

A case study on journalistic courage

Larry Kramer and “1,112 and Counting”: The letter that helped start an activist movement

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## Introduction

Depending on whom you ask, Larry Kramer may or may not qualify as a journalist. *The New York Times* frequently featured Kramer's op-eds during the HIV/AIDS crisis, but he is just as likely to be the subject of an interview or story as he is to be the person reporting it.<sup>i</sup> He's a writer, a gay rights activist, and a playwright known for the Oscar-nominated film *Women in Love*, award-winning play-turned-HBO-movie *The Normal Heart*, and the controversial novel *Faggots* that details a gay man's struggle to find love in 1970s New York City.<sup>ii</sup> His novel's detailed account of the gay sex scene made him into "something of a persona non grata," in part because Kramer appeared to rain on the parade that was the gay community's sexual liberation.<sup>iii</sup> Although panned at the time by some in the gay community, the novel ultimately became a best seller that darkly foretold the impending mass casualties wrought by HIV/AIDS when the lead character warns his lover to change his ways "before you fuck yourself to death."<sup>iv</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, though, Kramer is a revolutionary, one of the loudest voices calling the government and public to account for its inaction when a mysterious bundle of illnesses started appearing first in the gay community, then in hemophiliacs and people given blood transfusions during surgery, and finally the straight general population. He helped found two groups, Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), that were instrumental in helping those afflicted by HIV/AIDS during the onset of the epidemic and in "bringing drugs to market that now make it possible for millions of HIV-positive people to live reasonably normal lives."<sup>v</sup> Kramer was a "biblical figure, the Jeremiah if not the Moses of the AIDS struggle,"<sup>vi</sup> but his condemnation of the promiscuity of other gay men at a time when many homosexuals placed great value on sexual expression and freedom put him at odds with the prevailing culture.<sup>vii</sup>

After learning of the new mysterious virus that was rapidly killing off the community surrounding him, Kramer became one of the first people to publicly and loudly ask why no one was doing anything to help those afflicted by the disease. In what is now known as a defining moment in the rise of HIV/AIDS awareness and activism, Kramer’s letter “1,112 and Counting,” published in March 1983 in the *New York Native*, arguably the most notable gay newspaper at the time, thrust the disease into the spotlight, warning readers that “our continued existence as gay men upon the face of this earth is at stake. Unless we fight for our lives, we shall die.”<sup>viii</sup> It wasn’t Kramer’s first time writing an op-ed for a newspaper, but “1,112 and Counting” was possibly his most influential, the equivalent of throwing a “hand grenade into the foxhole of denial where most gay men in the United States had been sitting out the epidemic,” according to journalist Randy Shilts.<sup>ix</sup> In his best-selling history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic *And the Band Played On*, Shilts further describes Kramer’s piece as “inarguably one of the most influential works of advocacy journalism of the decade.”<sup>x</sup>

### **Media coverage, or lack thereof, in the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic**

*It's hard to imagine that the national response to the emergence of AIDS ranged from indifference to hostility. But that's exactly what happened when gay men in 1981 began dying of a strange array of opportunistic infections.*

— **David J. Jefferson, Newsweek**  
May 14, 2006<sup>xi</sup>

When the virus now known as HIV first started making people sick and AIDS started killing them, no one—including the gay community that was beginning to be ravaged by the disease—seemed to care.<sup>xii</sup> The Centers for Disease Control published its first report in June 1981, documenting cases of a rare form of pneumonia previously unheard of in otherwise healthy populations that had started killing gay men.<sup>xiii</sup> So as to not offend anyone’s moral

sensibilities, the headline of the report, published in the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, didn't reference homosexuality and the report itself was buried inside the issue rather than on the front page.<sup>xiv</sup> The following month, the CDC reported cases of Kaposi's sarcoma, a cancer that causes red-purple patches to grow on the skin and that was most commonly seen in older men of Middle Eastern or Mediterranean descent,<sup>xv</sup> in addition to more cases of the surprisingly deadly pneumonia in gay men "in the driest possible prose."<sup>xvi</sup>

The Associated Press, *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* all ran stories,<sup>xvii</sup> but the articles were exceedingly cautious, with *The New York Times* reporting that people outside the homosexual population weren't at risk and that there was likely an environmental factor at play and there was reason to believe it was not a contagious illness.<sup>xviii</sup> "This day in the limelight, however, was the most attention the new epidemic would receive for the next year...the outbreak faded from newsprint and became an item of interest largely to gay men."<sup>xix</sup> Media lost interest in the story despite the fact that by the end of the year, 270 gay men were officially reported as being immunodeficient and 121 of them were dead.<sup>xx</sup> Even in the early days of the epidemic, there were researchers who believed that maybe the group of illnesses were caused by an infectious agent and that maybe that infectious agent was a contagious virus, but for the most part, the federal government and the media played it safe, preferring to keep the public calm as it painfully slowly sorted things out.<sup>xxi</sup>

At best, the media were neglectful in their approach, with *The New York Times* featuring under a dozen stories in 1981 and 1982 on what people were calling "gay cancer" and the *Wall Street Journal* only deigning to cover the exponentially increasing threat to public health after straight victims were discovered.<sup>xxii</sup> As Shilts phrased it, "the gay plague got covered only because it finally had struck people who counted, people who were not homosexuals."<sup>xxiii</sup> At

worst, they were a key part of the problem, being at least partly to blame for the slow response time both within the communities being decimated by the mysterious illness and in the communities that had the political clout to actually do something about it. The *New York Native*, for instance, beat the June 5, 1981, *MMWR* report on the new gay cancer with a piece published in mid-May that the public health department said the claims of a dangerous new killer disease among gays were “unfounded.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Larry Kramer, however, was immediately alarmed and quickly got a group of supporters together, laying the foundation for GMHC, officially founded in 1982.<sup>xxv</sup> The group created a hotline—the first of its kind—to help people facing the newly CDC-declared epidemic, distributed informative pamphlets, and created a program that paired sick men with people who could help them in their day-to-day lives.<sup>xxvi</sup> But that wasn’t enough for Kramer.

He went back and forth with opponents about what the gay community needed to do in *Native* op-eds during the early outbreak period and he harassed *The New York Times* and the mayor of New York City’s office, but for the most part, no one really seemed to be listening.<sup>xxvii</sup> His militant approach may have been to blame. He “condemns what he sees as gay men’s irresponsible promiscuity, but in so doing he provokes and offends the constituency—other gay men—whose support he is supposedly soliciting.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Kramer himself characterizes the angry response to his letters to the editor as backlash to his views on gay promiscuity.<sup>xxix</sup> “It was very obvious what was causing it, and I said that if you had a brain, you should start cooling it. And that made a lot of enemies,” Kramer said in the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *New York Magazine*.<sup>xxx</sup> With those first few letters, though, Kramer was just getting started.

### **“1,112 and Counting” and the choices Larry Kramer made in publishing it**

*If this article doesn't scare the shit out of you, we're in real trouble. If this article doesn't rouse you to anger, fury, rage, and action, gay men may have no future on this earth. Our continued existence depends on just how angry you can get.*

— **Larry Kramer, *New York Native*  
Issue 59, March 14-27, 1983<sup>xxxix</sup>**

Tired of waiting on the government and media to act, Kramer submitted “1,112 and Counting” to the *New York Native*. Making it clear that his writing was personal and not on behalf of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis group, Kramer warned readers of the more than 1,000 cases (and growing) of AIDS; that health care workers were baffled and didn’t know how to treat the patients coming down with the illness, let alone save them from a terrifyingly gruesome death in most cases; and that unless they made radical changes to their lifestyles, the entire gay community might go up in flames.<sup>xxxii</sup> He attacked the government, specifically New York City’s mayor, for its inaction, saying that no other community would’ve been forced to suffer for two years, to wait and watch as more and more of its members became ill and died. Kramer ended the first portion of his letter with a damning proclamation, saying that Mayor Ed Koch’s silence regarding the AIDS epidemic, much like that of President Ronald Reagan, was literally killing gays.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Leadership and funding from Washington, D.C., was minimal, and without direction or money, federal agencies floundered in the growing number of AIDS cases, not knowing what to do.<sup>xxxiv</sup> “AIDS was from the very beginning a political crisis,” and the government’s reluctance to address it was costing lives.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Instead of seeing the gay community as the first victims of a plague that would inevitably strike not only our nation but also the entire world, government leaders questioned whether the disease was God’s punishment for the sin of homosexuality.<sup>xxxvi</sup> “We are being blamed for AIDS, for this epidemic,” Kramer wrote. “We are being called its perpetrators, through our blood, through our ‘promiscuity,’ through just being the gay men so much of the rest of the

world has learned to hate.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Interestingly, Kramer himself was guilty of reducing their plight to the issue of promiscuity to some extent, and the argument behind the letter itself was that the emphasis on sex with multiple partners, something that was incredibly common during the sexual liberation days, was going to have to shift.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In fact, the overwhelmingly negative response to “1,112 and Counting” showed how Kramer was perceived as “alarmist” and “sex-negative,” with some people claiming that he was using the forum to emphasize how *Faggots* foretold the epidemic.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The government wasn’t the sole object of Kramer’s wrath. He also went after the media, including the prominent gay publications of the time. Though Kramer specifically named the *Advocate*, *The New York Times*, and *The Village Voice*, but he broadly painted the “straight press” as being more or less uninterested in what was happening and maligned the gay press as “useless,” asking how the community can expect to get outsiders to care about the epidemic when its own community papers weren’t even bothering to really cover it.<sup>xl</sup> Kramer does make a notable exception of the *New York Native*, which one could argue was more related to his desire to continue using it as a personal platform to spread the word about AIDS than an actual belief that the *Native* was doing a good job covering it. As noted in a report from Princeton Survey Research Associates International and the Kaiser Family Foundation, “media coverage of HIV/AIDS was never dominated by stories about gay men,” despite gay men being the people most at risk of contracting the deadly disease.<sup>xli</sup> Efforts by activists to get the mainstream media onboard with covering the epidemic resulted in sporadic coverage at best, and most of the major HIV/AIDS stories in the 1980s were the result of business/science breakthroughs, such as the clinical trials and eventual sale of the life-saving drug AZT and the announcement that superstar

Rock Hudson was a gay man with HIV.<sup>xliii</sup> Otherwise, as Kramer declared, the media didn't really seem interested.

Perhaps most surprisingly, or not surprising at all depending on how much one knows about Kramer, he attacked members of the gay community itself in his article—those who don't give money to gay charities, those who remained in the closet, those who were more concerned with their sex lives than with the virus that is coming for their lives, but most of all those who knew what was going on and still refused to act. “I am very sick and saddened by every gay man who does not get behind this issue totally and with commitment - to fight for his life,” Kramer wrote.<sup>xliiii</sup> In his typical blunt style, he told those who refused to make noise out of fear of societal repercussions from the straight majority that they could “march off now to the gas chambers,” a message intentionally invoking the horror of the Holocaust to help clarify for readers just how dire of a situation gay men were in.<sup>xliv</sup> Kramer was outraged by the lack of outrage at what he rightly saw as a disease that had the potential to wipe out entire communities. Unfortunately, many in the gay community would dismiss “1,112 and Counting” as just another letter from that “nasty prude” Larry Kramer.<sup>xlv</sup> His simply wasn't a popular opinion at the time.

Most importantly, Kramer ended his 5,000-word letter with an appeal: “I don't want to die. I can only assume you don't want to die. Can we fight together?”<sup>xlvi</sup> He told readers what community groups were doing to demand accountability from government officials; he explained that the AIDS Network was learning civil disobedience tactics (sit-ins, traffic tie-ups, etc.) to get people's attention; and he asked readers for their help and support. Underscoring the seriousness of what he was asking volunteers to commit to, Kramer told them, “All participants must be prepared to be arrested.”<sup>xlvii</sup> He begged readers to care, to know that this disease—if by some miracle it hadn't touched them yet—would kill them or people they loved. “I know that unless I



fight with every ounce of my energy I will hate myself. I hope, I pray, I implore you to feel the same,” Kramer wrote.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Kramer knew his message likely wouldn't be well received; he knew because he was aware that much of the gay community didn't like him, viewed him as a traitor to gay liberation even.<sup>xlix</sup> He certainly didn't have to subject himself to public ridicule—no one made him write the letter, let alone publish it in one of the most prominent gay newspapers of the time. But he felt he had a duty to act. A paper published in the *African Journal of AIDS Research* almost 30 years after the first cases of HIV/AIDS were reported questions whether there is a place for advocacy in journalism when it comes to topics like AIDS.<sup>1</sup> The code of ethics from the Society of Professional Journalists offers four guiding principles for journalists: “seek truth and report it,” “minimize harm,” “act independently,” and “be accountable and transparent.”<sup>li</sup> Under the first tenet, the organization suggests that advocacy and commentary be labeled.<sup>lii</sup> In Kramer's case, “1,112 and Counting” did appear as a letter, and it should have, as it wasn't strictly impartial journalism.

But what exactly constitutes advocacy journalism? Given the moral undertones of the 1980s political climate<sup>liii</sup> and the conflation of “sex and morality” the AIDS epidemic presented,<sup>liv</sup> it wouldn't have been surprising for the public to respond negatively if they perceived media coverage as accepting or even advocating homosexuality. However, reluctance to cover a disease epidemic that killed tens of thousands of people within a decade isn't a display of moral integrity, if that's what news editors were going for; it's a dereliction of duty. Despite pleas from the gay community, the media largely refused to cover the illness when it was first discovered and even after it started killing significantly more people than the Legionnaire's outbreak the media were so eager to cover.<sup>lv</sup> But those getting Legionnaire's disease weren't gay

and those dying from AIDS were, and that made all the difference in terms of coverage worthiness.<sup>lvi</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It took activism, militant activism, to shake HIV/AIDS into the consciousness of mainstream America. Larry Kramer just happened to be the activist brave enough to take the brunt of the hatred from the straight, religious public and those within his own community. He was the one who was willing to tell gay men what they didn't want to hear: that they needed to change how they were expressing their sexuality or they would be risking their lives. He was willing to become even more of a pariah in the gay community if it meant he could potentially save lives, if it meant reaching someone in the government who could put HIV/AIDS on the agenda, if it meant getting the media to become partners in fighting this disease that wasn't just a concern for gay men but would soon be a concern to everyone. "Whether it was their goal or not, AIDS activists raised the bar for disease advocacy, showing the value of a tribe of committed men, women, and children who are willing to work—sometimes antagonistically—with institutional and public officials," and Larry Kramer was at the front of that activism when the disease first started being recognized and continues to be a fighter for the cause to this day.<sup>lvii</sup>

Larry Kramer didn't have to become an advocate for the cause, but it was a role he took on wholeheartedly from the very beginning. In writing "1,112 and Counting," Kramer committed to that role in a very public, courageous (albeit somewhat caustic) way. He helped mobilize a community that seemed paralyzed in the face of a deadly epidemic but unwilling to change. "They'd made sex the principal plank in their platform. No one then thought it would kill you," Kramer said in an interview years later.<sup>lviii</sup> In his letter, Kramer called on the

government to explain why it wasn't funding the studies and research necessary to battle this disease; he called on hospitals that were no longer accepting HIV/AIDS patients and were using waitlists for people who obviously wouldn't last long enough to get off of them; he called on the health care system that hadn't educated health care providers on dealing with AIDS patients; and he called on the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control, in addition to academic research journals and scientists looking to publish papers on the disease, to explain why they were more focused on getting research credits than in distributing funding and getting answers to what was going on.<sup>lix</sup>

To this day, Larry Kramer continues to fight against the disease that took so many loved ones from him. He's currently working on a novel he started back when the epidemic first began.<sup>lx</sup> "I'm sort of haunted by the notion that I have been spared when everybody I know is dead," Kramer said. "I'm one of the very few people left alive who knows everybody who's been involved in the politics of this since the beginning. And I really feel I have this obligation to tell it."<sup>lxi</sup> That sense of obligation, both to those who have died and to those who are just now learning about the disease that threatened the extinction of the gay community and beyond, was what drove Kramer to write "1,112 and Counting," to put his neck and reputation on the line for those who didn't have the power or the courage to do so themselves. He pushed people to push themselves, to stand up for themselves and their community at a time when many Americans preferred to believe gays didn't exist, because if they didn't stand up for themselves, who would?

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- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>v</sup> Green, Jesse. "4,000 Pages and Counting." NYMag.com. December 27, 2009. Accessed March 12, 2017. <http://nymag.com/news/features/62887/>.
- <sup>vi</sup> Green. "4,000 Pages and Counting." <http://nymag.com/news/features/62887/index1.html>.
- <sup>vii</sup> Rand. "An Inflammatory Fag and a Queer Form." p. 298;  
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- <sup>ix</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 244.
- <sup>x</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 245.
- <sup>xi</sup> Jefferson, David J. "How AIDS changed America." Newsweek. May 14, 2006. Accessed March 12, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/how-aids-changed-america-110511>.
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- <sup>xiv</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 68.
- <sup>xv</sup> The American Cancer Society editorial content team. "What Is Kaposi Sarcoma?" American Cancer Society. February 9, 2016. Accessed March 12, 2017. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/kaposi-sarcoma/about/what-is-kaposi-sarcoma.html>.
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- <sup>xvii</sup> "A Timeline of HIV/AIDS." AIDS.gov. Accessed March 12, 2017. <https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/embed.html>.

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- <sup>xix</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 78.
- <sup>xx</sup> "A Timeline of HIV/AIDS."
- <sup>xxi</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 65, 84, 111-112.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Jefferson. "How AIDS changed America"; Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 126.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 126.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 67.
- <sup>xxv</sup> "GMHC/HIV/AIDS Timeline." GMHC - Fight Aids. Love Life. 2017. Accessed March 12, 2017. <http://www.gmhc.org/about-us/gmhchivaids-timeline>; Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 90-91.
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- <sup>xxvii</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 109.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Rand. "An Inflammatory Fag and a Queer Form." p. 307.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Ed. Roshan, Maer. "Larry Kramer: Queer Conscience." *NYMag.com: 30th Anniversary Issue*. April 6, 1998. Accessed March 12, 2017. <http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/2423/>.
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- <sup>xxxiii</sup> *Ibid.*
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<sup>xxxviii</sup> Dow. "AIDS, perspective by incongruity, and gay identity in Larry Kramer's '1,112 and Counting.'" p. 228-229; Kramer. "1,112 and Counting."

<sup>xxxix</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 245.

<sup>xl</sup> Kramer. "1,112 and Counting."

<sup>xli</sup> Brodie, Mollyann, Elizabeth Hamel, Lee Ann Brady, Jennifer Kates, and Drew E. Altman. 2004. "AIDS at 21: Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic 1981-2002. (cover story)." *Columbia Journalism Review: 5. MasterFILE Elite*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 12, 2017).

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<sup>xliii</sup> Kramer. "1,112 and Counting."

<sup>xliv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xlv</sup> Green. "4,000 Pages and Counting." <http://nymag.com/news/features/62887/index1.html>

<sup>xlvi</sup> Kramer. "1,112 and Counting."

<sup>xlvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xlix</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 26-27.

<sup>l</sup> Krüger, F. 2005. "Ethical journalism in a time of AIDS." *African Journal Of AIDS Research*, 4(2), 127. EBSCOhost (accessed March 12, 2017).

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<sup>lii</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>lv</sup> Shilts. *And the Band Played On*, p. 143.

<sup>lvi</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>lviii</sup> Roshan. “Larry Kramer: Queer Conscience.”

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