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Undercover Reporting: The Truth About Deception

By Brooke Kroeger

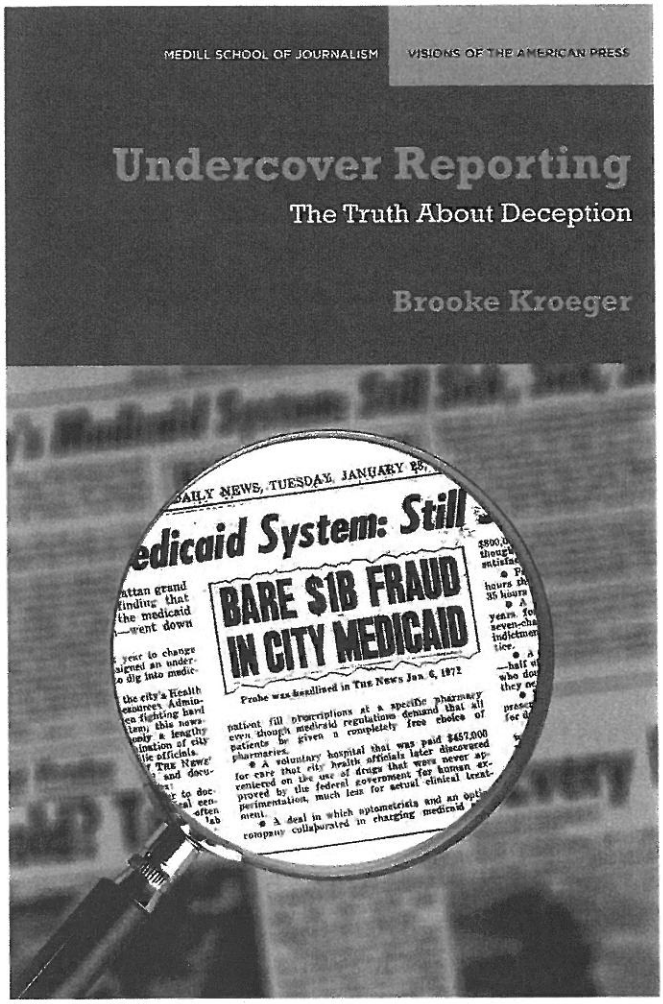
Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012, 496 pp.

Reviewed by Michael Murray
University of Missouri–St. Louis

In the foreword to this book, veteran journalist Pete Hamill credits the author, NYU journalism professor and former reporter Brooke Kroeger, for exploring what he once regarded as a form of urban cave exploration. Hamill admires the topic of using subterfuge or deception to uncover important facts. He also appreciates the quality of the writing—"bringing an academic exactitude" that is "mercifully free of academic jargon" (p. xiii). As much as anything, *Undercover Reporting*, part of the Northwestern University Press Medill School of Journalism "Visions of American Press" series under the sage editorship of David Abrahamson, provides a thorough, thoughtful, and useful account of how some very tricky topics have been journalistically excavated, along with the background of those urban cave explorers brave enough to dance with the dragons within—and then trot them out into the light of day.

The Introduction of the book explores the use of terms most commonly employed to describe undercover journalism, explaining how two *Washington Post* reporters won the Pulitzer Prize—relatively recently in 2008—for having gained unfettered access to a US military institution, Walter Reed Army Hospital. Using stealth tactics, Dana Priest and Anne Hull gathered information "under the radar" about how military veterans had often been poorly treated, and they are credited again here for their strategic methods, including especially the need to always find a way to blend into their surroundings. Readers with a strong interest in journalism history will appreciate how Kroeger explores the strategies employed to examine tough territory such as human trafficking. The author starts out with accounts of slave auctions and moves to more recent reporting on related topics such as child prostitution.

In a chapter titled "Predators," Kroeger offers a discussion of an ancient exposé from London's *Pall Mall Gazette*—the work of an undercover investigator—then looks at modern-day reports on international slave-trading from Peter Van Sant of CBS's *48 Hours*, Cynthia McFadden of ABC, and Ric Esther Bienstock of PBS's *Frontline*. The notorious *To Catch a Predator* (NBC) is also discussed in this context as a prelude to returning to an opening example from London in 1885 with some basic questions that were put to newsreaders at that time about the validity of the methods used in uncovering information critical to that story. And, as is typical, those questions revolve around basic truthfulness in terms of getting information, the underlying motives and also the manner



of presentation, noting how a sensationalistic approach can diminish the overall effectiveness of such a story.

Another chapter follows the work of Helen Stuart Campbell with serial fiction and her extension into the poverty of the urban poor in the 1870s. Kroeger explains how this work emphasized hard, cold facts as opposed to embellishment of that era, eventually overshadowed by flamboyant "stunt" girl reporting such as that of Nellie Bly. Campbell is credited by no less than Ida Tarbell as offering thrilling pictures of the poor and "a type of work which sooner or later the press must espouse" (p. 60). And as with so many subjects, the author spends a lot of time researching the reportorial environment of the writer and predecessors as a means of explaining unique qualities. Three or four pages about the persona of Nellie Bly are as well informed, well written, and carefully laid out as any summary you could find.

Explorations of the world of work and having reporters posing as young people in search of work provide fertile ground for investigations and offer a graphic overview of the special exploitation of women and the role of readers in carrying a series forward with letters of praise reprinted on page one. The use of "tramps" as field observers set a standard for investigation of itinerant day labor. Running into organized opposition, we get to dissect some tales of "derring-do" or what is simply described as after the fact claims of "derring-did" (p. 74). Addressed are the work of Jack London and Upton Sinclair, followed by a treatment of the exploits and latter exploitation of figures from the Van Vorst Ladies, who wrote for magazines but had work polished and consolidated into popular books. They offered undercover narratives of hardscrabble lives and some unseemly behavior from pickle and shoe factories of the Northeast to cotton mills in North Carolina. Advancing the "sob sister" literary moniker, just one Depression-era encounter with William Randolph Hearst led to an assignment in which a female writer was ordered to pursue employment opportunities with no more than a dime in her pocket, thus advancing "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"

The issue of race emerges again as the author regards it as the most reflexive reporter's best ally. The reemergence of attention to slave markets, wage exploitation of migratory laborers, and the popularity of John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* helped bring attention to the topic of reporting on race from inside. Details gleaned from direct engagement

provide a reminder of underlying exploitation evidenced by works that had a social impact in the modern era, including Gloria Steinem's story about an application to become a Playboy Bunny, George N. Allen's surreptitious study of a junior high school in *Undercover Teacher*, and Barbara Ehrenreich's more recent *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America*, an exploration of low-wage workers and the toll physical work exacts. The book also explores team investigations by media organizations, including network news, CBS's *Biography of a Bookie Joint*, ABC and the Food Lion case, the Chicago "Mirage" and the credit many received for carrying on a tradition in spite of legal and occasional government challenges. All in all, journalism historians will appreciate the scope of this book and the incredible amount of detail in discussing the most important undercover stories, supported by over one hundred pages of copious notes and a sixty-page bibliography, including many interviews and broadcast sources.