By Les Sillars

I. Introduction

Finding sources on some stories are easy. Governmental organizations, large corporations, and many non-profit organizations have public relations personnel who will give you the official story. Finding information so you can speak up for the voiceless is harder. It's also hard at times to find sources who can provide intelligent and useful background or perspective that will help readers understand the story more fully.

Even more important, however, is that the selection of sources is one of the places a Christian journalist can apply his biblical worldview to the task of journalism most directly, whether he works for a Christian or non-Christian publication. We'll talk about this more in Chapters 9-11, but for now we'll emphasize that a reporter's sources will shape the story directly, as we'll see below.

II. An Overview of Possible Sources

Let's start with a brief discussion of the kinds of sources available. Journalists need not work methodically through all the options on every story, but they do need to understand what the options are. Take advantage, as deadline permits, of any kind of source likely to add worthwhile information.

Sources can be either human or non-human, and primary or secondary. The first category is self-explanatory. The difference between primary and secondary sources is that the former are sources directly connected to the issue or event at hand, while secondary sources are those who provide background or commentary or otherwise add useful information to the main story.

In general, prefer human sources to non-human and primary sources to secondary. The reason for the first is obvious: a reporter can ask a source directly what he needs to know, and helpful sources will offer information about which the reporter might not have known to ask. Similarly, primary sources are better than secondary because they provide information directly with less chance of error and more chance of getting a complete version of the event or issue.

However, which sources will be most useful will vary depending on the story type. For example, when covering a crime journalists should normally make every effort to speak to (or otherwise contact) human sources: the accused, the victim, and the criminal investigators. However, if the crime involves document fraud of some sort, then to verify particular claims it may be just as or perhaps even more important to view the relevant papers.

Similarly, primary sources are always valuable but secondary sources may offer important and necessary insights. For example, in the above case, primary sources might provide information about a particular case of mortgage fraud, but a secondary source, such as an investigator with the federal Department of Justice, could explain how this particular crime is part of a much larger pattern of fraud that in the end contributed to the failure of many American banks and, eventually, a worldwide recession.

Primary human sources are usually easy to find, but often a bit of careful thought will help a reporter identify important but less-obvious sources. Reporters profiling an aspiring politician will want to talk to the candidate, of course, as well as friends, associates, political allies, and enemies. But what about former staffers who left partway through the campaign? They might have important insights into the candidate's character and, as former staffers, no reason not to be candid with a reporter. Recent business

associates, college roommates, members of various clubs or churches to which the candidate belongs—all these might be places to find important information about the politician.

As we will note elsewhere, the best reporting often comes when the journalist goes along with a subject on his daily activities, whatever they are. Not everybody with whom that candidate crosses paths is necessarily a potential source, but a good reporter will take note of good potential sources and follow up later.

III. Experts

"Experts" are one of the most common secondary human sources. Young reporters might wonder how to find someone qualified to comment on a given issue, but experts are surprisingly easy to locate—which is in part why they are so commonly quoted in news stories. Many universities and colleges publish directories of professors willing and able to comment on particular issues and many are listed on websites such as "ProfNet" from prnewswire.com.

Professors are usually eager to comment because being quoted in a news source is good publicity for the professor and the college, and they want to affect public debate. Think-tanks and lobby groups also make their staff and researchers available to the media for the same reasons. Governments at all levels—local, state, and federal—also employ academics, researchers, and others who may be appropriate sources. Journalism organizations and schools, such as New York University, The National Press Club, and the Poynter Institute, often maintain online lists of experts designed for reporters.

Another easy way to find experts is to look up likely-relevant books on the subject on a retail website like Amazon and then contact the authors. Often Amazon will include enough author information to track down the author directly by noting his hometown or current institution. If all else fails, publishers will pass on interview requests. If possible, at least glance through the book before contacting the author to help prepare intelligent questions.

American society has always valued the freedom of association; unsurprisingly, associations exist for almost everything, from trade and professional groups to informal gatherings of enthusiasts. A search on Google of "association" and almost any topic is likely to produce millions of results, so be discerning. The top result of a search on Google of "pro-life" is "prolife.com," which appears to be an individual's casual blog, followed by the Wikipedia entry for "pro-life," followed by a link to National Right to Life, a respected advocacy group. Clearly, these are not equally reliable.

Look for organizations that are most likely to be reliable, such as federal and state government sites, large, well-established think-tanks and lobby groups, professional and academic journals, and museums, schools, or colleges. And while reporters can get a lot of useful information directly from websites, prefer to contact the people who wrote it.

Moreover, reporters should almost never just pick an expert at random from a list. "Experts" wanting publicity are easy to find, but people who have a good grasp of the issue at hand and can comment intelligently and accurately are considerably less common.

The problem of finding knowledgeable and trustworthy experts raises two key issues that, in many ways, are central to the task of reporting. First, a good journalist needs some idea about the perspective of the expert he is consulting to interview that person properly and to evaluate his comments. This is especially true for controversial issues, whether or not

the debate pits conservatives against liberals or Republicans against Democrats or cat lovers against dog people. Good sources will give fair and accurate assessments of the issues and their opponents, but reporters cannot presume that is the case.

Second, a good journalist must have background knowledge of the issue itself, particularly divisive or controversial issues. This can make life difficult for young reporters because they will often be required to cover subjects about which they know little or nothing. This leaves them vulnerable to producing one-sided or ill-informed stories.

The first line of defense is a good editor. He should provide enough background for the reporter to at least begin making sense of the issue. Here's an example: Recently I assigned a young reporter for WORLD Virginia a story, based on an Associated Press report, about a bill defeated in the state legislature that would have established tax credits for companies that wanted to donate money to organizations that provide tuition scholarships for children in poor families to attend private schools. The reporter realized on his own that likely sources included senators who opposed and supported the bill. But to understand why they supported or opposed it, the reporter needed to know the background debate about "school choice"; that is, whether the government should encourage, through the use of tax breaks or some other program, families to take their children out of the public school system and enroll them in private institutions.

To understand that debate, the reporter had to know why many people (particularly conservatives) believe that public schools are in many instances failing children in poor families and that private schools offer better educations for these children. He needed also to know why others (usually liberals) believe that encouraging poor families to remove their kids from public schools weakens the whole system.

With that background, finding appropriate sources to provide context and interpretation to the vote in the Virginia Senate was relatively simple. The long-running debate in the state meant that groups of various kinds had lined up on both sides of the issue. Education "reformers" and proponents of school choice had established some organizations devoted to the issue (such as School Choice Virginia) that turned up on search engines. Larger, well-known conservative groups, even though they dealt with a wide range of issues, had experts available who were familiar with education reform efforts in Virginia, such as The Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, The Family Foundation, and the Virginia Council for Private Education. On the other side were those representing school boards and public school teachers and a group called the Virginia Education Commission.

Here's the point: a reporter who declines to do the hard work of understanding an issue will, first, have a difficult time finding sources and, second, be at the mercy of the sources he does find, unable to assess the information he receives. Journalists frequently have to begin reporting a story at least partly in the dark, but good reporters find reliable sources who can provide the background and context that will enlighten audiences and inform the reporter's reporting.

Finally, as we mentioned, a reporter's sources to a great degree will determine the content of his story. Every reporter should choose good sources who offer accurate and sound information. A Christian reporter can go a step further, selecting sources who can provide comments that are not only accurate and fair, but also reflect a biblically-based understanding of the world. A reporter writing for a Christian publication will of course

emphasize in his story information from those biblically-faithful sources; a Christian reporter from a mainstream organization has the opportunity in some stories to include sources who provide a biblical point of view, providing his audiences with perspectives they otherwise would not likely have seen.

We'll discuss how Christians should approach the task of writing for secular publications in more detail in later chapters. For now, the point is that reporters shape their stories largely through their selection of sources. A good journalist, therefore, does not just follow the lead of the first person he happens to encounter in reporting the story; rather, he takes seriously the task of understanding the story fully and finding appropriate sources who can articulate the issues clearly and accurately.

IV. Step-by-Step

With all that in mind, here's a step-by-step guide to finding sources on an issue with which you're not familiar.

1. Do enough background research to provide an outline of the issue at hand. This usually starts with your assignment editor. After that, search other news sources to see what has been written on it so far, and note the sources cited. Do not presume that other media have gotten the story correct, but news stories can nevertheless be very useful by explaining what information is public at that point. Don't neglect magazines and specialized journals if appropriate. Check encyclopedias, books, and reference works if appropriate. Do an online search for relevant associations or organizations.
2. Make a short list of the most promising human sources from your background reading and prioritize them. Start with primary human sources. When planning to interview a high profile-source, you may only get access on one occasion, so plan to do enough background research so that you're well prepared for that one interview. That may require you to start with secondary human sources.
3. Make a short list of accessible non-human sources from your background reading and prioritize those.
4. Start working your way through the lists. As you conduct interviews and continue to read, ask your sources, "Who else should I talk to about this?" Those knowledgeable in a particular field should be able to point you to other reputable and authoritative sources, saving you considerable time and effort.

The number of sources appropriate for any given story depends on a host of issues. Obviously the longer, more complex, and more significant the story, the more sources a reporter needs to ensure the story is accurate in its specifics as well as its overall point. No "rule of thumb" says that two sources are too few and 12 are too many for a 600-word story. When a reporter is confident that he has enough relevant information, or when his sources consistently repeat information he already has, he can stop reporting and start writing. Deadlines, of course, also play a role; sometimes five sources are enough because the reporter has no time for more.

Seldom should a reporter actually quote every person or source he interviewed for that story. The final version of a story should quote enough sources to give the audience confidence that the reporter has done his homework and to offer some variety of voices. Rarely can a single source carry a story for more than a few hundred words. However, stories with too many sources feel crowded and readers can struggle to keep track of them all. Do all the reporting necessary, but only quote those that provide new and significant information.

Exercises:

1. For question 2 in the exercises for Chapter 3, you came up with three story ideas. Identify six human and four non-human sources for each. These may be either primary or secondary sources.

2. Pretend you have been assigned to write a story on recent developments in the legal battle over gay marriage for WORLD Magazine.

a. Write a 400-word explanation of the issue that includes, first, a one-sentence summary for each of three relevant legal decisions in the past year (state or federal) and, second, the top reasons supporters and opponents frequently cite in favor of their positions

b. List three credible organizations that oppose gay marriage, and three that support it

c. Pick one of the decisions from those you noted above and list **by name** four primary human sources, two secondary human sources, and four relevant non-human sources (these need not directly involve the case e.g. a book describing the debate over gay marriage). For each human source, provide a telephone number, email address, or other means by which you would contact the source if you were actually doing the story.