

Helsingin Sanomat Foundation Fellowship 2014-2015

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Master of Arts in Journalism and Politics

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I spent the academic year '14-'15 studying towards the degree of Master of Arts in Journalism and Politics at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Out of four concentrations offered by the school– Politics, Business & Economics, Science and Arts & Culture – I chose the first one in order to finally properly study a field I had been interested in and done quite some reporting on. For years I had been hoping to get back to school to fill the gaps in my knowledge about political systems, theory and especially the interactions between politics and economics.

Columbia Journalism School offers two types of degrees – Master of Arts and Master of Science. The former is meant for experienced journalists who wish to deepen their knowledge of a certain field. It involved a great deal of academic study and even courses from other departments. Master of Science attracts usually younger people with little or no experience in journalism. They are offered a bigger variety of courses including skills courses like writing, photography, on-air reporting, video, data and investigative journalism. We, Master of Art students, were only given short introductions to some of these. As we came from different media it would have been useful to get a bit more instruction on certain skills.

The most important course in my concentration was obviously politics. We, the fifteen politics students, sat down every Tuesday and Thursday for three hours to discuss a topic we had prepared for by reading several long-form journalistic pieces or academic articles. The fall semester was dedicated to international politics and political theory whereas during spring we got acquainted with the American system. Additionally, we had to produce three in-depth articles per semester on chosen topics. They were discussed and constructively criticized in smaller groups after which we were encouraged to improve the final versions handed in for evaluation.

The fall semester beat the spring semester in quality of instruction. Firstly, in my view it gave us better theoretical tools to analyze situations across the globe. Secondly, the professor in the spring semester was so busy with other responsibilities he did not give us proper feedback until we already had graduated.

The year included some other courses at the Journalism School such as Evidence and Inference, which taught us to analyze critically the approaches and biases in the works of different journalists. It encouraged us to look at our own prejudices and offered a toolbox of methods for writing as objectively as possible. We discussed everything from Plato to psychology and statistics. We also learned to observe ethnographically and to conduct oral history interviews.

In the fall term the students were supposed to choose one and in the spring term two outside courses from other departments that would support their field of study. I headed to the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) and chose three courses I was eventually very happy with: International Political Economy, Economic Development in Latin America and Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism. Unlike the courses at the Journalism School, these courses all had final exams.

The 9-month-long Masters degree was pretty intense and filled with deadlines and obligations. On top of the courses we had to find time to concentrate on our Masters thesis, which were 8,000-10,000 word-long reported, journalistic articles. We could come up with our own topic, were given a supervisor and even could look for extra funding for a field trip. I chose to concentrate on the land conflict between agribusiness and an Indian tribe in Central-Western Brazil and spend the one-month-long Christmas break in the Brazilian countryside visiting indigenous reservations, their illegal camps and affected farmers. All in all, we had about six months to work on the thesis. It ended up being the most demanding part of the degree, especially because we had to find the time and the discipline to dedicate ourselves to the investigation.

In addition to the obligatory curriculum, Columbia Journalism School offers an amazing selection of guest lectures, trainings and career consultations. Experienced journalists would come to tell the students about their work and careers and talks would be organized on relevant, current topics such as digital journalism and the future of journalism after Snowden. On many Fridays documentaries would be screened in the lecture hall with free pizza and soda. I also frequently visited SIPA, especially when there were talks about Brazil, and contributed to an online publication on Brazilian issues, an initiative by Brazilian students.

The intensive year passed by quickly and there was not much time to do anything else but study. Gladly, I had the chance to stay in New York for nearly two months after graduation, which allowed me to get to know the city a bit better. The tough and cold winter had finally turned into a more relaxed, enjoyably warm summer. Now, nearly three months after I left behind the IVY-league University I feel overall satisfied with the past year. Of course it was not a bed of roses all the time and there were things that could have been organized better, but that is normal to any endeavor. I feel I learned immensely and am sure that the experience has equipped me with tools that will allow me to become a better journalist. I am eternally thankful to the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation for this unique opportunity!

Stockholm, 6.8.2015  
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