

Helsingin Sanomat Foundation  
Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism

## **Final Report on the HSS Fellowship year 2015-2016 at the Columbia Journalism School**

Marjut Tervola

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I'm grateful to the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation for providing me a fellowship to study for the academic year 2016-17 at Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, the home of the Pulitzer Prize, and one of the most prestigious journalism schools in the United States. My year at Columbia was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me to specialize in a subject area and learn from one of the most outstanding journalists in the world.

At Columbia, I studied in the M.A. program with a business and economics concentration. The M.A. program, which provides four concentrations, Arts and Culture, Politics and Science and Business, is for experienced journalists with three to fifteen years of experience. Before enrolling at Columbia, I had worked as a journalist in various fields of journalism – print, broadcast and online - for over ten years at Yle, Helsingin Sanomat and Talentum. At Columbia, it was pretty clear to me from the beginning that I wanted to pursue business stories.

Studying at Columbia is noticeably different from studying at a Finnish university. The M.A. program follows a structured curriculum with several mandatory classes. In addition to these, students can take two or three related graduate-level courses outside the Journalism School. The central course in my program was the full-year business seminar, which focused on macroeconomics in the fall, and corporate finance in the spring. For homework, we read academic papers and journalistic pieces and wrote stories related to topics discussed in the class. The business seminar also included guest speakers and company visits, giving us unique opportunities to talk with high profile professionals, award-winning journalists and researchers. For instance, we met Disney's operating officer Thomas Staggs and Uwe Ellinghaus, the chief marketing officer for Cadillac. It was thrilling to visit Cadillac's headquarters in Manhattan, a bright-colored office located in a skyscraper, with a breathtaking view of the city's beloved sights.

The business seminar was one of my favorite classes at the J-School. Our professors Eduardo Porter, a columnist at the New York Times, and James Stewart, the author of *Disney War*, taught us simple and effective ways to break down financial statements and numbers. Due to feedback offered from each assignment, I had a chance to hone my English writing. Porter, especially, stressed the importance of structure and sophisticated argumentation skills.

Other required classes were M.A. Essentials, Evidence and Inference and the Master Thesis. M.A. Essentials, a class given by Tom McGinty and Christopher Weaver from the WSJ's data desk, focused on investigative techniques and data journalism. In the class, they used their own stories and examples published in the WJS. Evidence and Inference, the course on journalistic methods, biases and ethic, was less worthwhile for me, mainly because of my long experience as a journalist. My classmates with less experience, however, enjoyed the class.

The Master Thesis was the most rewarding project at the J-School. At Columbia, the Master Thesis is required to be a long-form journalistic story of 10,000 words, and not an academic paper. Very rarely in the work world, is it possible to concentrate on one topic for several months, as it was at Columbia. As long as proposed travel plans are realistic and the story is doable, the J-School offers students good grants and resources for this project.

My Master Thesis was on the rise and fall of Yik Yak, an anonymous messaging app, which skyrocketed in popularity in 2014 and then suddenly collapsed over the next two years. It was used by US college kids. I was excited over the idea of covering American tech. However, it was not an easy topic to do. When I started the project in October, I didn't know that the company was about to lay off the majority of its employees. Obviously therefore, the founders refused my interview requests. In April, two weeks after the day the thesis was due, the app was shut down completely. It is never easy to get business people in the U.S. to talk to the press, but in this case, it was almost impossible. Another challenging thing in the project was to find time to do the thesis. This is because the M.A program is intensive and there were always assignments to do for other classes. An open block of time to focus solely on the thesis never came.

As electives, I had classes on accounting and corporate finance, both taught at the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and highly recommended for J-School's business students. Both courses were extremely demanding and the workload was enormous. For corporate finance, there were two weekly lectures and a voluntary recitation with a tutor, who walked through the subject area covered in the lectures once again. Almost every week we had a quiz in the class or an assignment to do at home. Using Excel, we calculated future cash flows and interpreted earning reports based on the real case examples. The professors at SIPA were excellent. They were not only competent instructors, but also outstanding lecturers, the best teachers that I have had in my entire life. Because I had never studied corporate finance or accounting at university, I feel that of all the courses I took over the entire year, I learned the most from these classes.

As part of the Columbia experience, I'd like to mention my smart, talented classmates from all over the world. Our group of 12 business journalists consisted of students from the US, Canada, Philippines, Malaysia, India, Norway and Singapore, and me from Finland. Studying a year in such an international environment was a privilege. We spent hours in the same class and after class in the library doing our assignments over late nights, helping each other and learning from one another.

One academic year is a short period of time. For new Columbia fellow students, I would recommend deciding what your priorities are. My goal was to deepen my understanding not only of business related issues, but also US society, politics and the economy in general. Because of the presidential elections, I had a chance to experience changes in US politics first-hand. I witnessed several rallies, both anti-Trump and pro-Trump, held in New York City and also in Washington DC. Many panels and seminars, held at Columbia, also covered current events, such as politics, fake news, Trump's presidency and the state of democracy. All in all, I very much enjoyed my year at Columbia, and in New York. After having worked years as a journalist, it was satisfying to go back to school and study in such a invigorating environment.

