

Final Report: World Press Institute Fellowship 2023

March 3 – May 6, 2023

I toured the United States for nine weeks as the World Press Institute fellow from Finland. I participated in almost a hundred visits to media outlets and other organizations, and I spoke during seven panel discussions. The trip was intense and memorable, I learned a lot about the United States and made new friends from around the world.

The ten invited journalists were from all continents: France, Bulgaria, Turkey, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, and Finland. We were a diverse group of investigative, foreign reporters, and political journalists, connected by our interest in international topics and news experience. The program took us from Minnesota to Iowa, New York, Washington, Miami, Austin, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago, with a final closing ceremony in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

Themes

The World Press Institute (WPI) had organized an extensive and diverse program. Throughout the visits, we had the opportunity to engage with a total of 160 professionals, including journalists, experts, and researchers. The duration of these visits varied from an hour to a couple of hours and we had two to four visits scheduled per day.

The program primarily centered around media visits, with notable highlights including national outlets like The Wall Street Journal, Associated Press (New York), CNN, Fox News, The New York Times, ProPublica, and National Public Radio. Engaging with motivated and passionate journalists, it soon became evident that concerns regarding the erosion of trust in the media and journalists weighed heavily on their minds. Local media outlets, on the other hand, enjoyed greater trust, and we had the opportunity to meet with reporters from local newspapers and radio stations in Minnesota and Iowa.

The award-winning New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman provided an analysis of the state of U.S. foreign policy that resonated deeply with us. In San Francisco, we engaged with innovators, including the company Substack, that shed light on the role of newsletters in the American media landscape. With the rapid rise of newsletters as an important publication channel for magazines, we learned how they are effectively utilized to attract new audiences.

We also toured various media universities in Minnesota, Iowa, and California. These institutions offered top-notch study programs. However, we discovered that only a minority of the students pursued journalism as a career path. The reasons are the relatively low wages for young journalists and the increasing skepticism towards the media. As a result, students are more interested in advertising and corporate communication.

Politics, particularly the upcoming presidential election in 2024, was another central topic. We had the opportunity to engage with politicians from both the Democratic and Republican

parties at the local level. Additionally, we visited research institutes, including Gallup, Pew Research, and Cato. Academics in Minnesota and Texas also shared their perspectives.

Agriculture, the food industry, and climate change were another significant theme. During our visit to Iowa, we explored two agricultural sites where the impacts of climate change, such as drought, decreased crop yields, and heavy rainfall, were discussed. It was intriguing to observe that while farmers acknowledged these effects, they expressed skepticism about the concept of climate change. In the United States, climate change remains a politically contentious issue, and the predominantly Republican farmers in Iowa clearly preferred not to discuss it.

Criminal policy was an extremely interesting theme. We visited the infamous San Quentin prison near San Francisco, where the inmates guided us and showed us the prison's own newsroom. This prison, which accommodates more than 4,000 people, houses both death row and long-term prisoners. Reforms are being planned according to a Nordic model, so that prisoners can be offered better opportunities for rehabilitation and education. We were fortunate as no WPI group has been able to visit the prison before.

Surprisingly, the program also featured seven panel discussions held in Minnesota and California, including the Main Library in Minneapolis and the World Affairs Council in San Francisco. As panelists, we had the opportunity to discuss the issues relevant to our respective countries and media landscapes, with audiences ranging from 50 to 100 attendees. During my presentations, I highlighted aspects of Finland's welfare society, our education system, and the NATO debate. It was intriguing to hear that many attendees were familiar with Finland's high ranking in the international happiness study, and I answered multiple questions about it.

Highlights

The program offered a diversity of experiences, and we were warmly welcomed at each visit destination. I have never encountered such a well-organized and thoughtfully planned study program before.

We also had a truly fantastic group. We formed a wonderful bond among ourselves, enjoying shared moments of laughter, taking care of one another, and exchanging life and work experiences. Building such a group is perhaps partly about luck. However, I believe that the application process played a crucial role in ensuring that participants were well-versed in travel and had prior experience working in international settings.

With the exception of Miami, we were fortunate to have our own individual hotel rooms throughout the trip around the United States. This arrangement provided a welcomed break after exhausting days. As I often found myself tired in the evenings and had blogging responsibilities to attend to, having my own hotel room was important in maintaining a positive mood. I hope that future WPI fellows will have the same convenience.

The fact that we were supposed to participate in several panel discussions was a surprise to me. At first, it was nerve-wracking to stand in front of an audience and answer complex questions about my country's politics and culture in English. But after a while it felt pleasantly

challenging. On the one hand, it was rewarding that I could share information about Finland and analyze Finnish politics, and on the other hand, it gave me confidence to give speeches in English.

Challenges

The program was packed with activities, starting every morning at nine and lasting for about nine hours. We also often had events in the evenings like dinners, panel discussions, and visits. Time was a challenge, especially during the first three weeks when I didn't have a single day off. I wrote blogs for WPI and the Helsingin Sanomain Säätiö Foundation late at night. Thankfully, WPI had made it clear before the program started that we weren't allowed to work for our employers during the program. I think it's a good rule.

Unexpectedly, my expenses in the US surpassed my initial budget, particularly during our travels throughout the country. Dining out in restaurants was costly, despite my efforts to find more affordable options. Most hotels did not include breakfast, adding some additional expense. WPI generously provided approximately 2,700 euros to cover our daily expenses. However, during the trip, I ended up spending over 5,000 euros, in addition to my ongoing living expenses in Finland. To cover the remaining costs, I relied on my personal savings and another scholarship. Although WPI's support was very generous, I found the stay in the United States to be quite expensive.

A few of the media visits felt somewhat superficial. It appeared that some of the journalists and editors we met failed to recognize our extensive journalistic background and experience. Their emphasis remained primarily on the practical aspects of day-to-day news operations. I would have preferred a greater exploration of ethical dilemmas and how they were resolved. Additionally, they seemed unaware of contemporary online journalism practices in Europe and the Nordic countries, leaving us with unanswered queries on the topic.

Summary

The well-organized and diverse program has given me valuable insights into American society. Traveling in the prosperous Midwest to the politically active East Coast, Spanish-speaking Florida, the Democratic hub of Austin, and the contrasting wealth disparity in California, I now have a deeper understanding of the country's multifaceted and contradictory nature. These perspectives enable me to approach news about the United States with a fresh outlook, benefiting me as a journalist at the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle).

The WPI program has not only allowed me to establish a unique network of fellow journalists but has also provided a supportive community of friends. We actively share insights and news with each other through Whatsapp.

Since my return, I have had the opportunity to meet Finnish WPI alumni who work in different media outlets in Finland, which is valuable. I am looking forward to participating in the WPI seminars and events organized for alumni.