

**A Mad Woman and a Playboy Bunny: True-Story Films of
Two Female Undercover Reporters Breaking Ground**

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Abstract:

Public scrutiny of undercover journalism has grown in recent decades because of its use of questionable reporting tactics, such as lying, stealing and trespassing. However, films continue to portray undercover journalists as heroes whose acts of deception are excused in the name of the public interest. Two films, *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* and *A Bunny's Tale*, tell the true stories of journalists Nellie Bly and Gloria Steinem, who made groundbreaking advances for undercover and female journalists. The films make their own groundbreaking advances as they present characters that reach beyond stereotypical images of the female journalists in movies.

Introduction

Two real-life female reporters, Nellie Bly and Gloria Steinem, set milestones in journalism as undercover and female reporters in the late 1880s and early 1960s.¹

Decades later, the reporters' stories were commemorated through films that supported some long-established images of journalists in popular culture while dispelling others.

Both women are known for reporting during decades when undercover journalism surged in popularity and practice.² The investigative reporting method requires journalists to observe and experience their writing topics firsthand. Journalists do this by either acting as regular members of the public or assuming false identities in order to gain access to the story they often would not otherwise be able to obtain.³

Nellie Bly, whose real name was “Pink” Elizabeth Jane Cochran, pioneered this form of investigative reporting, also known as “detective” or “stunt” journalism, in the 1880s.⁴ She went undercover to report stories society often considered too dangerous for female reporters, and her name soon Bly's name became synonymous with the practice.⁵

Steinem, who began her writing career in the early 1960s, also gained stardom by going undercover.⁶ She disguised herself as a Playboy Bunny in 1963 to report on the

working conditions of the women who worked at the popular Playboy Club In New York.⁷ She later gave voice to various women's rights issues through her writing and started a feminist-themed publication called *Ms. magazine*.⁸

The stories of both women's undercover reporting experiences were retold through the made-for-television movies *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* and *A Bunny's Tale*, released in the 1980s.

The films portrayed the female reporters and the practice of undercover reporting in a positive light, even though newspaper editors and the public were largely starting to disapprove of the reporting practice that called for ethically questionable newsgathering methods.

Like many fictional films throughout the 20th century that featured undercover journalists, the "stunt" journalists in *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* and *A Bunny's Tale* are presented as heroes who can do anything to get their stories as long as they benefit the public and are reported with pure motives.⁹ The undercover journalists' questionable acts of lying, stealing and trespassing are excused because the crimes the reporters exposed are seen as greater than the crimes they commit to expose them. This is a pattern not only found in films about undercover journalists, but in films about ordinary journalists, as well.

The Adventures of Nellie Bly and *A Bunny's Tale* also serve as stereotype-busters for female reporters. The independence and moral stability of Bly's and Steinem's characters set them apart from other on-screen female reporters throughout the past century. The two women's images in the 1980s films leave viewers with the image of

ground-breaking female reporters as women who can do their job without the help or redemption of men.

However, one area where at least one of the films falls short is in its lack of portrayal of the costs and consequences of undercover reporting, such as fraud and libel suits, which many real-life reporters have had to deal with. *A Bunny's Tale* waters down such consequences by omitting important facts about Steinem's experiences after her story is published. This shortchanges viewers from a full understanding of the experiences of the undercover reporter and of the female reporter.

Undercover Reporting—Three Types of Deception

There are three types of undercover journalism: active deception, passive deception and masquerading, according to journalism professor and former reporter Ron Smith in his book *Groping for Journalism Ethics*.¹⁰

Active deception involves reporters staging events to expose wrongdoing.¹¹ An example of such deception, according to Smith, could include a media outlet setting up a fake clinic in order to expose laboratory services salesmen offering illegal kickbacks. That was what CBS's 60 Minutes did in 1981 when its producers heard that clinics were receiving the kickbacks, which were costing Medicare and Medicaid millions of dollars. Fake staff members operated the clinic and reporters recorded the salesmen behind one-way mirrors in order to catch them committing their crimes.¹²

Passive deception requires a reporter to appear as a regular member of the public to gather information without others knowing a reporter is present.¹³ Unlike active

deception, passive deception does not require staging, and it is often viewed as a less ethically questionable method of undercover reporting.¹⁴

This could consist of something as simple as a food critic not identifying himself or herself as a journalist when reviewing a restaurant in order to avoid special treatment. Or, it could consist of a reporter applying for a job as a field laborer without disclosing his profession as a journalist in order to report about worker exploitation. The journalist might not actually lie on his application, but he might simply choose not to volunteer certain information so he can gain access to a worker's point of view.¹⁵

Masquerading involves reporters intentionally misrepresenting themselves for a story.¹⁶ An example of this would be a reporter who pretends to be a lawyer, a priest or a hospital employee so he or she can gain information or access to a particular environment.¹⁷

Bly's and Steinem's characters in the television films *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* and *A Bunny's Tale* use passive deception and masquerading when performing their undercover reporting.

It appears in the film that Bly acts as a regular member of the public in situations where there is little need to name herself, such as when she poses as a factory worker or a streetwalker. She later engages in masquerading in the film by using fake names while reporting, such as the time she poses as a deranged woman named Nellie Brown so she can be admitted into an insane asylum that mistreats its patients.

In *A Bunny's Tale*, Steinem strictly masquerades since she applies for a job as Playboy Bunny under the name Marie Catherine Ochs, which is actually the name of one of her ancestors.¹⁸

The Adventures of Nellie Bly

The Adventures of Nellie Bly, a made-for-television movie that aired in 1981, tells the story of the famous Nellie Bly's undercover reporting that abuse of the mentally ill and other social problems such as human trafficking and children and poor work conditions for sweatshop laborers.¹⁹ Bly is played in the movie by Linda Purl.²⁰

The film opens with a female reporter trying to sneak an interview with President Woodrow Wilson. After she is caught by the president's press aide and complains to him that there are no opportunities for female reporters, the man sits the young woman down and tells her a story. He starts to describe the setting—it was 1887 when Grover Cleveland was president and Nellie Bly was barely 20 and living in New York.²¹

His story encompasses the career of the famous Nellie Bly and her struggles in getting hired at *The World*, New York's leading newspaper at the time.

Bly first appears in the movie as an attractive, young blond walking by a burning building, where she immediately begins reporting on the incident. Next, she is shown taking her article to *The World's* office where she is rejected by the editor even though she argues that she has two years of experience as a reporter for *The Pittsburgh Dispatch*. The editor makes sure he gets all the details of the fire before breaking the bad news and sending her away.²²

In a second try to find a story, Bly returns to the burned-down factory the next day where she finds the lead for her next article by talking to a woman who used to work in the building. Bly decides to explore the world of sweatshops on her own and gets a job in a dark warehouse washing and drying glass jars. She learns from the sweatshop manager—a tall, burly man—that her pay will be docked if she does not clean enough jars or if they are not cleaned correctly.

As Bly spends her days working in the warehouse, she experiences the hardships sweatshops workers face firsthand—she stands all day with her feet drenched in water and uses a filthy restroom. She overhears the sweatshop manager tricking a non-English-speaking immigrant into signing a contract to allow him to oversee her wages and hears from another worker that it is a common practice.²³

As an undercover reporter, Bly does her fair share of grunt work, and it starts to take a toll. Bly is sitting in the room she rents at an inn when the inn manager, a middle-aged woman, enters and finds the aspiring reporter sitting and staring blankly. She pleads with Bly to quit the “terrible” job.

“It’s only been a few days and look at yourself,” the manager tells her.

When Bly responds that it is the only way she knows how to get the “real” story, the woman becomes angry.

“For what?” she asks. “For some people to make more money selling newspaper articles? To get your name in print?”

Bly tries then to explain her greater vision as an undercover reporter:

“Maybe it was that when I first started, but it’s much, much more than that now. Those women, those poor, poor children, there are thousands like them in New York, and I have the need to make people care about them. Someone has to do something. It has to start somewhere.”²⁴

The next day at the sweatshop, Bly’s outspoken personality and low tolerance for injustice seep out when she sees the manager make a sexual pass at a worker.

“Leaver her alone!” Bly yells just before throwing a wet towel at the man’s forehead and scowling at him. The outraged manager immediately fires her.²⁵

When a weak and exhausted Bly returns to *The World* the next day to pitch her sweatshop article, the office clerk takes pity on her and hints that she should sneak down the hall and slip the copy onto the editor’s desk while he gets a drink of water. Bly then inadvertently interrupts a meeting between the editor and publisher. The editor rejects her for a second time, but Bly refuses to leave without sharing her disgust and outrage through a speech that captures the men’s attention.

“I used to think this was the greatest newspaper in all the world,” Bly tells the men.

The startled publisher, who Bly does not yet realize is Joseph Pulitzer, questions her about her meaning. She replies that it is now just full of gossip about public figures.

“No more passion. It’s a tired, old paper and now I see why—your hypocrisy, your prejudices,” she says.

Pulitzer, who has just read over Bly's story, is impressed with her article and admits that he has grown old and needs young ideas. The editor, John Cockerill, is still hesitant and argues that the paper has already done factory stories.

“Not like this one,” Bly argues, emphasizing the firsthand experience from her undercover work. “I was there. I lived it. I worked in that despicable rat-infested ice box. Look, I salted my hands. I froze my feet. I ached in every muscle in my body.”

The speech lands Bly a job at the paper.²⁶

The rest of the movie consists of a series of Bly's undercover adventures. She poses as everything from a chorus girl to an orphan pickpocket who joins a ring of child thieves.²⁷ Her daring ventures and successful stories earn her respect and friendship from her bosses. But they also lead to arguments with Cockerill about her safety and how much she should risk through her undercover reporting.²⁸

After posing as a streetwalker, Bly exposes the illegal activities of a corrupt city councilman. Her editor later warns her about digging too deeply into the activities of the councilman, Mr. “Boss” Palmer, whom Bly wants to fully expose.²⁹

When posing as an illegal French immigrant among women being sold into white slavery, Bly sees her former sweatshop boss buying the women as workers. He recognizes Bly and the two men making the deal run after her in a dramatic chase scene, but she escapes.³⁰ Later, a sniper sent by Palmer tries to kill Bly. She is unaware that Palmer is associated with the sweatshop boss.³¹

But instead of becoming intimidated by the attack, Bly simply uses the incident to segue into another undercover project. She convinces Pulitzer and Cockerill to allow her to infiltrate the Blackwell's Island women's insane asylum as a patient to find her friend Rosie's sister, Angela, who was wrongly placed there by her husband. She persuades her bosses by saying she would be safer there where Palmer would not think to look.

But Bly purposefully omits her other mission, which is to find Palmer's wife, who has recently disappeared and she believes is at the asylum.³² Bly lies to Thompson, the former desk clerk who was reassigned to assist her on assignments. He is the person who is likely to figure out her true motive, and she tricks him into leaving town.³³

Bly then pretends to be crazy, is admitted to Blackwell's Island under a fake name and spends 10 days in the asylum. There she witnesses horrific treatment of the mentally ill and eventually finds both women, posing as a nurse at one time in order to reach Mrs. Palmer in the violent ward. At the end of the movie, Bly is discovered and is chased around the asylum by a crooked nurse and Palmer's sniper. The man corners Bly with a knife, but Cockerill, who finally finds out Bly duped him and is actually in danger, arrives just in time to save her. Bly collapses in his arms and cries.³⁴

According to the narrator, Bly's report led to reform at Blackwell's Island, the freedom of Mrs. Palmer and Angela and the imprisonment of Councilman Palmer and his apprentices.³⁵

The movie ends with the press aide, who is actually Thompson, introducing the young reporter to the older, well-seasoned Bly as she walks out of the president's office after an interview. The three make dinner plans.³⁶

The Real Nellie Bly

The *Adventures of Nellie Bly* does well to communicate the real reporter's sense of drive and independence. However, some details in the film of how and when Bly achieved some of her goals differ from those of her real life.

Coming from a broken home and a childhood of poverty, Bly—whose real name was “Pink” Elizabeth Jane Cochran—had no choice but to learn how to be independent at a young age, according to her biography *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist*.³⁷ In 1885, at age 20, Bly started working at *The Pittsburg Dispatch* after impressing the newspaper's editor with letter to the newspaper responding to a columnist's rant against women.³⁸ It was there she received her pen name “Nellie Bly” and worked for two years.³⁹

But after becoming dissatisfied with her general confinement to women's interest and culture stories because of her sex, Bly left her position at *The Dispatch* and moved to New York 1887 in search of a more fulfilling reporting job.⁴⁰

Unable to obtain job interviews with editors of the local newspaper editors despite her two years of experience as a journalist,⁴¹ Bly decided to get in contact with them by using her credentials as a *Dispatch* freelancer. She chose to write about what kind of atmosphere New York offered female reporters who were just starting out. Bly was able to connect with the various editors with the excuse of interviewing them for her story.⁴²

With the finding that many of the editors had prejudices against female reporters, Bly's article was published in *The Dispatch* and was subsequently picked up by other publications across the nation, which helped her establish her name as a writer.⁴³

Next, Bly managed to talk her way through the security at *The New York World* and meet with the newspaper's editor, Colonel John Cockerill.⁴⁴ Unlike the film's version of the story, Bly's first story pitch was to travel to Europe and return in steerage class to report on the experience of an immigrant.⁴⁵

Instead, Cockerill decided to start her off with something more manageable for a newcomer—an undercover story as a patient in the Women's Lunatic Asylum at Blackwell's Island.⁴⁶ (In the film, Bly does not work on this assignment until the end and it was her own idea.)

With a successful two-part series, Bly gained instant fame and was immediately hired as a permanent staff member at the newspaper. She was given the honor of signing her name at the end of the article and having her name in the headline, a rarity even for veteran reporters at the newspaper.⁴⁷

She continued her career as an undercover reporter, a feature writer and a columnist with *The World* where she covered top-tier stories. Bly went undercover to expose corrupt practices of employment agencies, the trafficking of newborns, slavery of white females in paper factories, bribery by an Albany lobbyist, and a long list of other socially-conscious stories.⁴⁸

The film does not give all the details about Bly's career as a journalist that might show just how much of a feminist she actually was, but it does communicate the message that she was a female reporter who crossed gender boundaries of her time.

A Bunny's Tale

The 1985 made-for-television movie *A Bunny's Tale*, starring Kirstie Alley, tells the story of reporter and women's rights activist Gloria Steinem who went undercover reporting as a Playboy Bunny at the Playboy Club in New York in the 1963.⁴⁹

In this movie, Steinem is assigned to cover the experience for a light feature story, but it turns into a much more serious piece as she discovers the poor treatment and work conditions of the Playboy Bunnies at the club.

Steinem, an attractive brunette, is at first hesitant to accept the assignment because she would much rather cover the ongoing civil rights movement.⁵⁰ However, she gives in and agrees to do it, even though her roommate warns her that she will probably miss out on other serious assignments by working on the piece.⁵¹

Steinem goes to a Bunny interview and applies with a fake name, Marie Catherine Ochs.⁵² Passing the initial appearance test, Steinem is called back for another interview and immediately given the job. When she is asked for her official documents, she says she has to have her birth certificate sent from home and claims to have lost her social security card, writing down a number on paper instead.⁵³

On the job, Steinem learns how to squeeze into a tight royal-blue outfit that looks like a strapless one-piece bathing suit with a round, fluffy tail on the back. She learns to

stuff the front of the outfit like the other Bunnies and finds out she is responsible for the expenses of cleaning her own outfit every day and dying her own three-inch heels to match.⁵⁴

Steinem also soon finds out that incoming Bunnies are forced to complete a gynecological examination for detection of venereal diseases. When she questions the doctor, she is told that they find that women who refuse the test usually do so because they have something to hide.

Soon after, Steinem is shown at a pay phone calling the Department of Health checking to see if such examinations are required for waitresses in the state of New York. She discovers that no physicals are required of waitresses, let alone gynecological ones.⁵⁵

Throughout most of the film, Steinem is either being trained or is working shifts, where demerits are given and pay is docked for lateness, eating in the Bunny room or elsewhere in the club, talking back to managers and more. She finds that most of the women do not take their meal breaks. Instead, they sneak small portions of food from plates leftover in the kitchen.⁵⁶ After a long shift of serving and being hit on by male customers, Steinem sits in the Bunny room and smokes a cigarette while wincing in pain. Bright red lines on her back from the outline of her tight outfit and welts on the back of her ankles are visible.⁵⁷

She also later learns that the ads for the Playboy Bunny positions are misleading and advertise much higher pay than the Bunnies actually receive. As she gets ready in the dressing room, she witnesses the workers argue over the issue, and then she hears one woman say that two former Bunnies are suing for unpaid wages.⁵⁸

Most of Steinem's work is observational and gained from firsthand experience as she lives the life of a Bunny. She writes quick notes when she is alone about the complaints she hears of being overworked and underpaid. She befriends a woman named Andrea who works the job to support her children as she and her divorced husband go through fights.⁵⁹

When Steinem tells her editor she wants to spend more time working at the club and do a more serious piece, he argues that he wants a light feature but finally gives in. Her personal investment in the story is obvious as she tries to make him realize the horrors of the job.

"I hope you never know what it feels like to be tortured by your clothes!" she tells him.⁶⁰

The movie also shows parts of Steinem's personal life, particularly her relationship with her playwright boyfriend, Ned, who gets irritated when Steinem becomes personally invested in her story.

Steinem's new level of consciousness of what Playboy Bunnies face as overworked, underpaid sex objects starts to seep into her after-work activities. When she attends a party with her boyfriend, instead of promoting his new play with the guests, she starts paying attention to how the servers sneak bits of food when no one else is watching. When another server starts dropping a heavy tray of drinks, Steinem grabs the tray effortlessly, holding it above her head waitress-style. By the end of the night, she is not out socializing with the crowd but telling her roommate about the women's problems.⁶¹

When Steinem and her boyfriend leave the party, he argues that she cares more about the Bunnies than about him and his play. He also reminds her about the rule for journalists to remain objective and uninvolved in the lives of their story subjects. Steinem tries to explain the story's importance to the women, but Ned leaves in anger.

The next scene shows the reporter cleaning her apartment to distract herself from her failing relationship as she and her roommate, discuss the hardships of love and lack of it. Her roommate, an artist, encourages her to give in for the sake of keeping a man who loves her before she tearfully confesses how empty she feels without a man in her own life. When Steinem encourages her to focus on selling her beautiful art pieces, the roommate complains that there is no place for females in the male-dominated galleries.

However, the roommate soon decides she will be stronger and try harder, and the women embrace. The scene seems to bring exposure to the issue of discrimination against women during the 1960s. It also seems to help illustrate Steinem as the stronger woman, which adds to her overall portrayal in the film as an independent female who does not rely on men for fulfillment.⁶²

Steinem continues working at the club and eventually makes up with her boyfriend, promising to see his play on opening night. Once she feels she has put in enough time to write her story, she quits and works her last day, making up an excuse about how she has to leave to take care of her sick mother.

However, when her friend Andrea arrives to work with a black eye and bruises from her ex-husband, Steinem agrees to continue working through the night and cover her shift, even though it means missing her boyfriend's play. The other Bunnies rush to

help Steinem get ready for the night.⁶³ At this point in the movie, Steinem makes a conscious decision to choose her article over romance.

The movie ends with her walking down the streets of New York while a voiceover narrative reveals that Steinem's two-part series resulted in a letter Hugh Hefner, owner of the Playboy Club and Playboy magazine. In the letter, Hefner stated that the article did not bother him but that he did eliminate the gynecological examination as a hiring requirement in case it becomes "misunderstood,"⁶⁴ according to the voiceover.

Steinem is then shown sitting with a cigarette in her mouth as she writes on her typewriter in her office. Through her voiceover, she explains that she has gained "a subject that needed writing about—women's lives—and the knowledge that all women are Bunnies."⁶⁵

The Real Gloria Steinem

The film *A Bunny's Tale* closely well-replicates Steinem's actual experience of disguising as a Playboy Bunny. Steinem's story about the undercover "stunt" was published in her 1963 *Show* magazine article titled "I Was a Playboy Bunny." The article was later republished in her book *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*.⁶⁶

Similarities between essay and film include details of Steinem's false name, excuses of lack of identification, her interviews, the other Bunnies, the Playboy Club policies, the dressing room eavesdropping, and other elements of the story.⁶⁷ There is even a common scene in the film and Steinem's true account of the Bunnies singing and

dancing provocatively in an empty Playroom after complaining about low pay and poor treatment.⁶⁸

However, the two story forms also have their differences.

The essay provides even more details than the film of Steinem's long and tiring shifts, of unwelcome advances from male patrons and of complaints from other Bunnies.⁶⁹ Some examples of the additional description of physical strain from the job that are not included in the film include Steinem's mention of having to wear nothing but a tiny jacket over her costume in below-zero-degree weather,⁷⁰ having to wrap her ribs in gauze and having wear shoes three sizes too big because of the swelling of her feet.⁷¹

Steinem also shows more concern in the essay about the possibility of getting caught, especially since she is a 30-year-old trying to pass off as the maximum Bunny age of 24. On multiple occasions, she worries about whether her supervisor, Miss Shay, is going to discover that she is a fake and hopes her investigation will not be cut short.⁷² On the contrary, the film does not communicate these anxieties except for a couple of cautious looks during her interviews.

One of the most notable differences between the real-life account and the film is that the essay includes a list of negative consequences Steinem faced after finishing the undercover story. Barely any of these consequences are listed in the film.

According to *A Bunny's Tale*, the worst that resulted from her undercover story was the loss of some other "serious" assignments, such as stories on the Civil Rights movement.⁷³

However, Steinem's real-life account shows that she endured several negative outcomes because of the undercover story: She and a small New York newspaper were sued for \$1 million for libel after the newspaper alleged that the club's manager had Mafia connections. While Steinem was cleared of the charges since she did not make the allegations, she wrote that she had to sit through "many unpleasant hours in depositions being threatened with punitive damages."⁷⁴

Furthermore, Steinem endured several weeks of "obscene and threatening phone calls" from a man with internal knowledge of the club.⁷⁵ She also had to deal with being viewed simply as an attractive woman rather than a serious journalist.⁷⁶ In *Gloria Steinem: A Biography*, Patricia Cronin Marcello wrote that she was often introduced as an ex-Bunny.⁷⁷

The film lacks these details, which keeps the viewers from witnessing some of the realistic hardships many undercover reporters face. As a result, the film creates and oversimplified image of the job, which has its risks.

The positive result from the story, according to the essay, was that Hugh Hefner sent her a letter afterward stating he would ban the requirement for the physical exam in case it was "misunderstood,"⁷⁸ a detail that is included in the film.

Another one of the film's variations from the essay is the presence of Ned and other characters. The essay makes no mention of a boyfriend, a Bunny that is a struggling single mother or a roommate. However, the real Steinem did have a boyfriend who wrote screenplays, but she would not to marry him because she feared marriage would overshadow her individuality, according to her biography.⁷⁹ Steinem later broke up with

another boyfriend, a speech-writer for President John F. Kennedy, because wanted her to conform to stop drinking and cursing and said he hoped she would one day stop working.⁸⁰

Throughout her life, Steinem had various romances but refused to marry because she always put her career first. She did not marry until she was 66 years old in the year 2000.⁸¹

After covering the Playboy Bunny story, Steinem went on to write about politics, join the feminist movement and establish feminist *Ms.* magazine. Some women's rights issues she wrote and spoke about included women's rights to use birth control and receive abortions.⁸²

In Society: Undercover Journalism Under Scrutiny

Undercover journalism dates back to the days of Nelly Bly at the end of the 19th century when it started becoming popular. It surged in the 1930s when cities fought circulation wars during the Great Depression. Its popularity continued into the 1960s and 1970s.

A Pulitzer Prize was awarded to a *Chicago Tribune* undercover reporter who worked as an ambulance driver to expose collaboration between police and ambulance companies in 1971. Pulitzer Prizes also went to *Tribune* reporters who posed as election judges to expose voting fraud in 1973 and others who worked in hospitals to reveal

patient abuses in 1976. Other newspapers received the coveted prizes for undercover reporting during the 1970s as well.⁸³

However, by the 1980s, the practice of undercover reporting began to abate as media professionals and the public started raising questions about ethics. One of the first major blows came when an undercover operation by the *Chicago Sun-Times* led to a debate on the Pulitzer Prize advisory board, which denied an award for the story that exposed electrical and building inspectors who solicited bribes to overlook safety deficiencies. The *Sun-Times*' exposé involved reporters setting up a fake tavern called the Mirage and using hidden cameras to catch the inspectors in action and recording the acts. The Pulitzer Prize board members disqualified the story because they did not want to honor undercover reporting methods that included deception.⁸⁴

Eugene Patterson, a member of the board in 1979 and 1982, called undercover journalism “a fashionable trend I don’t like to see encouraged.” He also said it should only be used for “extraordinary circumstances that would require a policy decision by the editor.”⁸⁵

While undercover reporting became highly popular in broadcast journalism during the 1990s, newspaper editors were already abandoning the method.⁸⁶ Broadcast reporters started getting sued. One of the most well-known cases involved ABC's *PrimeTime Live*'s undercover report by Diane Sawyer. ABC was sued for \$5.5 million for fraud after a reporter lied on an application to get a job at a Food Lion supermarket and exposed unsanitary meat handling practices that put the public in danger. A jury

awarded the sum to Food Lion in 1997, though a judge later reduced it to \$315,000. Eventually, an appeals court reduced the fee to \$2.⁸⁷

In another undercover story, an article by a reporter posing as a high school student for *The Albuquerque Tribune* in 1983 resulted in an angry outcry from students, teachers, parents and school administrators and a decision by her editors to stop using the reporting method.⁸⁸

Later surveys that later followed reflected the public's mistrust of the use of deception in journalism. A 1999 survey showed that 71 percent of the public said they disapproved of reporters not identifying themselves as reporters. It also found the public evenly divided about the use of hidden cameras and long-distance cameras to get photographs without the subject's knowledge.⁸⁹

One former editor called undercover reporting a contradiction to the purpose of journalism.

“In a day in which we are spending thousands of man hours uncovering deception, we simply cannot deceive,” said Benjamin Bradlee, former *Washington Post* executive editor. “How can newspapers fight for honesty and integrity when they themselves are less than honest in getting a story?”⁹⁰

But while skepticism about undercover reporting has grown, it is important to recognize that many important stories serving the public's safety result from the practice.

Without an undercover ABC reporter inside the Food Lion meat deli, consumers could have continued facing serious health threats. And without entering the insane

asylum posed as deranged woman, Bly probably would not have witnessed the mistreatment of the patients by the hospital staff.

According to today's standards, undercover reporting remains a gray issue. While many editors try to avoid it, professional journalists do recognize that it should be used in certain situations. The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics addresses the topic:

“Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.”⁹¹

In the Movies: Undercover Journalism in a More Positive Light

Films throughout the century have portrayed undercover journalists as heroic figures.⁹² Even as the public started growing more skeptical of the reporting method, the films *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* and *A Bunny's Tale* show that the positive portrayal of the undercover journalists in films continued through the 1980s.

The on-screen undercover reporters, based on fiction and real-life characters, can also get away with anything from lying, cheating, stealing and trespassing because they do it for the sake of uncovering much more serious crimes. These journalists emerge as heroes as long as they have pure motives, which often include solving crimes, exposing corruption and telling the stories of the voiceless.

In the 1910 film *For the Sunday Edition*, a male reporter disguises himself convict to infiltrate a gang's smuggling operation.⁹³ In the 1939 film *Blackwell's Island*, a male reporter arranges to be put in prison and says he is a murdering mobster who is running illegal operations from inside the prison.⁹⁴ In the 1947 film *Violence*, a female reporter goes undercover to help the FBI infiltrate a Fascist organization and expose its plan to case a riot.⁹⁵

These on-screen reporters face dangerous situations, especially if they are discovered, but they always escape, catch their villains and emerge as heroes.

In other films, reporters are more like Bly and Steinem in that they go undercover to observe lifestyles and tell the stories of the voiceless. In the fictional 1947 film *Gentleman's Agreement*, the male reporter goes undercover as a Jew to write about anti-Semitism.⁹⁶

Black Like Me, the 1964 film based on the true story of John Howard Griffin, features white male reporter goes undercover as a black man in the South so he could write about discrimination.⁹⁷ Griffin experienced the discomforts of the oppressed firsthand and discovered what it was like to be turned down for jobs, chased in the street and ridiculed because of his race. The experience leads him to psychological turmoil by the time he is done reporting.⁹⁸

Bly's and Steinem's film characters also experience the hardships of the oppressed for their stories. Bly toils for hours in a sweatshop with cold, wet feet and unsanitary bathroom facilities. Alongside the other patients in the insane asylum, she eats bland-tasting food, takes cold baths and receives physical abuse from the hospital staff.

Steinem works long shifts in three-inch heels and a skimpy outfit only to be sexually harassed on the job and paid little for it. She endures swollen feet and a welting back by the end of her shifts.

The undercover journalists' self-sacrificing actions make them ideal heroes whose stories raise awareness and bring justice for the oppressed.

These journalists' pure motives are what allow them to get away with lying, impersonation, theft, trespassing and other practices that are usually considered unethical. Another reason the reporters remain blameless is that they use the questionable actions to expose much more serious crimes that could harm the public.

This is the case for not only undercover journalists, but for the journalist in general in film, wrote Joe Saltzman, the director of the Image of the Journalists in Popular Culture Project.

"The reporter or editor can get away with everything as long as the end result is *in the public interest*," Saltzman wrote in his book *Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film*.⁹⁹

And lack of accountability for on-screen reporters who bend the rules of journalism ethics leads back to the sentiments of those who argue that the ends justify the means in real-life journalism.

Don Hewitt, *60 Minutes* producer, once said, "It's the small crime versus the greater good... If you catch someone violating 'thou shall not steal' by your 'thou shall not lie,' that's a pretty good trade-off."¹⁰⁰

However, the exception to the image of the undercover journalist as a hero in film usually occurs when the journalist acts under the wrong motives.

In the 1936 film *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, Babe Bennett goes undercover to gather information about the country-bumpkin-turned-millionaire Longfellow Deeds to publicly ridicule him. Because Bennett uses undercover reporting for harmful reasons instead of for the public good, she is not portrayed as a heroic figure until the end of the film when she drops her story and comes to Deeds' aid after falling in love with him.¹⁰¹

In the *Shock Corridor*, released in 1963, an undercover journalist feigns insanity so he can be admitted to an insane asylum to solve a murder. However, besides solving the murder, another major goal of his is to leave the asylum with material for an award-winning book, play or movie. While he ends up achieving his goal and winning a Pulitzer Prize, the reporter ends up actually going insane.¹⁰²

The *Adventures of Nellie Bly* and *A Bunny's Tale* follow a pattern of undercover journalism films in that their characters are portrayed as heroic because they have pure motives and their deception is used to uncover more serious offenses.

Nellie Bly and Gloria Steinem: Breaking Female Reporter Mold

Like their real-life counterparts, the film-based Bly and Steinem are independent women who do not need men to do their jobs or to find personal fulfillment. While the characters share the spunk of many female reporter characters in past movies, their

independence from men place them far beyond two common female reporter stereotypes in film—the love-stricken damsel in distress and the fallen woman.

Films in the 1930s started featuring more independent female reporter characters portrayed as more than just “sob sisters,” or female reporters sent to cover the emotional side of the news.¹⁰³ Instead, the characters were more like “stunt girl” reporters like Nellie Bly who were required to do the bizarre or sensational for their stories, wrote journalism film scholar Howard Good in *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism and the Movies*.¹⁰⁴

However, Good also noted that even the independent women who were as intelligent and talented as their male colleagues eventually succumbed to traditional gender roles.¹⁰⁵

This was the case of the character Torchy Blane, played by Glenda Farrell in a series of films.¹⁰⁶ The fast-talking woman who constantly outsmarts the police and always gets the story, whether it means impersonating a police officer or wire-tapping the mayor’s office.¹⁰⁷ However, Good wrote that by the end of the series, Torchy is more focused on love and marriage and starts needing to be rescued by her fiancé, the unintelligent police officer Steve McBride who she used to manipulate.¹⁰⁸

“Her frenetic energy, rapid-fire repartee, and man-tailored suits may have suggested that she was the equal of any man, but the image was misleading,” Good wrote of the character. “Torchy didn’t challenge the old notion of woman as the weaker sex; she just reproduced it in more contemporary—and insidious—form.”¹⁰⁹

In other movies, such as the 1931 film *Dance, Fools, Dance* and the 1946 film *Woman of the Year*, the stories of the independent female reporters became focused on their roles as wives.¹¹⁰ In *Woman of the Year*, intelligent world affairs columnist Tess breaks down after she cannot successfully cook breakfast for the man she loves.¹¹¹

And more recent images of female reporter are not much better, Good wrote.¹¹² More recent films have also portrayed the female journalists as not only reliant on men and love, but also as unethical. In movies like *Absence of Malice* in 1981, *The Paper* in 1994 and *To Die For* in 1995, the female reporters sleep with sources, publish false stories to meet deadline and kill for fame.¹¹³

On the contrary, *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* and *A Bunny's Tale* present positive images of female reporters who are portrayed as independent, morally upstanding and choosing journalism before romance.

Bly demonstrates her independence in *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* by becoming a female undercover reporter. When *The World* editor tells Bly the newspaper doesn't take women on its staff, she proves she is capable by finding her own undercover story. Once on *The World* staff, she proved on several occasions that she can handle stories that were normally only assigned to men, stories involving crime and corruption on the streets of New York. While she is not as sarcastic or fast-talking as characters like Torchy Blane, her spunk is evident at the beginning of the film when she tries to speak with the editor and an office clerk suggests she give up.

“Give up? Not only my life, sir,” Bly responds.¹¹⁴

The only time Bly relies on a man is when her editor rescues at the asylum after her identity as a reporter is discovered. He comes right in time as a man who works for a corrupt city official walks toward the cornered Bly with a knife. After the editor saves Bly, she collapses into her editor's arms and cries, which is an embellishment to the way she really left the asylum. In reality, the newspaper's lawyer arranged for her release, claiming to place her with friends willing to care for her.¹¹⁵ However, the film version of Bly gains her independent image at the end of the film when she is shown as an older, accomplished reporter who can obtain an interview with the president of the United States.

Steinem is a quieter character than both Torchy Blane and Bly, but her independence becomes apparent in the film when she stands up for her story to her editor. Steinem's editor originally assigns her the story as a soft feature. However, once Steinem starts finding out how poor the work conditions are for the Playboy Bunnies, she demands that her editor let her write the story from a more serious angle.

Steinem also shows independence as a reporter and as a woman when she chooses her story over her boyfriend. Unlike Torchy Blane and other female reporters in films during the 1930s and 1940s, Steinem does not need love or marriage to sustain her. She also does not fall under the category of the fallen woman who shortchanges the quality of her reporting or acts sexually promiscuously for success.

Conclusion:

The films *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* and *A Bunny's Tale* help create positive images of both undercover and female journalists.

They participate in a trend that persisted in films throughout the 20th century of showing the undercover journalist as a self-sacrificing hero whose main concern is serving the public and ending corruption. Viewers are also left with an awareness of the necessity of going undercover since Bly and Steinem both cover stories that otherwise would be very difficult to report.

However, viewers do not get a very clear sense of some of the costs and consequences of undercover reporting, which may require reporters to engage in ethically questionable acts like lying and trespassing. The facts that Steinem was sued, threatened and sexually stereotyped in her career are not included in the film, which does not allow the viewers to access some of the hardships real undercover journalists experience.

The films about the feminists strengthen the image of the female reporter, showing Bly and Steinem as independent females who can carry their own weight. They work to dispel stereotyped portrayals of female reporters as love-sick and sexually devious women and unethical reporters. Instead of being focused on love, marriage and even fame, Bly's and Steinem's characters are focused on reporting the truth.

Therefore, not only did the real-life Bly and Steinem break ground in journalism as female undercover reporters, but their film-based counterparts also broke ground in film portrayals of female journalists.

Endnotes:

¹ Brooke Kroeger, *Nellie Bly: Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* (New York: Times Books; and Toronto: Random House of Canada Limited, 1994) p. XIII;

Patricia Cronin Marcello, *Gloria Steinem: A Biography* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2004), xi.

² Ron F. Smith, *Groping for Ethics in Journalism, Fifth Edition* (Iowa State Press, Ames, 2003), 279.

³ Ron F. Smith, 274-275.

⁴ Brooke Kroeger, XIII, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶ Patricia Cronin Marcello, 84.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

⁹ *For the Sunday Edition* (1910), *The Queen of Spades* (1912), *A Newspaper Nemesis* (1951), *Badge of Honor* (1934), *Blackwell's Island* (1939), *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), *Violence* (1947), *Chain Gang* (1950), *Black Like Me* (1964), *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* (1981), *A Bunny's Tale* (1985) and *Fletch* (1985). Referenced by:

Richard Ness, *From Headline Hunter to Superman: A Journalism Filmography* (Lanham, MD & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1997), 8, 9, 13, 116, 216, 348, 369, 472, 518-519, 565, 609-610, 613.

¹⁰ Ron F. Smith, 274-275.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹² *Ibid.*, 275.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁶ Ron F. Smith, 274-275.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁸ Gloria Steinem, “I Was a Playboy Bunny,” *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, Limited, 1983), 30.

¹⁹ Brooke Kroeger, XIII, 101.

²⁰ Internet Movie Database, “The Adventures of Nellie Bly.” IMDB.com, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0081983/>.

²¹ *The Adventures of Nellie Bly*, 1981 running time est. at 96 minutes) color, Schick Sunn Classics Taft International Pictures. Directed by Henning Schellerup. Story written by Seeleg Lester and S. S. Schweitzer. Retrieved from Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture Archive (SVD 799), opening scene.

²² Ibid., the scene where Bly enters *The World* to pitch her fire story.

²³ Ibid., the extended series of scenes of Bly working in the sweatshop.

²⁴ Ibid., the scene with the conversation between Bly and the inn manager directly following the first sweatshop scenes.

²⁵ Ibid., the second scene at the sweatshop after Bly has a conversation with her co-worker and friend, Rose.

²⁶ Ibid., the following scene where Bly enters The World office for the second time.

²⁷ Ibid., the scene in which Bly dances onstage as a chorus girl; the scenes following Bly’s reunion with Rose when Rose’s brother, a pickpocket, steals Bly’s purse at a dinner party.

²⁸ Ibid., the scene in which Bly and Cockerill argue before the dinner party; Cockerill later assigns Thompson, the desk clerk, to be keep an eye on her and prevent her from getting caught.

²⁹ Ibid., earlier in the film, the scene where she poses as a street walker and hears about the councilman’s involvement from another street walker who tries to fill her in about the culture of the job.

³⁰ Ibid., scene of her venture as French immigrant being transported by steamboat, the scene after her undercover assignment as a pickpocket.

³¹ Ibid., the scene where Bly and her bosses walk down the street and gunshots nearly hit the female reporter; after the scene in which Palmer plots with the man exposed through Bly’s human trafficking story.

³² Ibid., scene following Bly’s and Thompson’s conversation with Rose and questioning of the Palmers’ maid of Mrs. Palmer’s whereabouts.

³³ Ibid., scene immediately following Bly’s conversation with Pulitzer and Cockerill about staying at the asylum.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, series of scenes at the asylum toward the end of the film.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, the narrator tells of the results of Bly's story as the film shows Palmer being led away in handcuffs.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, last scene of the film.

³⁷ Brooke Kroeger, 9-26.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 38-43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 48, 56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 81-83.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 101-104, 107, 115.

⁴⁹ *A Bunny's Tale*, 1985 (running time est. at 104 minutes for television) color, ABC Circle Films, The Stan Margolies Company. Directed by Karen Arthur. Story written by Gloria Steinem, Deena Goldstone and Lynn Roth. Based on an essay from *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* by Gloria Steinem. Retrieved from Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture Archive (SVDSP 672. SV 189, VHS 498).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, opening scene when Steinem is in the office receiving the assignment from her editor.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, scene where Steinem and her roommate talk in their room; the scene before Steinem goes to her second interview for the Playboy Club.

⁵² *Ibid.*, scene where Steinem stands in lineup for appearance test.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, scene in the office where the supervisor interviews her; scene after conversation with her roommate.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, the scene where Steinem goes in for her costume fitting and the women talk about the rules of the club; just before she goes into her first training scene.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Steinem is informed about the test in her second interview, and then later goes to the doctor's office to receive the physical in a later scene; she is shown calling the Board of Health from a pay phone right after the appointment; a couple of scenes later, she is heard explaining to her roommate what the Board of Health said.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Steinem gathers this information through conversations with other women during various scenes of the film.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, the scene after her first shift; Steinem sits in front of a mirror with her outfit unzipped and welts visible from her back as she smokes a cigarette and winces in pain.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, the scene of Steinem's second shift as she and the other Bunnies get ready for the night; after the scene where she overhears a co-worker crying in an argument with her ex-husband over the phone.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Andrea talks with Steinem in the kitchen at the club during the scene of Steinem's second shift.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, the scene in her editor's office before the scene with the women arguing over the ad.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, the scene of the dinner party.

⁶² *Ibid.*, the scene where Steinem and her boyfriend walk away from the party and argue; the scene after includes the conversation between Steinem and her roommate.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, one of the last scenes of the film when the Steinem covers Andrea's shift.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, closing scene of her waling through the New York streets.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, closing scene of her sitting in her office after walking through the New York streets.

⁶⁶ Gloria Steinem, pp. 29-69.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-69.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-69.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 45.

⁷³ A Bunny's Tale, the final scene at the end of the film when Steinem is in her office.

⁷⁴ Gloria Steinem, 67-69.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁶ Patricia Cronin Marcello, pp. 84-85.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁸ Gloria Steinem, 67.

⁷⁹ Patricia Cronin Marcello, 70-71, 77.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 85-87.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 104-117.

⁸³ Ron Smith, p. 279

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 279-280.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 281-282.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁹¹ Society of Professional Journalists, "Code of Ethics," Society of Professional Journalists, <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

⁹² *For the Sunday Edition* (1910), *The Queen of Spades* (1912), *A Newspaper Nemesis* (1951), *Badge of Honor* (1934), *Blackwell's Island* (1939), *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), *Violence* (1947), *Chain Gang* (1950), *Black Like Me* (1964), *The Adventures of Nellie Bly* (1981), *A Bunny's Tale* (1985) and *Fletch* (1985).

Richard Ness, *From Headline Hunter to Superman: A Journalism Filmography* (Lanham, MD & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1997), pp. 8, 9, 13, 116, 216, 348, 369, 472, 518-519, 565, 609-610, 613.

⁹³ Richard Ness, 8.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 472.

⁹⁸ *Black Like Me*, 1964 (running time est. at 107 minutes) black and white, Julius Tannenbaum; Hilltop Productions. Directed by Carl Lerner. Screenplay by Gerda Lerner. Presented by Victor Weingarten. Based on the novel *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin.

⁹⁹ Joe Saltzman, *Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film* (Los Angeles: The Norman Lear Center, University of Southern California, 2002), 146

¹⁰⁰ Ron F. Smith, 283-284.

¹⁰¹ Joe Saltzman, "Deception and Undercover Journalism: *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *Mr. Deeds*" in *Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies*, ed. Howard Good (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008) 7-11.

¹⁰² Richard Ness, 470-471.

¹⁰³ Howard Good, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism and the Movies* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1998).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 94-98.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38-39, 45-47.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 118.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 118-124, 134-135)

¹¹⁴ *The Adventures of Nellie Bly*, the scene where Bly tries to pitch her story about the fire near the beginning of the film.

¹¹⁵ Brooke Kroeger, 93.

Filmography:

A Bunny's Tale, 1985 (running time est. at 104 minutes for television) color, ABC Circle Films, The Stan Margolies Company. Directed by Karen Arthur. Story by written by Gloria Steinem, Deena Goldstone and Lynn Roth. Based on and essay from *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* by Gloria Steinem. Retrieved from Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture Archive (SVDSP 672. SV 189, VHS 498)

Black Like Me, 1964 (running time est. at 107 minutes) black and white, Julius Tannenbaum; Hilltop Productions. Directed by Carl Lerner. Screenplay by Gerda Lerner. Presented by Victor Weingarten. Based on the novel *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin.

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