

How do lines of inquiry unfold? Insights from journalism *

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My aim here is to analyze a central, normatively evaluable way to extend lines of inquiry. The central claims in my analysis are these:

(1) Lines of inquiry are extended through the practice of *treating things as zetetically relevant to questions*.

(2) This practice can be better or worse along various axes, including a specifically zetetic way.

"Zetetic" here means: pertaining to inquiry.¹

To defend these claims, my strategy is to introduce the zetetic practice and its normative features by examining its relationship to something already well-understood: the ways that news stories produced by journalists frame events.² I'll then argue that the same core zetetic practice can be found across domains, just not in journalism. Finding the same practice across such different human settings suggests it is a core feature of inquiry.

If true, these claims are important because they define an axis along which lines of inquiry can be better or worse, and lets us analyze the relationships between this axis of evaluation and other axes, such as political and ethical ones. For instance, a zetetic flaw could be a political advantage for some people in a polity and a political disadvantage for others - a possibility made vivid by a kind of news journalism we will examine.

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¹ Friedman 2020, Falbo 2023

² Often inspired by Goffmann 1974, framing research has extensively analyzed framing in many different contexts, including framing of news stories, political issues, poll questions, candidacies, and policies. Framing of all of these things by mass media has demonstrable effects on public opinion (McCombs and Shaw 1972, Chong and Druckman 2007) and on political power generally (Entmann 2007), as does framing of issues by political movements (Snow et al 1986, Woodly 2015). Research of all these kinds has helped us understand framing effects in news story narratives.

To introduce the zetetic practice through its role in news stories, it will be useful to begin with the roles of inquiry in journalism.

1. What roles does inquiry play in news journalism?

A specific format for news writing became standard with the rise of the journalism as a profession in the early decades of the twentieth century. Its conceit is that publicly important parts of the ongoing flow of events should be organized into stories, headlined, and narrated in simple, jargon-free prose that puts a premium on easy comprehension. In his histories of journalism, sociologist Michael Schudson helpfully contrasts this kind of news journalism with lists of facts, collections of verbatim quotes, or other formats lacking any voice (written or spoken) intended to shape and intone its narrative form.³

In journalism of this kind inquiry plays at least three roles. First, reporters and editors figure out which questions to ask about a newsworthy or potentially newsworthy set of events. (This role may be best characterized as meta-inquiry, which is inquiry into which inquiries to undertake). Second, reporters seek to discover and verify answers to those questions, as well as basic "who" "what" "where" "when" "how" and "why" questions about key agents and happenings.⁴ This second role is central to "reporting" - journalism's word for its distinctive ways of gathering and verifying information. Third, from reporting, the published story will be built. In short, processes of inquiry produce the stories, and stories are organized around lines of inquiry.

To see these roles for inquiry at work, consider one of the breakdowns of water treatment facilities in Jackson, Mississippi.⁵ Suddenly no drinkable water flows from the faucets. A reporter sent to cover the emergency in Jackson has to decide which story to write - a decision that will be highly constrained by the questions specific to the situation that they set out to answer. They might focus on addressing questions that put readers into "horizontal" relationships with (other) residents:

- What are the impacts on daily life for people in Jackson?
- How are residents and businesses coping with the lack of safe running water?

...or one might focus on questions pertaining to "vertical" relationships between leaders and residents:

³ Schudson 1981, 2020. Even before journalism became a profession, with credential-granting institutions, it was practiced with this same ethos. A prime example is Ida B. Wells-Barnett who systematically collected statistics on lynching (Wells-Barnett 1892, Bay 2014).

⁴ These are explicit instructions in introductions to professional journalistic practice (see for example Kovach and Rosenthal 2001, p. 87).

⁵ A news story about one such breakdown is Rojas 2022.

- What is wrong with the water treatment plant?
- How did it come to be dysfunctional? Who was supposed to make sure this didn't happen?
- What would it take to fix it? What's the time frame?

As a third option, a reporter might orient their investigation and coverage around relationships among politicians, asking such questions as:

- What are public officials saying about the breakdown? Who are they blaming for it?
- What did the officials say to or about one another?

Some of these questions might emerge in the process of seeking answers to other questions, and ultimately the news article might be shaped by many different questions. No matter how they arise, the questions that are pursued will yield different lines of inquiry, creating different possible angles for a story on the water crisis. A news story produced using professionally normal procedures of reporting will guide readers along the lines of inquiry shaped by its selections of questions, even if it does not have the form of a Q&A.

In a flat-footed sense, a news story is simply the particular column published at a specific place and time. But when reporters create a narrative about a situation by combining what they find out with other facts, they decide what "the story" will be in a more specialized sense. When an editor asks the standard question about a reporter's first draft - "What's the story?" - they're asking for an organizing frame that abstracts from specific reported facts. Like framing devices of all kinds, a news story's narrative frame is designed to be a communicative tool that purports to make sense of a specific situation.⁶

Narrative frames can be characterized at greater or lesser degrees of abstraction. The questions that direct attention to "vertical" relationships between Jackson's leaders and residents characterize an accountability frame specifically with reference to the city's water crisis. Characterized at a higher level of abstraction, accountability frames for news stories in general detail how powerful public figures caused or failed to prevent harms to a public.

The different sets of potential questions about the water crisis may help us picture how a news story's narrative frame is built. The more details a story specifies about what's wrong with the treatment plant, for instance, the more specifically it will identify the things public officials are responsible for fixing. Reporting that focuses primarily on solutions to shared problems has an obvious normative dimension. By focusing on what exactly is wrong with the water treatment plant, a news story addresses residents as if they are people to whom leaders are accountable, and

⁶On the central feature of frames in general as communicative tools, see Camp 2019.

empowers residents with specific information that could figure in appeals to public officials. By contrast, focusing only on partisan bickering highlights a cynical, disempowered stance toward governance in which one is primarily a spectator. In these ways, depending on which set of questions is selected, extending lines of inquiry into those questions can build significantly different narrative frames.

The contrast between potential news stories illustrates how lines of inquiry could be evaluated along political axes. If we look more closely at how narrative frames are built from lines of inquiry, we'll be able to see a different, specifically zetetic axis along which lines of inquiry and the news story frames they structure can be better or worse.

2. How do lines of inquiry build narrative frames?

If a news story's narrative frame is built from lines of inquiry, how are lines of inquiry built? My answer is that whether they are rehearsed in a news story or developed by an individual inquirer, lines of inquiry unfold through the central practice of *treating things as zetetically relevant to questions*.

This answer brings us to claim (1), introduced earlier:

Claim (1): Lines of inquiry are extended through the practice of *treating things as zetetically relevant to questions*.

I did not use the specialized (italicized) vocabulary in discussing news coverage of Jackson's water crisis. But that discussion highlights reasons to think that the practice of treating things as relevant to questions builds frames of news stories. To see how, let us examine this practice more closely.

2.1 Zetetic relevance to a question

Discussions in multiple disciplines have uncovered several explanatorily powerful types of relevance, each tied to a specific theoretical purpose. In the philosophy of language, one of H. P. Grice's proposed rational maxims of conversation, "Be relevant", helped to lay the groundwork for conversation analysis. Since then, linguists have used the notion of relevance to a topic or a "question under discussion" to analyze a wide range of different conversational phenomena.⁷ In psychiatry, some experimental paradigms designed to study dynamics of attention rely on the idea that individuals vary in how powerfully disposed they are to remain focused on a single topic in their spontaneous flow of thought, before shifting to a new topic.⁸ This paradigm relies on a notion of topical or thematic relevance.

⁷ Grice 1975, Sperber and Wilson 1985, Roberts 1996.

⁸ Sripada et al 2020.

Whereas these examples concern relevance to a theme, a topic, or a conversation, zetetic relevance concerns a specific kind of relevance to a question. There is more than one way of treating things as zetetically relevant to a question that structures an inquiry. I'll focus on a kind of treatment that purports to: identify things on which a reasonable answer to the question depends.

Many kinds of things can be treated as zetetically relevant to a question in this sense. Each such thing extends inquiry via a different activity. For instance, what a person S regards as a reasonable answer to a question Q could easily depend on what S regards as the possible answers to Q. Given a question Q, and a person S who has not yet settled on an answer, S can come to treat a proposition as belonging or not belonging to the space of possible answers to Q that are within S's ken. Changes to what S regards as belonging to this kind of space of possible answers are ways of extending inquiry into Q. Making such changes are one part of the complex practice of treating things as zetetically relevant to questions.

In this paper, though, among the things that can be treated as zetetically relevant to questions, I focus instead primarily on other questions and facts.⁹

To illustrate, suppose a subject S starts out wondering about a question Q1:

Q1. "Should the president run for re-election?"

Let's assume that in asking Q1, S is asking whether it would be a good outcome, all things considered, if the president ran for re-election. That's what S means by "should".

In wondering about Q1, S formulates a subsequent question, Q2:

Q2. "How old is the president?"

...and S treats Q2 as relevant to Q1, in the following way: S is using Q2 to identify some of the things on which (according to S) a reasonable answer to Q1 depends, such as his age. For this reason, S is disposed to consider an answer to Q2 as some sort of progress in answering Q1.

Because S treats Q2 as relevant to addressing Q1 in this way, if S learns that the president is eighty-something, learning his age will bring to mind various likely consequences of being eighty-something, and will prompt S to think through how those consequences bear on the two main answers to Q1 (yes, run! vs. no, don't run!).

⁹ Some other things that can be treated as zetetically relevant to questions include epistemic feelings such as dissonance, hunches, and other 'gut feelings', false claims, and presuppositions of questions. An example of the last item is coming in section 4, in the discussion of tobacco industry propaganda.

In what way might S take the president's age to bear on the possible answers to Q1? S may infer that the age-fact favors or disfavors one of the main answers to Q1. Or S may *consider whether* the fact that he is eighty-something counts in favor of either of the answers, or counts against it. Here, S would be treating the age-fact provisionally, in a suppositional mode, as a piece of evidence for or against one of the two main answers to Q1. As with other modes of supposition, S could *treat* the fact as relevant to Q1 as a way to think through whether it is actually is relevant or not without endorsing it as relevant, just as one could use suppositional reasoning to explore the consequences of a claim on which one has suspended judgment.

S might decide on reflection that the age-fact counts against his running for re-election. Here, S would be endorsing the status of the age-fact as relevant to Q1. She'd be treating the age-fact, non-provisionally, as a piece of evidence that can rationally influence her credal distribution over the possible answers she recognizes to Q1.

In this example, as a result of treating the *question* Q2 as relevant to Q1, S goes on to treat a *fact* that the president is eighty-something as relevant to Q1. The fact is an answer to Q2, and these treatments extend her line of inquiry.

All of these ways of treating questions and facts as relevant to a question have direct analogs in news stories. Just as a news story can treat facts and questions as relevant to the question "Why is there no drinkable water in Jackson, MS?," as we saw earlier, a news story (or an opinion piece) can treat questions about age and aging as relevant to Q1 in the same sense. Similarly, a news story could discuss the age-facts in a suppositional, suggestive, or suspended mode, without endorsing its relevance to whether the president should run for re-election. It could do so by saying things like "According to X, candidates over eighty are unfit to serve as president", without any accompanying assertions that age per se, contrary to X, is not after all relevant to question Q1.

These examples from individual inquiry and news stories suggest that treating things as relevant to questions extends lines of inquiry. These considerations support claim (1):

(1) Lines of inquiry are extended through the practice of *treating things as zetetically relevant to questions*.

2.2 Normative standards treating things as zetetically relevant to questions

Let's turn to the normative features of treating things as relevant to questions.

Suppose that after thinking some more about whether the president should run for re-election, S comes to think Q2 is not after all so relevant to Q1, and instead what's far more relevant to Q1 is a different set of questions, Q3:

Q3. "What political things need to happen? Is the president poised to accomplish them? Is anyone else better poised than he is?"

S might express this adjustment in her inquiry by saying something like: "Q2 is the wrong question. The president's age doesn't really matter. What matters is what he can accomplish politically." The questions in Q3 should determine whether the president should run for re-election, S comes to think - not his age. And so S starts to wonder about Q3, trying to identify what political things need to happen, whether the president is poised to accomplish them, and so on.

When S wonders about Q3 and generates possible answers to it, S treats those potential answers to Q3 as relevant to Q1, by considering whether or how strongly they favor either answer to Q1 ("Yes, run!" vs. "No, don't run!").

Here we see once again how the way of treating things as zetetically relevant to a question at issue here directs an inquiry in a not purely procedural sense.¹⁰ Questions in general are ways to set an agenda for future thought – a point developed sharply by Yumusak (2022). Questions that are treated as relevant to other questions, in the way described here, set an agenda in a specific way, when they are pursued as part of an inquiry. Changing which questions are treated as relevant to a question Q can change what S counts as evidence, or as reasonable support, for an answer to Q.

In the example so far, an individual inquirer S is applying their own zetetic normative standards in treating first Q2 and then Q3 as identifying some of the things on which a reasonable answer to Q1 depends. When we shift from individuals to a news story that treats Q2 as zetetically relevant to whether the president should run for re-election, the news story expresses a zetetic normative standard according to which a reasonable answer to Q1 depends on the age-facts.

As S's self-correction illustrates, normative standards such as the ones operative in S or in a news story are subject to evaluation. If a newspaper article devoted to whether the president should run for re-election focused only on Q2, and a media

¹⁰ By contrast, consider the notion of treating things as relevant to a procedure for reasonably answering a question. Suppose that S wants to find a pack of gum she just bought, and as a result, she tries to find out the answer to QA: Is the gum I just bought in the green bag or the blue bag? (Example adapted from Friedman ms 2022). But when the gum-seeker tries to look in the bags, she finds that both bags are missing, prompting a subsequent question QB: Where are the bags?. Answering QB would advance inquiry by readying the gum-seeker to get evidence that would answer QA. But notice that QB may not identify anything on which a reasonable answer (or other response) to QA depends, as S sees it. In this scenario, S is treating QB as relevant to her own procedure of finding the answer to QA, and not treating QB as if it identified anything on which a reasonable answer to QA depends, which is the key to the type of zetetic relevance developed in the rest of this paper.

critic had the same view as self-correcting S, the critic would think the questions or facts it treats as zetetically relevant to Q1 are actually not ones on which a reasonable answer to Q1 depends.

News stories make particularly vivid that the zetetic axis of evaluation I've highlighted is distinct from other axes of evaluation. Our media critic might find the news story to be effective rhetorically, politically, even economically (attracting a lot of readers), while still being flawed zetetically. These axes intersect in all sorts of ways, as when zetetic flaws can be politically beneficial for some and treacherous for others.¹¹

S and the media critic apply their own standards of what counts as a factor on which a reasonable answer to Q1 depends. These kinds of criticisms provide some support for central claim (2):

(2) The practice of treating things as zetetically relevant to questions can be better or worse along various axes, including a specifically zetetic way.¹²

At a minimum, the practice can be better or worse, according to standards held by subjects like S or our hypothetical media critic.

Is there a standard external to any specific inquirer, that the personal standards of S or the media critic can flout, match, or approximate? Could they be holding themselves to such an external standard? If so, then reasons to believe in such standards provide further support for claim (2).

These are fundamental normative questions about how lines of inquiry should unfold. My answers are: Yes and yes. If these answers are correct, then there are zetetic norms that set standards for how lines of inquiry should unfold, not just standards that happen to be held by specific inquirers or expressed by specific news stories. I'm not going to defend these Yeses from first principles, but I'll give a type of example that I think casts them in a favorable light.¹³ This type of example comes

¹¹ Dotson 2011, 2017, 2018 analyzes a range of cases in which political power that depends on epistemic shortcomings. She focuses on epistemic practices distinct from zetetic relevance to a question.

¹² Some readers may wonder whether, given a question Q, treating anything as a thing on which a reasonable answer to Q depends is ultimately just a way of treating it as bearing on a question evidentially. If so, then it might seem that the zetetic axis of evaluation identified here is a species of epistemic evaluation. I return to this issue in section 5.

¹³ Other epistemologists have discussed how lines of inquiry about specific topics should or should not unfold. For instance, Rima Basu (2023) addresses this question for professional philosophy, focusing on which questions it should and should not discuss, and Audrey Yap (2021) addresses the potential ill-effects of inquiry by inquirers who are privileged in various ways relative to the people whose experiences they are trying to understand. Their normative proposals and warnings are tied to inquiries with specific contents. By contrast,

from a large category of news stories brought into focus by the Apology movement among historically white newspapers.¹⁴

3. One hundred forty years of crime coverage in the Kansas City *Star-Times*

During the remarkable year 2020, a large handful of historically white newspapers in the United States issued apologies for their news coverage of their publics.¹⁵ The most extensive apology came from the Kansas City *Star*, which issued a six-part retrospective of one hundred forty years of their coverage of black Kansas Citians.¹⁶

Adhering to the idea that public apologies should specify exactly what wrongs need repair, each part of the retrospective closely examined coverage of past reporting on six different topics, including school desegregation, the 1976 Kansas City flood, and crime coverage. Across all the topics, and in well over a century of coverage, the *Star* identifies a pattern of flaws of omission and commission, all of which showed disregard and lack of concern for black Kansas Citians, a group nearly co-extensive with residents on the East side of the city.

The *Star* examines an article written in February 1922 which frames a police raid on the home of two brothers, Frank and James Elliott, as a story about the white police officers who conducted the raid.¹⁷ The story's headline, "Two Patrolmen are Shot" prompts an orienting question: How did two Kansas City police officers come to be wounded? Let's call that question Q1*. The story begins by reporting that the two officers entered the house of "a couple of Negro men" investigating them for possessing whisky during Prohibition. The men's names are not published. The officers were named: they were Charles Barger and Howard Pollard. The other facts reported by the *Star* are these: Officer Pollard went upstairs, began searching through a trunk, and found a pistol. Pollard claimed that one of the black men attacked him. As Barger followed, he was hit by shots. The story concludes with a list of 29-year-old Barger's war medals from WW1.

Some of the facts reported in the story help answer Q1*, such as where the officers were when they were shot, and who shot them (Frank Elliott). But the article fails to address questions whose answers would clearly help answer Q1*, including:

- How did the officers enter the house?
- Why did the Elliot brothers get their pistols?

the normative features of treating things as zetetically relevant to questions is supposed to be general, not limited to inquiry about specific topics.

¹⁴ The term "Apology movement" comes from Staples 2021.

¹⁵ Staples op cit. Cities in which such newspapers apologized include Los Angeles, California; Raleigh, North Carolina; Orlando, Florida; and Birmingham, Alabama.

¹⁶ Fannin 2020.

¹⁷ Adler 2020.

When X shoots Y, reporting often focuses on facts that might bear on X's motive. Such facts contribute directly to answering the generic version of Q1*: "How did Y come to be shot?". To find out such facts, a reporter would have to follow the Elliot brothers' paths through the evening, seeking answers to the basic questions above about the circumstances of the shooting. As the *Star's* 2020 apologetic retrospective points out, we know the answers to these omitted questions because they were reported in the *Kansas City Call*, a black newspaper whose coverage of the violence starts with the headline "Home invaded, man killed". The man killed was Frank Elliott, who was shot in his home by Officer Barger, and died the next day.

The *Call* does not orient its story around the police officers' path through the evening. But they do explain how the police officers came to be shot by Frank Elliott, and they report facts that would bear on his motive. It reports that the officers entered the house violently, with no warrant, and found no wrong-doing or disturbance at all.

In their detailed retrospective, the *Kansas City Star* in 2020 is apologizing not just for this story from 1922, but for the more general invariant perspective that shaped over a century of similar articles.¹⁸ This perspective has long been the target of similar criticisms of news journalism.¹⁹ It includes the presumption that police officers are effective, law-abiding crime-detectors, whereas black Kansas Citians are regularly adjacent to trouble and do not deserve concern. Each of these roles is readily highlighted by the other.²⁰

We can see the perspective at work by considering points at which it is congruent with the article.

Congruently with the part of the perspective according to which the officers could not have done anything wrong, the article includes facts about Barger's WW1 awards, and treats the police report as part of the machinery of record, as opposed to falling under the category of sources that need verification.²¹

¹⁸ Invariance across contexts is a key feature of perspectives. For three distinct approaches to perspectives that share this key feature, see Wright 1937, Camp 2013 and 2019, Yumusak 2022.

¹⁹ See e.g., the 1968 Kerner Commission Report (Cobb 2021). More generally, the existence of the "Black press" testifies to the need for investigative practices that would not be needed without the shortcomings of other newspapers (Washburn 2006).

²⁰ For analysis of how social roles can form clusters in which one role makes other roles legible, creating widely recognizable narratives, see Collins 1990.

²¹ "The machinery of record" was Walter Lippmann's term for sources of verification (Lippmann 1922, chapter 23).

Congruently with the part of the perspective according to which there are no grounds for readers to feel concern for the Elliot brothers, these brothers are not referred to by their names, the story omits any facts about what anyone lost in losing Frank Elliott, and it does not open the question of whether the Elliot brothers had done anything wrong. As a result of not raising this question, it does not evaluate possible answers to it or discuss anything that might help decide the matter. These omissions create an information gap that can be easily filled by some readers' presumptions that black Kansas Citians on the East side tend to get up to no good. Given such presumptions, a need for effective police officers makes sense, and indeed the story portrays Barger and Pollock as sympathetic heroes acting in self-defense against "a couple of Negro men".

Readers who already share the perspective will find nothing to challenge it either in this story, or, as the apology makes clear, in over a century of other news stories about crime in Kansas City. We can see here an illustration of philosopher Elisabeth Camp's claim that framing devices help comprehend perspectives. Camp's examples focus on all sorts of framing devices lacking narrative structure (such as the telling detail or loaded phrase), but her point extends to narrative frames. The news story's framing of events on one February night in 1922 expresses a much less fluid, terrifyingly recalcitrant perspective. The framing of this particular story is a representative example of the perspective that informed the way the newspaper wrote the news. The longstanding perspective, and the patterns in story-frames that express it: these things are what the *Star* and other newspapers are apologizing for. The frames are built by treating things as zetetically relevant to questions.

4. A challenge to the zetetic analysis of news story frames

On my zetetic analysis, the 1922 article expresses the newsroom's perspective in part through the question that structures it (Q1*: "How did two patrol officers come to be shot?"), the selection of facts that it treats as relevant to that question (that they went upstairs, looked in a trunk, found a gun; that Barger earned medals in WW1) and partly through its failure to treat subsequent questions as relevant (Did they find anything illegal going on? Why did the Frank Elliot shoot at the officers?). The article's frame is built by Q1 and the things treated as relevant to its answer. And this treatment exhibits a zetetic flaw. To correct the flaw, different questions should have been asked, and different facts should have been treated as relevant to Q1. By not following the Elliot Brothers' path through the evening, the story excludes facts that would show the illegitimate nature of the officer's violence. In this way, the zetetic flaws yield political advantages for those invested in disempowering black Kansas Citians.

The zetetic analysis is important, if it is correct, because it illustrates a distinct kind of flaw that lines of inquiry can have. The *Star* story is very probably full of verified facts, which readers can *know* on the basis of its reporting. Officer Barger was a decorated WW1 veteran. He did enter the Elliot brothers' house on that night. Frank Elliott did shoot him. The story's zetetic flaws do not operate through falsehoods, or

through failures to provide evidence for any of its stated claims. Instead, its flaws operate through its selection of questions and facts that shape its line of inquiry.²²

The conceit of the zetetic analysis is that this article is produced by inquiry. Specifically, it's produced by the practice of treating things as relevant to questions, and this practice is enacted on the page. In this respect, it is like countless other stories in the *Star* and other newspapers written during a period stretching over a century that express the same perspective. I now consider a challenge to this analysis.

The challenge grants that the *Star's* portrayal of the Elliott brothers as deserving the domination they received depends on not properly answering its own orienting question. It also grants the two central claims about the role in inquiry of treating things as zetetically relevant to questions:

(1) Lines of inquiry are extended through the practice of *treating things as zetetically relevant to questions*.

(2) This practice can be better or worse along various axes, including a specifically zetetic way.

What it contests is how broadly these claims apply to news journalism. According to the challenge, these claims do not apply so broadly to include articles like the one from 1922 in the *Star*. The key target of the challenge is thus the claim we can call the Zetetic News Analysis:

Zetetic News Analysis: The practice of *treating things as zetetically relevant to questions* builds the frames of news stories, including ones that express the kind of perspective for which many historically white newspapers apologized in 2020.

The challenger rejects the zetetic news analysis. On a competing analysis, the *Star* article exhibits other kinds of practices than the zetetic ones I've described. A defense of this competing analysis might draw on two sets of reasons.

²² Some readers may be interested in how existing theories of how lines of inquiry should unfold would say about the Kansas City *Star* example. Such readers may want to consider Denis Whitcomb and Jared Millson's 2023 paper developing erotetic logic, in which they define, for a formal system, notions of "evocation" of a question by a proposition, and "erotetic implication" of questions by other questions. Roughly, a question cannot be evoked or erotetically implied by a formula if the formula has a false presupposition. Their definitions are not meant to provide any principled way to select from among the questions that are evoked or erotetically implied those that "should" be asked, by zetetic standards. For instance, they would not rank as comparatively better or worse the line of inquiry exhibited in the Kansas City *Star's* coverage of the violence at the Elliott brothers' house and the Kansas City *Call's* coverage. By contrast, the zetetic axis of evaluation discussed here would rank the *Star's* coverage as zetetically worse.

First, the reporters did not seek out answers to Q1*, the way the Kansas City *Call* reporters did when they discovered the police officers did not have a warrant, interviewed James Elliot, and found that his landlady witnessed the raid and heard the officers yelling slurs at the two brothers. The article in the *Call* shows that getting this evidence was possible. These facts might be taken to suggest that the *Star's* reporters were not trying to treat anything as relevant to Q1*, and consequently the article is not the product of the zetetic practice my analysis highlights. If this particular article expresses the perspective without engaging in this zetetic practice, presumably other articles expressing the same perspective don't engage it, either.

If the story is not built by treating things as relevant to questions, what kinds of practices construct it? As a second basis for rejecting the zetetic news analysis, the challenger might propose in its place that the article's role is to reinforce racist presumptions and justify domination of Kansas Citians on the East Side - whether by design, or by unreflective participation in cultural common sense that influenced journalistic practices among historically white newspapers.²³ Portraying a scenario that supports such domination, and doing so as part of normal journalistic practice, is after all part of what the newspaper is apologizing for. So where my analysis finds flawed, politically inflected inquiry, the challenger finds at best the mere appearance of inquiry, without the actual practice of treating things (facts, or other questions) as zetetically relevant to Q1*.

4.1 The role of inquiry in news stories, revisited

My reply to the challenge is that the zetetic practice of treating things as relevant to questions is practically unavoidable within a genre of news stories to which the body of stories apologized for belongs. The same reporters and editors who produced this story produced countless other stories by adhering to what was considered normal journalistic practice. Police reports in the United States have long been regarded part of the machinery of record. If a reporter draws on a source to answer Q1*, it is treating that testimony from that source as something on which a reasonable answer to Q1* depends. In the U.S., police reports have only in the twenty-first century come to be regarded by historically white newspapers as sources that need verification, instead of sources that provide verification.²⁴

Further support for the idea that the Kansas City *Star* article and others like it treat things as relevant to orienting questions such as "How did the police officers come to be shot?" comes from considering what public discourse is like when it raises questions, but not in order to address them. Consider two questions made salient by

²³ On cultural common sense, see Woodly 2015, who develops ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, and Siegel 2017, chapter ten.

²⁴ The Washington Post Fatal Force database was initiated by journalist Wesley Lowery and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 2016.

<http://washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

tobacco industry spokespersons in materials designed to debunk the claim that the smoking causes cancer:

Q4. Why isn't throat cancer prevalent among smokers?

Q5. Why don't smokers who get lung cancer get it in both lungs?

In his study of tobacco industry propaganda, historian Robert Proctor notes that even when these questions were raised in pamphlets, answers were known but not rehearsed. (The answers: throat tissue doesn't absorb smoke as easily as lung cells; and if people with cancer in one lung survive long enough, they do tend to get cancer in the other lung. Lung cancer has a long latency period).²⁵ In the context of tobacco-industry propaganda, these questions are not addressed, and nothing is treated as zetetically relevant to them, because their role is not to set an agenda for inquiry. Their role is to be vehicles for presuppositions that are supposed to undermine another claim, or someone's credibility, by prompting a line of reasoning:

"If smoking caused lung cancer, then smokers would get throat cancer, but they don't, so it doesn't."

By contrast, the *Star* article oriented around Q1* makes it easy for readers who share the underlying perspective to feel that they know the answer, and have been led to it by the reporter's line of inquiry. Part of the rhetorical means by which news reports portray domination of black Kansas Citians in a favorable light is to raise such questions as Q1*, and use framing devices to suggest an answer, such as leaving out the Elliot brothers' names and all other information about them, describing them only as "a couple of Negro men". The story can sensibly be read as treating the fact that the people in the house were "a couple of Negro men" as relevant to how the police officers came to be shot. It's as if this racial classification is all the implied reader has to know, to know how the officers came to be shot.²⁶

Given the ethos of professional journalism, the practice of treating things as relevant to questions is not easily avoided. When professional journalism was forged in the United States in the early twentieth century, part of its stated purpose was to communicate on a mass scale information that is important for publics to know about. According to this vision for journalism, there is much of importance that publics would not otherwise be in a position to know without reporters who gather the news and convey it to them. Reporting is supposed to transform a state of ignorance into states of belief. Given that the conceit of journalism is to inform its publics, its tone and format create a presumption of informing readers about the specific situations reported.

More generally, any genre that purports to inform an otherwise ignorant reader with facts will engage the same zetetic practice. Even pro-tobacco-industry

²⁵ Proctor 1996, chapter 5.

²⁶ Thanks to Kristie Dotson for putting the point this way.

propaganda is engaged in zetetic practice - just not with respect to Q4 and Q5. The pamphlets Proctor analyzes treat the presuppositions of Q4 and Q5 as relevant to the question that orients their propaganda, which is: Does smoking cause lung cancer?²⁷ The propaganda is designed to get readers to think they have learned that the answer is “No”.

And here lies an important feature of *treating* things as relevant to questions: S can treat something (eg Q4 and Q5's presuppositions) as relevant to a Q, without *taking* or *believing* that it is relevant. It might be all a sham, designed for political advantage. But a sham can be effective in part because it exploits the practice of treating things as relevant to questions. Flawed inquiry is still inquiry.

5. How do zetetic practices relate to inquiry?

In this paper, I've focused on the zetetic practice of treating things as relevant to questions. Most of the discussion concerned treating facts and other questions as relevant to questions. As noted in section 2.1, these are not the only things that can be treated as relevant to questions, but they are the kinds of things most relevant to the zetetic analysis of the Kansas City *Star* example.

The example from the *Star* is useful because it lets us see how problems that take the form of selection rather than false or unjustified claims can flow from a repeatable, general perspective reflected in over a century of news reporting, generating myriad articles with similar flaws. I've made the case that these problems compromise a kind of zetetic practice central to inquiry, and integral to journalism.

I've said a lot about the relationship of journalism to the zetetic practice highlighted here, but what exactly is the relationship between this zetetic practice and inquiry?

The critical discussion of the zetetic analysis in section 4 suggests the following picture of this relationship: the zetetic practice of taking things to be relevant to a question Q is the activation of a disposition that can be grounded in different ways.

When someone simply wants to know whether smoking causes cancer, or how two officers came to be shot, or what happened at Frank and John Elliott's house on a terrible night in February 1922, and they go about trying to find out by assessing what might be relevant to answering these questions, what the possible answers are, which facts favor or disfavor various possible answers, and so on, they engage in zetetic activities. They are also disposed to engage these activities, and their

²⁷ This example shows why presuppositions of questions belongs on the list of things that can be treated as zetetically relevant to questions, along with facts, questions, and epistemic feelings. Note that since presuppositions can be false, they are not necessarily facts.

dispositions are grounded in what Friedman has called an “interrogative attitude” - a standing desiderative attitude toward questions.²⁸

The same activities of treating things as relevant to a question Q, and corresponding dispositions, can be grounded in attitudes that are not even approximately desires to answer Q. We saw an example in a piece of propaganda produced by the tobacco industry. The propaganda-laden pamphlet does not manifest anyone’s interrogative attitude toward “Does smoking cause cancer?”, but it does treat things as relevant to this question. Specifically, it treats the presuppositions of other questions in this way (questions Q4 and Q5 in the previous section). The zetetic activity rehearsed on the pamphlet’s pages is grounded in the rhetorical and political purposes of the document. Those purposes are to make people believe smoking doesn’t cause cancer, that supposed experts who say otherwise are not credible, and so on.

So zetetic practices can be grounded by something other than an interrogative attitude. Friedman makes a similar point, when she presents a version of a private detective Inspector Morse who secretly commits a murder, is then called to investigate it, and “goes through the motions” of investigating to keep up appearances of being a detective.²⁹ Here, the interrogative attitude is missing, but the dispositions they can ground are in place. Morse-the-schemer performs the corresponding activities, but his dispositions are grounded in a different way.

The fact that zetetic practice I’ve highlighted in this paper can arise from such different grounds has two important upshots.

First, the distinction between zetetic practices and their grounds generates different things we could identify with inquiring: the zetetic practices, grounded specifically in interrogative attitudes; or the zetetic practices, regardless of how they are grounded. Whichever zetetic practices we assign the vocabulary of “inquiry” to, we can assess those practices in the way I’ve tried to illustrate here. Something could be treated as relevant to a question (in the sense of being something on which a reasonable answer to the question depends) when it isn’t relevant (the fact that Barger earned medals World War I is not zetetically relevant to how he came to be shot, but the news article can be read as treating it that way). And something relevant to a question can fail to be treated as such (“Why did Frank Elliott shot at the officers?” and “What were the Elliott brother’s paths through the evening?” are relevant to the “How did the officers come to be shot?” but are not treated as such in the article we’ve discussed.) I’ve spoken of “lines of inquiry unfolding” in cases where there are zetetic practices, but there may not be any interrogative attitude underlying them.

This type of case brings us to the second upshot. It is often easier to identify zetetic practices than it is to discern what kinds of grounds they have. In the Kansas City

²⁸ Friedman 2013, see also Carruthers 2018.

²⁹ Friedman 2019, p. 301.

Star article, I've argued, there are zetetic practices that I've described in terms of treating things as zetetically relevant to questions. What, though, are the grounds of these practices, in that example? The journalists and editors were not scheming propagandists. The journalism that produced the article was culturally normal for white newspapers. Perhaps the zetetic practices rehearsed in the article were grounded in the journalists' interrogative attitudes, but they need not have been. The producers of that article could have been devoid of interest, curiosity, or any other desiderative stance toward the circumstances of the deaths they set out to investigate. Like the alienated Morse, they have just gone through the motions -- in their case, not to keep up appearances, but to get their job as journalists done.

Whatever underlying grounds the journalists' zetetic practices may have had, whether those grounds were interrogative attitudes or not, they were modulated by the perspective that informed it and so many other similar articles about Kansas Citians on the East side of town.

Putting these two upshots together, the zetetic practices emerge as their own target for normative evaluation, regardless of their grounds. These practices are an important category for theorizing. They are a locus of influence by perspectives, both within individuals and in journalism. And they are a means of making things salient in mass communication, both in journalism and other mass media, in ways that stimulate and prompt the zetetic practices of others. The practices play these roles, whether we identify them per se with "inquiring", or we reserve the label "inquiring" only for those practices when they are undergirded by specific type of desiderative attitude.

But what kind of normative evaluation is operative, when we assess these zetetic practices along a zetetic axis? When we focus on treating facts and other questions as relevant to a question Q, it may seem that this axis is directly or indirectly about the role of evidence in answering Q. Treating facts as zetetically relevant to a question Q is treating them as favoring or disfavoring possible answers to Q; treating other questions as zetetically relevant to Q, where this is treating them as identifying (through their correct answers) more facts that favor or disfavor possible answers to Q. I've talked about a "distinctly zetetic" axis of evaluation, but is this axis really distinct from the kinds of epistemic evaluations concerned with evidence for or against possible answers to Q? (Here I return to an issue flagged in footnote 13).

It may seem not to be so distinct, when we focus only on treating facts and other questions as relevant to a question Q. But when we shift to other ways of treating things as zetetically relevant to a question, the axis of evaluation is not as easily rendered in terms of evidence. Given a question Q, which facts or subsequent questions a reasonable answer to Q depends on is sensitive to the space of possible answers to Q, where this kind of answer space is not limited by the ken of a specific inquirer. When a Kansas City *Star* journalist asks in 1922 "How did the officers come to be shot?", and the answer space should include hypotheses specifying police

misconduct. The *Star* journalist may not have any evidence for police misconduct, and nothing in their culturally normal journalist practice may give them any such evidence. And perhaps the individual journalist does not even consider the hypothesis that the police did wrong – they may be so deeply embedded in their white newsroom’s cultural common sense that this hypothesis is not for them a live possibility. As the philosopher Charles Mills observed, this kind of oblivion is epistemically compromising.³⁰ We need analytic tools to specify how, and one such tool is the idea of an answer space that contains the hypothesis of which our hypothetical oblivious journalist remains ignorant.³¹ But the inquiry would be better if at the outset, such scenarios were left open. (Indeed leaving it open is exactly the sort of thing sometimes praised as methodological “objectivity” in journalism).³² If they were left open, other questions probing those scenarios might get asked, and other facts treated as relevant to them.

I’ve spoken of “distinctively zetetic” practices, with “distinctively zetetic axis of evaluation”, to emphasize that the kind of flaw to which I’ve drawn attention could co-exist with various other kinds of advantages. If X is better along axis A while being worse along axis B, then axis A must be different from axis B. But if someone wrongly includes or excludes something from a space of possible answers in their ken, is the flaw epistemic? Or could the practice be fine in all epistemic respects, but flawed in this one? Some readers may want an answer. I won’t offer one. My only observation is that such a practice, it seems, can’t be made epistemically better by successfully identifying evidence that favors or disfavors possible answers to Q in the answer space they recognize, because these practices determine what is treated as a “live” answer in the first place. Perhaps there is some other way for them to count as “epistemic”, but I won’t try to settle that question here.

Conclusion: on the methodological role of historical examples

I conclude with a methodological comment. One approach to the theory of inquiry focuses on the nature, structure, and roles in the mind; articulates specific questions, problems, or challenges related to those things; and draws on examples (whether hypothetical or actual) purely in the service of understanding them. The agenda is set by the questions, problems or challenges that can be articulated in abstract terms – such as what inquiry is, or how zetetic and epistemic norms relate to one another. In this approach, the value of examples lies purely in their dialectical role, not their specific content or any surrounding context.

A different approach focuses on practices of inquiry as we find them in certain broad historical contexts – such as journalism; and then formulates specific

³⁰ Mills 2007.

³¹ This kind of ignorance is theorized at length by Miller Larsen 2023. It is also related to Habgood-Coote’s analysis of “bad questions” in (unpublished manuscript).

³² For discussion of some of the complexities surrounding this notion, see the Nieman foundation discussion from 2022: <https://nieman.harvard.edu/articles/objectivity-deborah-douglas-susanna-siegel/>

questions, problems, or challenges related to understanding inquiry as it occurs in those contexts. The answers or solutions may be more general than the specific practices that prompt the inquiry. But the historically specific practices illustrated by the examples are the subject-matter. As a result, the surrounding context matters a lot more than it would in the first approach.

The discussion here is a hybrid of these approaches. I have tried to analyze a general type of zetetic practice, at the same time as I've tried to understand some central features of journalism at specific time and place. The value of this kind of hybrid, as I see it, is that we avoid two risks and gain two benefits. Without the historically specific phenomena, and fed a diet restricted to examples that need no historical context, a theory of inquiry risks getting diverted away from the analytic tools it would ultimately need to find application to inquiry in the wild. That's the first risk. The second risk is that we might become experts in inquiry, without ever becoming familiar with how zetetic practices actually operate in high stakes, socially embedded cases. From the other direction, by formulating general problems, questions, or challenges, we gain a framework for discussing historically specific phenomena in general terms. That's the first benefit. And the second one is that we gain a chance to orient ourselves in a reflective way toward those historically specific phenomena, and to clarify what they may mean for us.

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