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Report
Michaelmas, Hillary and Trinity terms 2008 - 2009-06-22

1. Thoughts of the year at RISJ

Our year at the RISJ started with the 25th anniversary seminar of the fellowship programme. During the warm September days, we met many previous fellows that called the year ground-breaking. Some of them had changed their lives and became academics, some had stayed in Great Britain, some had written a book following the fellowship. Most of them missed Oxford and said that the year had been one of the best of their lives.

What can I say about my year, then? Was it a life-changing experience?

Without doubt, I can say it was.

Not only did it return some of my long-lost motivation and interest in journalism. My years switching jobs and looking for “my thing” had taken its toll. When coming to Oxford, I simply did not know what I wanted to do when I grow up. Nine months later I can say that despite the crisis of business models, despite the all-penetrating entertainment (though I still like to ask why on Earth is Helsingin Sanomat reporting Big Brother?), despite the insecurity of the profession, the year at Oxford taught me that there still is good journalism, and good journalism has its place in this world. And I do want to give it a try.

Apart from these philosophies, the fellowship year gave privileged opportunities to attend lectures read by top politicians and academics, meet colleagues and build networks all around the world. Writing the thesis was an enjoyable experience that will hopefully be useful in the future as well.

For me personally the year was unforgettable not least due to the birth of my daughter Amanda: she was born two weeks before the end of the fellowship and attended the very last lectures together with me.

2. RISJ seminars and lectures

The only obligatory part of the fellowship programme were the Wednesday and Friday lectures organized by the Reuters Institute. Wednesday lunchtime seminar attracted journalists and journalism researchers to debate issues around journalism from business models to Al-Jazeera’s position in the world of broadcasting.

This seminar, organized at Green Templeton college, was always preceded by another one at the Reuters Institute. The RISJ Wednesday seminar was a fellow’s seminar, where each of us made a presentation about an issue close to our countries and/or ourselves. My turn was November 12th, when I made a presentation about the challenges for media in South Caucasus. Finally, on 17th of June, I made a presentation about the results of my research.

Friday seminar, Media and Politics, attracted often large audiences, thanks to the high-profile speakers of the seminar series. The seminar, strictly off the record, took place at Nuffield College’s seminar room. The speakers were either high-profile journalists covering politics and/or international affairs, or former politicians or press secretaries telling about their relationship with the media. The most impressive speakers in my opinion were the Guardian’s columnist Simon Jenkins, New York Times’ long-time foreign correspondent John Burns, the Times’ witty columnist

David Aaronovich and Financial Times' financial editor Gillian Tett. I was fascinated especially by Ms. Tett: a former anthropologist with a PhD about the life of a Tajik village, she became a financial correspondent nearly by accident, finally becoming one of the few journalists able to foresee the financial crisis.

RIJS staff also organized regular extra events for the fellows. During Michaelmas term, we spent an evening waiting for and discussing the results of US Presidential elections, and attended a joint RISJ – Said Business School seminar on journalism and financial crisis. During Hillary term, we attended a debate about the future of journalism and took part in a joint workshop with the Centre for Climate Change called Media and the Environment. The latter was an interesting opportunity to discuss climate change and the journalists' perceptions of it with student experts on the issue. During Trinity term, we had, among other things, and experts on journalists' use of numbers discussing how statistics and other numerical data should be reported, and a representative of US-based "Committee of Concerned Journalists" speaking about the future of journalism.

RISJ also played an active role in informing us about other events outside the RISJ and University of Oxford. For instance, in February 2009, I travelled to London for a master class on investigative reporting, run by two famous reporters of the Guardian, Nick Davies and David Leigh. In late March, I volunteered as a timekeeper at Price Moot Court, which is an international media law competition for law students from all over the world. I also travelled to London several times in order to attend events at Frontline Club.

3. Other lectures and Oxford resources

As a part of our fellowship, we also had a right to attend lectures at the University of Oxford. I took the habit of visiting St. Anthony's College's Monday evening lectures about Russian and Eastern European Studies. I also took some lectures in the field of international law

The problem of Oxford University is that as it is an institution that consists of 39 colleges and sometimes separate faculty buildings, it is sometimes hard to find out about all interesting events. For instance, I would have taken more courses at the Centre for Comparative Media Law at the Law Faculty, had I known about them earlier. Finding out all there is takes a lot of effort and some luck.

Oxford University has also excellent libraries and other facilities. A great deal of the books, however, need to be read at the library and cannot be borrowed home. I took the habit of reading at Bodlean Japanese Library: a small library near the Institute by the Saint Anthony's College. An excellent place to concentrate – usually there was maximum one other person plus the librarians present.

Georgian language was another major project of mine. When arriving at Oxford, I went to the Language Centre in order to polish my German or study some Spanish. To my pleasant surprise, I found out that the Language Centre offers free Georgian courses. So, during the first two terms I had two hours of Georgian a week, and during last (Trinity) term the amount grew to four hours. My Georgian teacher felt that our group of two – just me and an undergraduate student of German philology – was so motivated that we needed more classes. And indeed, despite the extremely difficult grammar of Georgian; I can proudly say that I do speak some of it.

4. Own Research Project

The most important part of the fellowship were naturally our own research projects. The theme of my paper was the coverage of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2004, 2006 and 2008. I prepared content analysis of four liberal newspapers: New York Times, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Novaya gazeta and the Guardian.

The first months at Oxford were excellent time for me, since thanks to the war in South Ossetia in August 2008, there were lots of seminar, conferences and discussions about Georgia. I had a chance to meet experts, and there were events in London as well, where both the Russian and Georgian versions of what really happened in August 2008 were discussed.

My work plan was the following: first term, gather materials, second term, prepare content analysis, third term, wrap it up and write.

I managed to stick to the schedule, however, content analysis as a method is extremely time-consuming. Coding and de-coding the data took a long time, and at the time of writing this some of the statistical data still needs polishing.

On the other hand, all the work analyzing over 270 newspaper stories was not in vain. I have been encouraged to write another version of the paper and publish it academically, and at this stage a Finnish think tank is also interested in publishing a version, or parts, of my research.

My research was also supported by a few things I did in the side. Between October and December 2008, I had a Georgia-related blog at the website of Yliopisto-lehti in Finland. In the spring of 2009, I published two short review articles in academic journals: an Abkhazia-related story in *Idäntutkimus* magazine (an academic Finnish journal on East European studies) and a comment story about the coverage of Georgian war in *Journalismikritiikin vuosikirja* (The Year Book for Journalism critics). I also took part as a speaker in the *Mediapäivät* conference in Helsinki in April 2008

5. Life in Oxford

Life in Oxford was not just science. Reuters Institute took care of numerous social events: we had several international pot luck parties, excursion to London, movie nights, concerts. Oxford is an extremely lively place with a lot to offer in terms of culture and free time. I took the advantage of numerous theatres in the city, attended yoga classes and took my three-year-old to a ballet school.

One of the big pluses of the fellowship programme are the other fellows. This year we had people from Burkina Faso, China, Vietnam, Australia, the UK, Austria, Israel, Egypt, Yemen, Japan, South Korea, Armenia.... The opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas with colleagues from all corners of the world is simply invaluable. Currently RISJ staff plans to establish an alumni website, through which the former fellows can keep in touch.

As a whole the year exceeded all expectations. It was inspiring, interesting, rewarding and relaxing all at the same time. I would like to thank Helsingin Sanomat Foundation for this opportunity I hope the Helsingin Sanomat fellowship at the Reuters Institute will become a long-lasting tradition – I believe it is a great contribution to the future of Finnish journalism. I feel privileged for being among the first fellows.

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