16.13: Journalism- Locate Information from Sources

After brainstorming angles and understanding the interests of the Atlantic audience, you decide the use of drones for delivery services would be an interesting focus. As commercial firms from Amazon to local breweries and drug stores explore drone delivery, the regulatory or safety concerns this raises would be a great topic for Atlantic readers.

Now you need information. You develop a set of questions that could be answered with information from a variety of potential contributors. There are many ways to do this kind of brainstorming and if you have a very specific question, thinking through what kind of agency or organization would be likely to have information or data or expertise on that specific question is the logical first step.

For example, if you want to know what the outlook is for the drone industry, you might want to find a public sector agency that generates industry outlooks and see what they have published. Check the government search engine
USA.gov for drone manufacturing and you get a report published by the Congressional Research Service on UAS manufacturing trends.

But if your specific question is “how many accidents have there been from the use of drones?” it would be logical to think about which agency is likely to track that sort of information. At the national level it would be the Federal Aviation Administration. You do a search on drone accidents at faa.gov and the second item looks perfect: A Summary of Unmanned Aircraft Accident / Incident Data. Sadly, on further examination, you see that it doesn’t pass the recency or relevance tests of evidence. But you have identified the likely agency for this kind of information – so it might be time to pick up the phone and make a call to see if you can locate someone who knows about those types of records and ask for the most recent version of the report.

At the beginning stages of the information strategy, sometimes you are better off with imagining the kinds of information that different contributors could offer – and the sort of questions they can answer. Here’s how that brainstorming might look for this particular topic:

**Public Sector Institutions:** government agencies could provide answers to questions about drones and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) related to:

- **Economy:** Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Commerce: census of business and manufacturing, specific financial information about companies in the drone business, employment outlook for the industry
- **Safety:** Federal Aviation Administration, Department of Transportation, Homeland Security: concerns about usage, creative uses of drones (for traffic regulation or monitoring road conditions)
- **Regulation:** Department of Justice, State Legislatures: laws regulating use can be handed down at different levels of government
- **Technology:** National Technical Information Service: technical reports

A good strategy for finding public sector sources that might have information to gather or experts to interview is to look through the directory of government agencies.

**Private-Sector Institutions:** You’ve decided your angle is the regulation of drones for commercial use. Clearly, you would want to identify some commercial enterprises that would be affected. Researching the background of this angle provides stories about a drug store in San Francisco, a brewery in Minnesota, and the mega-online store Amazon as having used, or wanting to use, drones to deliver products. Going to the corporate sites for QuiQui, Lakemaid Beer, and Amazon would provide answers to questions about their use of drones – and more importantly, the names of people you might want to interview.

On the non-profit side, talking to people in advocacy groups or organizations with concerns about the use of commercial drones can help fill in questions about the different perspectives on the issue that should be considered. These are often good places to check for backgrounders or “white papers” on the topics of most interest to those associations.

Do a search in Google for drones and association – look at their websites to see issues they cover. For a more authoritative source on associations, check the Associations Unlimited database (found on the UMN library website.)

**Scholarly:** Conducting a search for scholarly articles in the Business Source Premier database using the search equation (“drone aircraft” OR “unmanned aerial vehicles”) NOT war, you locate a number of relevant articles. One that
appeared in Computer Law and Security Review is titled “Drones: Regulatory challenges to an incipient industry,” and the abstract of the article sounds like it is a good fit for your needs. A challenge with using scholarly sources can be deciphering the specialist language they use in their writings. For journalists, it can be better to find sources to interview – scholars will speak more conversationally than they will write. In the Lesson on Interviewing we talked about sources for locating scholars to interview. In this case, you would read the article and then contact the author, David Wright, for an interview.

**Journalistic:** News articles are essential sources for other journalists – not only to find out what has been covered but also to see the types of sources that have been used. You’ll want to search one of the news archives services such as Google News (if you only want recent stories) or LexisNexis for broader coverage. In this case, however, you also find that journalists themselves are interesting sources of information because many of them want to use drones in their news work. So, journalistic sources are not only fodder for background and places to cull for good sources to find, they are also sources themselves. You might want to contact the Professional Society of Drone Journalists http://www.dronejournalism.org/

**Informal Sources:** If you are writing about how drones for commercial or non-military use are being regulated, you’d want to find some “just folks” to represent the impact of regulation. You’ll need to brainstorm the kinds of people you would want to hear from: people who use drones for fun, those concerned about drones flying over their neighborhood, people who have been injured by a drone, people who can’t wait to have their latest purchase from Amazon dropped on their doorstep. Locating informal sources might mean finding specific people who have posted on social media sites (look for tweets or pages related to drones) or it might be posting a “call” for comment on these sites and seeing what kinds of response you get. Reading the comments on articles you found through journalistic sources might lead you to interesting informal sources to interview.

**Search tip:** A term like “drone” has multiple related terms and different ways different disciplines will refer to the term. Take care when searching to try different versions (drone, UAV, UAS, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle…)

As you can see from this scenario, there are many steps and hundreds of information sources that could help with this message task. We are just scratching the surface of what you would actually need to do to prepare this type of story pitch to the editors of The Atlantic.