

All the News that Fits to Print:
Competition, Dominance, and Precedence on the Front Page of the *New York Times*

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In an organization, units, projects, and programs compete with one another for limited resources—including financial support, office space, and visibility. For the most part, all we see is the outcomes of this competition: products made by manufacturers, positions incorporated into a party's platform, groups served by charitable organizations, and so forth. While for some purposes this is all we need to know—for instance, if we are concerned with an organization's current market niche—this tells us little about how an organization decides to commit resources in one direction or another, about how bids for resources are weighed against one another, or otherwise battle it out.

In a newspaper, one of the most coveted resources is front page space. This is something that the various desks (e.g., foreign, national) actively compete for, ultimately in editorial meetings in which the strongest stories are presented as candidates for front page placement (Clayman and Reisner 1998). One reason is that stories on the front page are the most visible to readers, including those judging whether or not to buy the paper. Further, readers know that the front page encapsulates the editors' view of what counts as "the most important events of the day," in the words of one former senior editor,¹ so that competition for front page placement is simultaneously competition for most-important-news classification, for recognition by the paper that induces recognition by the readers.

The competition is almost certainly fierce at the *New York Times*, given the size of its readership (averaging 1,132,000 on weekdays, and 1,682,000 on Sundays, in 2003²) and its place at the pinnacle of U.S. journalism. An additional feature of the *Times* makes the question of the allocation of front page space to the various desks particularly problematic from an organizational perspective. Though the paper long ago abandoned any pretext of being the "paper of record,"³ it famously retains the motto "all the news that's fit to print," and accepts as its obligation to report, at least in cursory fashion, on significant events in the U.S. and abroad. As a result, the number of candidate stories from each desk fluctuates greatly from day to day. The total number of stories on the front page is, by contrast, relatively constant. Consequently, there is no simple formula that can be applied to the input from the various desks which will have a consistently formatted front page as its uniform result.

Here I use time series methods to study the allocation of front page space to the four main news desks of the *Times*: business, foreign, metropolitan, and national. Together, these

¹ Jack Rosenthal, "What Belongs on the Front page of the *New York Times*," *New York Times*, 8/22/04.

² <http://www.nytc.com/company-properties-times.html>

³ Daniel Okrent, "Paper of Record? No Way, No Reason, No Thanks," *New York Times*, 4/25/2004.

account for 69.7% of all articles published between the weeks of June 9, 1980, and April 19, 2004, and 97.2% of the articles that appeared on the front page. I begin the analysis by looking at overall front page representation, which reflects what I call “face dominance”—that is, the degree to which each desk dominates the front page when this is examined on its own. I then use time series analysis (ARIMA and vector autoregression) to model a desk’s front page presence as a function of the total amount of news put forward by that desk and by all of the others that week, as well as of lags in front page representation of each desk. This move us to a deeper level of description, from output to process, and from characterizations of quantitative dominance, which is necessarily transitive, to characterizations of sociometric relations between desks, which may not be.

Among the findings are: (1) that the national desk consistently takes precedence over the metropolitan and business desks; (2) that the metropolitan and business desks do not seem to compete with each other; (3) that the foreign desk is locked in bilateral struggles with each of the other desks; and (4) that the metropolitan and business desks are able to increase the number of front-page slots available, stretching an otherwise constrained resource.