

*Universities as celebrities?
The media coverage of complex data from a
Research Assessment exercise*

**2016 Annual meeting of Community of Practice on Composite Indicators and
Scoreboards**

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Andrea Bonaccorsi

University of Pisa

FBK-Institute for Research on the Evaluation of Public Policies, Trento

a.bonaccorsi@gmail.com

Outline

Context: a research assessment exercise in Italy (VQR 2004-2010)

Format: ranking and non ranking information

Results: media coverage of information on complex systems

Blasi B., Romagnosi S., Bonaccorsi (2016a)

Playing the ranking game. Media Coverage of the Evaluation of the Quality of Research in Italy.

Higher Education, online February 2016

Blasi B., Romagnosi S., Bonaccorsi (2016b)

Universities as celebrities? An examination of the media coverage of a large Research Assessment Exercise

Submitted for publication

Research Assessment (VQR 2004-2010)

Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca (VQR 2004-2010)

All researchers involved (universities and Public Research Organisations)- 3 or 6 products each

➤ 180,000 research products evaluated in total

Bibliometrics + peer review

Individual evaluation scores aggregated at the level of 16 disciplinary research areas and of departments

Aggregation of evaluation scores at university level in order to provide a formula-funding scheme to the Ministry of University

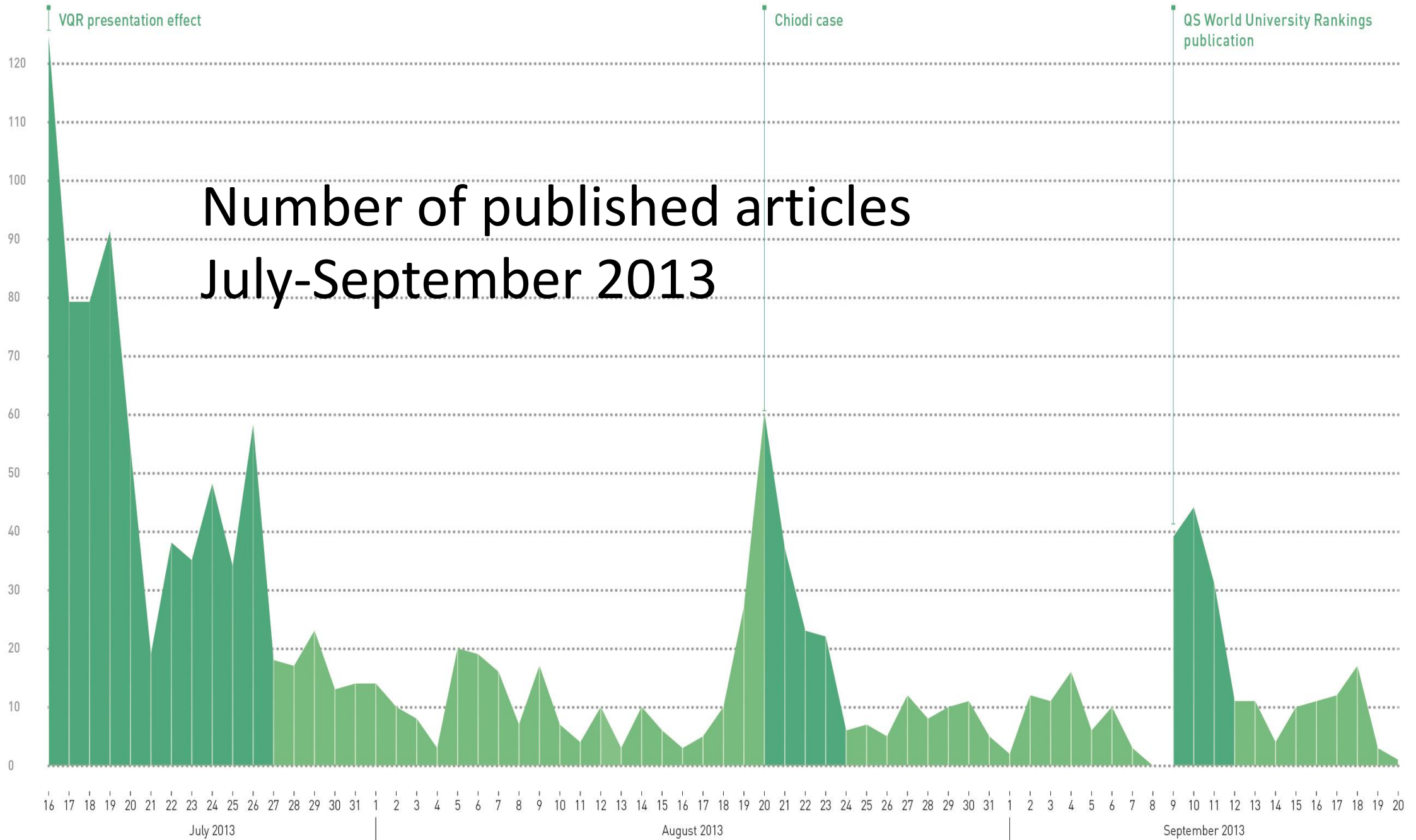
Ranking and non ranking information

- a press communiqué describing the agency's mission and activities and the VQR methodology;
- a presentation video about the agency and the assessment exercise;
- some infographics containing VQR facts and figures;
- five detailed tables providing
 - the average score and the share of excellent products across all the disciplinary fields;
 - the top 3 universities by research quality in each disciplinary fields;
 - the top 3 departments by research quality in each disciplinary fields;
 - the top universities by average research performance;
 - the top universities by percentage of improvement of the VQR-based allocation with respect to an allocation mechanism purely based on the number of FTE researchers (size).

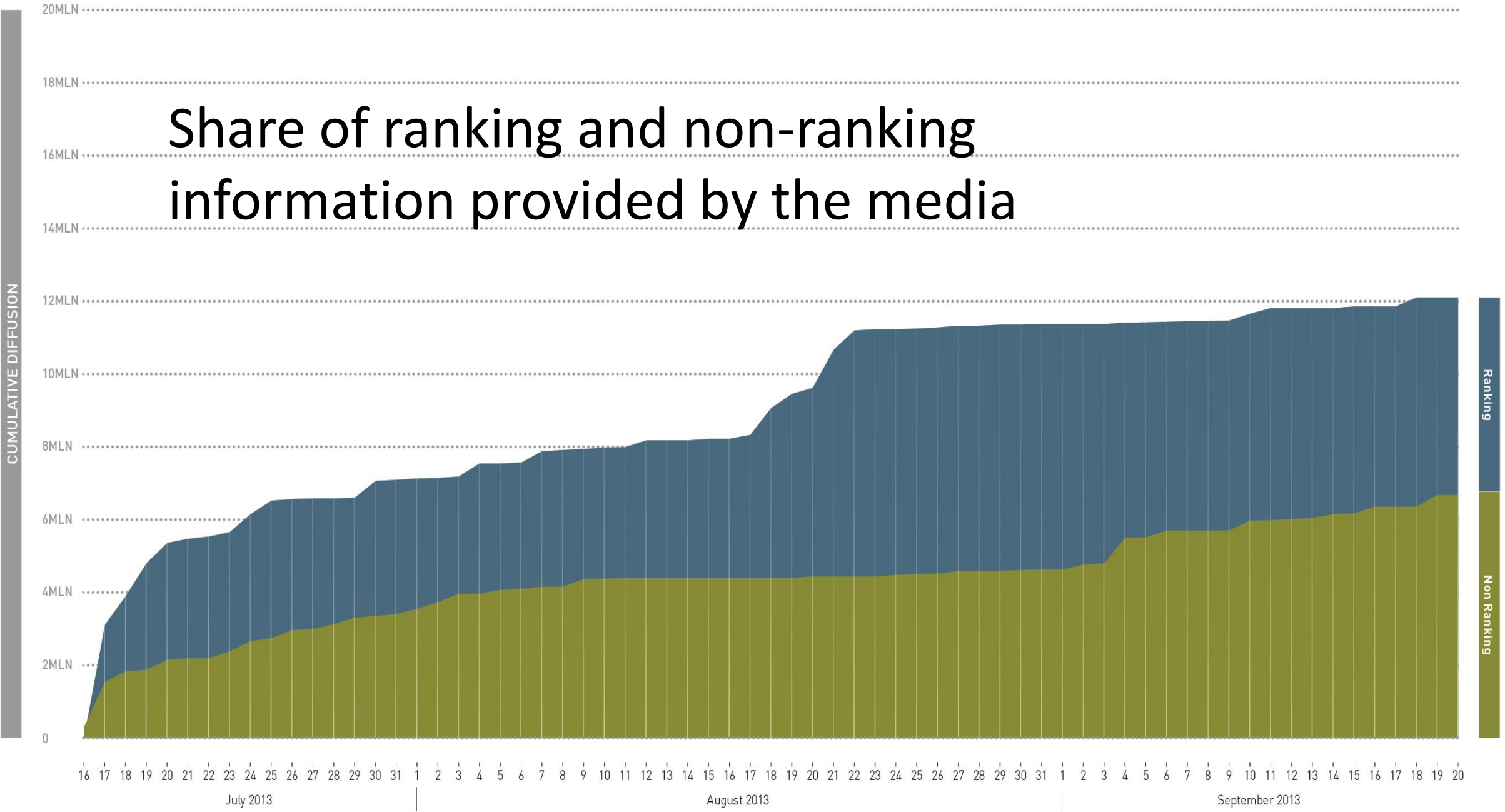
Type of source	Nr. of articles	%
Websites	905	64,4
- blog	107	7,6
- newsletter	3	0,2
- other	795	56,4
Press	501	35,6
- newspaper	491	34,9
- magazine	10	0,7
Total	1406	100
Position of the article (only for newspapers)	Nr. of articles	%
front page	57	11,6
high visibility (pages 2-10)	176	35,8
low visibility (after page 10)	258	52,6
Total	491	100
Scope of the newspaper (only for newspapers)	Nr. of articles	%
national	74	15,1
regional	417	84,9
Total	491	100

NUMBER OF PUBLISHED ARTICLES

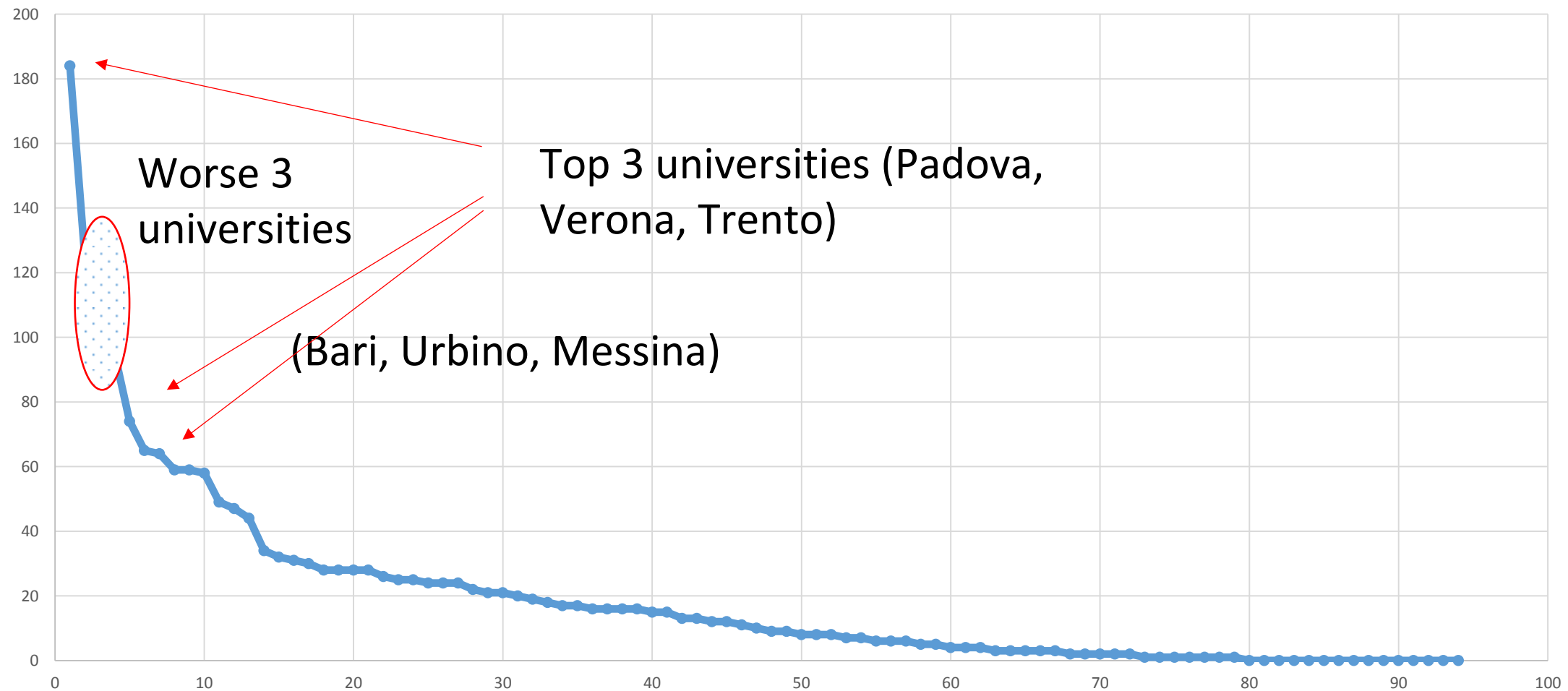
Number of published articles July-September 2013



Share of ranking and non-ranking information provided by the media



Number of occurrences of universities in media coverage



	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Model 6</i>
	Num_top	Num_podium	Average performance	Improvement	Webometrics	All
Comp_other	-14,36237 16,0082	3,922516 10,44111	3,47354 9,136491	2,901965 8,172372	3,151964 8,343142	-8,88 16,1
Comp	-11,64868 13,23442	-6,385479 8,258366	-8,466381 7,601277	-8,445443 7,241817	-6,447414 7,320594	-2,18 14,3
Old	17,36829 14,40402	3,945066 8,34313	6,47675 8,523191	3,9093 8,153632	4,32412 8,319953	21,0 13,4
Young	12,21999 14,58594	9,195493 8,216707	7,978298 8,523191	4,419353 7,838391	5,120986 8,162557	1,57 15,9
Staff	0,009665 0,0176254	0,0307206 * 0,0140743	0,0366528 * 0,0150585	0,0385594 * 0,0147328	0,0340896 0,0154375	0,026 0,019
Public	-5,84799 21,91061	0,1195916 11,19402	1,875744 11,51197	-3,689844 10,53836	-2,36749 10,73447	29,5 27,4
Advanced	26,29929 34,90042	13,52355 20,72958	18,84558 21,0999	13,86741 17,12024	18,78662 18,48386	27,3 39,8
Large	24,31833 28,31234	-5,912527 14,70378	7,914393 14,20055	8,813817 13,44083	5,970238 16,57366	61,3 37,9
Medium	7,93943 23,93999	1,67116 12,06991	8,298584 11,11864	8,890461 10,37342	7,080272 12,73106	19,6 27,2
Num_top	17,65394 *** 3,478935					18,346 6,26
Num_podium		6,444388 *** 1,297763				-0,136 5,25
Average performance			-0,5982228 0,3571897			0,569 1,59
Improvement				-0,5913958 ,3233064		-2,5970 1,06
Webometrics					-0,0679748 ,1538302	1,02 0,55
Num_top_2						
Num_podium_2						
Average performance_2						
Improvement_2						
Webometrics_2						
Constant	-14,52817 24,37947	-9,217895 12,22168	7,933839 11,99385	13,71882 11,69712	8,350345 17,59391	- 92,4 61,2
R-square	0,7170	0,4572	0,2916	0,2889	0,2616	0,8
Adj R-square	0,5506	0,3547	0,1983	0,2022	0,1716	0,0

* $p < 0,05$, ** $p < 0,01$, *** $p < 0,001$
Standard errors between parentheses

Variables

Regression model

Size of university	n.s.
Age	n.s.
Competition at province level	n.s.
Public governance	n.s.
Advanced school	n.s.
Webometrics	n.s.
Average performance	n.s.
Improvement	n.s.
Number of top positions (1st)	+ (***)
Number of podium positions (1st-3rd)	+ (***)

Determinants of media coverage

After controlling for a number of factors through a set of regression models we find that the *only* variable that explains the visibility of universities is their presence

- in a top (1st) position or
- in a podium position (that is, in one of the three positions of the Olympic podium)

in at least one of the rankings published alongside the Research Assessment Exercise report.

Final remarks

- The media system not only likes rankings, but actively “filters” information in order to build up attractive news
- The audience of the media system may be largely different from the one intended by producers of information (e.g. students and their families vs Ministry and the scientific community)
- Information is shaped into an “Olympic podium” structure
- Rankings attract attention:
 - contain simple information
 - avoid the cognitive load of weighting different dimensions of performance against each other
 - are perceived as the result of a competition
 - are associated to (often implicit) value judgments

We have to be aware of the media distortion induced by the format of the information