

I had the pleasure of attending the 2016 WPI (World Press Institute) Fellowship program in the United States, from mid-August till the end of October. Ten journalists from all over the world spent four weeks in the twin cities of Minnesota and five weeks travelling all around the country. This truly was once in a lifetime experience.

The main themes of the 2016 were presidential election, nuclear policy and security, police-community relations and the changing face of journalism. The five week trip round the US was as amazing as it sounds like. Several times on the way we heard people saying that not even many Americans have a chance to visit all these places in their lifetime.

Our trip across the country started with almost a week long stops in Washington DC and New York. After that travelling got more intense as we stayed first in Miami and travelled further to Los Angeles and San Francisco and continued to Atlanta and Austin. Last stop before getting back to Minnesota was Chicago. One of the definite highlights of the trip was an extra trip to Washington University in St Louis, where we had a chance to attend the second presidential debate.

There were 66 meetings altogether. We visited the east coast legacy media including Washington Post, New York Times and Wall Street Journal. We went to CNN, CBS, Politico and Miami Herald. We also visited many smaller but very innovative places: e.g. successful local digital media Texas Tribune, republican Harris Media (whose founder has been working both with and against Donald Trump) and AJ+ that has gained huge success in social media.

A lot of attention was paid to the different ways of financing the modern digitalised media. These models can't be directly applied to Finland, but the American innovations do have an effect on media all around the world.

I was very impressed by the Americans' solution-oriented mindset. Lack of audience or funding seems to be more of a challenge than a problem. Many innovations have been made as things have been getting tough. We have always looked up to the US media in Finland, and I was happy to find out that looking from US the Finnish media seems to be equally advanced in the digital transformation with the American media outlets.

There were a lot of meetings. Many of us thought it would have been good to stay in some places for more than hour or two in order to get deeper understanding on things. On the other hand we had a chance to meet the top officials in almost every place and the large quantity of places helped to form a broader view on things. In addition to media outlets we visited various organizations and companies. We even went to two local schools - one in Minnesota and the other in Brooklyn New York. Highlights of the trip included the Martin Luther King - and Jimmy Carter -centers in Atlanta.

I have been an exchange-student to US and have visited the country several times after that, but I still was able to learn a great deal about the country, its' people and the media. The timing was excellent as our fellowship took place right before the presidential election. We had the opportunity to witness how the American media during our stay started to accept the fact that Donald Trump actually might be able to make it to the White House.

The program was very intense, but as it was all pre-scheduled and pre-arranged, it did not feel too intense. Part of the challenge was to share rooms with changing people during the five week trip across the country.

In addition to meetings many receptions were held in the evenings, and I found all of them very useful as well. We also did have some free time and a couple of free weekends in interesting cities. Something extra could be arranged in every place. In New York we ended up in a spectacular jazz club in Harlem. Chicago was for blues and in Los Angeles we enjoyed classical music in the Walt Disney Concert Hall.

WPI is based in Minnesota and we spent the first three weeks of the program on the campus of St. Thomas University. Before arriving to US the Minnesota-part seemed to be quite long. It could have been shortened a bit, but on the other hand it did allow us to get properly introduced to the main themes of the 2016 fellowship. The university staff was very helpful, but the lectures given by them were perhaps not the most helpful ones. Luckily we did get many excellent lecturers from outside the university and had a chance to visit various interesting companies, media houses and organizations in Minnesota. We also had the opportunity to make visits to up north to a small city called Ely and down to the southern part of the state.

WPI was originally founded by a wealthy individual and is still financed by donations from funds, private companies and private people. The themes of the program are influenced by donors. Big part of the work is done by volunteers, and during our journey we had a chance to meet a lot of very interesting people representing various professions.

The nine weeks were spent in a group of ten. In addition to Finland, the fellows of 2016 came from Nigeria, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, Tunisia and China. For a few weeks I did not go to an elevator without nine other people standing around me. Some kind of a global test on the human nature, one could say.

During the nine weeks I made friends from all over the world and learned a lot from the others and about myself. From a Finnish point of view it was extremely interesting to hear about the freedom of the press -situation in other countries. Murders and beheadings of journalists and the culture of bribing seem to be almost everyday life to some colleagues. I knew it before, but now I could almost feel it.

WPI has been arranging the fellowships for more than 50 years. One of the first fellows was Kofi Annan, whose portrait we went to see while visiting the UN in New York. At first the program lasted for nine months and almost all the travelling was made by a van. A lot of nice traditions have been formed on the way, but as the media landscape is going through the biggest changes in decades, the fellowship needs to be changing as well. One of our ideas for change was the definite need for the renewal of the WPI web-site.

My conclusion is that the fellowship can be called a life-changing experience and I do highly recommend it to any ambitious and curious journalist in the world.

