

Final Report: World Press Institute Fellowship 2024 in the United States, September 6 – November 9, 2024

In fall 2024, I participated in the American World Press Institute's journalism program. This program is intended for international journalists and aims to give them a broad introduction to American society. The program isn't confined to one place; most of the time is spent traveling across the United States. Alongside me, nine other international journalists from around the world participated in the program. The other participants came from Brazil, Bulgaria, India, Italy, Kosovo, Nigeria, Peru, South Africa, and Ukraine.

The trip was intense and unforgettable, and I gained a much deeper understanding of the United States. Additionally, I learned a lot about the other participants' home countries and the common challenges media companies face worldwide. Few programs offer such a comprehensive view of the U.S. in such a short time. Naturally, being there in person to witness the U.S. election season made the experience all the more memorable. The program has been running for over 60 years, with many volunteers dedicating significant time to it.

Over nine weeks, we visited American media companies, met local politicians, NGOs, lawyers, academics, and everyday Americans. We traveled through six different states and numerous cities.

The program began in Minnesota's Twin Cities, Minneapolis/St. Paul, where the World Press Institute's "home base" is located. We spent the first three weeks there. During that time, the women in the program stayed in a rented house, while the men stayed in dorms at St. Thomas University in St. Paul. We each had our own rooms, a kitchen, a washing machine, and other amenities, and the house also became our regular hangout spot. We also had free access to the university's gym during our stay.

During the first three weeks, we attended lectures at St. Thomas University, visited local media companies, and took short trips to neighboring states, Iowa and Wisconsin. In Iowa, for example, we visited a local farm and the Amana Society, run by Christians who immigrated from Germany.

We also spent three days in Grand Marais in Northern Minnesota, near the Canadian border. There, we visited a national park managed by Indigenous groups. These rural visits were essential for gaining a broader perspective, as we mainly spent time in major U.S. cities.

For a Finn, Minnesota felt very familiar and homely: there are many immigrants of Finnish descent in the area, and the climate and nature closely resembled Finland's.

After the three weeks in Minnesota, we embarked on the official travel portion of the program, visiting Washington, D.C., New York, Miami, Phoenix, San Francisco, and Chicago.

In these cities, we had a wide range of experiences. We visited major media outlets (e.g., New York Times, CNN, Politico, AP, Washington Post) and local media as well. We visited, for example, the Heritage Foundation, which created the Project 2025 plan, San Quentin Prison in California, NGOs, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona. We also attended intriguing lectures from experts in U.S. politics and economics.

After the travel portion, we returned for one last week in Minneapolis/St. Paul, where we observed the historic Election Day at the grassroots level. On Election Day, we attended both Democratic and Republican election events and visited polling stations.

Each year, the WPI program usually emphasizes a specific theme; this year, it was artificial intelligence. My understanding of AI and everything related to it grew significantly. At the same time, I must say that Finnish media companies are quite advanced in using AI, not far behind their American counterparts.

The quality of the AI lectures varied: some were excellent, while others were quite general and not very practical. The best AI lectures came from journalists who follow the topic closely and offered us practical tips on what to watch out for.

We also participated in various panel discussions where the audience included local university students. In addition to the panels, we had to write blogs for the World Press Institute's own blog. The blog editor reviewed our texts with the same attention to detail as journalistic articles, even though the word count was limited. So, writing these blog posts took some time, although we had to write fewer than in previous years. Nevertheless, practicing writing journalistic texts in English was a valuable and educational experience.

There wasn't much free time in the program. However, I had more free time than many others, as the rules of the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation prohibit working during fellowship programs. I think that's mostly a good thing. Many other participants worked intensely during the program, and some became quite exhausted.

During the travel portion of the program, we stayed in hotel rooms, half of which we shared and half we had to ourselves. This arrangement seems to vary yearly depending on factors like cost: some years, participants get their own hotel rooms throughout, while other years, they always share rooms. Although sharing rooms mostly went smoothly, it would be preferable for participants to have their own rooms in the future, as personal time is already limited in the program.

The hotels we stayed in were generally high-quality. However, many of them surprisingly didn't include breakfast, which adds to personal expenses. You should also be prepared to wash clothes in public laundromats during the trip.

In summary, the WPI program suits a social and flexible person who can get along with people of different personalities and cultural backgrounds. Participants must also be prepared for a "suitcase lifestyle" for several weeks, so the program is ideal for someone who enjoys traveling.

Expenses and Stipend

All travel and accommodation expenses were covered in the program. Health insurance and most visa costs were also covered.

Additionally, participants receive an allowance from WPI, divided between cash and a prepaid credit card. We received about \$3,000 for the two months.

This amount was enough for living expenses and some fun on the trip, though it required budgeting. To cover expenses like rent or mortgage back home, you'll need your own savings.

Participants are also asked to bring their own credit cards, as some U.S. hotels require a hefty security deposit upon check-in. This amount is eventually refunded, but it often means hundreds of dollars frozen on the credit card for several days. We suggested to WPI that they cover these deposits rather than the participants. Additionally, a U.S. prepaid phone plan must be purchased individually. There were differences among participants from different countries in how expensive they found the U.S. to be.

We also received some free lunches and dinners at various events we attended. In Minnesota, we had access to a van for getting around and shopping. In Minnesota, we could also cook meals and do laundry at home, which reduced expenses.

Challenges:

As mentioned earlier, it's advisable to save up to cover two months' expenses in your home country and some extra spending money for the U.S. This fall, prices in the U.S. were extremely high, which was also a theme in the presidential election.

The program is very intensive and includes people from all over the world. There's some luck involved in the types of people you end up with in a given year. We mostly had a great group, but there were occasional tensions, and some people were rather dramatic. In such situations, it helps to keep a sense of humor and remember that the program only lasts two months.

Positives:

The program provided us with a broad view of American society. WPI has excellent connections, allowing us to visit places from prisons to the U.S. Department of State. Few other programs offer such a comprehensive view of the U.S. and its various aspects in such a short time. Traveling extensively across the country also provided insight into the sheer size of the U.S. and the differences between states and their issues. My understanding of U.S. domestic politics grew significantly.

Following the election season and talking with people also provided a broader understanding of U.S. politics, both good and bad. For example, it was easier to understand Donald Trump's electoral success and the factors behind it in person than from afar. Many weaknesses of the U.S. political system and society were also more apparent up close. WPI is not a propaganda tour; it aims to show the full range of societal issues.

Future:

I gained new friends worldwide and became quite close with many participants. They are now people I know I can reach out to for background on their country's issues. This is incredibly helpful for me as a journalist focusing on international topics.

I also feel I have a much better understanding of U.S. society and media. My understanding of many of the challenges facing American society has deepened. I also made many useful contacts I'll surely use as a journalist in the future. I'll likely be able to report on the U.S. with more depth in the future.

The program's AI segment also provided me with many new story ideas. It was also valuable to discuss the challenges and future of journalism with colleagues worldwide.