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2012 Summer Investigative Reporting Course

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I participated in the 2012 Summer Investigative Reporting Course July 9-27 at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York. The workshop was on both the Helsingin Sanomain Säätiö Foundation's and Columbia University's agenda for the first time. According to Columbia, it was intended for journalists who already have an extensive background in investigative journalism. 21 journalists from Finland, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Luxembourg, the United States of America, South Africa, Brazil, Italy, Columbia and New Zealand took part in the workshop.

The three-week workshop was divided in three themes: what investigative journalism is, data journalism and visualization, and the legal framework and ethical issues in investigative journalism. During the third week, we also examined the social media as a tool for the investigative journalist. Alongside theoretical tuition, each participant had their own investigative project which was refined during the workshop. The assignment was, first, to present one's idea for an investigative piece, then, to develop it according to instructions given during the three-week lectures, and, finally, to present the project both orally and as a written story memo. Orally, it was presented for both the other participants and for one of the guest editors from eminent U.S. news media. My story memo was evaluated by Bill Grueskin, former managing editor at the Wall Street Journal Online and now Dean of Academic Affairs and Professional Practice at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

As a whole, the workshop was excellent. The working pace was tight; timetable from 9AM to 5PM was usually divided in three sections: three hours of morning lecture, two hours of lunch discussion, and three hours of afternoon lecture. Many of the lecturers were award-winning journalists from the New York Times, Reuters, the public radio network NPR and NBC tv-channel. They shared their working methods and presented their investigative projects. Different interviewing techniques and unconventional information gathering techniques were examined.

The best presentation was given by Jim Mintz, former adjunct professor in the Columbia Journalism School and now president of a research and investigative firm. Mintz told, for example, how to get

sources to talk in difficult investigative projects. It is worth pointing out that all the investigative projects presented during the workshop had taken months, even a year, to work with. As well the other lecturers emphasized that appropriate investigative journalism requires resources, especially adequate amount of time. An investigative working process can be dissected in following fashion: acquiring information and records, persuading and interviewing civil servants and other sources, analyzing and visualizing data and information, and wrapping it up into an interesting package.

Among the topics were financing non-profit investigative journalism and collaboration between different media organizations or between profit and non-profit news organizations. In the U.S, there appears to be a strong trend where journalists join together in non-profit investigative teams. In the workshop, there were lecturers from the Global Investigative Journalism Network and ProPublica, an organization that, as a non-profit organization, collaborates with large U.S. news organizations. It seemed to be typical to acquire financing for investigative project in similar fashion that other non-profit organizations get financing in the U.S.

Different online services, databases and data visualizations were examined in a practical manner which provided a useful tool for one's own future work. We also took lessons at the computer lab in using Excel.

I could also find some aspects that can be improved: tuition was mainly listening to lecturers and commenting on their presentation. However, there was a refreshing exception; Blake Morrison, the former deputy enterprise editor at USA Today and the investigative projects editor at Reuters. He invited the whole group to examine how to expose Jack Kelley, the former leading foreign correspondent and reporter at USA Today. This was done by analyzing Kelley's own story piece; he was exposed of forging numerous foreign reportages. Morrison's method was quite refreshing; one learns investigative methods best by doing.

Furthermore, the workshop had only one visit to news organizations: to Bloomberg. The visit was interesting, nonetheless, a few more visits to news rooms would seem alluring, more so as New York has many of them at an easy reach.

At the beginning, it would have been useful to use exercises for the participants to get to know one another. As investigative journalism benefits greatly of people networking, participants learning to know each other at the very beginning would benefit all taking part in the workshop. Evidently, we

familiarized ourselves with one another eventually, but the tight schedule hindered us from, for example, having informal lunches amongst ourselves.

In conclusion, it can be said that the efficient three-week plunge into investigative journalism was highly advantageous. At the maximum, knowledge acquired during the workshop serves in processing one's own investigative projects. Furthermore, the rigor of investigative journalism is to be applied into everyday working process. The workshop was easy to fit into normal working schedule and could be attended to during summer vacation. I see the cooperation between Columbia and the HSS Foundation highly beneficial and I would recommend taking the three-week investigative workshop as a permanent element among the HSS Foundation's grant program.