just one phase, is also targeting an audience beyond French borders. And there’s a lot to do. Because in the war waged by world universities to attract young brains, the university of Pierre-et-Marie-Curie-Paris VI still compares very badly. True, it’s the first French university cited in the Shanghai ranking, but it only appears in the 41st place worldwide. Far behind the Americans and, in Europe, behind Oxford, Cambridge and the Swiss and Dutch polytechnics, as emphasised in the university’s advertisement. The fault lies with May 68, in particular, which irrevocably tarnished the prestigious name ‘Sorbonne’ when the university was divided up between several sites in Paris, while Harvard or Columbia kept theirs. If he is not working to rehumanise this venerable name, Gilbert Béréziat has another idea to improve its visibility: ‘It would be better to merge the grandes écoles with the universities.

While the ranking is a communication tool, it is also a resource when you have access to media outlets to take up a position. Stigmatised by what had been presented as underachievement, the grandes écoles were to react, through their representatives, to the publication of the ranking results as early as 2004. Individuals speaking on behalf of the grandes écoles represent 19% of the academic enunciators in the press corpus. Their prestige allows them to influence debates on higher education & research and to put the ‘bad result’ into perspective. In terms of academic prestige, the grandes écoles in France stand at the very top of the scale (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 19).

From the beginning of the media coverage process, we observe a reaction on the part of the directors of the École des Mines, the École normale supérieure (ENS) and the INSA of Lyon, and it was from 2007 onwards, in a context of the political use of the ranking to justify the reforms in progress, that their voice became more present, with contributions from the directors of ENS-Ulm and ENS-Lyon, HEC, Ecole centrale, Institut d'études politiques (IEP) de Paris (Sciences-Po), Ecole polytechnique, and Telecom-Paris-Tech (ENST). One of the presidents of the Conférence des grandes écoles (CGE), the national institution set up to represent the schools of engineering and business administration, sought to relativise the criteria adopted by the ranking, without calling into question the axiological conformity of this judgement tool with the elitist model embodied in these schools.

Les Echos, 17/09/2007: ‘The grandes écoles, which are not shy about adopting a rather paradoxical position, admit it quite clearly: these rankings, however useful they may be, must be handled with caution. ‘They have an impact on students, and are a positive stimulus, but we must be vigilant about the criteria used,’ warns Christian Margaria, President of the Conférence des grandes écoles.

While the beginning of the process in 2004 was marked by the publication of opinion pieces by members of the higher education & research community, these publications intensified in 2007 and 2008, bearing witness to the intensity of the debates. The corpus of opinion pieces revealed that 85% of the profiles of the commentators dealing with the ranking come from the academic world (university presidents, researchers or research directors, directors or lecturers from the grandes écoles). This corpus has made it possible to observe the importance of interactions and power relations played out between stakeholders, notably members of the academic community who entered into a proxy debate, with the signatories of opinion pieces using their respective articles to reply to one other. The place of the grandes écoles in the scale of academic prestige can be assessed by the number of their representatives who publish opinion pieces (Fig. 5), i.e., slightly <17%, because the ‘opinion piece’ genre requires specific resources justifying the publication of a well-argued point of view. Regardless of the diversity of the grandes écoles and the profiles of the commentators, their positioning in the hierarchies within higher education & research helped to make their voices heard in the debates on higher education & research, notably during the 2007 presidential campaign. This is reflected in the comments of the Director of HEC in two opinion pieces, published in 2006 and 2007, which set out to highlight the lack of resources for public-funded research.

Opinion piece by Bernard Ramanantsoa, CEO of the HEC group, Le Figaro, 5 March, 2007: ‘Research and education at the heart of the campaign
For once, everyone seems to agree. In a campaign characterised by contrasting positions, one issue wins unanimous support: research and higher education have a key role to play in the country’s future. Let us not indulge in alarmism: the Shanghai ranking is not everything and some of our institutions are doing well in global competition. But for how long, if we do not quickly realise the magnitude of the efforts to be made? Harvard University alone has reserves of 22 billion euros, France’s public research budget is barely 11 billion euros….

The content of the 90 opinion pieces that address the ranking highlights a salient discursive feature of the corpora, namely the frequent use of a concessive mode as in statements of the type ‘decried, certainly, but unavoidable’, ‘questionable yet authoritative’. This concessive mode is an argumentative construction that combines an argumentative movement in two steps. The first argument is followed by a second, which restricts or refutes the first, contributing to the neutralisation of counter-arguments and the acceptance of this judgement tool as something natural.

The analysis of the methods of disseminating the Shanghai ranking shows that the acute importance of reforms in higher education & research and the multiplication of arguments about academic ‘excellence’ provided a favourable environment for the media coverage of the Shanghai ranking, which also provided a journalistic resource for creating a buzz, increasing the attention of the media, as well as that of political or academic players. The analysis highlights the strategic uses made by the different stakeholders contributing to the dissemination of this ranking and its co-construction as an archetype of the academic ranking. If the derogatory framing in the ‘buzz-creation’ process applied to the ranking favoured its media coverage, the importance of the use of the concessive mode helped to neutralise counter-arguments and to make this judgement tool accepted as something natural (Barats 2019). Over the period studied, the ranking functions as an argument justifying reforms for politicians and as a communication tool for certain academic players. The co-construction of the media coverage process, notably by political and academic players, helps to shape the ranking as a judgement tool and as a means for producing value, which contributes to reconfiguring the prestige and reputation of the entities ranked: the ranking becomes a communication tool or, conversely, a tool of stigmatisation based on a name and shame approach.

The interest given to this ranking has strengthened and amplified the media coverage process by the reactions generated by the creation of the ‘buzz’, driven by a circular dynamic that feeds itself: the media coverage of the Shanghai ranking contributes to its reputation, its reputation helps to enhance the status of this ranking, which amplifies its legitimacy and, in turn, its media coverage. We also demonstrated that the plasticity of rankings, the simplicity of Academic Ranking of World Universities’s criteria, the periodicity of its publication (lack of news during the summer period), as well as the characteristics of the French system of higher education & research are important factors for the dissemination of this ranking.

In this way, the media coverage of the Shanghai ranking as a judgement tool has become a factor in the power relations in France between stakeholders in higher education & research and has helped to call into question the way—chiefly qualitative—in which academic excellence is appraised, i.e., located and anchored in the endogenous norms of the university profession (Mignot-Gérard and Sarfati, 2015; Gozlan, 2016) in favour of quantified indicators that would claim a certain universality, notwithstanding the diverse ways in which these judgement tools are appropriated. If national specificities can explain the dissemination of the ranking, our research confirms the importance taken at a European level of these judgement tools (Hazelkorn, 2007) and the prominence of competition (Musselin, 2017) and a market logic in policy making.

Data availability
The data sets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to press copyright but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. In the case of interviews conducted, they are also available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Received: 15 July 2019; Accepted: 10 March 2020; Published online: 01 May 2020

Notes
1 Fields medallists were first included in 2004.
2 Ying Cheng, December 2010, source: https://www.slideshare.net/URAP/arwu.
3 In other countries, such as Germany, Belgium and Switzerland, a large number of commentaries also attest to the interest expressed in this ranking by the media, the world of academia and politics.
4 Only two press releases dated 6 November, 2012 and 4 August, 2017 appear on the university’s website announcing, respectively, the first place obtained by the Biomedical Engineering Department and that of the Economics Department in the global ranking per academic subject published since 2007 by ARWU (Academic Ranking of World Universities) in addition to the university ranking. Sources (accessed in May 2019): http://economics.harvard.edu/news/harvard-economics-rankings-2015 and https://www.seas.harvard.edu/news/2017/08/harvard-first-in-biomedical-engineering-in-new-ranking-of-world-universities.
5 The agency was created in 1998. One-thousand seven-hundred organisations have taken out subscriptions, representing ~15,000 subscribers/readers. Since 2009, AEF has been offering its subscribers a permanent file devoted to academic rankings, an indication of the scale of the dissemination of these league tables and their success. Indeed, the articles devoted to rankings were among the most widely read publications. Source AEF: interviews in March 2011 and June 2015.
6 This complementary corpus has not been the subject of a systematic textual statistic analysis, unlike the first one. It has been subject to a qualitative analysis that confirms the trends observed.
7 Ten interviews were conducted with the journalists who chiefly covered the rankings (AEF, Le Monde, Le Figaro, Le Figaro, Libération) from March 2010 to September 2015.
8 A French daily newspaper specialising in economic and financial news, similar to Le Monde.
9 The work involved in documenting the body of publications has also revealed that the ranking was known in other areas of academic discourse production. For example, reference was made to the ranking in seminars organised by members of the higher education community, as well as in reports drawn up as early as 2004.
10 The journalist was responsible for higher education at an international level and had just recently been recruited by AEF.
Le palmarès 2008 est aussi médiocre que celui de l’année précédente. Ce qui en dit long sur la situation actuelle du système universitaire français. 

In France, the inclusion of international ranking in site policies (Pons, 2005) has led to an increase in the number of partnerships between French universities and foreign institutions. The Shanghai Ranking, which was launched in 2003, has become one of the most prominent rankings used by French universities to evaluate their performance. The ranking is based on several criteria, including the number of citations received by a university’s research publications, the number of international collaborations, and the number of Nobel Prize winners associated with the university.

The Shanghai Ranking has been praised for its objectivity and transparency, and it has been widely adopted by French universities. However, some critics have questioned the ranking’s validity and the impact of these rankings on the quality of university research. One of the main criticisms is that the Shanghai Ranking is based on a limited number of criteria and does not take into account other important factors such as the quality of teaching, the diversity of research, and the impact of research on society.

The inclusion of international ranking in site policies has also led to a shift in the priorities of French universities. Universities are now more focused on improving their rankings rather than on improving the quality of their research. This has led to a decline in the quality of research, as universities are more focused on producing papers that meet the criteria of the Shanghai Ranking rather than on producing research that is genuinely innovative and of high quality.

The inclusion of international ranking in site policies has also had a negative impact on the reputation of French universities. The Shanghai Ranking has been criticized for being biased in favor of universities in developed countries and against universities in developing countries. This has led to a decline in the reputation of French universities internationally.

The inclusion of international ranking in site policies has also had a negative impact on the quality of research. The Shanghai Ranking has been criticized for being biased in favor of universities in developed countries and against universities in developing countries. This has led to a decline in the quality of research, as universities are more focused on producing papers that meet the criteria of the Shanghai Ranking rather than on producing research that is genuinely innovative and of high quality.
In: Legavre J-B (eds) La presse écrite: objets délaissés. L’Harmattan, coll. “Logiques politiques”, Paris, pp. 247–270
Pons X (2015) “La médiatisation de PISA en France: travail journalistique et action publique”, in Bouchard J et al. (eds), La médiatisation de l’évaluation, Évaluation in the media. Peter Lang, pp. 193–214
Pontille D, Torny D (2012) Rendre publique l’évaluation des SHS: les controverses sur les listes de revues de l’AERES. Quaderni 77:11–24
Pontille D and Torny D (2010) Revues qui comptent, revues qu’on compte: produire des classements en économie et gestion. Revue de la régulation 8/Autumn. http://regulation.revues.org/8881
Ravinet P (2011) La coordination européenne “à la bolognaise”. Réflexions sur l’instrumentation de l’espace européen d’enseignement supérieur. Revue française de Science Politique 61:23–49
Soulas T (2016) Thèse de doctorat en sociologie: “Business schools Made in China. L’émergence des écoles de gestion chinoises”. November 2016, Université de Paris-Est
Vught F, Westerheijden Don F (2010) Multidimensional ranking: a new transparency tool for higher education and research. Higher Education Management and Policy 22:16
Werron T, Ringel L (2017) Rankings: conceptual remarks. geschlossene gesellschaften verhandlungen des 38 kongresses der deutschen gesellschaft für soziologie, edited by S. Lessenich, [online]. https://www.academia.edu/35056243/Rankings_Conceptual_remarks

Acknowledgements
I want to thank the Céditec and Mr. Malcom Scott for the translation.

Competing interests
The author declares no competing interests.

Additional information
Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to C.B.
Reprints and permission information is available at http://www.nature.com/reprints
Publisher’s note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

© The Author(s) 2020