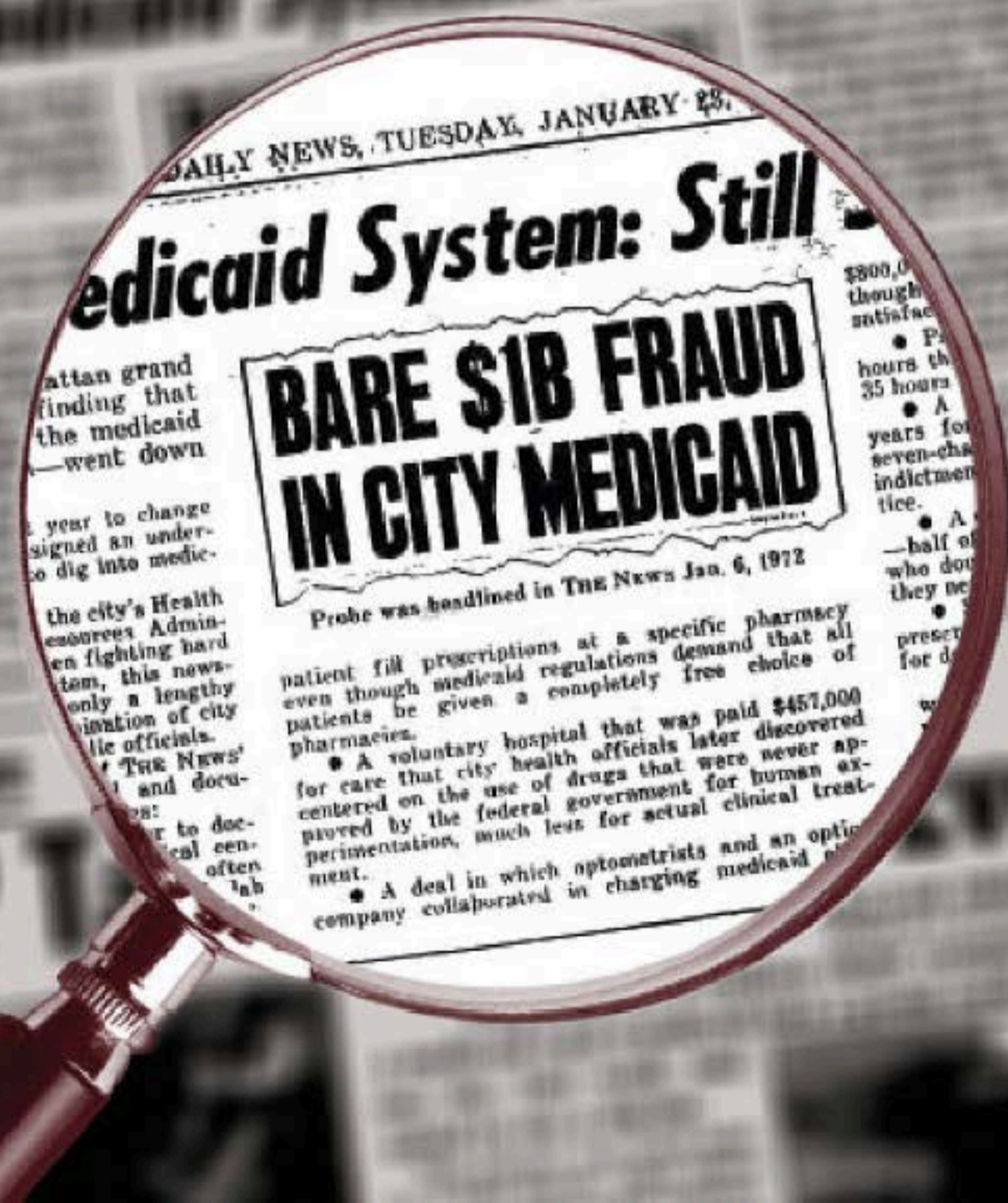


Undercover Reporting

The Truth About Deception

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Foreword by Pete Hamill



Either way, their point was to invite a vicarious, deeply empathetic reaction from readers, whose outrage and cries for reform the publications then could galvanize with editorials, follow-up stories, published letters to the editor, and other efforts aimed at inviting response. The point, as with the effective exposés of previous years, was to focus public attention on important social issues, to invite a wide public conversation, and to have impact. In the most successful cases reforms followed, as did more notoriety and boosts in circulation for the publications. For the writers, it meant career-building personal notice. This perfect circle of positive outcomes reinsured the place of undercover reporting in the evolution of journalistic practice. The pitfalls, then as now, were overexposure and a tendency to veer off into the ridiculous or purely sensationalistic. The key to repeated success was to limit the themes to the pressing matters of the day and to produce these types of stories sparingly enough to avoid wearing out the terrific impact they could have at their best.

It was not Campbell or her Civil War era predecessors, but Bly who emerged as the nineteenth century's top celebrity exponent of the undercover technique. Someone who should have been no more than a cursor blip on the screen of history retains almost mystical staying power. The prominence she gained in her early twenties as the star Sunday feature writer for the *New York World* stayed with her for the remaining thirty-five years of her short life. She died at age fifty-seven in 1922.¹⁹ In the years in between, she reengaged public interest in herself with two guest reappearances at the *World* during the 1890s, including a groundbreaking jailhouse interview with Emma Goldman and exceptional coverage of the Pullman Strike from the workers' standpoint.²⁰ In those years, she shocked her fans by marrying on the fly a man forty

years her senior; embroiling herself in highly dubious business dealings as head of her husband's company; and filing or defending herself against messy, debilitating family and business lawsuits. She escaped prosecution in the business case by going to Austria, where she reported from the eastern front in World War I for the *New York Evening Journal* and then returned to the United States in 1919 to write regular op-ed columns in the last years of her life under the editorship of her old friend, Arthur Brisbane.

None of what followed would have mattered to the public had it not been for those brief two and a half years as a stunt girl at Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper. That performance—and it was a performance—fixed her place in legend without any of the usual props for literary legacies that endure: an exceptional body of work; devoted descendants with an asset to protect; a foundation; or even an archive of personal papers preserved for scholars at a manuscript library. The sole sustainers of Bly's legacy have been timing, charisma, and her pioneering role in making stunt and undercover reporting matter. What tops a ten-day incarceration as an inmate of the women's lunatic asylum on Blackwell's (now Roosevelt) Island, her very first *New York World* assignment, published over two Sundays in October 1887? What outpaces a triumphant race across the globe in a record-shattering seventy-two days for a finale in winter 1889–1890?²¹ In the one-hundred-plus weeks in between, Bly regularly led the front page of the *World's* Sunday feature section. Although she sometimes wrote political campaign interviews, frivolous features, and even failed at a personal column in those early years,²² it was the stunt work—all told, about a score of exposés—that gave her high wattage.

As to her timing, poor and immigrant groups teemed into the city in this period, crowding the metropolis with new social problems that cried out for empathy, explanation, and understanding.

The mass circulation newspaper had arrived. The well-fixed half of the population became increasingly curious about the lives of these newcomers who, as they assimilated, became newspaper readers, too. Also, the times brought a new place for women in the world of work in general and in "The New Journalism" in particular. All of this contributed to Bly's instant rise.

The writing persona Bly created also was exceptional. Particular to her style was her choice of attention-getting issues and the inventive, widely imitated techniques she developed to bring these issues alive. Among her many exploits, she exposed a corrupt Albany lobbyist by pretending to be a prospective client,²³ caught a trafficker in infants by posing as an unwed mother who had a child to give away,²⁴ checked out the city's matrimonial agencies by posing as an applicant,²⁵ did a variation on the old Doesticks black arts ruse by pretending to be a patient with an ailment, and then visited a number of doctors to compare what they variously diagnosed and prescribed.²⁶ She hired a mesmerist for an evening's entertainment and then explained the sham to her readers,²⁷ sought employment as a maid through the offices of an unscrupulous employment agency,²⁸ labored in a paper box factory,²⁹ and danced in the chorus to explain why girls who weren't harlots or gold diggers would choose a life on the stage.³⁰ She investigated private investigators by posing as a suspicious wife,³¹ gained admittance to a home for women in unfortunate circumstances,³² slept in a Lower East Side tenement during the hottest nights of August,³³ and engineered her own arrest so that she could find out what happened to women who wound up in jail.³⁴

There was, and still is, the novelty she so perfectly depicted of an oh-so-genteel lady scribbler among those coarse, tobacco-spitting male reporters of the city room and out amid the evildoers in the big bad world. Danger! Daring! But more key to Bly's cel-

ebred success were her clandestine approaches, her bravery, her moxie, and how this self-described “New American Girl” displayed these abilities on the printed page. What the public got was a well-dressed, wily, ladylike darling who liked to feature her wasp waist and a million-dollar smile in her stories. She was not only fearless, she got results. In her earliest efforts for the *World*, her insane asylum exposé brought an appropriation to improve the asylum, and she ran that lobbyist out of the state capital. Her trip around the world was a global sensation. Her inspiring combination of attributes incited worldwide attention, not to mention deep professional jealousy. All of it made her gossip fodder in the local magazines and journalism trade publications, aggrandizing her celebrity status even more. She had a knack for making the attention stick.

One strong aspect of the Bly persona was its air of authenticity, an absolute necessity for the undercover reporter in any age. The persona she cultivated was a clean mirror image of her private self, at least as glimpsed through her legal actions, testimony, documented business dealings, and what little personal correspondence survives. The persona both pervaded and magnetized the work. But just as significant was the *World's* willingness to position Bly for stardom. Editors emblazoned her name on the page in big headlines, commissioned handsome illustrations, and offered full-page story display for her every published piece. The importance of this institutional support cannot be overestimated, and it was no doubt fed by the interest from readers that both Bly, as celebrity exponent, and the undercover method itself repeatedly demonstrated.

There is often, still, a clear correlation between the merit and the attention, prominence, prize nominations, and publicity lavished on undercover stories and their writers within the publication's editorial structure—largely to acknowledge the time and

resources this kind of work commands—and the impact the individuals and their stories are able to generate once the work appears. Then as now, the relatively large number of newspaper and magazine undercover investigations deemed worthy of publication at book length is a telling indicator.

In Bly's short stint as a stunt girl, she addressed almost every major social issue of the day and foreshadowed many future undercover themes, including safety in public transportation, if you count an ancillary benefit of her trip around the world as a Victorian girl out on her own. In the process, she generated meaningful attention for herself and her newspaper and energized and animated a fledgling journalistic form. Imitation was inevitable, in cities across the country, in Canada, and overseas. By the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, men increasingly were going undercover once again, too. More and more, the role of the journalist expanded beyond that of recorder, explainer, and reflector on the news to that of explorer and hard-hitting investigator. More sophisticated "detective" techniques soon emerged, harkening back to Campbell to produce stories that reflected far greater investigative skill, with or without a personal narrative dimension. Tarbell's Standard Oil exposé would be an obvious case in point. University-trained sociologists and ersatz ethnographers tried their hand. As for the undercover method, the sheer excitement it created, its bravura, its ability to get results and public attention—and for women just entering the field, the way it opened locked doors—assured its permanence as an effective reporting approach.

For late nineteenth-century reporters and writers, female or male, no investigative fields were more fertile to till than the world of work and the lack of it. In the 1880s and 1890s, male writers

would produce their share of undercover work, largely among the unemployed, but in that period, women predominated in stealth reporting on workplace hardship and abuse.

As it happened, work was not a major theme of Bly's stunt reporting, although she did do the couple of brief turns noted above. In her well-shaped shadow, the clones came swiftly. Eva McDonald, another twenty-two-year-old, was among the very first. Early in 1888, the Minnesotan outfitted herself from a rag-bag on assignment from the *St. Paul Globe* and went undercover for very brief periods in dozens of local mattress, bag, shirt, and blanket factories. McDonald wrote as Eva Gay but later went on to distinguish herself as a labor organizer under her married name of Eva Valesh. So effective was her reporting that the competing *Minneapolis Tribune* sniped in print that her tales of "poor working women employed at starving wages who were compelled to work in mere hovels"³⁵ had practically been the direct cause of a labor strike by local women.

Not long after, Charles Chapin, editor of the *Chicago Times*, hired Nell Cusak to investigate conditions for women in the factories of Chicago.³⁶ Under the byline Nell Nelson, her twenty-one part WHITE SLAVE GIRLS series³⁷ was provocative enough to warrant a book contract. Her explanatory prologue emphasized the same "just-the-facts" virtues that other undercover writers highlight to justify their subterfuge. She told of her "earnest endeavor" to "give all absolute facts with all their bearings to portray with exceptional fidelity and guardedness the state of things as existing."³⁸

Nelson got gratifying attention from the Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly, which endorsed her series at its August 19, 1888 meeting. One speaker told the assemblage that the Nelson articles about women workers had done more to open the eyes of the "skeptical class" than a report about a laboring man ever