



# Where International Rankings Meet Negativity Bias

## Domestic Press Responses to International Educational Rankings in Three EU Countries



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### Background

Why do governments agree to take part in international ranking studies? Is there a domestic political advantage, or do the risks of failure outweigh the benefits of success?

If success in measured performance schemes brings little credit to incumbent politicians, but failures are heavily publicized, what incentives are there for rational politicians participate in those schemes?

A key test of these questions is provided by the PISA studies that test 15-year-olds in science, maths and reading and the PIRLS studies that test reading literacy in 10-year-olds. The first PISA study in 2000 caused widespread shock in Germany when it revealed that Germany's 15-year-olds performed well below the OECD average prompting reforms of the education system.

The most recent PISA and PIRLS results, published in November and December 2007, indicated that Germany had improved markedly in PISA, but France and Britain's results had deteriorated (Figure 1).

What was the press response in Germany, Britain and France? Did the notoriously challenging British press take a different line from the other countries, or is negativity bias a more widespread phenomenon?

"Britain slumps in world league table" **Guardian** 5 Dec 2007

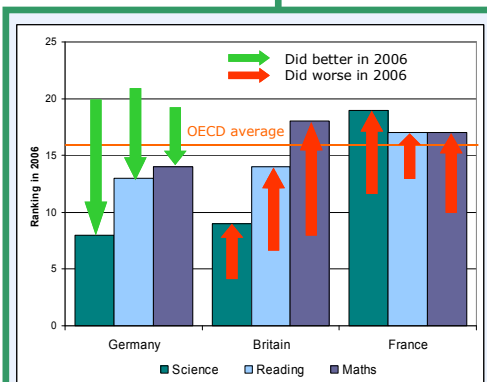


Figure 1. Countries' ranks in PISA 2006. Arrows show change in rank from 2000 (lower rank = better performance).

### What We Found

**Negativity:** British and French articles were more negative about their own country's education system than were the German articles about the German educational system, though even in the German press, criticism of the national education system significantly outweighed praise (Figure 2). Remarkably, none of the articles in Nov or Dec 2007 from any country was coded positive, but Germany showed a higher proportion of articles judged 'neutral'.

**Coverage:** The German newspapers yielded more than 15 times as many relevant articles as the French or British press (Figure 3). PIRLS (IGLU in Germany) was mentioned in only 5% of the German articles, compared to 30% of British or French articles.

**Criticism of study:** About 10% of the articles from each country voiced some criticism of the study.

**Subject matter:** 22% of German articles that mentioned the PISA study were on topics other than school level education. All the British and French articles were on school education.

**Comparisons with other countries:** German articles were less likely to compare the country with others, mentioning other countries in only 18% of articles, compared with 75% and 65% of British and French articles respectively.

"la dégradation du système scolaire français" **Le Monde** 11 Dec 2007

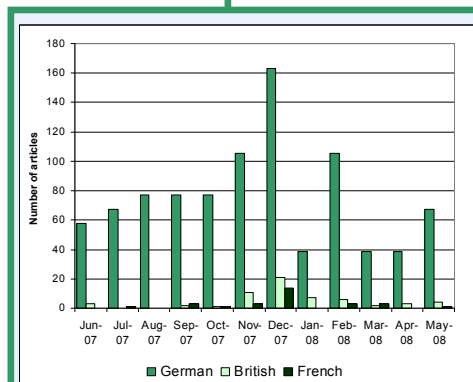


Figure 3. Number of press articles on PISA and PIRLS in 2007-8 (six newspapers from each country).

### What We Did

We searched the following regional and national newspapers for articles on the PISA and PIRLS rankings (including country-specific synonyms) for the period June 2007 to May 2008. **Germany:** Bild, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Die Welt, Taz, Rheinische Post Düsseldorf; **Britain:** Daily Mail, Times, Daily Telegraph, Guardian, Herald (Scotland), Western Mail (Wales); **France:** Le Monde, Libération, Le Figaro, Aujourd'hui en France, Ouest France, Sud Ouest.

We analysed approximately 10% (95) of the 912 German articles and all of the 60 British and 29 French articles. Two or more coders analysed each article.

**Coding criteria:**

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- overall tenor towards the country's results in the study and the country's national school education system (negative, neutral or positive)
- criticism of the study
- centrality of the study to the article
- comparison of the 'home' country with others

Statistical analysis included Pearson's chi-squared test for assessing whether the distributions of codes differed between countries, and the binomial frequency distribution for positivity:negativity bias.

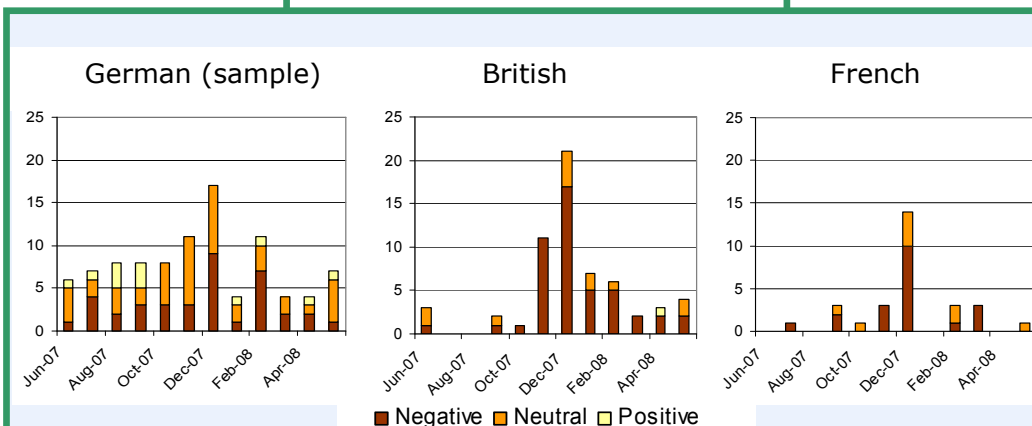


Figure 2. Overall tenor of coded articles

"die grundlegenden Probleme im Bildungsbereich fortbestehen" **Rheinische Post Düsseldorf** 7 Dec 2007

### Discussion

**Negativity bias?** Consistent with the negativity bias hypothesis, negative reporting is clearly not confined to the British press. Despite Germany's improvement in PISA scores in 2006, press coverage was preponderantly negative, concentrating on aspects such as inequality. France and Britain both fell in the rankings in 2006 compared to 2000, and the coverage in those countries was indeed more negative than in Germany.

**Political credit?** Germany's dramatic improvement in rankings after its educational reforms did not bring politicians credit compared to the coverage in 2001 (when the first PISA results were published). The press was just as negative in 2007-8 as it had been in 2001 (data from 2001 not shown).

Britain and France both suffered negative press coverage but nothing like the sheer number of press articles written in Germany (interestingly, only seen for PISA and not for PIRLS). Negativity took several forms, but overall we discerned little or no political advantage in terms of credit for incumbents from the decision to take part in these studies. We also found few calls to withdraw from or to reform the tests. Instead, rankings and league tables continue to proliferate.

Does the press think the rankings are a useful stick to beat the politicians with? Do politicians fear the political fallout of refusing to take part?

Find out more...



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