

Questions Should Not Disappear

Four proposed principles for preserving material unanswered questions, showing their evidence and status, and closing them when the evidence changes.

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Not every unknown belongs in the article. But when a missing answer materially changes what the story means, the question itself becomes part of the story's state.

When the National Transportation Safety Board finished investigating Alaska Airlines Flight 1282, it could explain the system failure.

The mid-exit-door plug had left Boeing's factory without the four bolts that were supposed to secure it. The plug had been opened during factory work. The required removal record had not been created. Because the documentation was absent, no quality-assurance inspection of the plug closure occurred.

The investigation could explain how the system failed.

It still could not identify who physically opened and closed the plug.

That unresolved detail is useful precisely because the NTSB did **not** treat the investigation as a search for one guilty worker. In 2024, the agency publicly rebuked Boeing for portraying the investigation that way and said its focus was probable cause, not individual blame or liability.

The story had an answer at system level.

It also still contained an unanswered detail.

That distinction matters.

Journalism is built around questions. Reporters ask who, what, when, where, why and how. Most of those questions disappear before publication because they are answered, disproven, judged irrelevant or replaced by better ones.

That is usually exactly what should happen.

But sometimes the missing answer remains material after the article is published.

In those cases, the question itself can be part of the state of the story — without becoming the whole story.

Not every unknown belongs in the article

There are infinitely many things a reporter does not know.

Most of them are not journalism.

An unanswered question becomes worth preserving only when its absence would hide a meaningful uncertainty in the story.

A useful public question needs at least three things:

- a factual basis;
- a reason the answer matters;
- wording that does not smuggle in a preferred conclusion.

That last point is critical.

Consider two questions about the Boeing case.

Bad:

Who sabotaged the door plug?

Better:

Who physically opened and closed the door plug?

The first question contains an accusation the evidence has not established.

The second describes the actual information gap.

But even the better question does not automatically deserve headline weight. The NTSB's systemic findings mattered more to the probable cause than identifying one worker.

An unanswered question is not evidence for an answer.

And an unresolved detail is not automatically the most important part of a story.

Preserve the information gap, not the accusation

This is why public questions need to travel with their basis.

A question shown on its own can be more suggestive than informative.

A better reader surface would show something like:

Open question Who physically opened and closed the plug?

Why this remains open Investigators reconstructed the work sequence but did not identify the individual or individuals who performed that step. For the opening step, this also limited their ability to determine whether the personnel involved had sufficient training and knowledge to understand the importance of the removal record.

Status Unresolved detail; system-level cause established.

Now the question is not floating freely.

The reader can see why it exists and how much weight it deserves.

That does not tell us who was responsible.

It tells us what the investigation did not establish.

Uncertainty is information.

Suspicion is an interpretation.

Journalism should not confuse the two.

Questions have a lifecycle

An open question should not remain open forever merely because it once was.

Volkswagen's diesel-emissions scandal shows the other side of the model.

In 2014, ICCT research documented a wide discrepancy between official certification or type-approval NOx emissions from modern diesel passenger cars and their emissions in real-world driving.

At that stage, the disciplined question was not:

Why is Volkswagen cheating?

It was:

What explains the discrepancy between laboratory and real-world emissions?

That question allowed several possible explanations.

In the United States, a separate ICCT-commissioned West Virginia University study brought unexpectedly high emissions from Volkswagen vehicles to regulators' attention in May 2014. Volkswagen continued to attribute the results to technical issues and in-use conditions. California regulators and the EPA tested those explanations. According to EPA's 2015 Notice of Violation, the proposed technical explanations did not account for the repeatedly high results. Only when regulators would not approve Volkswagen's 2016 diesel vehicles without an adequate explanation did Volkswagen admit that affected vehicles contained software designed to detect emissions testing.

The question changed state.

It went from:

open

to:

investigated

to:

answered.

That matters because a journalism system that preserves unanswered questions must also preserve when they stop being unanswered.

Otherwise it becomes an archive of stale suspicion.

A question should disappear from the prominent live story when it is answered, superseded, based on a disproven premise or no longer materially relevant.

Its history can remain in the article's audit trail.

But it should not continue to confront readers as though the uncertainty were still current.

Internal questions and public questions are different

A newsroom should preserve far more questions internally than it publishes.

Internal questions are part of reporting:

- Which document is missing?
- Who has not responded?
- Which timestamp needs verification?
- What evidence would distinguish explanation A from explanation B?

These can be speculative.

They can be rough.

They can be wrong.

That is fine.

A public open question needs a much higher threshold.

The newsroom should be able to answer:

What facts create this question?

Why would different plausible answers materially change the story?

Is the wording neutral enough not to imply what has not been established?

What is the question's current state?

If those cannot be answered, the question probably belongs in the reporter's notebook, not on the reader's screen.

A question can be partly resolved

Real stories do not always move cleanly from unknown to known.

Boeing is a good example.

The broader system failure was explained.

The detail-level actor question remained unresolved.

So the state is not simply:

open

or:

answered.

It can be:

partially answered.

That lets journalism say something more precise than either:

We know what happened.

or:

We still do not know.

Both can be true at different levels.

The system can be understood while a specific actor remains unidentified.

A cause can be known while a detail remains unknown.

These distinctions are already part of careful reporting.

The proposal is to preserve them more explicitly.

Four principles for open questions

When a material unanswered question remains after publication:

1. **Show the basis.** A public question should follow from identifiable reporting.
2. **Show why it matters.** The missing answer should materially affect understanding of the story.
3. **Show the state.** Make clear whether the question is open, partial, answered, unresolved or superseded.
4. **Close it when the evidence changes.** Do not let resolved or disproven questions survive as stale suspicion.

The point is not to publish more question marks.

It is to preserve the right uncertainty.

Implementation status at Hedegreen Research

This article proposes that material unanswered questions can be preserved as explicit, updateable story state.

That reader-facing Open Question surface is **not yet deployed** on Hedegreen Research. The article therefore presents a proposed editorial/publishing standard, not a description of an existing public feature.

The exact interface, prominence and lifecycle rules remain subject to testing.

What is still unproven

There are obvious risks.

Visible open questions might make readers overestimate uncertainty.

They might amplify suspicion even when carefully worded.

A newsroom might preserve too many of them.

A prominent “open question” element might receive more attention than the facts that already are established.

Those are design questions that should be tested.

The exact interface is not the standard.

The standard is simpler:

When a material part of the story remains unresolved, journalism should be able to preserve that uncertainty explicitly, connect it to the evidence that created it, and close it when the evidence changes.

Questions should not disappear merely because the article reached its final paragraph.

But neither should they live forever.

A truthful story is not only a record of what is known.

Sometimes it is also a precise record of what remains materially unknown.

Sources

- NTSB — final investigation / probable cause
(<https://www.nts.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA24MA063.aspx>).
- NTSB — final report (<https://www.nts.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Reports/AIR2504.pdf>).

- NTSB — Boeing sanctioned for media briefing (<https://www.nts.gov/news/press-releases/Pages/NR20240627.aspx>).
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RELATION MEMORY

NEARBY [A Percentage Needs a Reference Frame](#) · Previous instalment in Journalism, Reassembled. Article 002 preserves the context behind derived percentages; Article 003 proposes preserving material unanswered questions and their changing state. Ordered navigation is recorded separately in the part system.

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