

# How Close to Home?

A critical geography of the news coverage of the Boston Marathon Bombings

By Catherine D'Ignazio and Luisa Beck

*"My experience is what I agree to pay attention to."*

- William James

## Crisis, Attention and Geographic Bias

News coverage of tragic events often distills the unequal geographic distribution of media attention. On April 15th, 2013, international attention shifted to Boston, where two bombs exploded at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring more than 260. On the same day, a wave of bomb blasts across Iraq killed 42 people. And in the same week, explosions at a fertilizer plant in Texas killed 14 and injured 160. A 7.0 magnitude earthquake left almost 200 dead in Sichuan province, China. The following week, 80 dead bodies were found in Damascus, Syria, after days of intense fighting. While major news outlets did cover these events, it was not with the same intensity as the bombings and manhunt in Boston. The bombings at the marathon not only led to a drastic increase in coverage of Boston, but also turned the world's attention to places that were connected to the events: the Caucasus region of Russia, where Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev had ties, and China, where Lu Lingzi, a 23-year old victim of the bombings was from. In this analysis, we look to international news sources to see how media attention shifted around the globe before, during and after the Boston bombings. We chose four news sources at increasing distances from the marathon bombings in order to analyze how proximity to a crisis influences attention: the Boston Globe, the New York Times, the BBC and Al Jazeera.

## Research Questions

1. Can we see evidence that the closer an event occurred to a news source's geographic focus, the more attention it paid to the event, and that the attention stretched over a longer period of time?
2. Did the international media pay a disproportionate amount of attention to the Boston bombings in comparison to other tragedies in Texas, China, Iraq and Syria, even if Boston usually stands in that news source's Periphery?
3. How did attention paid to each event shift over time? Did stories closer to a news source's Area of Focus have a longer tail?

## Area of Focus and Periphery

Every news source has a geographic area of focus, as well as regions of the world that are mostly on the outskirts of its gaze. For example, the majority of the Boston Globe's reporting is about New England. We use the terms 'Area of Focus' and 'Periphery' to denote these customary areas of attention.

Boston Globe - Focus: New England  
 New York - Focus: United States  
 BBC - Focus: Great Britain  
 Al Jazeera English - Focus: Members of the Arab League

## Preliminary Findings

1. **Crises are not equal.** The international media shifted a disproportionate amount of attention to the Boston bombings in comparison to other tragedies. We see different patterns for "high-attention" crises (Boston bombings) that shift international attention more than "low-attention" crises (Sichuan Earthquake).
2. **Crises last longer for different geographies.** The closer a crisis occurred to a news source's geographic Area of Focus, the longer it paid attention to the event.
3. **The world turns towards the high-attention crisis.** For example, Al Jazeera and the BBC showed the greatest shift in coverage for MA - more than closer news sources like the NYT or Globe. High-attention crises result in greater shifts in attention the further away the news source is whereas the low-attention crisis only shifts media attention within a certain geographic range.
4. **But it's more complicated.** Factors apart from geographic proximity influence media attention: Geopolitical ties, GDP, rural vs. urban crises, human-caused crises vs. natural disasters, and the narrative & dramatic aspects of the event.

## Timeline

Week 1: Apr 7 - 13, 2013: Baseline Week

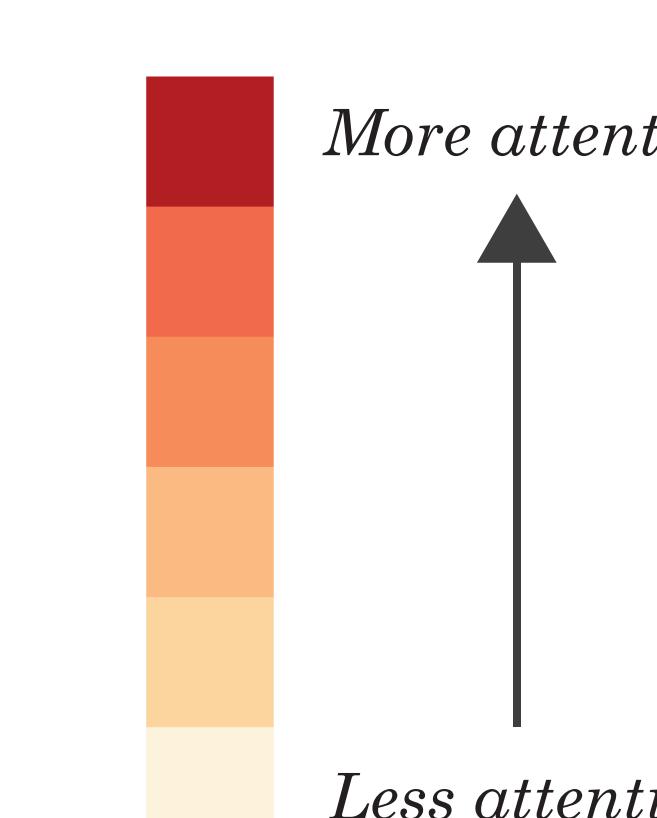
Week 2: Apr 14 - 20, 2013

April 15 (**Iraq**): Series of bomb blasts across Iraq  
 April 15 (**MA**): Two explosions at the Boston Marathon finish line  
 April 18 (**Texas**): Fertilizer explosion in the city of West, TX  
 April 19 (**MA**): Manhunt for Tsarnaev brothers  
 April 20 (**Russia**): Authorities search for motives of bombers  
 April 20 (**China**): Lushan Earthquake hits Sichuan Province

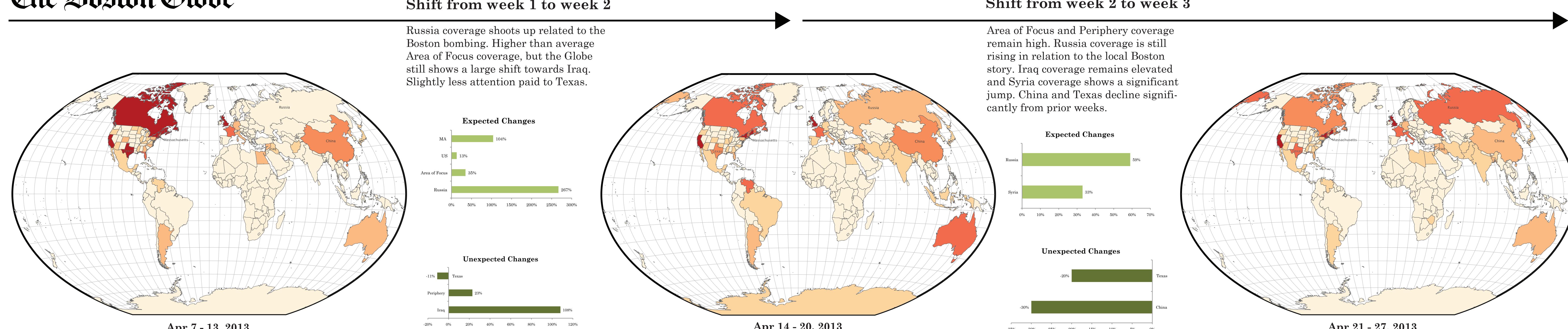
Week 3: Apr 21 - 27, 2013

April 22 (**Syria**): Eighty bodies found in Damascus  
 April 22 (**China**): Memorial services held for Boston bombing victim Lu Lingzi

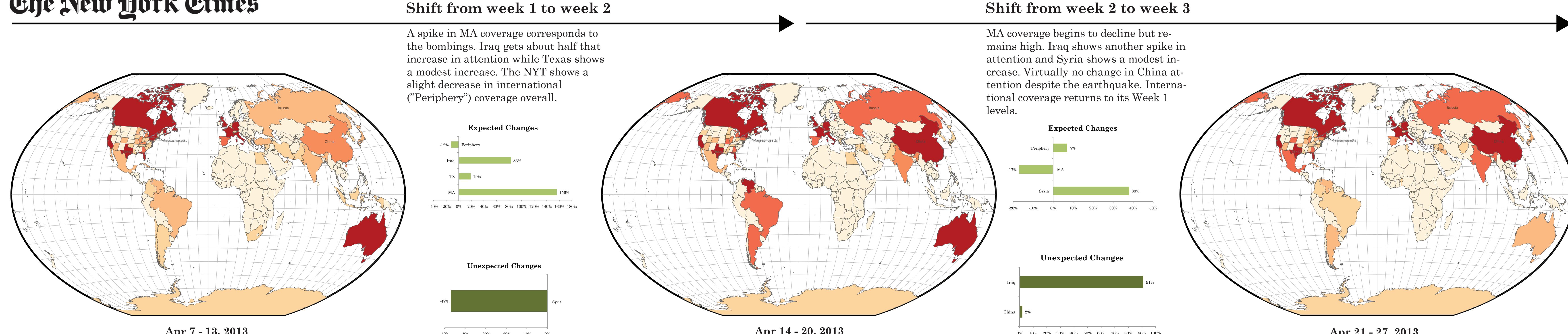
## Key



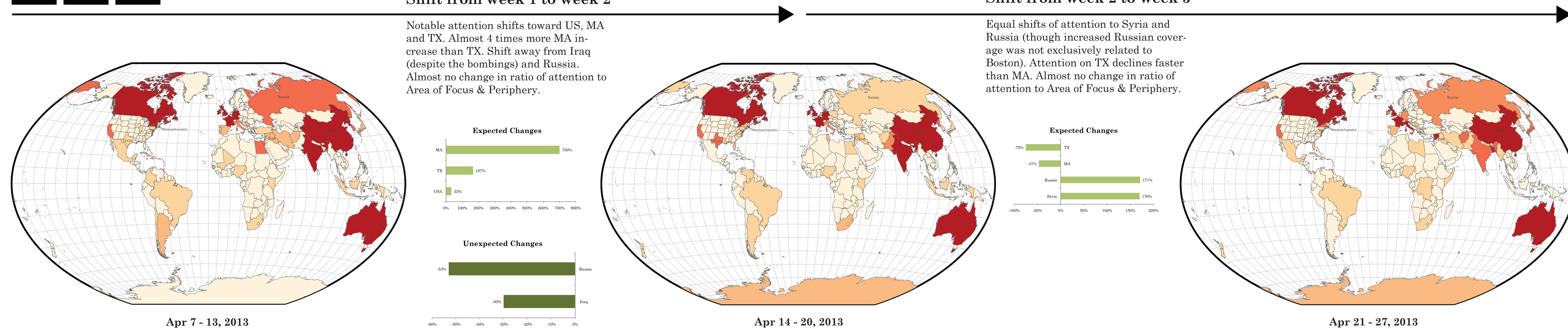
## The Boston Globe



## The New York Times



## BBC



## ALJAZEERA\*

