News that is both national

A social scientist suggests ways to find and cover trends that may be developing in many scattered communities

by AMITAI EZIONI

The media provide a mirror that enables society to examine its features and contortions. By means of the media, citizens and policymakers alike gain awareness of the social condition of the rich and the poor, the races and sexes. Both informal assessments and findings of scientific studies reach most citizens and policymakers not through full-length studies but through the summaries of them that appear in the media. Indeed, if a social development is not reported, for many practical purposes it is as if it did not exist. For example, a few months ago there was a major confrontation in Warsaw in which the police tried to arrest a religious group holed up in a church, but were prevented from doing so when a large crowd rushed to the group's aid. While the incident was extensively reported in Le Monde and Neue Zürcher Zeitung, it received little attention in the American media, and hence most Americans were unaware of this recent indication of strong religious sentiment in a Communist country.

The media's imperfections are many, ranging from a flat perspective (most subjects are soon termed boring and the restless focus shifts elsewhere) to a distorted view (the reflection tells us more about the mirror than about the events — for example, the tendency of the media to be more interested in bad than in good news). I wish to explore here a less often noted failing: the tendency to deal with national or local events to the gross neglect of multi-locale developments, that is, developments that occur simultaneously in scores of localities but do not constitute a national happening in the customary definition.

Perhaps the best example is the media's coverage of government — hardly a trivial subject. Great attention is paid to Washington, and to the local governments in the areas where individual newspapers and television and radio stations are situated, and reports are published occasionally from other states or localities. Yet very little is reported about developments that involve most or all of the governments of the fifty states, the 160 or so major cities, or the 38,000-odd local governments. Reporters are assigned to Washington or the state capitals or city hall; almost none cover multi-locale developments.

As a result, we are deprived of a whole category of news that is "national" in the sense that it affects most or a significant proportion of localities.

Thus, while every schoolchild has by now heard of Watergate, and many citizens may well have read something about misconduct in a particular local government, few of us have any idea whether local governments in general are full of little, or not so little, Watergates. Does illegal wiretapping occur only in Washington and, say, New Haven — or is it a rather common practice of local police forces? Is bribing known only to the Spiro Agnew and this or that governor (say of Maryland) — or is it, rather, rampant in our state or city governments? Is only this or that stage legislature a rubber stamp for the governor, or dominated by lobbyists — or is this the case with most state legislatures? Much has been reported recently about the F.B.I., and a local police force may be well covered, but are most of the nation's police forces effective, corrupt, politically partisan, or what?

Owing to several years of investigations into myriad federal programs and other aspects of Washington life, we have become increasingly aware of the deeper structural sources of the federal government's shortcomings. However, the habit of reporting local government scandals or problems in isolation, without relating them to the general condition of local governments, unwittingly creates the impression that such occurrences are unusual, unique, or even accidental, when such atypicality is far from established.

True, some multi-locale reporting is conducted by the wire services and national magazines. For example, by asking local newspapers, television and
radio stations to report any Medicaid scandals in their areas, the wire services and newspapers were able to establish that all state Medicaid programs were riddled with scandal. Such reporting, however, is rare; in addition, the little there is of it is frequently flawed by a primitive mode of sampling, somewhat akin to public-opinion reporting before the introduction of public-opinion surveys. Thus a reporter occasionally will tell a story about conditions in prisons in, say, Alabama, California, and Illinois, but his selection of sites will be arbitrary, or designed to reflect the reporter's opinions or assumptions. (A common device is to provide one good, one bad, and one intermediate site.) A recent example of this was an August 8, 1977, U.S. News & World Report story entitled "Surpassing Trend: You Can Beat City Hall." Its thesis: "More and more citizens are taking their governments to court --- for everything from injuries on ball diamonds to slipping on tuna sandwiches." The implication was clear: there was a nationwide trend. The news story referred to "thousands of citizens a year . . ." and "changes in state laws and court rulings" which have "eroded the historic immunity of cities, counties and states from law suits filed by persons who believe that they were injured. . . ."

The story then went on to report such activity from several cities, including Wilmington, Dallas, Houston, St. Paul, San Jose, and Detroit. Even a statistic was cited: "A report for the National League of Cities says insurance premiums for some [italics supplied] municipalities tripled between 1974 and 1976. The average increase among California cities was 98 percent." Now if we only knew what the report said about the rest of the country, we could tell if the cities named were typical or --- exceptions.

An October 6, 1977, Wall Street Journal story headlined "Cities Seek to Combat Big Increase in Arson; Half of Fires in Some Areas Are Set, but Investigators Obtain Few Convictions informed readers that scenes of arson were "becoming increasingly familiar in urban areas across America. Arson is one of the fastest-growing crimes in cities. . . ." Unnamed experts were reported as having estimated "that probably 20% to 30% of fires nationwide are the work of arsonists." (Note the round figures, always suspect, and the fact that "nationwide" and "cities" are not one and the same thing.) Then a category of big cities was introduced and illustrated by one, Boston (from which the story was filed), to wit: "In many big cities [italics supplied], such as Boston, the estimate is 50%." Where is the trend? Nationwide? Urban? Cities? Big cities? Boston? None of these? The rest of the story deals with a few nationwide impressions and --- with Boston.

A May 2, 1977, U.S. News & World Report story about the middle class got off to a promising start: "People are frank to admit it: They're making more money than ever before, but they keep falling further and further behind rising costs." The story went on: "Staff members of U.S. News & World Report talked with four randomly selected couples." They found them in De Quincy, Louisiana; Hanover Park, Illinois; Los Angeles; and Brooklyn. All fit the thesis just as a well-chosen glove fits the choosing hand. To be fair, whatever U.S. News meant by "randomly chosen" is not what a statistician means by it. As used by the magazine, the words are either a reassuring cliché or an indication that the reporter did not interview relatives. It almost certainly does not mean that U.S. News & World Report threw darts at a U.S. map, hit four spots, and then randomly opened the phone books of those areas to find the names of couples. It almost certainly does mean that couples were chosen to illustrate the trend, and hence were anything but random or representative of anything but the magazine's judgments.

What is necessary to gain a more inductive, empirical approach is to approximate a random or stratified sampling of the 38,000 local governments or even state and city governments. To obtain "enough" cases to satisfy the criteria of scientific sampling need not involve large numbers. What is important, however, is that the sample be chosen in such a way that it does not merely reinforce the reporter's preconceptions or is so small as to be almost certainly atypical. Thus, a "trend" in three towns may well be no trend at all. Using sampling techniques will allow previously unknown trends to appear rather than simply illustrating trends the reporter has intuited or hypothesized.

There are several ways such sampling can be done without incurring inordinate cost. When the subject is major cities, of which there are, say, 160, any editor (or reporter) can randomly pick ten from a master list and get a much less biased picture than could be gotten by relying on hunches and "feel" for what is "typical." If one deals with 38,000 local governments, the services of a statistician might be employed. I do not mean continuously employed; but a day's consulting would yield a sample of all governmental units, as well as providing a gauge of how reliable trend information would be, assuming relatively small samples are drawn. The reporter might then wish to visit only a few (or the editor might ask stringers to report on only a few of the chosen units) and get information about the rest by telephoning local government information officers and appropriate departments, or by using local newspaper files. Such procedures may be more suitable for wire services, television networks, national magazines, and big newspapers, which can afford them. Smaller publications and stations might be able to draw on a sample drawn up by a joint service provided by a newspaper association, institute, or university.

Without more and more inductive, multi-locale reporting, there is little hope that Americans will get a proper perspective on the national government and Washington as they compare with the local ones, and the print and broadcast media will continue to give us exaggerated or fragmentary reflections of the nature of our society.