

# Coverage of Bali tragedy shows how little Australia rates in American minds

Distance and population deter US media interest in our region, write **Andrew Leigh** and **Justin Wolfers**.

**J**OHN Howard says Australia stands "shoulder to shoulder" with the United States in the war on terrorism. But do the Americans know we are here? Despite the hubris sometimes exhibited by our Prime Minister, the recent tragedy in Bali has provided a painful demonstration of how little attention Australia garners in the US public debate.

It is not that the Bali tragedy was

ignored by the US media - merely that it was quickly buried. In the week following the Bali bombings, the top stories in the US were the Washington sniper and the baseball play-offs. While Bali made the front page for a day or two, the coverage quickly tailed off.

Since October 12, *The New York Times* has run 234 stories mentioning the sniper, while Bali rated only 94

mentions. And the *Times* is the most outward-looking of all US newspapers - the *Washington Post* gave events in Bali only about half as much attention.

On television, coverage of Bali was even more limited. Today, most Americans probably know that the sniper has been caught and the Anaheim Angels beat the San Francisco Giants. But our conversations at the water cooler indicate that many are unaware that anything happened in Bali. Why has Bali largely been ignored by the US press? In our view, there are four explanations.

The first is distance: the Asia-Pacific is just a little too far over the horizon. When foreign affairs are covered by the US press, top billing tends to go to Britain and Israel, followed by the Americas and Europe. Asia, Africa and Australia trail well behind. Indeed, stories on the "global" war on terrorism frequently ignore Australia's position. It is not unusual to read reports like that in *The New York Times* on September 4: "Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, virtually alone among world leaders, came out today in strong support of the administration's position."

Second, size matters. With 20 million people, Australia has about

half a per cent of the world's population. As a result, few US reporters are stationed in Australia, and much reporting comes from wire services. While scores of Australian journalists rushed to Bali after the bombing, few US reporters followed.

Next, only a few Americans were among the nearly 200 killed in Bali. While it is unfair to suggest that the media should cover foreign and domestic tragedies equally, it is worth noting the magnitude of the trade-off. More US column centimetres were devoted to the Washington sniper who killed 10 people than the bombers who

murdered nearly 20 times as many in Indonesia. This is not a reciprocal feeling - Australian papers devoted almost as much attention to September 11 as all but their New York counterparts.

The axiom "If it bleeds, it leads" does not apply equally to all victims. Our guess is that a tragedy that takes place outside the US is likely to receive somewhere between one-tenth and one-hundredth of the coverage that it would if it happened inside the US.

Finally, it is not just the print media not supplying stories about Bali. There also appears to be little demand for information about it on the Internet.

Yahoo! says the bombing has ranked among the top three Australian searches each week since October 12, but has not ranked in its top 20 US searches in any week. Instead, Kazaa, Halloween and Eminem continue to dominate the US mind. No news is not good news. But it suggests that a little more independence, and a little less deputy sheriffing in our foreign policy, is unlikely to do us much harm.

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