Undercover Reporting

Hamill, Pete, Kroeger, Brooke

Published by Northwestern University Press

Hamill, Pete and Brooke Kroeger.
Undercover Reporting: The Truth About Deception.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/18273.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/18273

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=723783
Some of the most daring and effective of the known undercover investigations into the murky world of human trafficking have been the work of journalists abroad, starting with the textbook-perfect execution and impact of W.T. Stead’s child prostitution exposé for London’s *Pall Mall Gazette*. Stead’s 1885 series about preying on the young¹ had everything, right down to the affirmation by government panel of the newspaper’s salacious and horrifying findings. He even had the help of the Salvation Army’s reformed prostitutes and procurers who returned to their former haunts to help gather and verify the information. Later, he would go to enormous lengths publicly to exonerate the charity. Docilely, he accepted a three-month jail term on an abduction conviction. As part of the investigative process, to verify how the system worked, Stead had been complicit in buying a child from her mother at the going rate of five pounds sterling. The newspaper then arranged to have the child whisked to safety abroad instead of to the brothel to which her mother agreed to send her.²

For weeks, newspapers the world over followed and reprinted the *Gazette’s* revelations of entrapment and abduction, and the
outright sale of children. The newspaper tracked the defilement of virgins, and the violence against the helpless young women who fell into these clutches. Stead was careful to position the exposé not as a moral outrage, but solely as the exposure of a crime. Waves of international embarrassment followed swiftly for Britain, inducing Parliament to implement the Criminal Law Amendment Act and thus raise the age of sexual consent from thirteen to sixteen.

Stead’s approach was utterly thorough. He consulted evidence collected by a committee of the House of Lords three years earlier with the resolve to update it, and he spent four weeks, helped by two aides “alternately in brothels and hospitals, in the streets and in refuges, in the company of procurresses and of bishops.”

He gave no names or addresses, emphasizing that his purpose was “not to secure the punishment of criminals but to lay bare the working of a great organization of crime.” To ratify the integrity of the operation, he gave that information in all its particulars ahead of time to two archbishops, members of parliament, charitable organizations, earls, and a public criminal investigator. He brought “the most experienced officers” into his confidence and interviewed them all for background and a deeper understanding before setting out. Throughout the operation, his team steered clear of the police, who might have tipped off the brothel keepers. He interviewed victims and near victims. The reporting was unassailable and the impact just as large.

As for the girls, Stead pointedly positioned his prostitutes as “innocent victims” forced into a life of sin and described what they endured in sensational enough detail to be considered obscene, triggering legal action.

A July 16, 1885 editorial in the Independent is perfectly on point as to the motive, impact, profit, and the significance of Stead’s investigation: that “vice and crime cannot be effectively dealt with
in secret,” and in cases such as this one where needed legislation was likely to fail, “something is required to arouse the public and secure such an expression of sentiment as law-makers and law-breakers must regard.” “However distasteful and distressing it may be,” it went on, “the pure” must be confronted with “human misery and wretchedness.”

Stead’s work has been credited not only with generating major reform movements in England and the United States, the eventual repeal of the Contagious Disease Act, and reform in the age of consent laws, but also “the articulation of late-nineteenth century feminism.”

No doubt the newspaper benefitted financially from the series. Circulation was up again, but more significantly, the Independent asserted, “no journal is more quoted or more sought after in London than The Pall Mall Gazette.” The result, it concluded, “is quite consistent with a good motive.”

Sexual slavery since then has endured as a topic for undercover reporting, yet even for U.S.-based reporters, the settings also tend to be foreign. Such projects often involve the collaboration of recognized human rights organizations, law enforcement agencies, or both. In 2005, Peter Van Sant and a CBS crew from the network newsmagazine 48 Hours went undercover in Bucharest to infiltrate a sex trafficking ring. The crew purchased a girl they identified as Nicoleta and then transported her to a shelter for trafficking victims. In the second half of the report, Van Sant returned to the United States to illuminate the prevalence of the human sex trade across the Mexican border into California. In this case, the reporting focused on the mother of a young girl sold into slavery in Mexico by a “well-known family of slave traders” and then brought to work in the New York City borough of Queens, where
she eventually escaped and then helped in the criminal investigation of her abductors.15

Van Sant’s reporting was unusual in that it attempted to establish a link between international sex trafficking and the United States. His undercover techniques mirrored not only Stead’s from the late nineteenth century but also those of contemporaries who have covered similar ground.

Of those involving partnerships with human rights organizations, ABC News, in March 1998, broadcast a report of its undercover investigation into sex trafficking in Israel, helped by Global Survival Network, which produced undercover videos that documented the sale of Russian women to Israeli pimps in Tel Aviv. ABC paired the footage with reporter Cynthia McFadden’s interviews with an official from the Israeli Ministry of the Interior and an Israeli trafficker, who described the details of the girls’ captivity. After the official expressed shock that this was happening, the human rights lawyer from Global Survival Network who obtained the footage cut in to explain that government complicity is essential to the operation of such prostitution networks. To bring off the ruse, the lawyer and her colleagues feigned interest in buying women through a dummy corporation they had formed for this purpose.

At the end of the broadcast, Diane Sawyer announced that Jacob Golan, the trafficker, had for the first time been arrested for running a brothel, but spent only a day in jail before the charges against him were dropped.16

Ric Esther Bienstock led the most dramatic of the more recent investigations of this kind. She and a documentary film crew infiltrated the sex trafficking trade between the Ukraine and Turkey. “Sex Slaves,” their harrowing documentary for PBS’s Frontline, aired in 2006.17
Bienstock’s reportorial approach, again, like Stead’s, was to infiltrate the trafficking source to uncover its mechanisms. Because Bienstock was a woman who did not speak Russian, her role in this process was mostly vicarious but still possible, thanks to the technological assist of the hidden camera. In addition to standard documentary fare, including personal testimonials from girls traded into prostitution who have since escaped, the cameras allowed Bienstock and her crew to track traffickers as they procured and sold women.

In one segment, Felix Golubev, Bienstock’s Russian-speaking producer, posed as a buyer with a camera hidden in his shirt and managed to get an inside look at how the system functioned. He encountered a trafficker called Nina who told him she received up to six hundred dollars per girl. She encouraged Golubev to hold the passports of the girls he bought to keep them from running off once they arrived in Turkey and grasped the extent of their peril. Later, a man named Vlad, the trafficker who sold his friend’s pregnant wife to a Turkish pimp, explained the system of “debt bondage” to which the women would be subjected—forced to pay off an initial fine that would be inflated continuously with “fees” that made their indentured servitude almost endless. If she ever managed to clear her debt, her pimp could “then simply sell her to someone else.”

In another segment, the crew’s hidden camera followed a trafficker identified as Olga as she made her way through Turkish customs and into Istanbul’s Russian district, where, in the apparent presence of Turkish police officers, she brazenly traded the women she had led into the country. Meanwhile, Katerina and Anya, two of Olga’s previous victims, narrated how Olga had tricked them in the same way, promising the women work in a shop and then trading them to a couple of men she said were the owners of a
café and who would take them to their new apartment in Turkey. “We guessed that she was selling us,” Katerina said, “but we hoped we were wrong. We hoped that we had misunderstood things.”

At the end of the program, the narrator explained that Tania, a girl from the Chernobyl area who had been traded into a prostitution ring in Turkey, had decided to go back to Turkey. Noting that she supported her family members financially, the program mentioned a brother with chronic abdominal problems who died a month after the filming.18

In a discussion section of Frontline’s online development of the story, a viewer angrily chastised the producers for not helping the boy, “whom if I remembered correctly, could have been treated and perhaps saved with a six hundred dollar procedure.” The producers responded by explaining that they did in fact pay for Tania’s brother’s procedure, though it was unsuccessful, but that Tania’s return to prostitution was motivated by other factors as well.19

Undercover reporting also figured prominently in the first sports program ever to win a coveted duPont-Columbia Award in 2006,20 after receiving a sports Emmy in 2005. It was a production of the HBO series Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel about camel racing in the United Arab Emirates, reported by Bernard Goldberg. “The Sport of Sheikhs”21 first aired in October 2004.

This was a case where the field producer, David Higgs, resorted to equipping himself with hidden cameras after police and local authorities resisted his efforts to report the story openly. What Higgs was able to document on camera backed up Goldberg’s interview with Ansar Burney, a human rights worker who told him that a United Arab Emirates (UAE) ban on the use of jockeys under fifteen years of age or under one hundred pounds remained largely ineffectual. Burney charged that most of the young camel jockeys had been forced into a form of enslavement to
their trainers, having been bought or kidnapped from their homes in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Some of these boys were barely old enough to speak, and most seemed unable to remember their families or where they had come from. The report showed that they had been starved to keep their weight down and that they trained under grueling conditions, forced to serve physically and often sexually abusive masters. Higgs’s hidden camera footage showed tiny boys who lifted their shirts to display bodies covered in bruises. They spoke of rape and abuse at the hands of violent masters. The living conditions were shockingly poor. Some slept outdoors on bare sand. Goldberg then implicated the UAE’s prime minister for involvement in the illegal trade. On camera, he also confronted a U.S. State Department official, John Miller, asking why the United States had declared the UAE a “model for the region in excellent protection of children from camel jockey work” in 2004, given the footage the HBO team had collected. Miller’s unsatisfying explanation was a lack of State Department manpower to uncover all the world’s offenses, at which point Goldberg suggested, and Miller denied, that the more likely reason was the critically important relationship of the UAE as a U.S. ally in the Middle East.22

This is as good a point as any to note the remarkable undercover work on other topics of journalists based in countries other than the United States. In the English-language media, Britain tops the list of proponents. Prominent are the names of Donal MacIntyre (admired but also sometimes accused of being the “master of the bleedin’ obvious”23); Roger Cook of ITV’s The Cook Report; and Mark Daly (who famously went undercover as a Manchester policeman to expose racism in the ranks). Australia, New Zealand, India, Canada, and South Africa all have produced exemplars as
well as media critics, who, like those in the United States, never hesitate to call out lapses and excesses when they happen. What is offered in the following few paragraphs is at best short shrift.

A few undercover reporters are known to U.S. readers via translation of their articles and books, starting first and foremost with Germany’s Günter Wallraff, who sees the journalism of disguise and role-playing as “a powerful instrument of agitation.” He has spent a career exposing not only Germany’s social and political ills but also those of such countries as Greece and Portugal. Best remembered of his exploits are his pose as Ali, the Turkish guest worker, “the lowest of the low” who is “hired and fired, sat upon and spat upon, used and abused, vilified, reified and thrown on a heap (in Turkey, preferably) when he is done with,” and as an editor at Bild-Zeitung, his investigation of “gutter-press journalism.” As one scholar put it, Wallraff’s forte is to use deception to uncover deception in making the case for open government, and by revealing the condition of the lowliest worker, to reveal the state of the nation.

Abbie Hoffman called Wallraff’s work “journalism as guerrilla theater,” and Wallraff himself “the reporter as life-actor,” someone who puts things “in a different focus” whenever he gets on stage. Hoffman’s profile in Mother Jones in 1979 also recounted Wallraff’s most stunning escapades to date, as well as his imbroglios, the accusations against him, the censorship attempts (later there would be plagiarism charges to defend against, too), and the various court challenges he has faced from government and industry.

Fabrizio Gatti and Roberto Saviano are two Italian standouts. Gatti has repeatedly gone undercover to reveal shocking situations, including a wrenching account of rampant de facto slave labor on a number of tomato farms in Puglia, which won the 2006 Journalist Award of the European Union. Saviano, who investi-
gated Naples-based organized crime for his book *Gomorrah*, won the 2006 Viareggio Literary Prize, among other honors. From Spain, Antonio Salas, a pseudonym, spent five years infiltrating “the shadowy, interconnected world of international terrorism” as Muhammad Abdallah, a Spanish-Venezuelan with Palestinian grandparents who, in efforts to remain convincing in a hammam bathhouse, went so far as to have himself circumcised.

One of Ghana’s boldest journalists, Anas Aremeyaw Anas, has also risen to the international fore. He has gone undercover in a mental hospital, a brothel, and a hotel, where, “on the trail of Chinese sex traffickers, he donned a tuxedo and delivered room service at a swanky hotel that the pimp frequented with his prostitutes.” In June 2008, the U.S. State Department acknowledged his positive role in its report on human trafficking, and the Ghana Journalists Association named him Journalist of the Year for 2006. He has also received the Kurt Schork Award from the Institute for War and Peace Reporting and the Every Human Has Rights Media Award. His reporting has resulted in arrests and convictions and earned him a shout-out from U.S. President Barack Obama on his visit to Ghana in July 2009.

Bringing him to international attention was his January 2008 undercover investigation for Ghana’s *Crusading Guide* (now the *New Crusading Guide*) to expose the sexual exploitation of twelve to sixteen-year-old girls at a brothel in suburban Accra known as the “Soldier Bar.” By taking a job as a janitor at the brothel, Anas managed to collect undercover video evidence of the sexual exploitation of little girls by paying adults. The newspaper submitted Anas’s video evidence to the police, who then raided the bar, arresting 239 sex workers. Among them were 60 minors. Anas reported that the ministry in charge of women’s and children’s affairs sent the arrested girls to safety and that during the raid, police,
who did not believe he was a reporter, slapped him and then jailed him briefly along with some 200 sex clients.\textsuperscript{41}

Anas has explained his unorthodox methods like this: “Sometimes you need the illegality in order to obtain the information. I think that it boils down to the public interest.” Without elaborating, he said he thought there were “levels of illegality.” Of his own response to the corruption in Ghana’s political system, he said, “It’s a reaction: I watched my society carefully and decided that this is how I have to work and I think it’s paid off very well. I have chosen to belong to the remedy.”\textsuperscript{42}

In the United States, perhaps the most popular and notorious example of undercover reporting on the broader category of sexual predators was \textit{Dateline NBC}’s “To Catch a Predator” series. Hosted by Chris Hansen, it launched in 2004. Hansen worked with the online watchdog group Perverted Justice to lure potential online sexual predators to houses where they believed they would find underage teens they had met during online chats. Then, via hidden camera, Hansen exposed and confronted the men while police officers waited to arrest them in a coordinated sting operation. The show was a ratings hit for NBC; its first two episodes drew an average of 8.5 million viewers. Fifteen thousand people emailed \textit{Dateline} after the third episode, which drew 11 million viewers.\textsuperscript{43} Although the program led to a number of arrests and convictions,\textsuperscript{44} it also raised questions and criticism, especially after an incident in November 2006. One of the show’s targets, a Texas county prosecutor named Louis Conradt Jr. shot himself to death in front of police officers who had forced their way into his home as a \textit{Dateline} camera crew waited outside.\textsuperscript{45} In 2007, Marsha Bartel, an NBC producer for more than twenty years, sued the network for breach of contract, charging that she was laid off from the show
“because she complained to her supervisors that the ‘Predator’ series repeatedly violated the standards of ethical journalism.”

Some critics questioned NBC’s payments to Perverted Justice after one of its agents joined the group in the fourth episode; others took issue with the program’s air of entrapment—what Hansen described as “enticement.” The show’s cooperation with law enforcement also raised questions—in one instance, a police officer deputized a Perverted Justice operator. There also was concern that the program exaggerated a relatively minor problem. (A National Center for Missing & Exploited Children study indicates that “more than seventy percent of sexual abuse of children is perpetrated by family members or family friends,” not unknown online predators.) Rival news organizations and other journalists wondered in print whether Predator meant to be reporting news or creating it.

A local station’s entry into the world of cybersex in 2003, the year before the start of the “Predator” series, already had raised similar issues. Jennifer Hersey was a twenty-six-year-old television news producer at station WFTV in Orlando, Florida, when she presented herself as a thirteen-year-old girl in an online chat room and exchanged instant messages with a man who exposed himself on a webcam and encouraged her to do the same. He turned out to be a former sheriff’s deputy and a prosecutor. Media ethicists at the time took issue with Hersey’s encounter as the basis for the man’s arrest, the positioning of a journalist as “an active arm of law enforcement,” in the words of Gary Hill, then chairman of the Society of Professional Journalists Ethics Committee and director of investigations for KSTP-Channel 3. Bob Steele, of the Poynter Institute, added, “We should not in any routine way be collaborative and cooperative with law enforcement agencies. If we are, it erodes our watchdog roles.” Other ethicists consulted
at the time contended—as the *Washington Post* reporters similarly contended about their handling of officials at Walter Reed—that journalists should first publish their work and then let authorities do their own investigating afterward—“unless a crime is about to be committed or someone’s life is in danger.”

Back in 1885, the *Independent* asked its readers if Stead and his *Pall Mall Gazette* should be commended or condemned for its actions in the child prostitution exposé. It offered three tests in the form of questions, all of which are good measures, then or now. “Are the statements true? What are the organization’s motives in making them? In what manner are they made?” Facts, the editorial went on, “may be so used as to do great moral injury, as when the manner of reporting crime tends to make the revolting elements attractive, and represents the criminal as hero. This is the vice—we had almost said the crime—of the daily press.”