



Clay Risen

Managing Editor

Home Media: Democracy: A Journal of Ideas, Washington, DC
Guest Media: Der Tagesspiegel, Berlin

Clay Risen is the managing editor of *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*. He oversees all elements of the editing and production process, from scouting new writers to coordinating distribution to more than 1,000 bookstores nationwide. Founded in 2006, *Democracy* has quickly become one of the leading outlets for progressive thinking in Washington. It was named the 2008 Best New Publication by the Independent Press Awards and was a 2009 finalist for Best Political Commentary.

Before coming to *Democracy*, Clay was an assistant editor at *The New Republic*, where he

covered finance and politics. He has continued writing as a freelance journalist, with recent articles in *The Atlantic*, *Smithsonian*, and the *New York Times Magazine* on topics ranging from architecture to American history to European politics. Clay is also the author of *A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination*, a narrative history of the week following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death.

Clay graduated from Georgetown University and the University of Chicago, where he studied modern German history. From 1999 to 2000 he taught English in Jennersdorf, Austria.

Report by Clay Risen

Before leaving for Germany I set five goals for myself: Write a substantial amount for my host publication, write a substantial amount for freelance outlets in the United States, learn more about German media, improve my language skills, and, last but not least, enjoy my time in Germany.

I was placed at *Der Tagesspiegel*, a major Berlin daily. It has a strong focus on national politics, which fit my own background as a political journalist in Washington. While there I wrote four op-ed pieces for the print edition and three op-ed pieces exclusively for the web, so a little less than one a week. I wrote all my articles directly in German, which took longer but allowed me to greatly expand my written language skills.

However, despite my substantial work for the newspaper, I do not feel I was as embedded in the day-to-day operations as I could have been, a shortcoming that I blame on both myself and the newspaper. It was, perhaps, not the best time to be there: The paper had just gone through layoffs, it was gearing up to move offices, and it was focused on covering the national elections, which fell during my final week on the job. In general, August is not the best time to begin a fellowship at a German publication—everyone is on holiday.

This all may explain why I was placed in the web design department; not only is the web not my area of expertise or interest, but the department was located in a different building, on a different block, than the main office. No one ever explained what my role was or my opportunities to write were, nor did I ever feel particularly welcome by the organization (though I did meet many very nice people). I didn't expect a red carpet, or even to be taken out to lunch. But I could not even get the paper's Washington correspondent to return my emails. Most disappointingly, no one seemed particularly interested in tapping me as a resource on American politics—on the contrary, the attitude appeared to be that they knew enough already.

I certainly could have been more proactive. I could have attended more editorial meetings, I could have introduced myself more aggressively to editors, and I could have pitched stories to a wider variety of departments. Then again, I did all these things to some extent, with little to no result. Ultimately, I think my stay at *Der Tagesspiegel* was a victim of timing: Two months is simply too short a time to correct for a bad start.

Fortunately, my time at *Der Tagesspiegel* was just one part of my stay. In fact, my freelance work benefited from my lack of responsibilities in the office. I wrote for the *Washington Post*, Newsweek.com, and the *Boston Review*, among other outlets. I also wrote dispatches for the *Atlantic's* food blog, where I am a regular contributor on beer and liquor-related topics.

One of the pleasant difficulties of living in Berlin is the prevalence of English speakers. This made it easy to get around (especially for my wife, who doesn't speak German), but it made it harder than I had imagined to practice my language skills regularly. I also found that my time spent in Austria and southern Germany had tuned my ear to something much different than the Berlin dialect, and so part of my time was spent simply adjusting. Yet adjusting to dialects is a critical part of advanced German, and so I welcomed the challenge.

Finally, I enjoyed my time outside work. My wife and I spent a lot of time exploring the city; within a few weeks we felt we were really a part of daily life in Berlin. Though I had been there a few times before, it was only on this trip that I saw the city as it is really lived, away from Unter den Linden and the Museuminsel. One weekend we went canoeing for three days along the Finowkanal, along the way befriending a wonderful couple who owned a bed-and-breakfast near the Oder River. We also appreciated the opportunity to visit Munich during Oktoberfest as part of the Burns Fellowship mid-term briefing.

I also made many good friends, both in and outside the Burns program. The other fellows, particularly the ones I got to know well in Berlin, were hard-working but fun-loving folks, as were the German and American alums I met during the course of my stay. Through friends back in the United States I also got to know several reporters and editors at other German news outlets.

My experience at *Der Tagesspiegel* aside, I exceeded all five of my goals for the trip. and I am deeply indebted to the Burns program and the ICFJ for the opportunity.