

## **Final Report**

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### STARTING POINT

## Studying in the waves of the pandemic

The long-awaited year in Los Angeles was able to start in June 2021. I had to postpone my studies at USC Annenberg University for a year due to the coronavirus pandemic. In the spring and summer of 2020, the corona situation in the United States was grim, and USC pivoted to online learning for a year. The university and the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation made it possible to postpone my studies a year ahead in an exceptional situation. I waited anxiously to see which way the problem would develop during the following winter.

Next spring, I was relieved the pandemic showed signs of fading away. I managed to get visas for my family. We flew to California, and the master's program began in the last week of June.

When we arrived in California on June 15th, the entire state celebrated the beginning of a new normal. California had removed all Covid-related restrictions on the same day. It seemed that the shadow of Covid-19 had disappeared for good. A month passed when the delta variant of Covid-19 turned the infection curves into a worrying growth. The university pivoted to using face masks again. In mid-August, the university started a massive testing operation: Students and staff had to take a Covid test every week throughout the fall semester, even though almost everyone had been fully vaccinated since the summer.

Despite the exceptional circumstances, the teaching at USC was relatively normal the whole academic year, even though everyone wore masks indoors until the beginning of March. The University Park campus was still very deserted in the summer, but right from the beginning of the fall semester, the area was full of students. During the academic year, more than 30,000 students studied at USC. On campus, most rode on skateboards and bikes from building to building. The campus area is like a small town and an oasis between the rugged residential areas of South Los Angeles.

The school year spent in the shadow of Covid-19 culminated in a colossal graduation party on May 13, 2022. Masks had officially been taken off, and tens of thousands of people packed into the USC campus. The atmosphere was relieved when loved ones and families finally celebrated the students' achievements in person. The USC marching band took care of the carnival atmosphere by playing chart hits from tent to tent. It was beautiful to see and experience an American, spectacular party.

## STUDIES

### Annenberg swears by the name of narrative journalism

In the fall semester, I wanted to choose new technology and data journalism courses that would serve my goals for the year. However, the master's program includes 11 credits worth of compulsory courses, and these courses filled my fall.

#### Summer Semester

Course	Credits
JOUR-511 : Introduction to Narrative Non-Fiction	1 credit
JOUR-528 : Summer Digital Journalism Immersion	3 credits

## Fall Semester

Course	Credits
JOUR-488 : Data-Driven Storytelling About Los Angeles	4 credits
JOUR-489 : Hands-on Disruption: Experimenting with Emerging Technology	2 credits
JOUR-567 : The Power of Narrative	2 credits
JOUR-595 : Critical Thinking: The Art and Science of Not Getting Fooled	3 credits
JOUR-594A : Master's Thesis	2 credits
<b>Summer and fall semester credits in total</b>	<b>17 credits</b>

The summer started with the *Summer Digital Journalism Immersion*. The course covered everything from writing a story to making a traditional TV stand-in. The second course of the summer, *Introduction to Narrative Non-Fiction*, was an introduction to the long and text-based journalistic narration. The same theme continued in the fall's *The Power of Narrative* course, where we students did a lot of interviews and background work for a long journalistic story. The class was a refreshing change from my typical job, which doesn't involve much writing.

One of the exciting courses of the fall was *Critical Thinking: The Art and Science of Not Getting Fooled*, led by Professor Diane Winston. The course, which stimulates critical thinking, drilled into the theories of power in the media context. The goal was to make journalism students understand what economic and cultural forces affect American society and the media environment and how a journalist can navigate his/her/their work within the framework of these theories. This class taught me the challenges American society has faced during and after Donald Trump's presidency. America is wounded, and society is highly polarized. Professor Winston was very cynical, and it was difficult for her to see a clear way out of the current situation.

The most exciting part of the fall semester was the elective courses. Led by Professor Robert Hernandez, *Hands-on Disruption: Experimenting with Emerging Technology*

covered 360 videos, 3D object modeling, virtual reality immersion and augmented reality.

In Hernandez's class, we gave a voice to formerly-incarcerated people. They decided themselves what kind of story they wanted to tell about themselves.

Just before Christmas, I finished the final project of the course: an approximately six-minute 360 video about 22-year-old Vivian Slu, whose brother Sonny has been in prison for 22 years. I filmed and edited the footage together with an American student. Telling the family's story was an educational journey for us into the effects of the American justice and prison system. We understood the drastic consequences of long sentences on the lives of the incarcerated's loved ones. In practice, the whole family is in prison. The pain of loved ones is shocking, especially when the convicted has sworn his innocence for more than 20 years.

I started my thesis in Professor Gabriel Kahn's *Data-Driven Storytelling About Los Angeles* class. I designed and developed a journalistic tool prototype that visualizes information from the Los Angeles Police Department's crime database. The topic of the tool is hate crimes, which have surged alarmingly in the United States in the last couple of years.

During the fall, I made the tool prototypes with the design tool Figma. Before the actual planning and design work, I interviewed the hate crime coordinator of the Los Angeles Police Department, Det. Orlando Martinez and several representatives of anti-hate crime organizations. In this way, I understood the scope of the phenomenon and its effects on the community in the area. After that, I rolled up my sleeves and started designing the prototype. The prototype was user tested by students in Kahn's class, and I gained valuable insights from the user testing about the problem areas of the prototype.

## Spring Semester

Course	Credits
PRIN-504 : Aesthetics of Form I	4 credits
IDSN-520 : Design Essentials	3 credits
COMM-499 : Special Topics: Skateboarding and Action Sports in Business, Media and Culture	4 credits
JOUR-527 : Advanced Disruption: Innovation with Emerging Technology	2 credits
JOUR-555 : Advanced Coding for Creative Storytelling	2 credits
JOUR-594B : Master's Thesis	2 credits
<b>Spring semester credits in total</b>	<b>17 credits</b>
<b>Academic year credits in total</b>	<b>34 credits</b>

In the spring semester, I continued developing the prototype of the hate crime tool and wrote my master's thesis about the work process. The prototype hasn't been made into a finished product yet, but *Crosstown* site development manager Lauren Whaley will use my final work as she continues to work on the topic. I also coded an interactive map for my thesis using the skills learned from the *Advanced Coding for Creative Storytelling* course I took in the spring.

I had more elective courses in the spring semester than in the fall. I took two classes at the Iovine and Young Academy, one of USC's newest schools that combines art, technology, design, and business innovation.

The courses were completely different from journalism, which was refreshing. Studying at the design school gave me a new perspective in many ways. I saw up close how students of another field approach everyday problems in a different way than journalism students. When journalists report on issues, designers try to create and shape solutions to them.

From Annenberg's course selection, I chose two courses for the spring, Robert Hernandez's *Advanced Disruption: Innovation with Emerging Technology*. The working method and tools were the same as in the fall semester, but in the spring, we did final projects of a different nature.

During the spring, we did two projects, the first published by the Los Angeles Times in April. The public service television channel KCET also published our story.

April 2022 was the 30th anniversary of the Los Angeles civil rest. The uprising's root causes – racism, injustice, and police violence – are still painfully relevant in the United States. That's why we decided to tackle the topic, and we made four collections of stories in groups. All of the stories were published on the JOVRNALISM project website.

One of my most exciting spring classes was *Skateboarding and Action Sports in Business, Media and Culture*, taught by Neftalie Williams, the first skateboarding professor in the United States and a doctorate in skateboarding. The course fascinated me because I have been skating since I was a teenager. In addition, my 7-year-old son started skateboarding in Los Angeles.

Prof. Williams believes that skateboarding can serve as a tool for social change. The more we know about skateboarding, the better we can make our other communities inclusive for everyone. Prof. Williams went through the idea in class and a Los Angeles Times story, which was awarded the NLGJA award in the summer.

LIFE

## Santa Monica is a safe place to live

My family and I chose Santa Monica as a place to live, which turned out to be excellent. The area is safe and comfortable, and all necessary services are within walking distance. Santa Monica is a city of about 80,000 inhabitants on the shores of the Pacific Ocean and one of the most prosperous residential areas in Los Angeles County. In Santa Monica, you can even safely bike with a child, which is rare in the Los Angeles area.

Renting an apartment, buying a car and getting insurance was a chore, but in the end, everything went smoothly. We bought a car because we wanted to travel independently, and Los Angeles is a difficult place to live without a car. For the first month and a half, we lived as subtenants in the home of a former HS Foundation fellow residing in Santa Monica while she and her family were in the Nordic countries for the summer. At the end of July, we got our rental flat just a few minutes away from Santa Monica beach. Rental agreements in Santa Monica and the Los Angeles area must be made for at least 12 months. The beach was like our backyard. We went there daily for jogging, swimming, cycling and roller skating.

IN CONCLUSION

## The Californianness got to us

I would like to thank the Helsingin Sanomain Foundation for the study scholarship and the opportunity to live and study in Los Angeles. The year in Southern California was unique and valuable, especially when I spent it with my family. I, my spouse, and our son now permanently are partly Californian. Californianness remains in our lives as a positive life attitude. California has also taught us to recognize opportunities and seize them.