

Columbia Summer Investigative Reporting Course

I attended the Summer Investigative Reporting Course at Columbia university in summer 2023.

I had heard good things about this course from former students, so my expectations were high. And I wasn't disappointed. The course was very well planned, and it included a huge number of useful tools as well as lecturers who are the best in their field. I got to know colleagues from multiple countries as there were students from Finland, Switzerland, Japan, China, South Korea, Italy, and United Kingdom. I now have someone to ask for help, if I cover something related to one of these countries. The organizers also ask students for feedback multiple times and do their best to develop the course. Based on last year's feedback, for example, the data sessions were spread out across many weeks rather than being packed into one.

I work in a regional newspaper in northern Finland. Before the course, I was a bit worried if the things we learned would be useful for me. But they really are: I learned that often investigative journalism has a lot to do with the way of thinking or just knowing the right places to look for something. So, it's not all about having a lot of time for one project. We also learned some tools which should be helpful when trying to find time to do longer projects in between daily responsibilities.

Besides learning the tools, the course was about developing an "investigative mindset". It means learning to think like an investigative journalist: what are the less obvious ways I could find the information I am looking for? What kind of documents could exist on my topic? How could I go one step further than I normally go? I felt I got a lot of useful tips to use in my daily work.

Of course, there were also things which are not that helpful to me. Some web pages and tools are mostly relevant in the United States. There were also other issues: for example, in Lapland there are some gaps in

the satellite pictures. One web page was about using the shadows to determine time the picture was taken. However, I couldn't find anything tall enough to get a proper shadow in Lapland.

For me almost everything we learned on the course was completely new. Maybe that's why I, at times, felt that the days were even too packed with interesting information. We stayed at the university for eight hours five days a week, and we also had some material that we were supposed to read before the lectures. I feel that I would have needed more time to review what we had learned. Luckily, we can also review things now that we are back home.

For me, this was also a language course. I'm fluent in English but haven't really used the language for years. I've sometimes even opted not to apply for some professional courses because I was worried about my language skills. However, at Columbia I was able to follow the teaching well enough and got more confident with speaking. If anyone else is worried about this, I would like to say, don't be! Most of the Finnish people speak English well enough for this course.

Altogether, this course was a wonderful experience which will give me new energy and ideas in my daily work.