

The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation

Final Report

Ville Seuri

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, 2015–2016

## **Introduction**

I stayed at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, for the academic year 2015–2016 (three terms). The stay was sponsored by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation. Like those of all journalist fellows of the Reuters Institute, my studies can be divided into three categories: seminars arranged by the institute, talks and lectures by other departments, institutes, and colleges of the university, and my own research.

There are very few obligatory seminars for the journalist fellows of the Reuters Institute, and thus everyone is quite free to lay their own path and make their own mistakes. Anyhow, I hope this report will help future fellows to prepare for their time in Oxford and the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation to help them get started. The most important thing is to have some sort of an idea of what you want to learn and to find out where those things are taught. You should not expect anyone to tell you any of this.

## **Seminars organised by the Reuters Institute**

There were more than twenty journalist fellows at the Reuters Institute in 2015–2016. Most stayed only for one or two of the three terms, but I was lucky enough to spend the whole year. For me meeting the other journalist fellows was the most enlightening experience of the whole stay. The conversations we had strengthened my belief in the mission of journalism in society, but also taught me to be humble and thankful for the relatively easy conditions we Finnish journalists get to work in.

In term time the Reuters Institute organises three seminars a week: two on Wednesdays and one on Fridays. One of the seminars is an internal event for the journalist fellows to give talks on issues related to their work. Oftentimes these were extremely interesting and the discussions we had were lively, to say the least. The talk I gave in the second semester concerned the fake news -

phenomenon generally and the notorious MV-lehti specifically. Unfortunately, the phenomenon was recognised by all of my fellows.

The other seminar series was called *The Business and Practice of Journalism*, and it comprised talks by various people, mostly working in the media and not directly affiliated with the university. As I work in a newspaper that's already travelled quite far down the path to digitalisation, not much of the things discussed in the seminars were new. Moreover, the institute presently has very strong ties with the BBC, and therefore quite many of the speakers came from the BBC. And as many in the audience also had a background at the BBC, the discussion was often very BBC-centric and uninteresting to anyone not very familiar with the inner workings of the organisation. And as the BBC is a world of its own, many things that apply to the BBC don't apply to anyone else.

Furthermore, the problem with these seminars was that the institute's relationship with the new players of the news industry is not as close as it should be. Partly this is because of the institute's location in Oxford and not in London, where the new companies are, but partly it is a question of a dismissive attitude: when the new players were present, they were there as curiosities whose journalism is not quite "real journalism". Fortunately, I could sense a change in the attitude during the year I spent in Oxford. However, another great part of British journalism stayed completely absent from the seminars: there were no speakers who would work for Conservative broadsheets or tabloids that, after all, form the overwhelming majority of the British press.

Apart from these, the institute organises a weekly seminar on media and politics with Nuffield College. This legendary seminar series has been running for decades and it can attract very high profile speakers. Many of the seminars were very interesting but often also UK-centric. I tried to learn something about British politics during my year in Oxford, but reading a book on British post-war political history would have helped.

The institute also organised all sorts of other things. During the year we visited the offices of Reuters, the BBC, Al-Jazeera English, and *The Financial Times*. I also took part in at least one scientific conference organised by the institute and in several seminars they set up with the London School of Economics. The latter were always wonderful and the speakers were top of the line.

All seminars in Oxford have about the same structure: first there is a talk for about 30 or 45 minutes, after which about as much time is devoted to discussion and questions. It took me a while

to realise that it is good to think of some questions in advance in case you want to try to take the discussion in a certain direction.

## **Other seminars**

In my experience the fellowship at the Reuters Institute is probably best suited for journalists specialising in foreign news, since many of the seminars on offer are on international relations and the like, but others will also find suitable courses at the university. It just may take more time.

Before the first term started I made a list of the things I'd like to study: Russian studies and language, British history, spreadsheets and data analysis, programming, shooting and editing online videos... In the end I did study some of all of these, with the exception of British history, since the course I wanted to get on was organised at the same time with the institute's seminars.

Most seminars I followed were either open to everyone or I got an invitation through the institute or by other means. There were some institutions that offered more interesting courses than others, like St. Antony's College, Martin School, and All Souls' College. Especially St. Antony's should be interesting for anyone with an interest in international politics or area studies. The Saïd Business School organises open talks very rarely, but all I was able to get to were excellent.

A list of the seminars organised by different colleges and departments of the university is always published a few days before the term starts. One should read through this list carefully. On the course of the year I formed a rule-of-thumb that one-off seminars are normally better than seminar series.

Apart from knowledge, a journalist will need skills. I refreshed my Russian at the university language centre for two terms, and took part in a lot of courses offered by the university IT Services. The latter included an introduction into different programming languages, several spreadsheets courses, and a three-day-course into shooting and editing video. All the courses offered by the IT Services were very good.

The university community also has a lot of societies that offer excellent events, often for free. It took me several months to get to know any of these, but in the end I did, for instance, take part in events at the famous Oxford Union and see Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus in a talk organised

by the Oxford Guild Business Society. (The former lets journalists listen to debates without having to pay the high membership fee, and the latter seems to bring a lot of high profile speakers from the business world to Oxford.) An art buff should also be aware of the Edgar Wind Society for History of Art that offers, for instance, highly exclusive peeks into treasures of various colleges. I managed to take part only in one of their events.

## **My research**

During my year in Oxford I was researching innovation management in news companies. My aim was to find out how newsroom managers combine leading innovation with the need to maintain the day-to-day production of the news, what difficulties this combining may cause, and how these difficulties can be overcome.

Initially I wanted to conduct a case study of a well-functioning team in some news organisation, but it soon became evident that getting that kind of access to a news company would not be possible. Therefore, I decided to base my research on interviews with editors from three news organisations: The Guardian, The Independent, and BuzzFeed UK.

At the beginning I was worried if I could still produce a long piece of writing after so many years of news work, but in the end it proved not to be a problem. The paper the journalist fellows produce is a rather short one, and thus there is a danger that when you work on it for a year, it will grow too large. Nevertheless, overt perfectionism has never been one of my vices, so I was able to finish the paper early in the spring and could thus concentrate on other things during the third term.

The discussions with my interviewees were interesting, and the research gave me the opportunity to visit the offices of The Guardian and The Independent / The Evening Standard. I read a lot of literature that I will be able to use in my work in Helsingin Sanomat. Furthermore, doing the research gave me the inspiration to start working on my Master's thesis that I did not complete while studying journalism in the University of Tampere.

## **Conclusion**

The year in Oxford gave me a much-needed opportunity to take a break from daily news work and to analyse the way I do my job. It gave me a view into the present state and future of journalism that

I could not have got in peripheral Finland. Furthermore, I was able to ponder my strengths, possibilities and future career – this will be useful in the future for sure.

More than anything else, though, the year in Oxford was an opportunity to get to know people who I would otherwise never have met, and with whom I have had numerous discussions that have made me, I hope, a bit wiser. I hope I will be able to retain these friendships in the future, and that these contacts will also prove useful for my work, whatever it may be.