

Report on Columbia University Investigative Reporting Summer School

"If your mother says she loves you, check it out."

This was the most important lesson I learned in the Investigative Reporting Summer School organized by Columbia University. During the three weeks of the course many lecturers stressed out, that systematic doubt is the main tool for investigative journalist.

I learned that doubt is something that you cultivate. An investigative journalist must have a set of tools: questions, habits and criteria for assessing information. For example, the question "How do you know that?" is central when you try to figure out, whether or not to trust a source. When being systematic, you have to cross-check written and oral sources.

Acquiring sources was also very important lesson. "No comments" is only the first step in a path that leads to getting information. Several lecturers in the summer school discussed methods for acquiring sources.

If the first week of the course was about doubt and methods, second week was about data journalism. There were workshops on Excel and using data sets. One workshop was about Google fusion tables and the basics of data visualization.

The lecturers in the second week were some of the best in the field of data journalism. For me, the workshops were too elementary. But the lecturers showed how data journalism is made in the big media outlets of the world. The resources are better, but the problems are similar to ours.

Third week concentrated on ethics, law and social media. Also, a lot of time was spent on individual projects being prepared by the students. Everyone was working on their project through the summer school and outside lecturers helped them to make their story memos better. This kind of work was excellent way to learn new ways of thinking.

Of course, there were some bad lectures in the three weeks. Some speakers were not prepared to talk at all. Some thought, that they were talking to college students and their talks were quite elementary.

In general, the summer school was excellent. Three weeks were sufficient to change my perception about methods and goals of investigative journalism. This will be of great benefit for me in the future.