

Brooke Kroeger, **Undercover Reporting: The Truth About Deception**. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013, 496 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
David Conrad
University of Pennsylvania

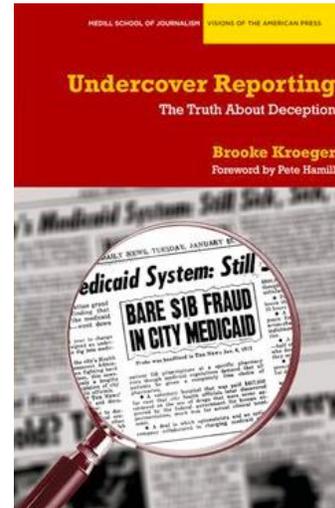
In 1989, the *Hartford Courant* assigned a team of black and white reporters to pose as prospective homebuyers; they were instructed to alter their names and to effectively lie in order to disguise their identity as journalists to area realtors. The resulting investigation exposed widespread discriminatory real estate practices in the Connecticut capital, practices that frequently subjected black clients to racial steering and “tactics that effectively barred them from even seeing the inside of a house” (p. 125). The extensive evidence gathered by the newspaper led the governor to enact a statewide investigation into racial discrimination by real estate agencies.

Courant reporters claimed that their deceptive techniques were justified in light of the illegal activity that they uncovered, but the paper’s ombudsman, Henry McNulty, disagreed. McNulty argued that the investigation should have never happened in the first place—that a news story should never be based on deception, “regardless of its social importance” (p. 126).

Such criticism is hardly unique to the New England daily. Journalism’s high priests have long criticized the surreptitious methods of undercover reporting, arguing that great insider journalism can be produced just as effectively without misrepresentation or subterfuge, which they claim betrays the integrity of the profession and the trust of the public. In fact, at the height of its scrutiny, undercover journalism didn’t garner a single Pulitzer Prize between the *Chicago Sun-Times* Mirage controversy of 1979 and Tony Horwitz’s chicken-processing investigation for *The Wall Street Journal* in 1995.

Yet, during this span of 16 years, and in the decades long before and after, undercover reporting has spurred some of the most influential achievements in American journalism. Drawing from a volume of evidence, Brooke Kroeger makes this point convincingly in her newest book, **Undercover Reporting: The Truth About Deception**. She incisively dissects the ethical debates surrounding the use of deception by journalists and argues that it is precisely because of its public service that the method of undercover reporting should be valorized.

Her position is intended to provoke readers, and it has. A critique by media watcher Jack Shafer in the *Columbia Journalism Review* summarizes much of the retort. The first problem that arises for Shafer (2012) is Kroeger’s use of an “over-expansive definition of undercover reporting” (p. 55) which he says includes nearly every journalistic investigation that has used deception. The second is that he simply doesn’t think undercover reporting is ethical.



We journalists don't trust sources who lie. Then why should we trust reporters who do the same? When I was an editor, I occasionally had trouble keeping my less-scrupulous writers on the straight and true. When I imagine giving them—or even my most conscientious reporter—a license to make things up in order to get a story, my mind derails. Kroeger's thoughtful openness to telling direct lies has turned me full-force against the technique. (Shafer, 2012, p. 56)

It is an injustice to Kroeger's prodigious volume, however, to limit its utility to such a narrow "agree" or "disagree" ethical conundrum. And researchers interested in the intersection of ethics and journalism will likely find the breadth of the book's historical analysis to mark its greatest strength, not its weakness. In other words, while *Undercover Reporting* will certainly help spin the wheels of debate over journalistic ethics in undercover forays—a discussion made all the more poignant with the immersion of digital technology and citizen journalism—what is arguably more important is the notable contribution it makes to chronicling the evolution of a long-standing practice in American journalism.

Similar to the seminal writings of Michael Schudson (1978) on the development of the interview and the journalist's role as an interpreter of events, Kroeger finds that the adoption of "investigative techniques" in the late nineteenth century expanded the role of the journalist beyond that of mere recorder, explainer, and reflector to one of social reformer and hard-hitting investigator. In literary terms, undercover exposes also brought a narrative "pow" (p. 172) and "presence" (p. 205) to news writing.

The reporters' further purpose was to experience the conditions, the cruelty, and the difficulties in as much the way their subjects experienced them as possible, and to fill in what was by then an already tried-and-true narrative framework with details amassed from actual experiences. (p. 62)

Drawn from hundreds of journalistic pieces dating back to the 1820s—all of which are made accessible through a living archive found at <http://undercoverreporting.org>—Kroeger ultimately argues that effective undercover reporting affirmed its place in the evolution of journalistic practice by focusing public attention on important social issues, inviting a wide public conversation, and generating impact.

Undercover Reporting documents well-known works, such as Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*, along with those that never maintained national attention, such as the Van Vorst sisters' five-part series, in 1902, on the exploitation of women in the workforce. Rather than attempting to summarize each of the volume's 15 chapters and all of the stories investigated in its nearly 500 pages, however, the remainder of this review will emphasize two themes that anchor much of Kroeger's analysis.

First, rather than demonstrating a proclivity to advance all or nothing judgments on the technique, the scope of work under consideration is placed along an ethical continuum.

On the one end, Kroeger interrogates the critical backlashes generated by journalists who directly lied in their reporting. These stories range from ABC's 1992 investigation of Food Lion supermarkets,

during which reporters lied on job applications in order to document firsthand the gross mishandling of the company's perishables (Chapter 10), to George N. Allen's ruse as an English teacher at John Marshall Junior High School for two-and-a-half months in Brooklyn in 1960 (Chapter 13), to John Howard Griffin's skin-dyed transformation from a white journalist to a black man in the 1959 segregated South (Chapter 8). In addition, Kroeger dedicates the entirety of Chapter 14 to the discussion of Mirage, a tavern created and staffed by *Chicago Sun-Times* journalists. Briefly, the newspaper investigation used the tavern to document police and governmental corruption. The ensuing exposes successfully led to massive reform in the Windy City, but were not awarded a Pulitzer Prize, much to the surprise of reporters and editors. Instead, a presiding sentiment among the award's board, and among many media commentators, was that giving a Pulitzer to the *Sun-Times* would be sending American journalism on the wrong course.

On the other end of the ethical spectrum, Kroeger illustrates how a mere "sleight of hand" allowed the *Miami Herald* to cover the Pope's visit to Cuba in 1998, referring to how *Miami Herald* reporters travelled on tourist visas because the country would not approve the paper's request for journalist stamps, a practice that remains commonplace in contemporary foreign reporting. Further, she says that journalists often deceive not by lying, but by not telling the truth. Walter White, who was black, used his own blue-eyed, white-looking "natural disguise" to fit in among the people of small southern towns (Chapter 8), for instance. His investigations of racial strife were published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's magazine, *The Crisis*, between 1918 and 1928. Kroeger states that White's technique was simply to informally chat with local white people; he didn't give away his purpose, but he didn't misrepresent himself either.

By employing such an expansive notion of undercover reporting—with White and the *Herald* on one end and Mirage and Griffin on the other—Kroeger reveals how the long, unsettled ethical debate is not necessarily a conversation of *whether* deceit is ever defensible; it is a debate about *when* it is permissible. Given the historic scope of journalistic practice, placing stories on a spectrum demonstrates how difficult drawing such a line can be.

Second, a key, though understated, assertion in the book is that undercover reporting has not only led to important reform in society, but also within the profession of journalism. It created a space through which women entered the profession, for instance, long before they could even vote. And while the likes of Annie Laurie and Nellie Bly undoubtedly launched their legendary careers on the strength of their undercover assignments in the late 1880s and 1890s, Kroeger also reveals how women like Helen Stuart Campbell, who provided firsthand accounts of life in New York's poorest neighborhoods, did the same a decade earlier. Finally, the book demonstrates how undercover investigations, and the reporters who conducted them, inspired others. In Chapter 9, Ted Conover is depicted as channeling Jack London, George Orwell, and Hermann Hesse in his storied writings on America's hoboes. Kroeger states that Conover even made a point to track down Neil Henry for advice and affirmation shortly after Henry had published a 12-part series about the seedy side of Washington, DC, in *The Washington Post*. In Chapter 10, she uses original interviews to trace the origins of the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigations of *The Wall Street Journal's* Tony Horwitz (p. 156) and *The New York Times's* Charlie LeDuff (p. 165), in 1995 and 2001, respectively, revealing stark similarities in their reporting on abuses by food handlers, the least of which being that they both consciously carried the vision of Upton Sinclair. Finally, even the foreword of

the book, written by Pete Hamill, is dominated by a narration of how he discovered, as a young reporter, the 1943 book *Under Cover* by John Roy Carlson. He recalls being fascinated by Carlson and imagined himself changing his identity, donning a disguise, and "truly living in a melodrama that was about pursuing the truth" (p. xii).

In summary, discussion of this book in schools of journalism and communication studies should not solely focus on its unabashed support of undercover reporting. More important, *Undercover Reporting* is a catalog of what Kroeger often refers to as "journalism that matters." It is an inventory of journalistic investigations of great and small impact that have inspired both social change and generations of journalists. Today, American journalism, especially the long-standing news institutions responsible for producing much of the undercover material, is at a widely documented critical disjuncture, faced with the challenge of arguing why it matters. Unlike Shafer, after reading this prodigious work, I am not left with the question "Is it okay to lie?" Instead, I am struck by the profession's track record of verve and impact. And if news organizations and journalists remain dedicated to finding ways of generating journalism that matters, then Kroeger offers readers a convincing account for why undercover reporting has, and will likely continue to be, one such avenue.

References

Schudson, M. (1978), *Discovering the news*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Shafer, J. (2012, September/October). The lying game. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 55–56.