

AIDS, Activism, and the Limits of Journalism: Remembering Randy Shilts

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Abstract

This study examines Randy Shilts's obituaries to explore how journalism's boundary work both includes and constrains marginalized voices. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, we investigate how 21 obituaries portray Shilts as a pioneering journalist whose work is frequently reframed through AIDS activism, ultimately consolidating his legacy around a singular crisis and tightly linking the two. Drawing on theories of boundary work and collective memory, this research highlights journalism's ongoing struggle with identity, activism, and professional legitimacy. Findings reveal that while Shilts's reporting broadened journalism's scope to include LGBTQ+ journalists, his posthumous remembrance reflects persistent tensions regarding the authority, autonomy, and activism of marginalized journalists. His legacy is shaped by journalism's selective memory, which frames AIDS as a historical rather than an ongoing issue. It emphasizes how journalism polices its boundaries, even in how it remembers its own.

Keywords

journalism history, media and sexuality, journalism ethics, critical discourse analysis, cultural resistance, LGBTQ+ studies

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The boundaries of journalism have long been defined by decisions regarding whose voices and stories are considered legitimate, a process closely linked to the competition for legitimacy and authority within the field (Carlson, 2015). LGBTQ+ journalists and outlets are often marginalized in this competitive media environment, framed as outsiders to prevailing norms of objectivity and professionalism, and judged as less legitimate than their counterparts (Gross, 2001). In the 20th century, LGBTQ+ issues were frequently sensationalized or overlooked by the press. Coverage of the AIDS epidemic further revealed the biases and inadequacies in journalism's treatment of LGBTQ+ issues, with AIDS often portrayed as a moral indictment of the gay community, reinforcing stereotypes of promiscuity and "deviance" rather than being recognized as a critical public health concern (D'Emilio, 1998). Despite resistance and prejudice, LGBTQ+ journalists have played a crucial role in challenging damaging narratives and expanding accurate coverage (D'Emilio, 1998; Wilk, 2023). In 1981, Randy Shilts became one of the first openly gay reporters at a major outlet when he joined the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He was the first newspaper reporter to cover the AIDS epidemic and the LGBTQ+ community full-time (D'Emilio, 1998; Wilk, 2023). His reporting sparked criticism of his editorial choices and his ability to maintain journalistic objectivity, yet he also garnered praise for drawing attention to a community largely ignored by much of the press (Wilk, 2023).

To understand Shilts' legacy, this study examines the press narratives surrounding him at the time of his death from AIDS-related complications (Wilk, 2023). By focusing solely on obituaries, this research aims to understand how media outlets framed his legacy, how journalistic norms and values influenced that framing, and how broader societal attitudes toward LGBTQ+ journalists and AIDS activism shaped (and permeated) the discourse. Drawing on theories of boundary work (Bourdieu, 1993; Carlson, 2015), this study examines how obituaries critically shape collective memory, reflecting the boundaries of authority, legitimacy, and objectivity in journalism. This research highlights the marginalization or recognition of LGBTQ+ individuals in mainstream journalism and obituary narratives, contributing to scholarship on LGBTQ+ journalists and boundary work, an area where research is scarce (Johnson, 2025b).

Literature Review

Negotiating Legitimacy: The Boundaries of Journalism

Carlson (2015) explains that "whatever is distinct about journalism must be continuously constructed" (p. 2), emphasizing that journalism's defining characteristics are not static but must be actively negotiated and reaffirmed. The question of who or what qualifies as a journalist has been a longstanding debate, with scholars and practitioners unable to reach a unified definition (Carlson, 2015; Singer, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2015). This ongoing contestation represents boundary work, a process closely tied to the competition for legitimacy and authority within the field, where those deemed legitimate gain access to institutional resources

(Carlson, 2015). Boundary work helps reinforce journalism's credibility, authority, and societal relevance by positioning certain actors or practices as essential to journalism and others as peripheral or illegitimate.

Bourdieu's field theory (1993) provides a perspective for understanding how professional fields establish boundaries that distinguish legitimate practices by accumulating cultural capital, asserting authority within the field, and continuously negotiating power dynamics. For instance, traditional news outlets have historically resisted recognizing citizen journalism or alternative media as legitimate reporting methods despite their increasing influence and role in informing the public (Singer, 2015). There are three key types of boundary work: expulsion, in which established actors exclude outsiders or rivals to maintain control; expansion, which extends the field's reach to enhance legitimacy; and protection of autonomy, where the field defends its independence from external influences (Carlson, 2015). Each type of boundary work can be observed within journalistic discourse, which Carvalho (2008) defines as "the discursive construction of events, problems, and positions by social actors" and the "discursive strategies that they employ" (p. 161). Journalistic discourse includes the professional conventions, ideological assumptions, and practices that shape how news is produced, structured, and understood by audiences. It is time-sensitive, evolving in response to shifting political, social, and technological contexts while maintaining normative claims about objectivity, credibility, and authority (Reynolds, 2019). Previous research emphasized how journalistic discourse can distinguish between journalists and non-journalists through institutional gatekeeping and professional norms, shaping who is included in mainstream journalism and how credibility and legitimacy are constructed (Carlson, 2015; Schmidt, 2023; Singer, 2015).

Carlson (2015) found that boundary-setting through expulsion is the most common strategy in journalism, reflecting the field's ongoing struggle to define itself by excluding others. Expulsion strategies emerge in newsroom hiring practices, leadership structures, and representation, where gatekeeping mechanisms have resulted in the underrepresentation of women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ journalists (D'Emilio, 1998). One of the most enduring tools of expulsion has been the profession's reliance on objectivity as a key benchmark for journalistic legitimacy, generally understood as the ability to report on a story without inserting any personal bias, though its definitions have long been contested (Schmidt, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2015; Williams Fayne, 2021). The power of objectivity as a gatekeeping device stems in part from its polysemic nature; its appearance as a universal ideal obscures significant disparities in how it is defined and applied, enabling it to be selectively mobilized to delegitimize some journalists while protecting the authority of others (Schmidt, 2023). Since the 19th century, objectivity has been constructed and enforced primarily by White male journalists, who aligned the profession with ideals of scientific rigor and professional distance (Velloso, 2025; Williams Fayne, 2021). It was first linked to notions of neutrality and impartiality, and later to accuracy, balance, and fairness (Velloso, 2025). This tension is especially relevant in the case of Randy Shilts. Although he was a White man and therefore not subject to racialized exclusion from

journalism, Shilts understood objectivity as a fragile professional resource, something he felt he had to actively claim and defend because of his sexuality and the subject matter he covered. Connecting objectivity to Shilts' self-conception highlights the paradox at the heart of this case: even as objectivity is often treated as a universal norm, its practical application remains uneven, requiring some journalists to perform adherence more explicitly than others. Equating objectivity with neutrality has reinforced the notion that journalists can, and should, be disembodied, privileging the White male perspective as default (Williams Fayne, 2021), a dynamic that later reappears in the ways journalists are posthumously evaluated and remembered.

Appeals to objectivity have been used both to exclude certain actors from legitimate journalism and to selectively include and constrain others. Nonprofit and advocacy-driven news organizations, for instance, are often dismissed as biased and untrustworthy despite adhering to professional standards and focusing on underreported issues (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2015). As Williams Fayne (2021) observes, "journalistic notions of objectivity have always been in opposition to the tenets of the Black press" (p. 330), highlighting objectivity as a racialized construct that privileges white, male professional experiences as the default standpoint for defining "neutral" news. Schmidt (2023) finds that journalists of color challenge the professional norm of journalistic objectivity as a problematic concept that delegitimizes experiential knowledge from marginalized communities and conceals power structures, while calling for a reckoning in how objectivity and credibility are defined. This connects to the broader pattern in which journalists perceived as too closely aligned with activist causes or as reporting on the communities to which they belong are frequently delegitimized as biased or activist (Johnson, 2025a). Collectively, this shows how boundary work and shifting professional norms and practices, especially the ideal of objectivity, serve to define and police journalism's limits, determining who is recognized as legitimate, which perspectives are valued or marginalized, and how authority and credibility are continually negotiated within the field.

Collective Memory and Obituaries

The debate over journalism's boundaries continues even after a journalist's career ends; it extends to how they are remembered. Obituaries serve as a platform for boundary work by publicly solidifying an individual's legacy, becoming a space where professional boundaries are reinforced, contested, or renegotiated. In doing so, obituaries shape individual reputations and contribute to collective memory, influencing how the profession and society remember its most influential figures.

The obituary is a cultural tool for representing and remembering individuals and events that have shaped society (Avital-Benatar, 2020). It is a modern form of memorialization in which editorial choices, such as who is included and how they are depicted, reflect broader societal values and norms (Boyce & Dove, 2022). Therefore, obituaries are often influenced by historical biases and dominant cultural narratives (Zandberg et al., 2012). Obituaries engage with *cultural memory*, which

preserves enduring and institutionalized knowledge, and *communicative memory*, which captures transient, event-specific recollections, such as those surrounding an individual's death (Avital-Benatar, 2020; Revers, 2017). Since journalists and media institutions create them, obituaries mirror the press's dominant values, reinforcing certain narratives while omitting or minimizing others. This dual role of obituaries, preserving memory while also reshaping it, helps clarify why journalism, especially when connected to well-known figures, acts as an active shaper of collective memory, influencing how society remembers and honors individuals (Avital-Benatar, 2020; Revers, 2017).

Obituaries of journalists serve as powerful tools for documenting careers and shaping professional legacies within collective memory. They reflect journalistic values and often engage in boundary work, reinforcing or challenging the limits of journalistic legitimacy. For example, how a journalist's work is framed in their obituary, whether it highlights their contributions to the field or underscores controversies, reveals how the profession maintains or shifts its standards (Avital-Benatar, 2020; Boyce & Dove, 2022; Zandberg et al., 2012). Journalist obituaries often emphasize traits such as integrity, investigative rigor, or commitment to truth, reinforcing journalism's self-image and professional ideals (Avital-Benatar, 2020; Boyce & Dove, 2022; Zandberg et al., 2012). The obituaries of sex media moguls Hugh Hefner and Larry Flynt exemplify this dynamic. While Hefner's obituaries framed him as a legitimate media figure, Flynt's was more contested, with his publication positioned outside the confines of journalism. This discrepancy highlights how obituaries can engage in boundary work, particularly when an individual's legacy is contentious or outside the mainstream, as well as tied to their sexuality (Johnson, 2024).

Method

In this project, we draw on Critical Discourse Analysis, specifically the framework outlined by Carvalho (2008) and Reynolds (2019), to examine obituaries written about Randy Shilts. CDA is a vital approach for "its focus on power analysis, historicity, and cultural context also makes it distinctive among qualitative analysis tools" (Reynolds, 2019, p. 48). Shilts, a gay journalist recognized for his coverage of and eventual death resulting from the HIV/AIDS epidemic, serves as a means to understand how journalists position queer authorities at the edges of the institution. His obituaries were published during the AIDS epidemic, a time when media narratives concerning the crisis and the LGBTQ+ community were deeply contentious and politically charged. Given this, we ask: *How do journalists position Randy Shilts, his identity, and his contributions within journalistic boundaries?*

Critical Discourse Analysis is understood as both a theory and a method, and it is often employed to understand not only the power inherent in language but also the power behind it. CDA serves as a mechanism to understand power dynamics more critically and comprehensively, in line with our desire to discern how journalists wield power in their own words (i.e., the obituary) to position others within the institution's

boundaries. For Carvalho (2008), this type of power-laden discourse is “media representation of social issues,” but also “the discursive construction of events, problems and positions by social actors” and “the discursive strategies that they employ” (p. 161). Journalistic conventions often obscure the narratives and personhood of marginalized individuals, making CDA a crucial tool for analyzing this data.

Data Collection

We gathered the 21 available obituaries from mainstream and queer press publications. Of the 21 obituaries, one was published by an LGBTQ publication (the *Bay Area Reporter*). While several queer press outlets published an obituary of Shilts, it was not original reporting; instead, it was republished from a mainstream news outlet, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *LA Times*, or the *Chicago Tribune*. A table of the articles analyzed for this paper is included below. We utilized university databases, Google searches, the Online Archive of California (OAC), and the GLBT Historical Society’s archive to compile these obituaries. Initially, our search also uncovered memorial coverage of Shilts, including articles written years later to commemorate either the anniversary of his death or of one of his significant works. The Online Archive of California (OAC) and the GLBT Historical Society’s archives also contained these memorial stories. We chose to exclude this commemorative content to focus on how journalists use boundaries to shape perceptions of a journalist and the journalist’s work in the period immediately following their death, rather than the more longitudinal approach of considering how different types of authors (e.g., journalists, historians, essayists, friends, and family members) reflect on the legacy of the journalist years after the journalists’ death (Table 1).

The data selection does not represent a random or comprehensive sample but was collected to capture critical discourse moments, periods in which knowledge and viewpoints on a specific topic are shifting or expanding (Reynolds, 2019). Analyzing critical discourse moments enables a targeted examination of discursive turns and ongoing trends during key moments in the social construction of an issue (Carvalho, 2008). By studying obituaries published shortly after Shilts’ death, we can trace how media outlets framed his legacy, how journalistic norms and values influenced that framing, and how broader societal attitudes toward LGBTQ+ journalists and AIDS activism shaped the discourse. The obituaries also represented a moment of difficulty because of Shilts’ place in history, both because of his AIDS reporting and his AIDS diagnosis. David Tuller, a colleague of Shilts at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and one of Shilts’ obituary writers, later shared the difficulty of writing it: “Writing his obituary [was] a challenge, because you couldn’t deny that there was controversy. And I got some angry responses later from people, that it was too nice, or I should’ve been much more critical” (Walker, 2024). For Tuller, with Shilts, “he was, obviously, a pioneer...” but it was “very difficult when it’s also your own community and the people that you know are dying and getting sick... People would throw things at him, or spit at him, or yell at him or whatever. I think at some point he sort of felt like persona non grata in the Castro. But he did

Table 1. Shilts Obituaries by Publication, Author, Date, and Headline.

Publication	Author	Date	Headline
Washington Post	J.Y. Smith	Feb. 17 1994	WRITER RANDY SHILTS DIES
Variety	Variety Staff	Feb. 17 1994	Band' author Shilts dies of AIDS
New York Times	William Grimes	Feb. 18 1994	Randy Shilts, Author, Dies at 42; One of First to Write About AIDS
LA Times	Jenifer Warren, Richard C. Paddock	Feb. 18 1994	Randy Shilts, Chronicler of AIDS Epidemic, Dies at 42 : Journalism: Author of 'And the Band Played On' is credited with awakening nation to the health crisis.
AP/Roanoke Times	n/a	Feb. 18 1994	GROUNDBREAKING JOURNALIST RANDY SHILTS DIES OF AIDS
Chicago Tribune	Contributed	Feb. 18 1994	AIDS JOURNALIST RANDY SHILTS, 42
Baltimore Sun	New York Times Wire	Feb. 18 1994	Gay reporter who pioneered coverage of AIDS dies of the disease
Oregon Daily Emerald	Jim Davis	Feb. 18 1994	Nationally known alumunus dies
San Francisco Chronicle	Keith Power	Feb. 18 1994	Reporter driven by his mission
San Francisco Chronicle	Lori Olszewski, David Tuller	Feb. 18 1994	Writer Randy Shilts Dies at 42 - Pioneer Coverage of AIDS
The Daily Breeze	Elizabeth Weise	Feb. 18 1994	Band Played On' author Shilts dies
The Washington Post	Victor F. Zonana	Feb. 18 1994	Randy Shilts: Pioneer Amid The Peril
San Francisco Examiner	Examiner Staff Report	Feb. 19 1994	Randy Shilts
The Register-Guard	n/a	Feb. 19 1994	A reporter above all else
Independent	James Kirkup	Feb. 22 1994	Obituary: Randy Shilts
San Francisco Examiner	Rob Morse	Feb. 23 1994	Remembering Randy
Flash (Newsletter of the School of Journalism and	n/a	Feb. 23 1994	Obituaries: Randy Shilts '75

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Publication	Author	Date	Headline
Communication at the University of Oregon) Bay Area Reporter	Jim Provenzano	Feb. 24 1994	Randy Shilts: Gone but not forgotten
Newsweek	Jerry Adler, Carey Monserrate	Feb. 28 1994	And the Band Stopped Playing: Author Randy Shilts lived and died the brutal struggle against AIDS
U.S. News and World Report	Erica Goode	Feb. 28 1994	Epitaph: The Day the Music Died
TIME	Staff	Feb. 28 1994	Died: Randy Shilts

what he felt was right to do” (Walker, 2024). It is because of this that the moment is important to study, and the way his own professional community, not just his queer community, remembered him in this moment is vital.

Data Analysis

In this paper, the opportunity to examine the role of a social issue (AIDS, LGBTQ+ identities) and the construction of the actors within it (Randy Shilts) makes CDA an ideal method for analyzing the collected data. We use Reynolds’ (2019) approach to CDA for our analysis. Our approach to data analysis was iterative, involving four readings of the obituaries. The first reading provided familiarity with the scope, structure, and context of obituaries. The first reading helped identify significant themes, debates, and silences (Carvalho, 2008; Reynolds, 2019). It also allowed us to catch any final redundancy in the obituaries. The second reading emphasized descriptive and values-based coding (Reynolds, 2019). This initial coding was conducted using electronic spreadsheets to see how themes and ideas emerged within and among our readings.

The third reading involved second-cycle coding, which Reynolds (2019) describes as “contextualizing patterns and themes.” We used MAXQDA during this reading to collapse codes and synthesize them according to patterns. While longitudinal coding is often considered necessary in this cycle, given that our data corpus is only two weeks after Shilts’ death, we cannot explore more longitudinal themes and ideas. Reynolds (2019) encourages CDA projects to think longitudinally, tracking common themes, ideas, and structures to identify opportunities for change and critique. A longitudinal focus on Shilts would provide a chance to understand paradigm shifts relative to the discussion of LGBTQ+ journalists; however, given the time at which Shilts died and the subsequent policy and legal disputes associated with the LGBTQ+ community, it is more challenging to identify conversations about his death at length. Future studies

could explore more contemporary examples of memorialized content about Shilts, which could then offer a revisit of these obituaries or an analysis that focuses on longitudinal coding, compared to this paper's findings.

To answer our research question, we focused on how patterns emerged relative to LGBTQ+ issues and the boundaries of journalism (Carlson, 2015). The final reading of this data used Carlson's (2015) typology of boundary work as the primary lens for Reynolds' (2019) transideological critique to "code for counterhegemonic as well as dominant-hegemonic discourse" (Reynolds, 2019) within the obituaries. Doing this allowed us to consider how Shilts is remembered as a journalist vis-à-vis the language journalists use to talk about him in the obituaries they wrote, but also what role the HIV/AIDS epidemic and his sexuality played in how journalists consider his placement concerning institutional boundaries.

Historical Positioning

The period immediately following Randy Shilts' death marked a critical moment for discourse (Carvalho, 2008; Reynolds, 2019), during which media narratives surrounding AIDS, queer identity, and journalistic authority were actively negotiated. As Carvalho (2008) observes, "A time-sensitive critical discourse analysis means considering the particular context of a given period, from specific events and developments related to the issues under examination to wider aspects of the social environment" (p. 164). Because discourse is inherently shaped by the historical and institutional contexts in which it is produced, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) necessitates an examination of the language used in Shilts' obituaries and the broader sociopolitical conditions that inform their production.

By the end of 1993, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported over 360,000 cases of AIDS in the United States, with more than 234,000 deaths. That same year, AIDS was declared the leading cause of death among Americans aged 25 to 44. While the federal government started to expand funding for AIDS research and treatment, exemplified by the National Institutes of Health Revitalization Act of 1993, which established the Office of AIDS Research and prioritized AIDS as a national research focus, the epidemic continued to be highly stigmatized. Ongoing public fears, misinformation, and moralization, portraying AIDS as a result of personal behavior rather than a systemic public health crisis, continued to shape media narratives and discourse, reinforcing discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities and those affected by the disease. This period also witnessed increasing activism from organizations like ACT UP, which challenged governmental inaction and media coverage of the epidemic. Media coverage of AIDS remained polarized, reflecting broader societal tensions related to queer identity and the moralization of the epidemic (Fee & Krieger, 1993).

Shilts' obituaries function as discursive artifacts that reflect his life and career while actively shaping his role in journalism and the broader AIDS narrative. In 1981, he became the first openly gay reporter hired by a major daily newspaper, *The*

San Francisco Chronicle, where he extensively covered the emerging AIDS epidemic. At a time when mainstream media provided minimal coverage of the crisis, Shilts was among the first journalists to recognize its significance and advocate for ongoing reporting (Heredia, 2004). His reporting received both praise and criticism, particularly regarding his stance on bathhouse closures and perceptions of his “lack of objectivity” due to his openness about his sexuality and his deep involvement with LGBTQ+ issues (Wilk, 2023). By 1989, Shilts had established himself as a prominent voice and trusted commentator on AIDS (Heredia, 2004). His death prompted media outlets to navigate and construct narratives about his professional legacy and the greater importance of AIDS reporting.

As Reynolds (2019) argues, critical discourse analysis allows scholars to examine how media coverage at pivotal junctures reinforces or challenges dominant narratives. In the case of Shilts, these obituaries exemplify how journalists established a queer authority within the profession’s boundaries at a time when LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream journalism was precarious. By situating our analysis within this historical moment, we recognize that these obituaries were not simply memorials but sites of meaning-making shaped by the institutional and cultural forces of the time.

Shilts and the Boundaries of Being a Gay Activist, AIDS Journalist

Shilts’ identity as an openly gay journalist and his focus on LGBTQ+ issues positioned him as a pioneer and trailblazer in journalism, a recognition consistently reflected in his obituaries. However, these obituaries also navigate tensions between celebrating his professional achievements and framing his sexual orientation and AIDS diagnosis as potential challenges to professional norms. These narratives reveal broader dynamics of marginalization and legitimacy in journalism, particularly concerning minority voices. Our findings highlight recurring themes of expansion and exclusion within the boundaries of journalism (Carlson, 2015). Three key themes emerged: the recognition of Shilts as a trailblazer and pioneer in journalism; the distinction between Shilts as an AIDS activist versus a journalist with AIDS who writes about AIDS; and the inseparability of AIDS from Shilts’ legacy. Given the emphasis on activism, we treat “activism” not as a stable identity category consistently assigned across outlets, but as a discursive frame that is applied, contested, softened, or explicitly rejected.

The first theme highlights the expansion of journalism’s boundaries, focusing on Shilts as a participant. According to the obituaries, Shilts is widely recognized as a groundbreaking journalist who expanded the scope of mainstream reporting by focusing on LGBTQ+ issues, particularly during the height of the AIDS crisis. His obituaries highlight his pioneering role in expanding the boundaries of journalism in terms of subject matter and representation. While these descriptions celebrate his trailblazing contributions, they also reveal how his identity was inseparable from his professional work. The second and third themes reflect a departure from journalistic practices and

professional norms. The obituaries grapple with whether to define Shilts as a journalist or an activist, highlighting a persistent tension in journalism between advocacy and objectivity. While some portray him as a committed reporter dedicated to uncovering the truth, others view his work as inextricably linked to activism, driven by a sense of responsibility to the LGBTQ+ community. The obituaries stress that Shilts' reporting on the AIDS epidemic represents a professional achievement and a defining aspect of his public memory. They consistently connect his career to his own HIV diagnosis, reinforcing how deeply intertwined his personal and professional identities became in the collective remembrance of his work.

While these themes highlight this interconnection of Shilts' personal and professional identities, the obituaries collectively reveal what we describe as a bright lavender line in the boundary work surrounding his legacy. In several cases, this line places Shilts' role as a journalist in recurring tension with interpretive frames that reposition his work through the language of activism, moral leadership, and movement participation. This pattern is neither uniform nor uncontested. Rather, it becomes visible when activist labels are applied and then negotiated against Shilts' repeated insistence that he "wanted to keep on being a reporter."

Some obituaries apply activist-oriented language directly. *The Oregon Daily Emerald*'s subheadline describes Shilts as a "leader in gay activism." In *U.S. News & World Report*, Erica Goode notes that Shilts rejected the labels "activist" and "advocate," quoting him as saying, "I'm just your basic reporter," but then argues that activism nonetheless fits his career by invoking a dictionary definition. *Newsweek* similarly situates him within a movement frame, with a caption referring to him as "one of the movement's 'grand old men,'" and Larry Kramer stating, "We were the two grand old men of the AIDS activism movement." At the same time, other obituaries actively defend Shilts as a journalist. Multiple outlets quote his statement that "every gay writer who tests positive ends up being an AIDS activist" and that he "wanted to keep on being a reporter." *The Register-Guard* frames him as "A reporter above all else," and the *Bay Area Reporter* quotes Dave Ford describing him as "a journalist to the end." Taken together, these examples show that the boundary work does not occur through outright exclusion. It occurs through interpretive negotiation, in which Shilts' authority as a journalist is repeatedly asserted against language that reclassifies his work as advocacy.

Boundary Expansion: Recognition as a Trailblazer and Pioneer

The obituaries of Randy Shilts acknowledge his groundbreaking role as the first openly gay reporter at a major metropolitan newspaper and one of the first journalists to cover AIDS as a national crisis. Twelve of the obituaries, just over half, highlight the significance of his position at *The San Francisco Chronicle*, noting that his hiring marked a shift in mainstream newsrooms' willingness to diversify their staff and engage with LGBTQ+ issues. His professional achievements are consistently recognized, with references to his investigative work, bestselling books, and impact on public awareness

and understanding of the AIDS epidemic. The emphasis on Shilts' work as a journalist and his "first-ever" status signals an expansion of professional ranks to include and celebrate Shilts and his sexual orientation within the journalism community. The consistent focus on Shilts being the first openly out journalist, coupled with terms like "trailblazer" and "pioneer," reinforces how journalists viewed Shilts as someone who pushed journalism to expand rather than exclude queer journalists from the profession.

The headlines reinforce his legacy as a trailblazer, referring to Shilts as "AIDS Journalist" (Chicago Tribune), "Groundbreaking Journalist" (AP), "One of the First to Write about AIDS" (New York Times), and "Pioneer Amid the Peril" (Washington Post). Given that the headline's purpose is to set the tone for the subsequent article, the use of such language emphasizes Shilts' groundbreaking work. However, as we will discuss in later themes, it also reveals how his pioneering status is inextricably linked to the unprecedented epidemic of that time. Essentially, while the epidemic catalyzed a significant cultural shift, so did Shilts in his coverage. Obituary writers frequently describe Shilts as a journalist, author, reporter, activist, and writer, often pairing these descriptions with adjectives such as "gay," "openly gay," "driven," "controversial," and "brave." The *Los Angeles Times* characterized him as "a tenacious, award-winning journalist who became the nation's foremost chronicler of gay life and the AIDS epidemic." Throughout every obituary, the expansion of his job title was tied to Shilts' sexual orientation, illustrating why he was considered a "trailblazer" or "pioneer" in journalism. His work was indeed significant, but the obituaries also highlighted Shilts' sexual orientation as a means to demonstrate how his role within the profession pushed boundaries outward, thus creating a pathway for future LGBTQ+ journalists.

The obituaries of Randy Shilts use boundary-expanding strategies that reinforce his status as both a pioneering journalist and a figure who reshaped the limits of mainstream journalism. Through repeated emphasis on "firsts," his identity as the first openly gay reporter in a major newsroom, his groundbreaking AIDS reporting, and his role in bringing LGBTQ+ issues to national prominence, these remembrances celebrate his trailblazing role while simultaneously highlighting how his identity was inseparable from his professional work. By framing Shilts through both his journalistic contributions and his position as a gay man in the public eye, obituaries expand the boundaries of journalism's historical canon to accommodate his presence. By emphasizing Shilts' singularity through language of "firsts," rarity, and personal courage, the obituaries expand journalism's historical canon to include his work while framing that inclusion through individualized achievement rather than institutional transformation. In this way, Shilts is remembered as an individual breakthrough rather than as part of a collective or structural shift toward greater inclusivity in journalism. The effect is not that obituaries fail to announce reform, but that they encode inclusion as personal anomaly rather than institutional transformation. The distinction we draw here is not normative but analytical. Structural inclusion in journalistic memory is more often signaled through normalization than novelty: not by isolating figures as exceptional

“firsts,” but by situating them within cohorts, institutional change, and ongoing professional lineages (Adams, 2022; Galy-Badenas et al., 2025; Usher & Carlson, 2022). None of these markers appear consistently in Shilts’ obituaries. Instead, his inclusion is encoded through the language of exception, emphasizing “firsts,” rarity, and personal courage, without extending that recognition to journalism as an institution undergoing transformation. The result is a form of boundary expansion that accommodates Shilts as an individual case while leaving the profession’s underlying norms intact.

Notably, the obituaries reveal a tension in how Shilts was positioned within both journalistic and LGBTQ+ communities. Some remembrances, such as *The Washington Post*’s declaration, “It is no exaggeration to say that all openly gay journalists who came after him stood on his shoulders,” suggest that his contributions were boundary-defining, paving the way for greater LGBTQ+ representation in the field. Yet the language of legacy also reinforces his singularity, framing his success as an anomaly rather than part of a broader movement toward diversification in journalism. Similarly, *The San Francisco Chronicle*’s description of him as “one of the world’s most famous gay journalists” highlights his identity as a core aspect of his professional legacy, again broadening journalism’s boundaries to include his work while sometimes confining him within a niche, a “gay journalist,” rather than positioning sexual identity as contextual rather than defining. This duality, both expansion and containment, is especially evident in the use of the nickname “gay Uncle Tom,” a term that appeared in two obituaries. Historically, the “Uncle Tom” label has served as a pejorative, suggesting a betrayal of one’s marginalized community to assimilate into dominant structures. Applied to Shilts, it reflects the criticism he faced from some LGBTQ+ activists who believed his reporting, especially his work on AIDS and his sharp critiques of the gay community’s response to the epidemic, aligned with mainstream narratives that sought to discipline or pathologize gay men rather than advocate uncritically for their interests. The inclusion of this language in his obituary reveals the contested nature of his boundary-expanding role. While he undoubtedly pushed journalism’s limits by bringing LGBTQ+ issues into the mainstream, he did so in ways that were sometimes seen as reinforcing rather than dismantling existing power hierarchies. The invocation of “gay Uncle Tom” in his obituaries thus complicates the narrative of expansion, illustrating how Shilts’ role as a boundary-pushing journalist was met with both celebration and resistance, both from within journalism and from the community he sought to represent.

The obituaries’ portrayal of Shilts reveals the paradoxes of boundary expansion in journalism: while his career marked a shift in who could claim authority within the field, his legacy was influenced by a continuous framing of his identity as both a professional asset and a source of contention. His work was not only groundbreaking in its subject matter but also in how it challenged and redefined the limits of journalism, though never without controversy. His obituaries, therefore, do more than commemorate his contributions; they also encapsulate the tensions of his career, underscoring how boundary expansion in journalism is often accompanied by efforts to regulate and debate the conditions of that expansion.

A more responsible posthumous framing would recognize that Shilts actively understood himself as a journalist whose proximity to the AIDS crisis strengthened, rather than jeopardized, his professional authority. His insistence that he “wanted to keep on being a reporter” reflected a deeply held belief in journalism’s civic role and its capacity to confront public health indifference. A more equitable obituary would therefore acknowledge both his identity and the epistemic commitments that shaped his reporting: he was a gay man living through the crisis, but he was also a journalist whose method, sourcing, and tenacity materially altered how the nation understood AIDS. The problem is not the presence of identity in these obituary framings, but the imbalance that elevates identity to the primary interpretive register while relegating his journalistic method and agency to the background. Bringing these strands together would offer a fuller and more just accounting of Shilts’ contributions and better reflect the professional life he understood himself to be living.

Expulsion Through Professional Norms: AIDS Activist Versus Journalist

Shilts vehemently rejected the label of “activist” throughout his career, fully aware that such a designation could delegitimize him in the eyes of mainstream journalism. Yet, his obituaries reinforce a persistent ambiguity in how his work is understood, blurring the lines between journalist and advocate. This framing reflects the tension Shilts sought to avoid, where deviation from traditional journalistic norms risked expulsion from the profession’s established ranks. This ambiguity is captured by Shilts’ own words: “Every gay writer who tests positive ends up being an AIDS activist, and I didn’t want to end up being an activist. I wanted to keep on being a reporter” (New York Times; AP; Chicago Tribune; Newsweek). Rather than functioning solely as evidence of professional vulnerability, this statement reflects an unambiguous assertion of self-understanding. Shilts was not conflicted about his role; he clearly stated that he saw himself as a journalist whose proximity to the AIDS crisis deepened his reporting rather than transforming him into an advocate. However, his words were no longer his once the disease he spent the latter part of his career writing about took his life; he no longer could be the subject telling the story, but instead became the object of the obituary writers now telling *his* story.

This reclassification is most explicit in Erica Goode’s *U.S. News & World Report* obituary, which directly engages the professional stakes of the activist label. Goode acknowledges that Shilts “insisted he was neither activist nor advocate,” quoting him as saying, “I’m just your basic reporter,” and noting that among journalists, the term activist implies a lack of objectivity. She then reframes his career by invoking a dictionary definition of activism as “positive, direct action to achieve an end,” concluding that “given Shilts’s accomplishments, it is hard not to see this as an accurate description.” In this formulation, Shilts’ reporting is no longer evaluated primarily as a professional practice governed by journalistic norms, but rather as a form of social action justified by its outcomes and impacts. His refusal to engage in what Goode calls “muddy grays” is framed not as a departure from journalistic nuance, but as one of his

greatest strengths. This move effectively overrides Shilts' professional self-understanding and recasts his journalism as activism on normative grounds, illustrating how appeals to objectivity and its limits serve as mechanisms for posthumous boundary-expulsion. Other obituary writers attempted to honor this self-understanding. LeRoy Aarons' comment that Shilts "could be gay and still write one hell of a story and play it down the middle" affirms his professional intentions, even as it underscores the reality that journalists from marginalized communities are often required to *prove* neutrality in ways that others are not. A more robust framing would therefore begin with Shilts' own articulation of his role, taking his self-definition seriously rather than allowing external labels (e.g., "activist," "conduit," or "AIDS celebrity") to supersede it. Doing so would recognize Shilts not as a figure whose credibility was contingent on navigating identity politics but as a journalist who consistently asserted and enacted a professional identity that his obituaries only partially acknowledge; as this theme shows, when Shilts became an object of the obituary, those professional norms became an opportunity for boundary expulsion. What is notably absent from many of these activist reclassifications, however, is sustained attention to Shilts' journalism as craft, labor, and method, a gap that becomes visible when comparing how a small subset of obituaries foreground newsroom practice while the majority rely on shorthand descriptors or moral framing.

A small subset of sources gives sustained attention to Shilts' journalism as labor, method, and institutional practice rather than treating his authority as self-evident. These accounts foreground not only what he reported, but how he worked within newsroom structures, navigated editorial constraints, and carried out long-term investigative projects. Such descriptions are comparatively rare, but analytically significant because they make visible reporting practices that many other obituaries leave implicit. Keith Power's tribute in the *San Francisco Chronicle* offers one of the clearest depictions of Shilts' newsroom labor, describing him as "churning out story after story" amid resistance from editors and colleagues and situating that productivity within a newsroom uncertain how to handle AIDS coverage. Power also emphasizes the physical proximity required by Shilts' reporting, recounting how he moved through hospitals, clinics, and affected communities to gather information others avoided. Similarly, Torie Osborn, writing in *The Washington Blade*, provides unusual detail about the investigative labor behind *Conduct Unbecoming*, noting the scope of interviews, documents, and archival materials that undergirded the book's claims. In these accounts, journalism appears as methodical, time-intensive, and institutionally situated work.

By contrast, most mainstream obituaries invoke Shilts' journalism through professional shorthand, describing his work as "meticulous," "exhaustive," or "groundbreaking" without lingering on the reporting process itself. The issue is not that obituaries fail to provide minute process detail, nor that such adjectives are inherently insufficient. Rather, in much of the corpus, they function as compressed assertions of craft that quickly give way to broader claims about public importance, symbolic status, or crisis impact. The *Los Angeles Times* praises Shilts' tenacity while offering little sense of how that tenacity operated in practice. The *New York Times* frames him as an early

recognizer of AIDS without tracing the reporting steps that produced that recognition. *Variety* labels his work exhaustive while leaving the mechanics of that exhaustiveness unexplored. In these instances, journalism is remembered less as demonstrated practice than as an already established credential authorizing other forms of meaning. This distinction matters for the boundary work the obituaries perform. When reporting is rendered as visible labor and method, Shilts appears as a journalist operating within professional norms, institutional constraints, and investigative traditions. When craft is assumed rather than shown, other frames, including activism, symbolism, and crisis significance, more readily organize his legacy. The result is not the absence of journalism, but its compression into accolade, which leaves professional identity more vulnerable to reinterpretation.

When journalism-as-method is absent or compressed into shorthand, Shilts' professional identity becomes more vulnerable to reinterpretation. As noted earlier, the term "gay Uncle Tom" already surfaces in the obituaries as a marker of the contested space Shilts occupied within both journalism and the LGBTQ+ community. Here, however, that language does different work. In several obituaries, the interpretive gap left by the absence of reporting craft is filled not with further attention to journalistic practice, but with moral and movement-based frames that reposition Shilts as an outsider to traditional journalism. *The Oregon Daily Emerald* labeled Shilts a "leader in gay activism," a designation that directly contradicts his repeated insistence that he was, above all, a reporter. More telling, however, is the recurrence of the phrase "gay Uncle Tom" in obituaries and quoted recollections. Historically, this label functions as a disciplinary accusation within marginalized communities, signaling perceived ideological betrayal rather than professional disagreement. Applied to Shilts, it reframes journalistic decision-making as a moral failure, implicitly judging legitimacy by movement loyalty rather than journalistic standards.

Obituaries that recount Shilts' own reflections on being attacked by the gay press reinforce this reclassification. When Shilts describes how accusations of being "an Uncle Tom and part of the establishment" made his life "miserable," he is positioned not as a journalist navigating contested coverage, but as a figure held emotionally and politically accountable to the community he covered. This framing collapses professional autonomy into identity obligation. The use of Shilts's own words in the obituaries allows him to be remembered less as an independent reporter exercising editorial judgment and more as a representative whose authority depended on whether his work aligned with activist expectations. In this way, the "gay Uncle Tom" language performs another example of expulsionary boundary work. It redefines journalistic authority through moral allegiance, making activism the implicit standard against which Shilts' credibility is measured.

Expulsion Through Legacy Norms: The Inseparability of AIDS and Shilts

Across the obituaries, AIDS functions as the dominant interpretive frame through which Shilts' professional life is remembered. References to HIV and AIDS far

outnumber mentions of other aspects of his career, including his reporting methods, newsroom practices, or broader investigative contributions. This emphasis reflects the undeniable centrality of the epidemic to Shilts' work and to the historical moment in which he reported. At the same time, the disproportionate focus on disease consolidates his legacy around crisis rather than professional practice. Shilts' journalism becomes legible primarily through its relationship to AIDS, limiting recognition of his work as part of a broader journalistic tradition that extends beyond a single historical emergency. HIV and AIDS were referenced 138 times in Shilts' obituaries, far surpassing mentions of criticisms (25), references to his sexuality (43), or descriptions of him as an individual (70). This highlights how deeply his legacy is intertwined with the AIDS crisis. Shilts tested positive for the virus that causes AIDS in 1987 but did not publicly disclose his diagnosis until 1993. He explained that he kept it secret for years out of fear it would detract from his role as a reporter on AIDS issues (AP). Despite Shilts' desire to separate his illness from his professional work, his obituaries often placed him within the broader narrative of AIDS victims, stating, "Like many AIDS victims, he did a lot in a short time" (U.S. News & World Report). Others echoed similar sentiments, noting that he "lived and died [in] the brutal struggle against AIDS" (Newsweek), framing his life as one wholly defined by the epidemic. Similarly, *The New York Times* called him an "AIDS Celebrity," emphasizing his public visibility in connection to the crisis rather than his broader contributions to journalism. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, Shilts' former employer, remarked, "since he chose to report almost exclusively on the AIDS medical story, none of the old hands felt envious." Shilts was not viewed as a competitor among established journalists because his reporting was primarily confined to a marginalized topic at the time; in fact, he focused on a subject that many believed could lead to contracting the disease simply by being in the same room as someone infected. Shilts' presence in journalism was fully legitimized on his terms and was primarily because he covered a crisis largely ignored by mainstream reporters. In this way, Shilts' journalistic authority was inseparably linked to AIDS, limiting recognition of him beyond that context.

This description serves as a form of expulsion through his practical legacy. His obituaries, rather than celebrating his journalistic impact on their own, reinforced the idea that his professional existence depended on the epidemic, limiting how he could be remembered in journalism and marginalizing him in collective memory. Instead of being recognized alongside other investigative reporters who revealed systemic failures, he was remembered as someone whose work was inseparable from his illness. This categorization constrained the scope of his legacy, which was also restricted, given his succumbing to the disease. While the AIDS epidemic exists independently of Shilts, his public memory does not exist apart from AIDS. Journalists did not allow Shilts the space to be commemorated solely as himself; instead, his remembrance was shaped by the dominant narrative of the crisis, positioning AIDS as the defining force of his legacy, including what characterized his career, criticism, and death. In this way, Shilts was posthumously repositioned within journalistic memory as a figure whose authority is anchored primarily to crisis rather than to professional method.

An equitable framing would acknowledge that AIDS was central to Shilts' life and reporting while resisting the impulse to collapse his entire professional identity into the epidemic. The issue is not that the obituary writers reference AIDS; if they did otherwise, it would erase both the crisis he confronted and the specificity of his contributions. But the disproportionate emphasis on the disease positions Shilts primarily as a symbol rather than a journalist with agency, method, and a body of work that extended beyond his diagnosis. This dynamic underscores a broader vulnerability faced by marginalized journalists: they have limited control over how their identities and legacies are narrated, and circumstances can eclipse their professional choices and intentions. Recognizing Shilts as a journalist who consciously used his reporting to expose institutional indifference, rather than as a figure whose authority derived solely from personal experience with AIDS, would offer a more accurate and just account of his professional life. Such a framing would neither downplay the significance of the epidemic nor make it the only lens through which Shilts is remembered.

Discussion and Conclusions

The obituaries of Randy Shilts provide a critical lens for examining how journalism navigates the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. They illustrate what Carlson (2015) describes as journalism's ongoing construction of legitimacy, selectively broadening its scope to accommodate marginalized voices while simultaneously confining them within narrow parameters. Shilts' career exemplifies this paradox; his reporting on AIDS and LGBTQ+ issues was recognized as groundbreaking. At the same time, his legacy remains predominantly linked to these topics rather than within journalism's broader tradition of investigative reporting. This pattern demonstrates a form of boundary expansion that ultimately proves limiting: journalists create space for new players, but often only under specific conditions, ensuring that their professional identities remain tied to particular beats or crises rather than being integrated into the broader field.

Shilts' contested role in journalism at this time reflects the profession's historical discomfort with marginalized journalists covering their communities. As Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2015) point out, journalism has long relied on objectivity to legitimize itself, often viewing personal identity as a barrier to credibility. The obituaries illustrate this tension by wrestling with whether Shilts was a journalist or an activist, implicitly reinforcing the notion that a gay journalist writing about AIDS could not entirely conform to the standards of objectivity. This concern parallels historical trends in journalism, where Black journalists covering civil rights, women reporting on feminism, and journalists of color writing on race have similarly faced scrutiny for their perceived inability to separate from their subjects (e.g., Wes Lowery's 2020 essay on moral clarity or Nikole Hannah-Jones' 1619 project and subsequent issues with UNC-Chapel Hill). As Carlson (2015) observes, expulsion-based boundary work remains prevalent in journalism, defining who qualifies as a legitimate practitioner of the profession. In their effort to classify his work, Shilts' obituaries reveal

how this boundary policing persists even after death, influencing how the profession remembers individuals who challenge conventional norms. Even as they celebrate Shilts as a pioneer, they consistently highlight his identity as “one of the world’s most famous *gay* journalists” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, emphasis added) rather than simply as a journalist. This framing reinforces a form of professional containment. At the same time, while Shilts’ contributions are recognized, his legacy is primarily associated with LGBTQ+ and AIDS activism rather than with other investigative journalists of his time. This phenomenon can be seen as a posthumous extension of the boundary work that characterized Shilts’ career. While he compelled journalism to confront AIDS as a serious issue, his professional authority was never wholly separate from his sexual identity. This tendency aligns with historical patterns in journalistic memory, in which marginalized reporters are often remembered more for their identities than for their methodologies or impact.

A more coherent and equitable framing in Shilts’ obituary would recognize that these tensions are not mutually exclusive and should not be treated as such. The goal is not to separate Shilts from his identity or the AIDS crisis, both of which are essential to understanding his work, but to prevent these categories from becoming the only interpretive lens through which his career is evaluated. Identity, proximity to crisis, and journalistic method can coexist without one subsuming the others. A responsible obituary would acknowledge Shilts’ sexuality, his diagnosis, and his closeness to the communities he covered while also foregrounding his self-understood professional identity as a reporter, his investigative achievements, and the structural conditions that made his work necessary. This is the balance missing from many of the obituaries we analyzed: not a choice between portraying Shilts as a gay journalist or a journalist, or between calling him an activist or a reporter, but an opportunity to recognize the integrated way he lived these commitments. Across the obituaries, sexuality, illness, and community proximity are routinely foregrounded through headlines, leads, and evaluative language, while Shilts’ own articulation of his role as a reporter, his investigative methods, and the institutional neglect that made his reporting necessary appear intermittently, defensively, or as secondary justification rather than as organizing frames of remembrance. Our argument is therefore not that obituary writers should have excluded identity markers, but that their framings too often allowed those markers to eclipse the full scope of Shilts’ professional agency, intentions, and broader contributions.

Importantly, our analysis does not evaluate what 1994 obituary writers should have anticipated or framed differently. Rather, it examines how obituary conventions, as historically bounded journalistic forms, shape the long-term legibility of journalists and crises within collective memory. In 1994, AIDS was incontrovertibly a crisis, and framing it as such was both accurate and ethically necessary; any alternative framing would have risked minimization rather than justice. The persistent linkage between Shilts and AIDS in his obituaries raises questions about journalism’s role in historical framing. As Zandberg et al. (2012) argue, journalism actively shapes collective memory, determining which narratives are preserved and which are marginalized. The

overwhelming emphasis on AIDS in Shilts' remembrance reflects a broader issue in journalism's approach to memory—not because obituary writers in 1994 failed to anticipate future developments in public health reporting, but because obituaries are historically bounded texts whose conventions inevitably shape how figures remain legible over time. Our interest, therefore, is not in judging the appropriateness of crisis framing at the time, but in examining how such historically situated framings structure the long-term contours of journalistic memory. In doing so, the obituaries reflect a broader dynamic in journalistic memory construction: obituaries do not simply recount a life; they encode the cultural terms through which that life becomes historically legible (Boyce & Dove, 2022). Here, Shilts is primarily encoded as a figure of a past emergency rather than as a journalist whose work reshaped public health reporting and whose influence extended beyond the epidemic itself. Seen this way, the limitation we identify is not a moral failure of obituary writers, but a structural feature of memorialization itself: one that becomes visible only through retrospective analysis.

Our argument is not that obituary writers should have anticipated later developments in AIDS journalism, but that their historically situated framings reveal how journalism constructs memory in ways that can narrow interpretive possibilities available to future publics. As Johnson (2025a) argues, such narratives of LGBTQ+ individuals often take on a disciplinary function, defining the limits of queer journalistic authority by tethering practitioners to the crises that marked their eras. Recognizing this pattern underscores the need to revisit historical representations, such as Shilts' obituaries, to cultivate a more inclusive and justice-oriented public memory. This memory acknowledges the constraints of the moment in which these texts were produced, while also refusing to let those constraints dictate the full scope of what journalism and journalists made possible. This highlights a broader limitation in how journalism constructs its historical narratives; once a crisis becomes associated with a particular figure or moment, its representation risks becoming static, even as the reality of the issue evolves. Journalism cannot engage in restorative justice, often positioning itself as an exemplar of procedural justice due to its attachment to objectivity (Johnson, 2025a). Consequently, journalists like Shilts become ghosts of the past, waiting to be resurfaced to address the historical harms associated with them and their marginalized identities.

The obituaries of Randy Shilts highlight the complexities of journalism's boundary work, emphasizing its ability to expand and restrict. Breaking barriers defined his career: becoming the first openly gay reporter at a major newspaper, forcing mainstream journalism to confront AIDS as a public health crisis, and raising the visibility of LGBTQ+ issues in the media. The legacy shown in his obituaries remains tightly managed, revealing journalism's historical unease with marginalized reporters who challenge norms. The use of exclusionary language effectively denies Shilts' pioneering role and depicts him as a victim of "the gay disease" rather than a leader in coverage, education, and prevention. This tension continues to shape journalism today. The ongoing debate over whether journalists from marginalized groups can stay objective when reporting on issues related to their identities remains unresolved. Current

newsroom policies on social media, political expression, and advocacy reflect worries similar to those that influenced how Shilts was portrayed in his obituaries. The same skepticism that labeled Shilts as either an activist or a journalist now fuels discussions about whether journalists can show solidarity with racial justice movements, critique systemic inequalities, and connect with their communities while maintaining professional credibility. These issues are not new but are constantly evolving.

The selective framing of Shilts' legacy also highlights how journalism shapes historical narratives in ways that reinforce professional hierarchies. Unlike other investigative journalists whose work is acknowledged across various domains, Shilts is confined to a singular narrative; his career defined by AIDS, with his contributions viewed primarily through the lens of the crisis he covered. This serves as a posthumous expulsion, confining his professional legacy to a specific context rather than integrating him into the broader canon of journalism history. As previous research on metajournalistic discourse has indicated, journalism's memory is not neutral; it actively influences how figures are remembered, often in ways that uphold existing power structures (Avital-Benatar, 2020; Johnson, 2025a).

The way Shilts' legacy has been constructed highlights a broader issue in journalism's approach to framing history. AIDS existed before Shilts and continues long after his death. However, his obituaries portray him as *the* AIDS journalist, implicitly suggesting that the epidemic itself is in the past. This framing risks obscuring both the ongoing realities of HIV/AIDS and the efforts of journalists who have continued to report on the issue. Journalism and its practitioners, in striving to memorialize figures like Shilts, must also recognize how their historical narratives shape the public's understanding of unresolved crises. Shilts' obituaries do more than commemorate his career; they reveal the limitations of journalism's inclusivity. They demonstrate how journalism expands to include marginalized figures but often does so in ways that restrict how those figures are remembered. Shilts' case reminds us that boundary work does not end with a journalist's career; it persists in how they are remembered, reinforcing the profession's ongoing struggles for legitimacy, authority, and inclusion.

Limitations and Future Scholarship

The texts for this study are limited to obituaries. To address the longitudinal impact (Carvalho, 2008), future work can also incorporate memorials and later reflections on Shilts' legacy to examine any subsequent shifts in the collective memory. The aim was historical, not longitudinal. Future work could also examine other obituaries of famous queer journalists, although that pantheon is less visible or familiar than we would hope. Scholars could, rather than looking at obituaries, examine how journalism portrays visible queer journalists across different forms of metajournalistic discourse, such as how Anderson Cooper was discussed as a journalist before and after his public coming-out story. Additionally, what we learned in this study is that the AIDS epidemic was a driving force not just in public health and life but in the ways members of the journalism community understood, explained, and contained their own.

Shilts's binding to AIDS, through coverage and death, shows that the epidemic represents a significant cultural moment that can and should be used as a flashpoint for comparative analysis of other moments. For example, Shilts is referred to as the "Gay Uncle Tom" because of his harsh critiques of his own community's lack of safe sex practices and condom use. His critique could be understood in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, where masks became contentious (i.e., are masks and condoms perceived to be the same in the coverage?), including the ways people spoke of the scientific communities' representation of them, or even monkeypox and its reflection on gay men in particular.

What our analysis makes clear is that Shilts cannot be reduced to a single interpretive register; neither solely a canary in a coal mine nor solely a journalist advocating for a healthier culture. His professional identity and personal circumstances were intertwined in ways that resist binary classification, and his obituaries often struggled to capture this complexity. Rather than posing this as an unresolved question, we argue that Shilts' life and work exemplify how marginalized journalists simultaneously inhabit multiple roles and how these roles are unevenly represented in journalistic memory. Future research can build on this by examining how other historically situated obituaries of queer journalists, activists, and public figures negotiate similar tensions. Such work would illuminate how journalism's commemorative practices encode particular understandings of identity, agency, and professional legitimacy—and how revisiting these framings can contribute to more equitable, inclusive, and justice-oriented public memory.

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Emma Gran (MA, Marquette University) is an instructor in the Diederich College of Communication. She is interested in the role of journalism history in shaping our understanding of journalism practice and in identifying the voices that have been historically erased.