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World Press Institute Fellowship

Sept. 5-Nov. 8, 2025

I participated in the World Press Institute journalism fellowship in the United States in the fall of 2025.

I had been looking over the program and considering applying for several years. Although the educational requirements were not particularly strict, I wanted to complete the master's degree I had started before applying.

So I was highly motivated when I learned that I had been selected as a fellow, even though I already have more than 20 years of work experience. It also meant that I was clearly older than the other participants in the WPI fellowship program.

Our group included nine journalists from around the world. The other participants came from Argentina, Canada, Namibia, Kenya, Bulgaria, Italy, Egypt and Indonesia.

Some fellows had previous experience in the United States, while others were visiting the country for the first time.

I had previously worked in the United States as a photojournalist. In my view, that was even an advantage during the fellowship. I already had some understanding of American society and the practical realities of everyday life.

As a WPI fellow, however, I had the opportunity to broaden my understanding of the country and focus on subjects that I had not previously had the time or access to explore in depth.

A fellow supported by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation is not allowed to work during the study trip. Fortunately. It was a unique privilege to step away from the routines of everyday work and make room for new ideas.

“Nine weeks, nine cities, nine fellows”

An incredible range of subjects and experiences fit into nine weeks.

We arrived in Minneapolis in September 2025, just a week after a school shooting in the city. Two elementary schoolchildren were killed and nearly 20 people were injured. The tragedy also affected some members of the WPI staff personally.

Less than a week into the program, MAGA activist Charlie Kirk was shot at a public event on a university campus in Utah. By then, at the latest, it became clear to many of us that the issues we report on in our home newsrooms are not abstract in the United States. They are very much present.

We spent our first weeks in Minneapolis, the home city of the World Press Institute. From there, we drove near the Canadian border to the small town of Grand Marais, where the scenery felt strangely familiar from a Finnish perspective — and there was even a Finnish sauna. We stayed with host families, giving us a brief taste of family life and relaxed outdoor activities before the intensive program and demanding travel schedule began.

In the fall of 2025, our study tour traveled by car and plane to nine destinations across the United States: Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota; Grand Marais, Minnesota; Muscatine, Iowa; Chicago; San Francisco; Phoenix; Anchorage, Alaska; Washington, D.C.; New York; and Austin, Texas.

Universities and think tanks

I appreciated the fact that the fellowship included lectures and meetings on a wide range of subjects at universities across the United States.

The tailored meetings with professors and lecturers were highly effective deep dives. It was a unique opportunity to ask experts detailed questions directly, and our group made the most of every minute. We almost competed for the chance to ask questions, and time often seemed to run out too quickly.

Several sessions were particularly memorable: **American Politics in the Trump Era**, with political science professor David Schultz at Hamline University in St. Paul; **A Conversation on the State of Local News in the U.S. and Chicago's Media Landscape, Past and Present**, at Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Chicago; a discussion with Dr. Shelby Grossman at Arizona State University's Cronkite School of Journalism on AI-generated harms, covert influence operations, information disorder and digital publics; **A Conversation on Mental Health and Journalism**, with Kate West at the University of Texas at Austin; and a meeting with polling expert Jim Henson, director of the Texas Politics Project.

In addition, WPI Program Director Camilla Bath trained our group on the use of artificial intelligence in newsrooms. Her session, **AI and the Modern Newsroom: Tools, Trends and Ethical Challenges**, helped us understand the essential basics of using AI in journalism.

The **Solutions Journalism Network Workshop** in Chicago was also thought-provoking. Together, we explored new, solutions-oriented approaches to journalism.

Among the universities, the opportunity to study at **Stanford University** — even for only one day — was especially meaningful to me. I enjoyed every moment. It was fascinating to see the campus from the inside, observe the students and briefly take part in the life of one of the world's leading universities.

Stanford had arranged several tailored lectures and meetings for us, including **Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency**, with Professor Larry Diamond of Stanford's departments of political science and sociology; **a meeting with Cheryl Phillips**, founder of Big Local News; and **a meeting with Djordje Padejski**, a lecturer in Stanford's journalism program.

And since I mentioned Stanford, I cannot leave out another remarkable experience: dinner at the **Harvard Club in New York**. The two sons of World Press Institute founder Harry Morgan met the fellows there for dinner. Normally, access is limited to alumni of this Ivy League university. It was an incredible glimpse into rooms and halls filled with the atmosphere and history of Harvard. A memorable moment for WPI's 60th class.

Our visits to think tanks and research institutions focused largely on Washington. They included organizations familiar from news coverage: **Pew Research Center, the Brookings Institution, the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute**.

One of the most interesting visits was to the conservative think tank **The Heritage Foundation**. Before President Donald Trump returned to office, the organization published the Project 2025 report, which has been regarded as a blueprint for a possible return to power. Trump, however, has denied any connection to the report.

Our visit to the United States took place during the first year of Trump's second term. At The Heritage Foundation, one of the issues that sparked lively discussion was cuts to funding for public media. Several of us fellows work for public service media organizations.

Our time in Washington also coincided with the **International Monetary Fund's annual meetings**, offering another interesting glimpse behind the scenes.

Media visits and networking

One of the greatest strengths of the World Press Institute fellowship is the opportunity to get inside American media companies and news organizations.

We visited media outlets in several states, and I was both surprised and especially pleased that leading journalists and editors from major news organizations gave their time to our group.

Most had cleared an hour from their schedules simply to sit down with us, discuss current issues and answer our questions. Among them were **Joseph Kahn**, executive editor of The New York Times, and **Marc Lacey**, its managing editor.

At the **Pulitzer Center** in Washington, we met author, New York Times columnist and Pulitzer Prize winner **Thomas Friedman**.

The significance of these meetings was heightened by the fact that many of the discussions were held on background, allowing for unusually candid conversations.

Our media visits included **the Star Tribune** and **Minnesota Public Radio** in Minneapolis; **Chicago Public Media** and **the Chicago Sun-Times**; **the Center for Investigative Reporting** and **Mother Jones** in San Francisco; **The Arizona Republic** in Phoenix; **KTUU-Alaska's News Source** in Anchorage; **The Washington Post**, **CBS News**, **Axios**, **Politico** and **CNN** in Washington; **ProPublica**, **NBCUniversal**, **The New York Times**, **Documented**, **The Wall Street Journal**, **Dan Abrams Media**, **New York Public Radio**, **The Associated Press** and **LinkedIn News** in New York; and the **Texas Tribune** in Austin.

Perhaps it was comforting to realize that the challenges facing newsrooms appear to be global: reaching younger audiences, tight finances, shrinking newsrooms, growing expectations and the rapid rise of AI.

In Chicago, for example, the struggle for survival had led to an unusual partnership in which public service organization Chicago Public Media acquired the Chicago Sun-Times in 2022.

Encounters

During nine weeks, we met Americans from almost every walk of life. We had the opportunity to speak with families, schoolchildren, students, diplomats and people serving life sentences.

We experienced ordinary **family life** while staying with host families in the small town of Grand Marais, Minnesota. I stayed with a family that ran the town's dental practice. Whether we were at a school volleyball game or having dinner at a restaurant, everyone seemed to know the mother of the family, the dentist. These moments felt like something from a feel-good American movie.

We volunteered **with children** in San Francisco. **826 Valencia** is an organization that runs storytelling activities for underserved students. We helped children come up with their own stories, which they wrote and recorded as short podcasts over the course of a few hours. It was also a learning experience for me to try to distill my own expertise into something a child could understand.

We met **middle school students** at Muscatine High School in Iowa, where we held rotating roundtable discussions. Their questions about journalism were sharper than ever. We also met **journalism students** in Minneapolis. Answering their questions really forces you to explain and defend your own professional decisions.

We discussed **diplomacy** with the Canadian consul general in Minneapolis, spoke with Austria's tech diplomat in San Francisco, and attended a lecture and discussion on U.S. foreign policy with former American diplomat Tom Hanson. In Anchorage, we discussed Arctic issues at the Alaska World Affairs Council.

We also met **Stéphane Dujarric, spokesperson for the United Nations secretary-general**, at U.N. headquarters in New York. We watched him at work during his daily press briefing.

We encountered a darker side of life through a group of people serving life sentences at the notorious **San Quentin prison** in San Francisco. These meetings have remained permanently in the memories of previous fellows as well as ours. Four incarcerated men served as our guides under supervision. Each introduced himself by describing, in stark detail, the homicide that had led to his life sentence. We were also allowed to ask them anything openly. It was a sobering experience for everyone involved.

The prison also operates, quite progressively, a newspaper in which some incarcerated people work. The contrast was striking: just a few yards away, the prison cells, only a few square meters in size, looked as if they belonged to another century.

In Chicago, we visited a nonprofit working to reduce gun violence on the streets. The organization, **CRED**, is led by Arne Duncan, who served as U.S. education secretary during the Obama administration. In Minneapolis, people returning from prison were supported in their transition back to everyday life by being offered work at **All Square**, a lunch restaurant.

Blogs and panel discussions

During the trip, each fellow wrote blog posts for the WPI website.

In practice, it was my turn to write about every other week. I found that pace manageable, although many of us could only find time to write very late at night, just before the deadline.

My understanding is that fellows in previous years had been required to write a blog post every week. That would have been too much in a program with such an intensive schedule.

The writing taught me a great deal. Producing text in English was even easier than I had expected. Only the Canadian journalist in our group was a native English speaker, so the rest of us struggled with comma rules and nuances.

We were instructed to use the writing style of the Associated Press. Naturally, AP style was not familiar to me as a writer, but having a professional edit the texts taught me a great deal. I enjoyed the challenge. I wrote, among other things, about the difficult financial situation facing news organizations, the role and importance of volunteering in the United States, and the growing problem of news deserts. We were free to choose our own topics.

In addition, everyone had to step outside their comfort zone and speak publicly. Each fellow took part in public panel discussions in front of an audience. I appeared on stage in Grand Marais, Minnesota; Anchorage, Alaska; and at the graduation ceremony in Minneapolis. At the ceremony, everyone also delivered a speech they had written themselves — another new experience.

Finland attracted a great deal of interest during the panel discussions. My fellowship took place at a time when relations between Finland and the United States had become historically close.

The audiences at these events were mostly well past middle age, clearly well-read and closely informed about the politics of the day. They were interested in Finland's location next to Russia, Finland's purchase of fighter jets from the United States, prominent political figures such as Sanna Marin and Alexander Stubb, Finland's accession to NATO, and icebreaker deals that happened to coincide with our time near the Arctic in Alaska.

During the English-language panel discussions on Finnish foreign policy, I certainly had to push myself. But I managed, and that felt great. The final panel discussion was even

surprisingly relaxed and fun, despite the fact that four fellows were discussing serious issues.

Strengths, weaknesses and costs

In my view, the World Press Institute fellowship is exceptionally well planned. There are many moving parts: visits, flights, transfers, accommodations and much more. The people responsible work throughout the entire program. If something is canceled, they try to arrange something else in its place. I appreciated that greatly. On paper, I believe our itinerary was more than 70 pages long.

Zach Mullinax, who became executive director of the World Press Institute a couple of years ago, is very good at his job. He was joined for part of the program by his predecessor, David McDonald, who now serves as chair of the board. Our class was also the first to include Program Director Camilla Bath, and that was an excellent decision. Because the program evolves and changes somewhat during the nine weeks, Bath was able to help with the arrangements. She also has a background in journalism and therefore understood us especially well.

Although the WPI fellowship has a 60-year history, I am still impressed by the commitment of foundations and private individuals who help fund it. We met Americans who literally give their own time and money so that international journalists can see and experience everything described above. I appreciate that enormously.

There were also many volunteers who served as our contacts, drivers, hosts and new friends. The contacts assigned to me in Minneapolis — a text editor around my age and a young television journalist — are now my friends.

The weaknesses are difficult to find. Some visits were too superficial: We were not a school group but a group of journalists and professionals.

It was also unfortunate that access to conservative media organizations has become more difficult. For example, Fox News immediately declined to receive our group. Our visit to The Heritage Foundation helped balance that somewhat, but still.

Our group also discussed how it would be useful to include a state in the so-called Rust Belt or Bible Belt. That would make the program even more balanced.

The investment by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation in a fellow's trip is substantial. The World Press Institute also takes very good care of the group and provides a daily allowance, including money for meals. Still, a fellow should understand that the allowance alone is not enough. The United States has become increasingly expensive,

and food alone can consume a significant amount of money. Most of us, of course, also continued to have expenses at home.

For my part, I used not only some of my savings but also several weeks of annual leave and took a considerable amount of unpaid leave. That should also be taken into account when calculating the cost of the trip. The schedule is intensive and there is a great deal of programming. This is not a vacation.

There is free time, too. I encourage future fellows to enjoy the unique opportunity to see and experience things outside the official program as well. I spent both time and money on an architecture tour and an improvisational theater performance in Chicago, an NHL game in Washington, a museum of contemporary art in San Francisco, a musical in New York and live gigs in numerous cities, including Austin. We also made unforgettable visits to the Grand Canyon and a glacier in Alaska.

The future

Immediately after returning home, I wrote this in a social media post:

“Two and a half months in the United States was an intense and eye-opening experience. It reminded me who I am, what I want — and, above all, what I do not want. I am grateful that the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation and the World Press Institute considered my professional skills valuable and wanted to invest time and money in them.”

I still feel the same way. The American professional environment and style of social interaction suit me.

In the United States, I took on challenges more boldly because the environment encouraged me to do so. I produced texts in English, spoke fluently in front of audiences in a foreign language, built professional networks and made plenty of small talk.

During our visits, I liked the way editors, for example, presented bold ideas and opinions — even when I did not share the same view, or when it was immediately clear that I was thinking, “Well, that is never going to happen.” Or is that simply the way we think in Finland?

Fortunately, I was open-minded enough to believe that the fellowship could also benefit a middle-aged journalist, and I applied for the fellowship. As I said earlier, I believe that my professional skills and life experience were more of an advantage than a disadvantage during this program.

My work in Yle's newsroom requires broad general knowledge and the ability to quickly grasp complex and wide-ranging issues. It is clear that such an extensive study trip will directly benefit my everyday work.

Thank you for the opportunity to expand my skills and sharpen my professional identity.