

Final report

Investigative Journalism Summer Course 2012, Columbia University

Foreword

I participated in the Investigative Journalism Summer Course held in Columbia University, New York (9-27.7.2012). My participation was made possible by grant from The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation and this is my final report for them about the course.

I work as the editor-in-chief of the Finnish Image magazine. As an editor I saw this course as a unique opportunity to update and broaden my professional skills both as an editor and a writer. My expectations were high – not at least because it was held in Columbia University, one of the most highly appreciated journalism schools not just in the U.S. but in the whole world. But I was also driven by the subject of the course. I personally believe that investigative journalism offers answers to the biggest questions in our profession: How does the quality journalism can survive and even flourish in this era of media turbulence.

How were these expectations fulfilled? In the three week course all the lectures were “off the record” which makes it hard to report about the course in the any other level than one – the personal level. So in the following chapters I try to express what I personally got from the course.

Structure of the course

The course took three weeks. Each week had its own agenda. First week concentrated in the basics of the subject such as history, terminology and how to build the hypothesis. The second week focused on the use of data as well as the packaging of the story. The last week covered the law and the ethical questions, social media and the future challenges of the investigative journalism.

Besides that every student had to made a story memo of the story he’s going to do after the end of the course and pitch it in the course. The idea was to use in practice the ideas, methods and tools mentioned in the lectures.

Evaluation of the course

The course had a very broad approach in the subject in a very narrow amount of time. It could have led to shallowness but instead the course succeeded to be both intense and deep at the same time. I found many lectures inspiring and some of them were among the best ones I’ve ever been.

How to interview a reluctant source? How does an assumption differ from the fact? What to do in a case there’s difficult to find the most ethical solution? I felt my questions were answered. I also enjoyed the way it was done: instead of just giving the right answers the speakers confronted us students with these questions and guided us to find the solutions ourselves.

Of course there were also some fantastic lectures that were simply about the working process of large investigative stories. In these cases it was clear that the strict “off the record” policy helped the speakers to talk more freely about their work and the challenges they met during it.

The fundamentals of investigative journalism haven't changed since it was born in the latter part of the 19th century. But the methods of practicing as well as publishing it have changed a lot – and that change is all but over. Data journalism offers new ways to make investigative journalism more appealing and meaningful to the large audiences. The story doesn't always have to be long text paragraphs. Sometimes it can be told better by data visualization. Databases in the websites can be seen as a vital part of the public service: they help the readers to find themselves the things that are most meaningful for them.

The workshop part of the course – story memos and pitches – was a bit tautological. Because of the time difference and the tight course schedule there wasn't really a chance to work further with the story itself although the discussions helped to develop the pitch. But of course for me as an editor it was a great experience to see the editors of New York Times and ProPublica in action and giving a feedback to us.

Summary

The three week course in Columbia University was intensive experience. I felt that the course not just gave practical tools for my everyday work. It also gave a perspective to it and encouraged to think bigger and be more demanding.

It also offered change to network both with the speakers and the fellow students. The cooperation of the investigative journalist worldwide is an increasing trend and a useful strategy to make ambitious journalism in the age of globalization and media turbulence.

The course succeeded all my expectations. I hope that my Finnish colleagues have a possibility to experience the same also in the future. I recommend that the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation will continue the cooperation with Columbia University and this course also in the future.

In Helsinki, 22rd of August 2012

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