

Riikka Haikarainen

## ”We want you to feel possible”

### *Three lessons from a journalist who switched to academia*

As a journalist and staff writer for a decade, I made a transition to the academic world in 2014–2015 as I studied for a Master of Arts in Specialized Journalism at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Through my studies, I acquired new journalistic skills, but more importantly, developed courage to test new ideas and practices. I will present three lessons in the media field and the Southern Californian professional culture that I came home with. In my daily work, these lessons have also evolved into a new storytelling concept: I have developed a live storytelling event for the Finnish National Theatre where journalists present a previously unpublished story as a live speech. So far, all the nine shows have been sold out, received excellent feedback from the audience, and created enthusiasm in our newsroom.

“We want you to feel possible.”

With these words, my professor at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles greeted my fellow Master of Arts graduate students and me in her first e-mail to us. It was a hot Californian July of 2014, and we – some recent journalism graduates, others experienced reporters like myself – were embarking on an exhausting yet rewarding 10-month-long program in Specialized Journalism.

During the course of the program, I often thought about my professor’s slogan. For me, the feeling of ability and potential summarizes the new insights that I brought back from California to my work as a staff writer for *Helsingin Sanomat*, the biggest daily newspaper in Finland.

In the academic world, I acquired new journalistic skills, but perhaps more importantly, developed courage to test new ideas

and practices. In this article, I will analyze my study experience by presenting three lessons that I learned. They emphasize the nobility of networking, being ambitious but constantly examining what you don’t yet know, and experimenting with new solutions. I will also present the new storytelling concept – a live journalism event – that I have successfully developed with my colleagues in *Helsingin Sanomat*. I hope these experiences and insights are valuable and relevant to both media researchers and practitioners who seek to develop their own professions.

#### **Lesson #1: Nobody works alone – use other people’s expertise**

*Networking is not about building a personal brand, rather it is about enriching your own work with the wisdom of collaborators.*

The Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism’s Specialized Journalism program at the USC, a private university with more than 45 years of experience in communication and journalism education, trains journalists “to produce high-level reporting

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At the commencement ceremony, the USC graduates receive diplomas wearing the traditional cap and gown. The author of this article is standing to the left.

on the topic of their choosing across media platforms” (USC Annenberg, 2017). For a program that costs USD 56,000, I received a full scholarship from the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation, a private foundation established in 2005 with a mission of supporting Finnish quality journalism and freedom of speech (The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation, 2017a).

The program at the USC Annenberg offers specialization classes in a wide variety of subjects, ranging from politics and education to science, business, environment, health, sports, arts and urban affairs. Having worked as a science and health reporter in Finland, I picked science journalism as my area of focus. I also wanted to deepen my knowledge in a totally different area of journalism: religion reporting, focusing on Islam. In addition to these, I was free to take classes from any USC school or faculty and I picked courses in communication management, TV production, and drama.

The multidisciplinary nature of the program emphasizes network building as a cruci-

al skill in today’s rapidly changing media field. Before the program took off, we were asked to write a short biography. Only as I read my classmates’ bios did I realize that their purpose was to function as an invitation to collaborate: the bios described the skills, interests and professional mission of each student. The bios were circulated among our guest speakers, teachers and professors. Consequently, some of them even knew our names as they arrived to lecture for the first time.

The general atmosphere at Annenberg was one of mutual cooperation: not only did the students look for valuable professional contacts, but the faculty staff also considered the student body to be their possible future collaborator. The staff was eager to dig out the special qualities, interests, and strengths of their students in order to guide us forward and introduce promising graduates to employers.

My year in California made me realize – somewhat contrary to my own previous thinking – that networking is not an act of build-

ding a personal brand but rather a necessity and first step in mastering your craft as a media professional. In the Southern Californian work culture, the starting point is that nobody works alone. One should always reach out to relevant professionals to invite their expertise to complement one's own work.

How do we bring about this culture of cooperation into our Nordic context and implement the same method of working between journalists and journalism researchers? The need and motivation for cooperation seems apparent. With the media business being currently redefined, journalists are hungry for expert knowledge in their own field. In January 2017, *The New York Times* published a report outlining the newsroom's strategy and aspirations (The New York Times, 2017). According to the report, the NYT staff is craving new skills and insights and, thus, the report calls for a major expansion of staff training in digitally native journalism. This is a valuable momentum for a much closer cooperation between journalists and researchers, also in the Nordic countries.

Cooperation demands a mutual will to share knowledge and learn from each other. While working as the science editor for *Helsingin Sanomat*, I was invited to give a lecture on our news criteria and editorial process for the students of the science journalism program at the University of Helsinki. During my lecture, I received excellent questions and comments from the students – both Master's and PhD students, some already working full-time as science communicators – and thus made new contacts with potential news sources.

Another example of a fruitful cooperation is the ongoing research project on the "post-truth era" funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation. The project with a funding of 500,000 euros was launched with a one-day, open seminar that was attended by almost 100 journalists and media researchers (The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation, 2017b). First, they were briefed on global security threats and the newest technological developments in spreading propaganda and disinformation. During the second part of the seminar, the

participants were divided into small discussion groups which brainstormed ideas for research projects and thus enabled meaningful networking opportunities for journalists and researchers.

## **Lesson # 2: Be ambitious but accept guidance**

*As the media landscape is rapidly changing, we need both the newest knowledge and the long-term wisdom. Look outside your bubble – you can't teach what you don't know.*

As a professional journalist and staff writer for a decade, I believe I am on fairly good terms with deadlines. Still, the M.A. program at USC challenged even me. We started off with a digital reporting immersion course, which brought about 10-hour-long working days, plus additional homework. Throughout the program, every deadline came with a set time, not just a date.

The higher the demands, the more supportive the USC teaching staff became. The faculty did their utmost to support the students in reaching their goals. As part of the immersion class, each one of us produced a short video documentary shot in a Los Angeles neighborhood. When one of my classmates broke her arm in a car accident during the immersion course, professors organized a group of students to edit and finalize her documentary.

As the demands grow higher, accountability and transparency have to be of top quality, too.

This also applies to the changing media landscape, demanding both media scholars and practitioners to constantly examine what we do not yet know. Do we, in the Nordic context, challenge ourselves enough? Nordic journalism and media research should partner with the best experts in the world – we all have the necessary language abilities for that.

I will offer a couple of practical suggestions on how to go about in mutual learning. First, as a journalist, check out and update your own network – find out who's the best journalism scholar in your own field of interest or beat, be it political reporting, gender issues, or health

reporting. Subscribe to the newsletters of the top journalism research think-tanks such as the Nieman Journalism Lab at the Harvard University (Nieman Foundation, 2017), which reports on the most promising journalistic innovations. As a researcher, look for the smartest and most astute journalist in your field of interest and start building a relationship. Invite a top Fulbright scholar to work at your media house or university, or partner with a media company to bring in a world-class journalism expert to give training.

Don't hesitate to address and debate also extremely topical themes with researchers – such a discussion can be rewarding for both parties. Here's an example: In early March 2017, *Columbia Journalism Review*, the bi-monthly publication of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, partnered with Reuters and *The Guardian* and organized a one-day conference on the media coverage of President Trump's six-week-old administration. The panel discussion, which was live-streamed, featured journalism professors, and editors from both the *New York Times* and *Breitbart News*, the pro-Trump conservative media outlet (The Columbia Journalism Review, 2017).

The most important aspect is your attitude: hunger for continuous professional development, interest in the needs of others, and readiness to listen.

### **Lesson # 3: To make something possible, you need to experiment**

*Embrace pragmatism: analyze by making prototypes. Spread and test your ideas as early as possible.*

During my studies at the USC, I only read a handful of academic articles on media research; the program did not dive deeply into the research of journalism. Acquiring and improving the abilities to *practice* journalism were the main goals and, thus, prototyping and experimenting were the most important methods of learning. In our monetization class, we took assignments from media startups and solved business cases on monetizing

content. During the science journalism course, we visited a biology lab and covered their research projects. With the religion reporting class, we travelled to Indonesia for a ten-day reporting trip.

How do we make journalism research relevant in today's journalism education and rapidly changing field? Since many professional journalists don't necessarily follow journalism research that closely, researchers should try to popularize their research towards journalists through social media, trade publications, and journalism conferences. I believe researchers should learn how to be translators, interpreting the unfamiliar in familiar terms. Through the process of exchanging ideas on research and practical journalistic work, both journalists and scientists could enhance their thinking and prototype new ideas.

I myself returned home from California with one prototype: a new concept for journalistic storytelling. I developed the idea in Los Angeles where I saw a show called Pop-Up Magazine, a live storytelling event, organized by a collective of freelance journalists and documentarists at a local movie theater. At the Pop-Up Magazine show, they presented a previously unpublished live speech based on their journalistic projects. In the U.S., many media outlets are experimenting with similar live journalism formats to engage new audiences and develop storytelling (Eveleth, 2015).

I wanted to experiment with the live journalism concept with my colleagues from *Helsingin Sanomat*, (HS) and during the fall of 2015 we started to develop a live journalism event called *The Black Box* (*Musta laatikko* in Finnish). At Black Box, ten journalists from HS climb up to a theatre stage and present a previously unpublished story as a live speech. *The Black Box* premiered at the Finnish National Theatre in February 2016. Since then, all five productions – nine shows in total – have been instantly sold out and received enthusiastic feedback from the audience which now amounts to more than 3,000. One of the live events has also been live-streamed for the digital subscribers of HS.

The live stories performed at the Black Box

have covered almost every beat of the newspaper: from domestic and international news, business and politics to arts, history, personal stories, sports, and lifestyle. The journalists have given exclusive insights into their investigative methods and scoops. Each story is previously unpublished: they are told for the first time at the theater stage. The speakers prepare the script for their 5–12-minute-long speech beforehand, go through a rigorous editing process with an editor, and, finally, rehearse the speech several times with editors and a freelance speech coach. Later on, many of the live speeches are rewritten for print or online news stories and published at HS.fi.

In December 2016, we conducted a small survey among the members of the live audience and received over 350 written evaluations. The feedback was extremely positive and enthusiastic: the audience was excited about the exclusive and behind-the-scenes-type of content that the speeches offered. I believe, at best, such a transparency and openness builds up trust between journalism and its audience. At the HS newsroom, the Black

Box offers a new, exciting venue for audience engagement, and our journalists have been pleased to get professional coaching in public speaking.

### More in common than ever before

Right now, journalism researchers and practitioners have a stronger need to cooperate than ever before. During the last couple of years, we have witnessed a growing populist political culture both in the U.S. and in Europe – a development which emphasizes the need to defend our professionalism: the pursuit for truth, commitment to democracy and independence. I believe this trend will ultimately draw the different fields of media closer to each other.

Although the rising nationalist and populist political movements frame societal problems as simple, us-versus-them-type-of battles, the biggest challenges of today are so-called “wicked problems”. Such dilemmas have contradictory and ever-changing requirements, and their solutions are inherently dif-

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In the academic year 2014–2015, the M.A. in Specialized Journalism program at the USC had 23 students, all of whom were women. 18 of the students were U.S. citizens.

ficult because of complex interdependencies. The three lessons I presented – the nobility of networking, being ambitious but constantly examining what you do not yet know, and experimenting with new solutions – are tools

that both journalists and media researchers who work in the complex world of today can make good use of. At best, they are tools that make you feel more possible, no matter what your field is.

### **The Helsingin Sanomat Foundation grants scholarships to Finnish journalists**

- Since 2006, the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation has granted more than 100 scholarships to Finnish journalists in their mid-career to study and develop their professional skills in top universities abroad.
- In addition to the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, the foundation sends journalists to the Columbia University in New York City, Reuters Institute at Oxford University (UK), Freie Universität (Berlin, Germany), Fudan University (Shanghai, China), and the European University at Saint Petersburg (Russia).
- At USC and Columbia, the Finnish journalists study for a Master's degree. In the other universities, they take classes as visiting scholars working on a personal study project which is published at the end of the academic year.

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