

# *Historiography*

in Mass Communication



Volume 9 (2023). Number 4

# *Historiography in Mass Communication*

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## Essays

This journal invites historians to submit essays. They may be original ones written specifically for this journal, or they may be from material that the authors already have (such as classroom lectures, AJHA presidential addresses, etc.).

Essay length may vary from 500 to 5,000 words.

To submit an essay for consideration, email a Word file to the editor at [historiography.jmc@gmail.com](mailto:historiography.jmc@gmail.com)

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# Historian Interview

Brooke Kroeger ©



Kroeger

**B**rooke Kroeger, a professor emerita at New York University, is the author of a number of books that have received national recognition. NPR in 1994 named her *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* a Best Book of the Year. She has published five other books, including *Fannie: The Talent for Success of Writer Fannie Hurst* (1998, a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Best Books of the Year); *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* (2003, a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Best Books of the Year); *Undercover Reporting: The Truth About Deception* (2012, a finalist for the Frank Luther Mott Research Award from Kappa Tau Alpha); and *The Suffragents: How Women Used Men to Get the Vote* (Gold Medal in U.S. History in the 2018 Independent Publisher Book Awards and a finalist for the 2018 Sally and Morris Lasky Prize of the Center for Political History). Her latest book is *Undaunted: How Women Changed American Journalism*.

***Historiography:*** *Tell us a little about your family background — where you were born and grew up, your education, and so forth.*

**Kroeger:** I grew up in Kansas City with a large, close extended family. I have two younger brothers, no longer young but both accomplished. The older of the two is an educator and ordained rabbi; the younger, a

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software designer and musician who is well-known in the rarefied community of jazz and blues harmonicists. My indefatigable father, who wrote unpublished pot-boilers, ran a number of small retail businesses without success. My mother became a real estate agent after she turned 50 and loved her work.

I chose Boston University for college because, in 1967, it was far from home and one of two known places in the Northeast corridor to study journalism. I minored in political science. On graduation in 1971, I went directly to Columbia to the graduate journalism school, which then still carried Joseph Pulitzer's name. I was in the class of 1971-72.

I've been married twice, divorced once, and widowed in 2021. I claim three children, the youngest of whom I bore, and seven grandchildren ages 12 to 24.

***Historiography:*** *What did you do professionally before going into teaching?*

**Kroeger:** I married the first time, mid-year while at Columbia, at age 22. The spring of 1972 after Columbia graduation, knowing we would soon be moving, I took a job as the entire staff of a 24-page shopper called *Town & Village*, which covered Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village. Shortly after we arrived in Chicago in the early fall, the AP hired me on a three-month vacation relief arrangement. When that ended, the bureau chief kindly advocated for me for a full-time job at the city's UPI bureau, where I started in January 1973. I replaced the formidable Anne Keegan, whom the *Chicago Tribune* had just hired. I've often been asked if I felt like a pioneer in those days, but the answer is no. The Vietnam draft loomed for all eligible young men. So that and

the discrimination that legal actions against *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life*, *Look*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*, the *Detroit Free-Press*, *Readers Digest* and so on, meant opportunity for women had widened, much in the way it did during both world wars.

I loved working in Chicago. Beyond the usual reporting duties, I learned to write Big Ten roundups and short college game stories (“Brooke: You cannot *make* a rebound”), covered the gubernatorial campaign of 1976, and have a permanent reminder in stretch marks of the three painful hours I stood — eight months pregnant — for an address at the Medina Temple from presidential hopeful Jimmy Carter at 8:30 pm on September 9, 1976. After I filed, I yielded, and was granted desk duty for the remaining few weeks to term. I was on the election team — so heady — and felt sure I could make it to that first Tuesday in November, but Brett came on her due date of October 27, and the nurse called in to my bureau chief to say I would not be in because I was in labor. My husband had already left for his new assignment in Brussels, where I arrived three weeks later from Kansas City, where I had gone to stay with my parents three days after Brett’s birth. As her passport declared, “Height: 1 foot, six inches.” UPI promised me a job in Brussels as soon as I was ready to return. With accrued vacation, I cobbled together four months of maternity leave and started work in UPI’s Brussels bureau and European headquarters in March 1977.

Brussels was dull, except for the Moluccan siege in Holland and the Shaba war in then Zaire, which we covered mostly by phone. For me, the quiet job was very helpful with a newborn and a husband always on the road. Chapeaus off to the Belgians for their social net; daycare was remarkable and utterly affordable, even on a UPI salary. None of my friends with babies back home could even imagine the luck I was having

in being able to manage work and an infant, nor were most ready to bear children. Over my eight years abroad, there were men with children with wives at home to care for them, plenty of single women, but I was the only woman working as a journalist among us who had a child.

Luckily, by December, UPI decided to move its Europe, Middle East, Africa Division headquarters from Brussels to London, where the news flow was constant. I reported and edited for the next two years during the administration of Margaret Thatcher. In August 1979, the company transferred me to Tel Aviv to prepare to become bureau chief as my predecessor left for Washington. My years in the Middle East, 1979-83, included the finalizing of the Camp David Accords, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, almost daily Palestinian uprisings, the aggressive establishing of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, the Sabra and Shatilla massacre and judicial reckoning, the assassination of Anwar Sadat, the death of Moshe Dayan, the blowing up by Israel of Iraq's nuclear reactor (We beat the competition by forty-five minutes on that story. It was a very proud day for the bureau), and the Israeli hand-back of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, not in that order. There were so many major stories and the almost unfathomable after Brussels and London: weather so perfect it never spoiled plans. No one even mentioned it.

In 1983, I was called back to London (as the company was falling apart, let's just acknowledge) to become division editor, responsible for the 100 correspondents and large UPI stringer network from London to Johannesburg to Moscow. A year later, in August 1984, as UPI went into more complete freefall, *Newsday* hired me. I was remarrying at the time, and we thought New York was not an option for us; so I turned down the offer of foreign editor. Then, when New York indeed began to make the most sense in the long run, we changed our minds and

*Newsday* now offered me the UN correspondent position, which I gladly accepted. After eight years abroad, foreign news was familiar turf but not New York City. It had been so long since I had been back home, I didn't even know what *The Gong Show* was. And I was glad we could settle in the city and not in the middle of Long Island.

At just about that time, after a year at the UN, *New York Newsday* was starting up and needed experienced women editors. I was called upon to become an editor at the “tabloid in a tutu” and was named one of two deputy metropolitan editors. *Newsday* was a great paper at the time and *New York Newsday* a grand experiment, but neither turned out to be the right fit for me after having run a third of the world for one glorious year. I resigned in December 1984 and freelanced for magazines for about three years before the idea for the *Nellie Bly* book emerged. That work took three years; *Fannie*, which followed immediately, took five. I completed the manuscript in 1998, just as the opportunity to become a visiting professor at NYU came up. I applied and was chosen, and then, two years later, applied for a tenure-track associate professor position on a three-year track, two years of which I had already fulfilled and thus went up for tenure the following year. *Fannie* was published in August 1999. So, although I had been working on the book for years before NYU was in my sights, its publication date meant it counted on the tenure clock. The attention *Nellie* had received earlier also worked in my favor. Plus, I took to teaching in a big way.

***Historiography:*** *Where, and what courses, have you taught?*

**Kroeger:** I have only taught at NYU. My years of service were twenty-two, from 1998 to 2020, with six (2005-2011) as department chair and founding director of the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. My last



year on the active full-time faculty, 2020-21, was a sabbatical.

I love to teach skills. In the early years, I taught feature writing and the initial reporting class to graduate students in the Literary Reportage program and to those in Cultural Reporting and Criticism. I also taught a seminar in the literature of undercover reporting. For more than a decade, I guided the year-long senior Honors seminar for undergraduates, during which top students with the requisite GPA devote themselves to reporting and writing a senior thesis of up to 10,000 words in length.

I created GloJo, for Global and Joint Program Studies, the (still unique) global journalism program, which splits a two-year graduate studies MA between journalism and eight different academic area studies graduate programs plus international relations. For years I taught the thesis preparation course in the third of their four semesters as the GloJos completed their reporting. GloJo masters degree candidates spend the full two years in the program working on their thesis requirement; the undergraduate honors students, two semesters. But the GloJo efforts always involve a summer between years one and two for reporting from abroad. I advised as many as seven or eight of my students one-on-one for this requirement each year as well.

Where's the history, you might wonder? My courses generally required a major archival component. A favorite of mine was "A Lot about a Plot," which involved a semester's worth of reporting to produce a 3,000-word narrative based on primary sources. Students were required to track the history of a numbered plot of New York City land to before its first-built origins — "back to grassland," as we put it. As much as students balked at this assignment, and they often did, I am gratified by the number of thank-you notes received years after the fact when they were pleased to know how to mine off-line historical archives

and real estate records in their work as professionals.

Oh yes, and I once taught a course in Writing Lives. Enrollment was small; so we never offered it again, but it was potent. Several of the 50-page biographies produced in that class saw publication of one kind or another. The author Kate Bolick was in that class, writing about Neith Boyce; so was Carol Lee of NBC News, with a fine piece on Bella Abzug.

***Historiography:*** *Tell us about your background in history: When did you first get interested in historical research? How did your education prepare you to be a historian? etc.*

**Kroeger:** I blush to dare to think of myself as anything more than a reporter who loves the archives and likes to go deep and fresh. As an historian, if the term even applies, I'm self-taught. The impetus to do this kind of work emanated from the decision to write a biography of Nellie Bly, knowing from my initial survey of the resources known to be available that there seemed to be very little primary material. I took that as a challenge. Quickly, I learned I not only possessed *die Kraft zu sitzen* but relished the opportunity to engage in the hunt for what was thought to be unfindable. I described this in some detail in *Historiography's* May 2023 issue. [Ed. note: That issue of *Historiography* is available on our journal's website at this address: [http://history-jmc.com/2023\\_Issues\\_files/vol.%209%2022%20Historiography2.pdf](http://history-jmc.com/2023_Issues_files/vol.%209%2022%20Historiography2.pdf)].

To me, engagement in the act of investigation and discovery is about as exciting and fulfilling as life gets. I credit my reporting years with however poorly or well I do this work. The immediacy of wire service work teaches one to be able to long for the opportunity to do what really needs to be done: taking perhaps another six months; perhaps

another six years. But this happens just as obligation and the assignment demand the harsh adjustment of that timeline to the six hours or sometimes six minutes to get the story out. It's surprisingly useful training for when the opportunity to go long and deep at last presents itself.

***Historiography:** Who or what have been the major influences on your historical outlook and work?*

**Kroeger:** Robert Caro, Jill Lepore, Scott Berg's *Max Perkins*, just to name a few. I admire and have learned from many AJHA colleagues as well, including but by no means limited to those on whose work and/or guidance I have most directly relied: David Abrahamson, Jinx Brousard, Kathy Roberts Forde, Tracy Lucht, Carolyn Kitch, Linda Lumsden, Kim Mangum, Jane Marcellus, Jane Rhodes, Linda Steiner, and Kim Todd.

***Historiography:** What are the main areas or ideas on which you concentrate your historical work?*

**Kroeger:** The evolution of women's place in history through the lens of their place in the culture as writers or journalists; the role of men in women's advancement; the examination of the discomfort that deception creates for what would or could be considered good and reasonable purpose.

***Historiography:** Summarize for us the body of work — books, journal articles, and so forth — that you have done related to history.*

**Kroeger:** All of it, really. *Nellie*, as described in the May 2023 issue of

this journal; *Fannie*, whose years (1885-1968) slightly overlap with Nellie's but extend to a high point in second-wave feminism (I've been interviewed about this for the fall-winter 2023 issue of *Le Temps des médias*); *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* grew out of my work on Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* and the real-time response to the book and films from scholars Black and white; *Undercover Reporting* takes this controversial field back to 1820 with its unearthing of major investigations long lost to history; *The Suffragents* excavated (not altogether popularly, but what I wrote was truth) the buried but critical role of men in the struggle of women to win the vote; and this past May, *Undaunted: How Women Changed American Journalism*, a representative history of women at the top of the profession — specifically those who served in what have long been considered the most coveted men's roles — from 1840 to the present.

**Historiography:** *Of the books and articles you have written, from which ones did you get the most satisfaction?*

**Kroeger:** *Nellie* because of the place in the work of others it has continued to hold over the past thirty years, and *Undaunted* because of the early response it has been receiving.

**Historiography:** *We realize that it is difficult to judge one's own work — and that the most accomplished people are often the most modest — but if you had to summarize your most important contributions to the field of JMC (journalism/mass communication) history, what would they be?*

**Kroeger:** See just above, with the requisite embarrassment at even being so considered. *Undaunted* has for the first time for me a notable reliance

on the work of others. There are, however, several scoops, e.g., see Anne O'Hare McCormick's Pulitzer, the chapter on "Power Coupling," great heretofore unknown characters such as Edith Evans Asbury and Ann Stringer, and Jill Abramson's latter-day reflections on her dismissal. The use of the chronological continuum as the book's organizing structure also gives rise to new reflections, I think. At least it did for me.

My previous works all put a hard downbeat on the presentation of previously unexplored primary material with the attendant hope of introducing new knowledge and information and of generating new prisms through which to reach understandings.

**Historiography:** *As you look back over your career, if you could do anything differently, what would it be?*

**Kroeger:** That's easy: I wish I would have had the sense, even at 41, to apply to a Ph.D. program when I began to work on *Nellie*. My dissertation would have been well under way. Alas.

**Historiography:** *Tell us about your "philosophy of history" (of historical study in general or of JMC history in particular) or what you think are the most important principles for studying history.*

**Kroeger:** As I've said before to *Historiography*, leave no stone unturned; will success where it seems impossible; privilege primary over secondary sources; cast the widest possible net for new resources; conduct interviews as soon as feasible as life is fragile; honor chronology, which has so much to teach; then go follow the trail of amassed material everywhere it leads.

***Historiography:*** *What do you think we in JMC history need to be doing to improve the status of JMC history in (1) JMC education and (2) the wider field of history in general?*

**Kroeger:** To “improve the status,” in these crazy times, likely means finding ways to extend the visibility of the work in as many ways as possible. I note the success of the *Journalism History* podcast as a means of extending reach to targeted audiences and classrooms. Identifying and executing a few ideas such as that might be a great help. Is it available through all the academic and open databases? That would be a start if it’s not already in place....

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