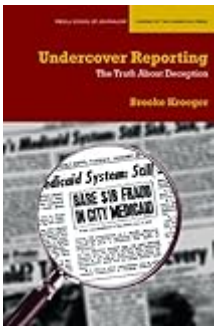
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Brooke Kroeger. *Undercover Reporting: The Truth about Deception.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012. 432 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-2619-0.

Reviewed by Gerry Lanosga (Indiana University)

Published on Jhistory (February, 2014)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek (Harvard)

The phrase âundercover reportingâ is apt to evoke reactions of disdain and disapproval from many, if not most, of journalismâs high priests and priestesses. But in this impressive work, Brooke Kroeger does much to rescue the controversial reporting technique by recovering the important journalism produced through undercover reporting throughout the history of American journalism. Kroegerâs aims are clear from the opening sentence, in which she declares that her book âunabashedly celebrates the great American tradition of undercover reportingâ (p. xv). Acknowledging problems that the inherent deception in the form pose for âwould-be truth-tellersâ of journalism, she nevertheless argues persuasively that the potential for important social reforms prompted by undercover reporting far outweigh the objections to it.

With a foreword by journalist Pete Hamill, the book contains fifteen chapters organized topically. Kroeger sets out her argument in the introduction, and the rest of the book serves as something of a catalog of selected works from a larger body of undercover journalism that she has compiled. (That corpus of material is available in a companion online database at www.undercoverreporting.com.) The data comprises works of âjournalism for significant purposeâ that relied on deceptive practices (p. xix). It is largely American work though some notable examples from abroad are mentioned. Kroeger also highlights the fictional efforts by Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle* [1906]) and George Orwell (*Down and Out in Paris and London* [1933]) because of the influential and inspirational role these seminal works played.

A central argument of the book is that undercover reporting has much earlier roots than usually thought and that it has never been out of vogue, despite frequent criticisms of the practice. Kroeger dates undercover reporting back at least to the 1820s, with reporters in the 1850s legitimizing it by going undercover to reveal the truth about southern slavery. These early practitioners, she suggests, did not dwell on ethical concerns because of the presumed efficacy of the method. Most of the book is devoted to more recent examples, including many little-known stories as well as prominent cases, such as the *Chicago Sun-Times*â Mirage Bar sting, ABCâs Food Lion investigation, and Barbara Ehrenreichâs *Nickel and Dimed* (2001). Kroeger also gives a nod to nontraditional current practitioners of undercover work, such as conservative activist James OâKeefe.

The work by OâKeefe and other partisans or activists raises the question of whether such efforts should be con-

sidered journalism. Kroeger concludes that the important thing is not who does undercover reporting but that it is done sparingly and with appropriate controls. She argues that good undercover reporting âperforms journalismâs all-important watchdog or âauditâ functionâ and often leads to reforms that serve to refute critics opposed to the use of subterfuge (p. 293). Kroeger is somewhat inconsistent in her discussion of undercover reporting when it is not done well. At one point she contends that there are relatively few misfires in undercover reporting. Yet earlier she acknowledges that journalists missed the mark as often as they hit it, creating controversy along the way.

Although the book is somewhat slim on negative cases, the basic argument that undercover reporting can be a powerful tool in the service of accountability journalism is solid. Kroeger has marshaled an impressive array of evidence from what she terms an âidiosyncratic collection of sourcesâ (p. xvi)–prize lists, key word database searches, books, academic journals, microfilm, and a number of crucial interviews with contemporary journalists as well as survivors from earlier decades.

Researchers might wish for a more detailed discussion of the methodology for searching and obtaining these elements. Likewise, the book could have been better organized. The topical arrangement necessitates a fair amount of skipping around chronologically, particularly with the material from the 1950s forward, which can be confusing. A deeper question that the book does not address is how exactly the idea of undercover reporting first came into being.

These issues aside, this book is a treasure for the wide range of material that it has unearthed and made available. In addition to the chapters, there are 111 pages of detailed endnotes and a 61-page bibliography. While the author acknowledges that the book is not comprehensive, she notes that the online database contains even more material and will be continually updated. Students and casual readers will find this book fascinating and well written; Kroeger has also provided a truly invaluable service to historians interested in the development of the professional practices of journalism.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory

Citation: Gerry Lanosga. Review of Kroeger, Brooke, *Undercover Reporting: The Truth about Deception.* Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40331

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.