

Research Paper

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Memorializing women journalists

Obituaries on women journalists' role performance

Abstract: Obituaries, though seemingly straightforward, hold deep reflections for the role of women journalists. Through the lens of metajournalistic discourse, this study explores obituaries of women journalists (n=1064) from the United States. The analysis finds that the memorialization of women journalists reflect on their role as advocates in and outside of the newsroom. In doing so, they not only redefine their profession, but work to champion societal advancement and gender equality.

Keywords: women journalists, metajournalistic discourse, advocacy, memorialization, departed journalists, obituaries

Joan Kuni (1930-2019) had a unique way of doing things. Instead of taking the bus, she rode her horse to school. She would change the lyrics of songs to create her own stories. When it came time to decide her future, »Joan did not follow the path that most young women took in the '50s. Rather than become a bride, teacher or secretary, Joan focused on a broadcasting career, and she excelled.«

Joan Kuni's career started as a disc jockey and news reporter at KWWC college radio, which led to a position at WJR-AM Radio in Detroit. As a program director there, she demonstrated her versatility in news, sports, sound, and commercials. Moving to television with WXYZ, Joan notably helped launch the career of the famous TV personality Soupy Sales, making a significant impact on the television industry.

When she decided to start a family, »her tenacity, creativity and huge heart« remained undiminished. Her first two sons were born with intellectual and developmental disabilities and were told they would not lead meaningful lives. Joan Kuni, staying true to her nature, chose a different path, advocating tirelessly for

them and others facing similar challenges. Her efforts resulted in the creation of the Wayne D. Kuni & Joan E. Kuni Foundation, which supports housing and enrichment opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. In 2013, Joan Kuni was instrumental in developing Stephen's Place, an assisted living complex named after her son, funded by the Kuni Foundation. Her advocacy continues to inspire positive change. »Throughout her life, Joan was a pioneer and advocate, blazing a trail for women in broadcasting and shifting the tide of inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities« (Obituary 502).

This study aims to understand how women journalists are memorialized by analyzing a large corpus of obituaries of women journalists ($n=1064$) from the United States. Using this dataset, the paper explores the metajournalistic discourse surrounding women journalists, examining how obituaries provide insights into their professional identities and news work. Metajournalistic discourse, as a self-reflective practice within journalism, offers a lens to analyze the portrayal of women journalists in obituaries, highlighting their contributions, challenges, and the evolving dynamics of the journalistic landscape.

The authors engaged in an iterative, constant-comparative analysis (LINDLOF/TAYLOR 2011) of the dataset. Fram (2013) notes that such analysis is valuable for etic coding, driven by literature and theory. Through this analysis, the study addresses research questions concerning the memorialization of women journalists' professional identities and news work. By exploring themes of community engagement, advocacy, career achievements, and personal relationships, alongside the values and persistence exhibited in their journalistic endeavors and news work, this research illuminates the multifaceted roles and impact of U.S. women journalists within the field.

In examining the memorialization of women journalists through obituaries, the concept of role performance as advocacy emerges as a significant theme. Women journalists, as depicted in these obituaries, are portrayed not only as professionals but also as advocates for broader societal change. This advocacy is demonstrated through their volunteer work, community involvement, and active participation in local organizations and charities.

Notably, narratives highlight their pioneering roles as »first women« in journalism, emphasizing their advocacy for gender inclusivity and representation within the profession. These women journalists' stories and advocacy extend beyond newsrooms, as they take on leadership positions in organizations, assume chair roles, and become the first women to receive prestigious awards. By stepping into roles that had never been filled by women before, whether within the newsroom or beyond, these journalists not only reshape their profession but also advocate for societal progress and gender equity (CUNNINGHAM et al. 2017), leaving a lasting legacy memorialized in their obituaries.

Women's role performance in newswork

Obituaries can highlight the unique contributions of women journalists within the newsroom. By the late nineteenth century, white, middle-class women in the United States increasingly sought active roles beyond domestic confines. However, the opportunities for white, middle-class, and educated women in journalism were limited, leading them to engage in writing that differed significantly from the straightforward factual reporting of their man counterparts (CHAMBERS et al. 2005). Women's roles in journalism are often shaped by societal expectations and may be linked to stereotypical feminine traits (CHAMBERS et al. 2005), which can include values such as cooperation, non-violent conflict resolution, peace advocacy, compassion, emotionality, honesty, congeniality, and altruism (PAUL et al. 2022; SHOR et al. 2018).

Women in American journalism today face challenges that hinder their ability to succeed and progress within newsrooms across the country (YORK 2017). The percentage of women journalists in the United States rose from 37.5% in 2013 to 40.9% in 2022 (WILLNAT et al. 2022). Similarly, the Reuters Institute found that an average of 40% of journalists in 12 markets were women in 2024 (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024). A study in 2025 found that there are over 6,047 journalists currently employed in the United States, and 53.4% of them are women, while 46.6% are men (ZIPPIA 2025). There is, however, a significant lack of women in leadership positions in journalism. Arguedas et al. (2024) examined the representation of women in top editorial roles across those 12 markets with different levels of gender equality, using data from 240 news outlets (both online and offline). They found that only 24.2% of top editors were women, which is below the 40% average of women journalists in these markets (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024). Men still dominate top editorial positions in 11 of the 12 markets. The study revealed a weak positive correlation between the percentage of women in journalism and in editorial roles, but in most markets, women were underrepresented in senior positions compared to their numbers in the profession (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024). Although gender parity is far from achieved, the percentage of women journalists in top editorial positions has slowly increased from 23% in 2020 to 25% in 2024, with a potential to reach parity by 2074 if this trend continues (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024).

Women face several challenges in the workplace. Systemic sexism is one, which manifests in the silencing of outspoken women, pressure on women leaders to overlook issues, gender stereotypes, and widespread retaliation against women who challenge sexist behavior or demand accountability in newsrooms (BAILEY 2022; HECKMAN 2014; LIPINSKI 2019). Women are also hindered by harassment (CHAKRADHAR 2022), wage gaps, discrimination in job assignments (SCHUDSON/HAAS 2008; STIVERS 2012), and balancing family responsibilities with

career commitments (YORK 2017). Women in journalism are also less likely to get credit for the work they do (HECKMAN 2012).

U.S. women journalists often navigate gender expectations, specifically in regard to their news sourcing and choice of news topics, as part of their news work, recognizing that aligning with stereotypic expectations can impact how their work is evaluated (CHAMBERS et al. 2005). The journalist may recognize that such alignment could positively impact how her work is evaluated, as it conforms to societal expectations about the congruence between the reporter's gender, the topic covered, and the gender of the sources quoted (PAUL et al. 2022; SHOR et al. 2018). Even when women address political or social matters, they are encouraged to adopt a »human-interest« approach, emphasizing the impact of events on individuals' everyday lives. Thus, and conversant with literature on women's work in the professions, the primary role of early women journalists was to evoke emotional responses from readers (CHAMBERS et al. 2005); hence, they then are also tasked with a disproportionate amount of *emotional labor* in newsrooms (SORONEN 2018). Emotional labor is reflected in two activities – evocation and suppression; evocation requires women to manifest emotion in places where it is initially absent, and suppression requires women to manage undesired emotions which are initially present (HOCHSCHILD 1979). In a similar manner, women in the professions are often tasked with what Anderson (2023) describes as *hermeneutic labor*, in which women are tasked with making sense of the emotions of others.

In this way there exists an unintentional activation of implicit gender stereotypes within journalism, and there is the potential backlash when women journalists deviate from these expectations. A study done by Cassidy (2008) analyzed the professional role conceptions of men and women newspaper journalists in the United States. He found that women newspaper journalists tend to prioritize adopting an activist stance in their approach to journalism. He also found that women journalists tended to incorporate traditionally masculine norms of the profession into their job performance (CASSIDY 2008). They feel as if they have to adjust in order to be accepted as »real« journalists (VAN ZOONEN 1998). In this way, women journalists engage in an interplay with societal gender norms, leveraging strategies, like taking on more man-centric characteristics (CASSIDY 2008; VAN ZOONEN 1998), to enhance credibility while being aware of the potential challenges and biases associated with these expectations.

Prior research reflects that the presence of women in significant editorial and managerial positions positively influences the overall reporting of various issues in the news, particularly with regard to the coverage of women (SHOR et al. 2018); this includes reporting on topics disproportionately affecting women. This viewpoint underscores the significance of women journalists in leadership roles, emphasizing their potential role in shaping and enhancing the quality and perspective of news reporting, particularly in areas related to women. More broadly,

this reflects the importance of diversity in decision-making roles for fostering inclusivity and accuracy in news media (CHAMBERS et al. 2005).

Despite strides in news leadership, journalism by women continues to be perceived as a counter-culture, conflicting with the prevailing journalist culture (MELIN-HIGGINS 2004), reflecting the minimal historical presence of women in newsrooms, typically men-dominated spaces. Simply being present in such environments often resulted in expectations that they would champion the interests of women in their audience.

Metajournalistic discourse on women

Metajournalistic discourse plays a crucial role in journalism, providing a platform where various actors, often journalists themselves, engage in defining, setting boundaries, and evaluating the legitimacy of journalism (CARLSON 2016). This discourse includes public assessments of news content, reflections on journalistic practices, analyses of ethical dilemmas, and considerations of the dynamics within the journalism field. The term »metajournalistic discourse« within the broader context of journalism refers to discussions that focus on evaluating news production processes and the conditions surrounding their reception, as well as delineating the profession's boundaries (CARLSON 2016). Metajournalistic discourse serves as a stabilizing force within the journalistic field, helping journalists to assess norms and expectations amidst the field's evolving standards (PERREAULT/PERREAULT/MAARES 2022). It acts as a self-reflective practice, enabling journalists to comprehensively examine their profession, contemplate the news media's impact on society, and navigate the evolving landscape of the industry (PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023); the practice allows journalists to engage in *epistemic contests* in which journalists debate not just what is known, but how journalists define their ways of knowing (CARLSON 2025). The evolution of technology has further expanded the avenues for discussions about journalism, allowing journalists to communicate in more emotional and personal ways across various platforms (PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023). But it is not only technological shifts that have shaped journalists engagement in discussion in regard to emotions, but also cultural shifts in regard to journalistic profession, news work, and journalistic audiences (see MAARES et al. 2023; PERREAULT et al. 2024b). Broadly, journalists feel more need to engage *affectively* and view the deployment of emotions as key to creating knowledge (KOTIŠOVÁ/VAN DER VELDEN 2023).

Metajournalistic discourse takes on diverse forms, such as editor's notes, amicus briefs, and public statements, and is not solely the responsibility of journalists; non-journalists also contribute significantly to co-creating and participating in critical discourses on the nature of journalism (PERREAULT/

TANDOC/CABERLON 2023; PHELAN/SALTER 2021). Moreover, it serves as a lens through which journalists conceptualize their work (PERREAULT/NÖLLEKE 2022; PERREAULT/KANANOVICH/HACKETT 2023), establish field boundaries, and navigate crises, contributing to a stabilized journalistic landscape (PERREAULT/PERREAULT/MAARES 2022; PERREAULT et al. 2024a). While some aspects of metajournalistic discourse address external readers, it primarily tends to be inward-facing, fostering discussions among journalists themselves and creating a space for introspection and dialogue within the journalistic community (VOS 2016).

The historical authority within journalism plays a crucial role in shaping journalists' perceptions of the world (MOON 2021). Obituaries, traditionally viewed as simple remembrances of the deceased, gain significance when applied to the experiences of journalists. They offer a unique opportunity for metajournalistic discourse, allowing the journalistic field to reflect on its historical trajectory and impact on journalists' worldviews (PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023). Beyond serving as a memorialization tool, obituaries become a form of collective memory, reaffirming the mission of journalists, reinforcing norms, and creating models for emulation, thus establishing a recognized tradition of journalistic success (CARLSON 2007).

In commemorating departed journalists, obituaries go beyond mere remembrance; they become a tool for boundary maintenance within the journalistic community (CARLSON/BERKOWITZ 2014). They provide spaces for introspection about journalism and contribute to the ongoing constitution of journalistic practice within the field (CARLSON 2016).

The theoretical argument supporting the significance of metajournalistic discourse, including the obituary as a form of it, lies in its ability to connect the creation and circulation of journalism's sociocultural meanings to the social practices surrounding news production and consumption. As a pragmatic discourse delineating journalism as a cultural practice and a normative one shaping perceptions of what news should be, metajournalistic discourse becomes the site where actors inside and outside of journalism engage in establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy (CARLSON 2016).

Obituaries of women

Obituaries are an often underdiscussed, but essential aspect of journalism knowledge-building service to a community by linking »the past to the present« (PERREAULT et al. 2023: 12) and connecting »individual lives with generational, or family, memory and with American collective memory« (HUME 2000: 11). Through the process of memorialization »even after journalists have passed

their contributions live on« (19); in effect, through reflecting a community back on itself. Obituaries are of course manufactured memorializations: reconstructing the lives of those who have passed through historical and social contexts (EDY 1999). As a staple in U.S. news, it serves as a »secularized rite de passage, to help the bereaved; yet is also a verdict...about the worth of the dead person's contribution« (FOWLER 2011: 61). Obituaries are developed in two manners: by family members who at times pay a fee for the obituary publications and at times by journalists within a newsroom. Nevertheless, given that journalists take part in production and distribution of the obituary, and that obituaries are suited to the form of journalism, we consider the overall process one of metajournalism. This also reflects Carlson's (2016) argument that researchers ought to take seriously the »divisions among journalists and the blurring of boundaries between journalists and non journalists« (CARLSON 2016: 357).

Fowler (2005) categorizes women's obituaries into five types: traditional positive, untraditional positive, negative, tragic, and ironic. Research shows that ironic obituaries, which humorously highlight the outrageous aspects of a woman's life, and tragic obituaries, which portray the deceased as victims of structural injustice, are relatively rare (FOWLER 2005). The more common types are:

Traditional positive: According to Fowler (2005), this is the most prevalent type, focusing on the deceased's achievements and celebrating their life.

Untraditional positive: Fowler (2005) describes these obituaries as highlighting the »mould breaking« work of women (160), while still adhering to the norms of traditional positive obituaries.

Negative: This rare type of obituary is applied to stigmatized individuals, either due to their actions or identity, effectively marginalizing them from the community (FOWLER 2005).

Unlike other forms of reporting on the death of a person, journalism practices regarding the obituary tend to offer a reflection of »a life lived instead of a death died« (STARCK 2005: 268). And these reflections tend to lean heavily on journalist's »cultural authority to make truth claims« (ADAMS 2022: 1040), regarding an individual's legacy.

This leads us to pose the following research questions:

RQ 1: *How do obituaries of women journalists memorialize their professional identity?*

RQ 2: *How do obituaries of women journalists memorialize their news work?*

Method

In response to Carlson's (2016) suggestion that researchers should seriously consider the divisions among journalists and the blurred lines between journalists and non-journalists who create metadiscourse, we adopt an inclusive approach

to metajournalism in this study. We include any obituary in our analysis if (1) the journalist is listed on the Journalist Memorial Site and (2) the obituary is published by a news source. Taussig (2017) highlights that obituaries can be written by various individuals, including family, friends, and journalists. However, our focus is on the discussion of journalism within these obituaries. Additionally, the obituary writer acts as an agent of memorialization (CARLSON 2007); these agents »speak to the importance of the news work or personal traits of the memorialized subjects (or a combination) take on a double role of constructing the memorialized subject as an elite figure while affirming, through their authority to speak, their own status as elite figures and authorities« (CARLSON 2007: 175).

In order to address the research questions, the scholars evaluated a database of obituaries, created as a part of a larger metajournalism and obituaries project (see also PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023); it was explored here in order to specifically highlight the experiences of U.S. women journalists. For inclusion in the study, obituaries needed to be listed on the Journalist Memorial Site between January 1, 2020 and December 31, 2021 – the timing, aligned with the height of coronavirus pandemic, made these years a key time for metajournalistic discourse reflections on journalistic identities and news work (PERREAULT/PERREAULT/MAARES 2022) – and be published by a news source in order to be eligible for inclusion. Some listed obituaries are only listed on Legacy.com, but the database privileges multiple players of engagement within the journalistic field; hence, it was deemed important that obituaries be published through a news outlet. The database draws no distinctions – nor does the Journalist Memorial Site – among the obituary producers, which of course include both journalists and non-journalists and are typically listed without authorship. This is in recognition that regardless of the obituary producer's background they are operating as an »agent of memorialization« (CARLSON 2007) and hence, play a crucial role in defining a range of topics within journalism. In line with this, the length of journalistic experience was also not applied for exclusion purposes given that all journalistic experience is relevant for discussion regardless of whether journalists spent only a few years or their entire working lives within the field.

For the purposes of this paper, the obituaries were winnowed by the authors to only evaluate women journalists in the United States ($n=1064$), given that women journalists face many of the same professional boundaries as journalists across the globe but in a socio-political context with a relatively weak social-safety support infrastructure (e.g. maternity support, etc.). The pronouns employed in the obituary indicated the gender of the individual as woman. The coding of the obituaries took place over three stages, following Creswell's (2007) structure for a constant comparative design: open coding, in which the authors read all content, taking note of broad trends; axial coding, in which these data trends were broken down into categories and concepts; and then selective coding, in which

the themes were used to find individual participant quotes which best evidenced the volume that the categories and concepts reflected within the data. While constant comparative research designs are often accompanied by a grounded theory framework, Fram (2013) notes that they are also well suited for an etic coding method, such as this one, driven by theory and literature. This coding process was done over the course of a series of meetings (December 2023-March 2024) among the authors, in which each scholar would share relevant data and emerging themes would be discussed.

Obituaries included a range of locations across the United States. In reporting the results, the authors hence privileged picking examples and quotes most illustrative of the overall themes in the data and share national location in cases where it adds valuable contextual depth. Furthermore, we've created a table for referencing the particular quotes and their sources used in this study for reference in the online Appendix (Table 1).

Professional identity of women journalists as community engagers

In regard to RQ 1, the obituaries of women journalists illuminate their professional identities through various dimensions, including community engagement, advocacy, career achievements, and family. This section delves into how these obituaries commemorate the professional identity of women journalists, focusing on their significant contributions to society and journalism.

In the obituaries of women journalists, professional identity is memorialized not only through their contributions to journalism but also through their extensive involvement in community engagement and advocacy for various causes. One, for instance, was not only known for her journalistic prowess but also for her active participation in »local community affairs« (Obituary 27): She was »involved in numerous charitable endeavors« and »directed funding to a variety of charitable causes, including St. Charles Borromeo Parish, Operation Breakthrough, The Kansas City Art Institute, The Kansas City Symphony, and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, among others.« Women journalists are portrayed as having »long record[s] of community involvement« (Obituary 34), as some specified serving »many years on the board« (Obituary 91) or having »deep connections to community that came from 60 years of living« (Obituary 89) in their hometown. It was also evident that women journalists pursued their passions with dedication. Obituary 99 notes, »Music was her ›heart‹ and she sang professionally in weddings, funerals, and other community gatherings, singing and acting in community plays.« This highlights their commitment to using their talents to enrich their neighborhoods. Through their performances and involvement in community events, they left a lasting impact, showcasing how

they seamlessly integrated their personal interests with their roles as community advocates and journalists.

The exploration of women journalists' engagement with advocacy reveals a multifaceted approach to memorializing their professional identities through causes they champion. Women were described as »strong« (Obituary 92, 230), »tireless« (Obituary 125, 130), and »outspoken« (Obituary 186) advocates. Many were advocates for equal rights and justice (e.g. Obituary 16, 162, 498), even participating in »civil rights lunch-counter sit-ins« (Obituary 16). Women were passionate about a wide range of causes and topics, from »children's literacy programs« (Obituary 115) and art (Obituary 230) to doctors (Obituary 186) and cancer research (Obituary 125). Many were also »strong feminist[s]« (Obituary 162). Obituary 650, for instance, noted the journalist was a trailblazer for women's opportunities and broke barriers in her professional career and advocacy work. She was »the first woman to receive an honorary doctorate from Concordia University Wisconsin, the first woman president of the National Association of Lutheran Development Executives (ALDE), the first woman to serve as development director of Bethesda Lutheran Home, [and] the first woman to receive the »Keyperson of the Year« award from the Concordia Century Club« (Obituary 650). Another woman journalist »mentored dozens of younger women, encouraging them to take leadership roles in politics and social services« (Obituary 439).

Their efforts to make a positive impact in their community were further demonstrated through volunteering (Obituary 10). In connection to their advocacy, the obituaries often mentioned their efforts in »volunteering [their] ability« (Obituary 10). Obituary 33 noted the journalist was »awarded the Volunteer Activist Award in 1978 for her work to make the arts a central part of the BR community,« and Obituary 490, who was involved with a long list of community volunteer programs, »was named Wauwatosa Distinguished Citizen for 1999« and was »nominated by four organizations in which she had held leadership positions.« These obituaries highlight the journalists' multifaceted roles as volunteers and community leaders.

The obituaries showed that in the realm of journalism, women's professional identities are often defined by the remarkable scope and impact of their career achievements, serving as pivotal indicators of their expertise, influence, and significant contributions within the field.

For instance, one such trailblazer, recognized for her pioneering efforts in advancing women's leadership, directed intensive training sessions and focus groups aimed at fostering professional growth within the industry (Obituary 393). Her approach led to the establishment of annual Women's Leadership Conferences, earning her accolades such as being named a World Economic Forum Global Leader for Tomorrow and a Crain's New York Business Rising Star. Through her mentorship and vision, she catalyzed a transformation within her

organization, paving the way for greater gender diversity and representation at all levels (Obituary 393). Similarly, another exemplary journalist's ascent to leadership roles was propelled by her »work ethic, integrity, principles and respect for human dignity« (Obituary 407). The women are also often memorialized through various career progressions. Many were recognized for their journey to editorial positions within the field (Obituary 479, 484, 485, 514). In Obituary 951 a journalist was described as »a groundbreaker,« as »she was the first woman to be hired in some of her editorial positions.«

Women journalists are frequently memorialized for their groundbreaking achievements as the »first woman« to occupy significant roles and break barriers within their respective fields. For instance, Obituary 23 described the journalist's pioneering appointment as the first woman to serve as editor of a prominent section, underscoring her trailblazing role in journalism. Similarly, in Obituary 27, the journalist's distinction as the first woman to serve on the Board of Trustees and later as a Fellow at the University of Notre Dame highlights her significant contributions to academia and governance. In Obituary 87, the woman's legacy as the first woman city editor at the *Phoenix Gazette* exemplifies her trailblazing role in newsroom leadership. In Obituary 229, the departed journalist »broke barriers for future women journalists as the first woman promoted to city editor at *The Oklahoman and Times*.« They also seemed to challenge gender norms. Obituary 332 »noted that she was at one time the highest paid woman in Albany and one of the first to wear pants on the floor of the Senate Chamber.« Obituary 517 credited the journalist as »the first woman to cover sports in Toledo and an early role model for women succeeding in a male dominated career.« These instances illuminate the lasting impact of women journalists who have defied norms, shattered glass ceilings, and paved the way for future generations in their respective fields.

Notably, the obituaries seemed to provide more extensive coverage of a woman's career when she had held a leadership position. Obituaries highlighting the woman solely as a »reporter« or »columnist« often only described her career within a couple of sentences.

Finally, while the obituaries celebrate the professional accomplishments of women journalists, they also offer insights into their personal lives, including their familial relationships. The women journalists demonstrated an unparalleled devotion to their families, loving them »fiercely« (Obituary 876) and »deeply« (Obituary 216), as exemplified by their heartfelt expressions of »loving her family with her heart and soul« (Obituary 1013). These sentiments are echoed in those who are remembered for their absolute »devotion to motherhood« (Obituary 216) and descriptions of being a »beloved wife and mother« (Obituary 828, 837). One obituary exemplified the professional sacrifice women journalists make in order to preserve family. These obituaries would seem to be in contrast to related scholarship which includes men journalists (PERREAULT/TANDOC/

CABERLON 2023). Obituary 461 described that despite her »strong feminist views« during a blossoming woman's movement, she sacrificed her dream of being a reporter for *Newsweek* in Washington D.C. before starting a family, but was ultimately »joyful to welcome« her daughter in 1967 (Obituary 461). Despite the challenges and sacrifices they may have faced, the obituaries' focus on these journalists' enduring love and dedication to family serve as a reminder of their multifaceted identities and the values they held.

Women journalists memorialized in regard to their values

In regard to RQ 2, obituaries serve as a retrospective lens through which the lives and contributions of individuals are commemorated and remembered. In the realm of journalism, obituaries play a significant role in immortalizing the legacies of professionals who have made substantial contributions to the field. Women journalists, in particular, have historically faced unique challenges and barriers within the men-dominated industry. Thus, examining how their news work is depicted can provide valuable insights into the recognition and representation of their contributions throughout their career.

Obituaries of women journalists often emphasize their unwavering passion for the profession and their relentless commitment to pursuing stories with integrity and perseverance. Through expressions such as »dedicated,« »passionate,« and »committed,« these obituaries highlight the sentiment that the obituaries argue drove these journalists in their work. Moreover, mentioned awards and accolades for integrity and honesty serve as tangible markers of the journalists' dedication to journalistic ethics. By memorializing these qualities, obituaries underscore the role of passion and commitment in shaping the professional identity of women journalists and their news work.

The values upheld by women journalists in their practice, such as »reporting the unbiased truth« with »personal integrity and positivity« (Obituary 60) and reporting with »care, research, and thought« (Obituary 82) are recurrent themes in obituaries for women. These values are not only depicted as guiding principles but also as defining characteristics of their journalistic endeavors. Additionally, obituaries often celebrate the persistence exhibited by women journalists in pursuing stories (Obituary 87) and advocating for social change (e.g. Obituary 1, 4, 84). Whether through investigative journalism or human-interest pieces, these obituaries highlight the resilience and determination of women journalists in the U.S. in the face of adversity (e.g. Obituary 206, 691).

The obituaries also contextualize women journalists' role performance by describing their areas of specialization and level of industry involvement within print, broadcast, radio, and digital news media. They delineate the diverse roles

and contributions of these professionals within the journalistic field, portraying their involvement as either a hobby (Obituary 630), seasonal occupation (Obituary 764), or focus of their careers (e.g. Obituary 453, 828). Moreover, mentions of working closely with celebrities (such as Abbie Hoffman, Obituary 266; Lady Bird Johnson, Obituary 342; Frank Sinatra, Obituary 43) or specializing in fields such as entertainment, columns, and travel provide insights into the breadth and depth of their talents and expertise.

Discussion

Like the rest of the trailblazing journalists of this study, Joan Kuni defied societal expectations and pursued a career in broadcasting in the United States at a time when few women dared to do so (Obituary 502). Her determination to carve her own path, rather than conforming to the limited professional roles typically available to white, middle class women in the 1950s, mirrors the courage and resilience of those who paved the way for greater gender equality in journalism. Just as the women journalists advocated for greater representation, diversity, and inclusivity within the media industry and society at large, Joan Kuni advocated tirelessly for her sons and others with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Obituaries reflect on the long legacy of a journalist and offer a way to connect the values of the past with the context of the present (PERREAULT/TANDOC/CABERLON 2023). Hence, the findings of this study reflect on essential functions of women within the journalistic field, even as they also reflect the numerous constraints women faced during the times in which most of these departed journalists conducted their careers. In regard to RQ 1, obituaries of women journalists memorialized a woman's professional identity also in the context of community engagement (this was often constructed in relation to volunteer work and advocacy), but then in some cases in relation to women's career achievement. The latter was reflected only when women had exhibited noteworthy leadership or had received noteworthy awards. Regarding RQ 2, obituaries of women journalists memorialized their news work as stemming from passion. The particulars of women's news work (whether practiced through writing, video, photography) emerge from values identified in the obituaries: integrity, honesty, and persistence.

Taken together, we see a picture of women journalists in the United States emerge that is conversant with much of what we know regarding deceased journalists and the experiences of women in newsrooms. Women journalists in this study tended to be memorialized in relation to their advocacy (PAUL et al. 2022; SHOR et al. 2018), which seems conversant with prior research regarding the emotional labor expectations of women for, both, evocation and suppression

(SORONEN 2018); women journalists would be memorialized in relation to advocacy given that emotion is more tied into their professional expectations. Hence, it was the contributions to the communities and contributions to their family that tended to be noteworthy in their memorialization more so than their individual contributions to the journalistic field. This reflects two things: first, the constrained understandings of the contributions of women in newsrooms that is historically situated, and still persists as is evidenced in these obituaries; second, these memorializations are a tribute to contributions that extend far beyond the newsroom. Hence, women's work described as *trailblazers* or *trendsetters* or »*first women to...*« does point to their achievements, but these phrases also point toward achievements that emerged *in spite* of their cultural constraints (HOSLEY/YAMADA 1987).

Within these narratives, women journalists are not simply portrayed as professionals fulfilling their duties but as advocates actively engaged in promoting broader societal change (PAUL et al. 2022). Through their *mould-breaking* work, these journalists transcended conventional boundaries, stepping into roles and positions that had previously been exclusively occupied by men (FOWLER 2005). This courageous act of breaking barriers within the newsroom and beyond not only reshaped the landscape of journalism but also served as a catalyst for societal progress and gender equity.

For this reason, through the lens of Fowler's (2005) typology, the majority of the obituaries in this study tended to be untraditional positive, that is, they reflected the »mould-breaking« activities of women in journalism. Yet an important theoretical connection is evidenced here, in that for something to be recognized as »mould-breaking,« implicitly the »mould« itself is also recognized. Metajournalism engages within the field through three primary means: through boundary work, leading understanding as an interpretive community, and paradigm repair. This mould-breaking would seem to reflect a sort of paradigm repair work. Paradigm repair occurs through two steps: first, identifying an area within journalism that is a threat to the overall field (e.g. the mould), and, second, through offering applied means with which to diminish, expel, or rationalize the perceived threat (e.g. the mould-breaking; FOWLER 2005). The focus on the trail-blazing experiences of women journalists would then reflect the broad structural inequalities that women faced, such as working in a men-dominated field (Obituary 766), and through journalism's historical authority (MOON 2021). This allows the obituaries of women to rationalize that these inequities have been addressed, or at least *are being* addressed. Yet, that being said, through centering these experiences, and claiming these experiences, journalism is able to reify and reinforce the professional norms of the institution. In other words, by claiming a woman's *trailblazing* experiences as an experience of journalism, they

at once acknowledge that a trail needed to be blazed, but also offer the paradigmatic reinforcement that the trail now exists.

This memorialization reflects an increased recognition of women's contributions and a more inclusive environment within journalism and potentially in society as a whole. The fact that there are more women in the field in the United States now, compared to the times when the women journalists who were described in the obituaries worked, implies that the efforts of these trailblazers have had an impact. That said, previous studies of obituaries have reflected that the form of the obituary has changed significantly through American journalistic history, with individuals being memorialized differently in eras ranging from the Civil War to women's suffrage (HUME 2000). In this way, »obituaries highlight era ethical issues of virtue and exclusion« (HUME 2000: 12) and, in connecting the past with the present, the present is *making sense* of the experiences of the past – and not on the terms of the women memorialized.

In this way, the current obituaries do reflect something of U.S. journalism's present given that the increasing visibility of women in journalism, as seen in the rise of women journalists from 37.5% in 2013 to 40.9% in 2022 (WILLNAT et al. 2022) and 53.4% in 2025 (ZIPPIA 2025), signals significant progress. Nevertheless, systemic barriers still exist, especially in leadership roles. While women make up a growing portion of the journalism workforce in the U.S., they remain significantly underrepresented in top editorial positions, with only 24.2% of top editors being women (ARGUEDAS et al. 2024). This reflects ongoing structural sexism, with women facing not only gendered expectations and workplace harassment (BAILEY 2022; LIPINSKI 2019) but also enduring professional retaliation when challenging sexist behaviors. The fact that women still have to continue to »break the mould« to be recognized in these leadership spaces points to the persistent inequalities in the field, despite the positive shifts in overall representation. Moreover, this underrepresentation of women in senior editorial roles, coupled with slow but steady progress, aligns with the broader historical exclusion of women's contributions in journalism. The gradual increase in women's presence, while encouraging, underscores that these inequalities are deeply rooted and must be addressed through both structural and cultural change. The memorialization of trailblazing women, such as through the obituaries analyzed in this study, serves as an acknowledgment of their achievements but also highlights the ongoing need for institutional transformation to achieve gender parity. As Hume (2000) noted, obituaries of women – while more frequent today – often reflect a history of exclusion and the challenge of rewriting journalistic history to fully incorporate women's contributions.

As more women enter and succeed in journalism, their experiences become increasingly visible and acknowledged; something *The New York Times* famously engaged with in noting that »over the entire 167-year history of *The New York*

Times, between 15 and 20 percent of our obituary subjects have been women – a frustratingly imprecise number that also fails to fully reflect huge changes over the decades in the obituary form itself» (SUN 2018, para. 4). As Hume (2018) found, obituaries tend to favor men across the board with their remembrance reflecting a subtle conferring of enhanced social stature in American society. This highlights the importance of the present study in foregrounding the experiences of women journalists, in particular given that their stories have a history of marginalization within the U.S. press system.

All studies have limitations, and this study is no different. We know, for example, that journalism in one place does not reflect journalism in all places. Here of course, this database of obituaries reflects only the United States; hence, the experiences of women could have been reflected with a broader selection of countries (PERREAULT 2014; NIEMEYER 2023). Furthermore, the nature of the obituary means that the author of the obituary is often unknown, and while regardless of the authorship these obituaries speak to the contents of this study, it is possible that important nuance is lost when it is impossible to determine which obituaries are written from current journalists, family members, or prewritten by the departed journalist themselves.

Through their actions and commitment to their profession, these trailblazing journalists left a mark on history, a legacy that is vividly captured and celebrated in the obituaries that memorialize their remarkable lives and contributions. In essence, the memorialization of women journalists through obituaries serves as a reminder of their role performance as advocates, highlighting not only their professional achievements but also their enduring impact on societal norms, gender dynamics, and the ongoing struggle for equality.

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