

Final Report

Helsingin Sanomain Säätiö

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Small sidenote called Brexit

I took part in the Journalist Fellowship program at the Reuters Institute for the academic year 2020-2021, and my fellowship was funded by Helsingin Sanomat foundation. In the fall term, I was accompanied by five journalists, and during spring the group grew to thirteen. I met colleagues from several different parts of the world, from Brazil to Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan to South Korea, Kenya to Canada.

I travelled to the UK in October at a historical moment, during the last moments of the Brexit transition period. Despite its massiveness, however, Brexit felt like a small sidenote, thanks to the covid pandemic. In October, at the beginning of the school year, case numbers were relatively low and universities started testing their hybrid strategies.

In November, the situation worsened and England went back to lockdown. Fortunately, the government had decided to prioritize colleges and face-to-face teaching, and we were allowed to sit in the lecture hall of the Reuters Institute throughout the lockdown. In fact, we were almost the only people in the building. The seminar guests mainly participated remotely. This limitation meant that our seminar calendar was truly international because the lectures were not restricted by location.

Oxford University's central campus felt empty compared to the usual hustle and bustle. Many facilities were closed or the number of participants was limited. Even for a library, one had to book a seat in advance. In the autumn term, there was also a six-person gathering restriction in the country. With our small group of five, however, we were able to move around relatively freely.

Change is the only constant

When I flew to Finland for Christmas, I intended to stay for only a week, but the virus decided otherwise. The covid situation in England quickly deteriorated due to a new variant, and airlines cancelled their flights. A third lockdown began in the country, and all teaching moved online. I made a difficult decision and continued my studies in Finland, where the covid situation was much better.

I was finally able to return to England in April under Easter and found myself in the midst of tightened entry restrictions: all in all, I had to take four tests and stay in quarantine for eight days.

When freedom came, it felt as if I had landed arrived in another reality: instead of the December coldness, I was surrounded by greenery, and people were relieved because the long winter lockdown had finally ended; maybe this could be the start of a new normal?

In the end, I was the only one in my group who did not return to Oxford during the winter lockdown. When I then met all the people I had only met through video calls in real life for the first time, the feeling was special to say the least. The covid situation made us closer even from a distance: everyone felt uncannily familiar right from the start.

The last three months were intense. Each of us wanted to take back the time and experiences lost due to covid. Everyday life finally started to resemble normality. For a while, the situation in England seemed strangely good even on a global scale. The Finnish media, too, covered pub terraces in England reopening when Finland was only dreaming of something similar.

I managed to travel to London a couple of times and also had time to make a day trip to Wales. Traveling within the country during covid was pleasant in its own way. Due to strict entry regulations, there were not many tourists, and we mainly spent time among locals.

From Capitol to covid

Coronavirus was naturally the main topic of our year. Another partly overlapping theme was politics. In fall, a big part of the media coverage and our reading groups as well were centered around the U.S. presidential election. Donald Trump in particular provided food for thought as a media phenomenon – the polarization of the media, freedom of speech, disinformation, and tech giants in particular. Everything, of course, culminated in the Capitol attack in January. Were the events and the media circus that followed a sign of a longer-lasting trend? Has the power of social media gone too far and does traditional media have power to affect people if they believe what they want anyway?

On the other hand, these doomsday stereotypes were also challenged in our reading groups with Reuters researchers. For instance, studies show that real-life relationships still shape us the most and they ultimately affect our opinions and behavior more strongly than Twitter fights.

I greatly appreciated the balanced and moderate spirit of our discussions. I had to challenge my own thinking a lot and face many internalized biases that I hadn't even been aware of before.

Dissolving genre boundaries

As a health journalist, the seminar calendar of the covid year was particularly interesting to me. One of the personal highlights for me was a seminar held by Jessica Hamzelou, health reporter at the *New Scientist* magazine. Instead of hard covid numbers, her speech touched the invisible side of the pandemic, namely the stress and emotional toll that it has had not only on our readers but also on front-line covid reporters. During the first wave, many news reporters unexpectedly had to transform into front-line health journalists, which was not the easiest task.

Another common theme of our discussions was the dissolving of journalistic genre boundaries. Covid is a great example of the fact that health is not just health, but also politics, economics, history, and vice versa. The pandemic has also upped the appreciation of health reporting within newsrooms, and many media houses have invested in innovative, visual storytelling around health topics. I hope that the trend will remain, and that premium content will be created outside the genres of traditional hard journalism, too.

Another fascinating example of dissolving genre boundaries is environmental reporting. One of the most interesting speeches of the spring term was from Wolfgang Blau, former President, International and Chief Operating Officer of Condé Nast and current visiting fellow at the Reuters Institute, who focuses on ways to integrate climate change into all genres of journalism, from politics to lifestyle, instead of having a single environmental journalist within a newsroom who solely covers environment.

The third overarching theme of our year was diversity, particularly from an intersectional perspective. We are all a complex mix of different categories such as gender, ethnicity, and social status. The challenge for journalism is to engage in the debate on diversity in a balanced, truthful way. Projects that measure the gender distribution of our news and newsrooms are a good start, but from there, we ultimately have to move to more complex questions: What sources do we use? From whose perspective do we write and to whom? Do we force our subjects and interviewees into a narrow mold, or do we treat them as the complex entities they truly are?

From tech hype to meaning

We discussed the power of tech giants frequently during our fellowship, and for good reason. Companies like Google and Facebook have taken over a large part of the distribution of journalism and, consequently, ad revenue too. Legislation has been slow to respond. Now the media industry is struggling to find out ways to sensibly limit this power while maintaining cooperation.

An interesting example of this balancing act was the seminar hosted by Sinead Boucher who leads the New Zealand publication *Stuff*. *Stuff* made international headlines when it decided to leave Facebook altogether.

I concluded my year with my personal final project where I also focused on technology, albeit from slightly more optimistic perspective of possibilities. I studied immersive and interactive journalism and how these new technologies and forms of storytelling could be implemented sustainably so that even smaller media houses could benefit from them. I interviewed journalists who all have a unique perspective to innovative storytelling, from Francesca Panetta, former head of the *Guardian's* Virtual Reality unit, to Vincent Ryan, who trains journalists at *Google News Lab*.

The most important takeaway for me was that tech hype is turning into talk about meaning. Now that the mobile platform is starting to be familiar to both journalists and audiences, blind experimentation is turning into deeper reflection on how new technologies can support storytelling and the deeper purposes and values of journalism such as fairness, truthfulness and understanding.

Journalism is currently going through a phase of technological democratization: smartphones are becoming more common and cheaper, and it will make journalism available to completely new audiences.

Innovative, predominantly visual journalism can also be part of this democratization process, as visual communication is more intuitive and at the same time older than a written text. It can transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries and reach people that wouldn't be reached by traditional written news.

Fragmented yet memorable

Any year is hard or even impossible to summarize. This is particularly true to my year in Oxford. I gained both food for thought, professional confidence, and lifelong friends. In an international group, I learned how journalists wrestle with different problems around the world, but on a deeper level, we are also united by very similar concerns.

More importantly, I also learned to work with different cultures and communication styles, and as a consequence, I learned more about myself. While the pandemic made the year more fragmented, it didn't manage to wipe out the most important lessons nor make my year any less rewarding.

I am thankful for Helsingin Sanomat Foundation for making perhaps the most memorable year of my life by far possible.