

Report to Helsingin Sanomat Foundation  
Summer Investigative Reporting Course  
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Columbia University in the City of New York  
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Three weeks in New York and in one of the world's most celebrated universities, Columbia University, gave a lot more than I expected - and I expected a lot.

It's not so much that the course opened up a whole new chamber of investigative journalism tools, which I wouldn't have noticed before, but the course deepened and rearranged the principles that I kind of already knew in a vague and disorganized way. The deepening and the rearranging of things happened in an incredibly elegant and efficient way. The merit for this belongs to the teachers, some of the world's best investigative journalists.

Investigative journalism consists of certain things, and those things are the same in a Pulitzer Prize winning article as in a investigative piece written in Finland. This is one of the main findings of the course to me, in a general level. In theory, I now feel that I could very well write the best ever investigative journalism article here in Finland. That it does not depend on money or some other things that they have more in America.

Although, there *is* more money to do investigative journalism in America. And more time. Some of the journalists that we met, like Walt Bogdanich and David Barstow from the New York Times, had made their most important stories for more than a year. In Finland, in a daily paper, you're lucky if you get one and a half weeks.

But meeting these top journalists, and hearing about the conditions in which they work did not create despair, it created hope. Long investigative reporting story, when opened surgically and accurately shows familiar things: hunting for documents, hunting for whistleblowers, interviewing thinking and that's about it.

It's just that after the course I feel I can do all of this in a much better and efficient way than before.

And of course the course taught a strikingly large number of new, concrete things to do with my story and my everyday work. I don't mean new tricks, but new ways to do the old tricks better. For example, Jim Mintz, a journalist and a detective, taught hands-on what needs to be done when interviewing a reluctant people: what do you say first, what do you say then, what not to do, what is the worst mistake etc.

This was a stunning experience, considering that in Finland it is often said that you can't really teach someone to do an interview. This is true, in a way, but in another way not at all true. Conducting an interview is as any other thing in the world: it can be done brilliantly, you just have to know what to do. I've done ten years of interviews and I've been progressing steadily (I guess). Still, after that one lecture I believe I'm at a whole new level as an interviewer, at least in theory. Now, of course, this is to be brought to practice.

In other areas the experience was similar: what really is a proof and what is just a piece of information suggesting that the thing I'm trying to prove is true? I have kind of known the difference, but when this kind of questions are put out in a brilliant lecture by an experienced journalist, it is a great way to brighten the view. Things that are clear in my head can be taken into use in everyday work.

I think one of the most important things to report is to highlight that we experienced almost no bad lectures. Numerous speakers were enthusiastic and motivated, and knew who they were talking to. That is journalists who are not novices and most likely will never work in the United States. Most of the lecturers had understood this in just the right way.

The best five to six lecturers were so good in their field and their teaching that they can not be compared with each other. Walt Bogdanich taught what is the force of storytelling in an investigative case. David Barstow revealed that you really can penetrate into an organization not just waiting for a whistleblower but actually doing it through hard work and right decisions. Blake Morrison (USA Today) dug a case in which he had to prove a story written by his colleague was a hoax. We did hands on the same thing that Morrison had done reading the story and finding the weak spots where the accuracy of the story could be tested. It taught a lot about what an investigative reporter should concentrate, what not. Jo Graven McGinty (The New York Times) showed that a graphic representation can be done almost about anything - and it is in many cases the backbone of the story. Documents are worth searching for.

The statistical work and the use of Excel was part of the course. The teaching was generally good, but a couple of days is so short a time that the benefit may be superficial. What I think I should do now is to take another Excel course in Finland to repeat the lessons. It was almost more useful when some journalists (such as Walt Bogdanich) told their own simple Excel stuff with their latest stories. It lit the lamp: I can do this with my story as well.

The importance of official documents was emphasized on the course. This suited me well. "Of all the important things there is a document" kind of spirit was present in many performer's speeches. "Paper trail" can most often be found. The application of that principle in Finland is no problem.

We have a more limited access to documents compared to some countries, but on the other hand, for example the tax transparency in Finland was a big surprise to many lecturers and course mates. This made me think that we should use the tax information more widely and more creatively than just to list the richest people. These kinds of ideas came to my mind during the course frequently. I think this is a good sign: education was not just a few examples of what top journalism is in the United States, but it gave ideas of what journalism can be here in my office in Finland.

One big difference between the U.S. and other countries in investigative journalism is the tradition. The Watergate scandal alone took the American investigative journalism so many steps forward that we still have some of those steps to take. We need a Watergate of our own - that is, a series of events, stories written by ordinary reporters that lead to a situation where the most powerful man/woman in the country has to resign (or something like that), as Nixon had to do after the Watergate scandal. Watergate brought media to the same level with strong politicians. A top politician in the United States can not make a decision without turning to media to ask its "opinion" about it. This is not the case in Finland.

I noticed some cultural differences between American and European investigative journalism.

A premiss in American investigative journalism is that there is wrongdoing, a person doing wrong and someone suffering from it. These are all presented to the reader / viewer. Always. Through this, I realized that my own work has often been quite academic: I could more often search for the people who suffer from the wrongdoings I bring to light.

The last week of the course focused mainly on ethics. This seemed like too much - but it was not. Ethics is not just a list of things you can or cannot do but it is also a tool for an investigative journalist. A tool, which can reflect whether I have done every effort to find out how things really

are. We went through a number of ethically questionable stories and had discussions on whether they should have been published in the first place. Once again: a direct connection to my own work, tremendous inspiration.

There was lots of talk of the future of investigative journalism now that the big media corporations are laying off people and there is less space to do investigative journalism.

David Kaplan, one of the lecturers, a merited investigative journalist, said that there are no good old days: he always had to fight to get room for his stories, to show to the doubters that what he's doing makes sense. This is perhaps the essence of investigative journalism (or part of it): you have to fight for the time and space that it needs. You had to do it earlier, you have to do it now, you have to do it in the future.

There are more and more non-profit investigative journalism groups in the United States. This may be the future in Finland, too: iPads are becoming more popular and large media houses lay off people (which directly means less opportunities to do investigative journalism). New channels may occur for investigative journalism to find its readers. One important part of investigative journalism is telling your readers something earth-shattering that is true and contrary to what they have believed. There is always room for this, room to show the wrongdoings of the powerful people, for example.

I am immeasurably thankful to Helsingin Sanomat Foundation for the opportunity to get this course. It improved me as a journalist. It feels like it multiplied my understanding of (investigative) journalism in three weeks - which is quite amazing considering I've worked over ten years as a journalist. Thank you.