

Burns report Susanne Amann

"You are here in pretty interesting times" - I don't know how often I heard this sentence during my two months at the "San Francisco Chronicle". And it is true: There couldn't have been better times for a journalist to be in the United States. I heard the acceptance speech of Barack Obama and John McCain, watched the reporting about the Russian-Georgian war and saw the election campaign finally turning into somehow more serious after the whole country had to focus on the turmoil on Wall Street and discussed the bailout plan.

I had countless discussions with friends and colleagues about the political future of their country, about the image and the role of United States throughout the world. I discovered an even more divided nation I had expected and above all I discovered San Francisco - this lively, colorful and proud to be liberal city in northern California.

At the Chronicle

The times hadn't been interesting only in terms of politics and economy. On my first day at the Chronicle I found myself right in the middle of the American newspaper crisis. Nearly half of the desks in the big office room, where the business department is located, are already empty. Since summer 2007 the Chronicle has lost around a third of its stuff. But it's not yet over: At one of my first days I received the third and last buyout-offer of Hearst, the publishing company.

No wonder that the following weeks were full of discussions about who is going to take the buyout, what possibilities they have and what will happen to the ones who stay. I attended a few farewell parties, seeing longtime reporters and editors holding their last speeches, full of tears, sadness and fury about their loved profession. "The Chronicle has already changed and in one or two years it won't be there anymore", I was told by many.

Nevertheless I had the warmest welcome you could imagine. First of all they gave me a two-day-introduction, where I got to know almost every part of the newspaper - which was extremely helpful. While joking about their current situation my colleagues at the business department gave me their full support, answered all my questions and helped me with contacts and ideas. I could even use the company car pool for stories I didn't write for the Chronicle but for Spiegel Online.

Most of my stories I actually did for Spiegel Online - because the Chronicle is very focused on the Bay area. Therefore in every story they are looking for the regional angle and weren't very interested in an outsider's perspective or stories from Europe. One exception was the op-editor Lois Kazakoff, who asked me to write a piece about the German recycling system.

But nevertheless it was interesting to discover the many similarities in the way American and German journalists work. I enjoyed listening to my colleagues while they were planning stories, doing research on the phone or inviting people for an interview. All that seemed to be pretty similar to a German newsroom - with one exception: They care a lot more about editing. Reporting and editing are two different and therefore separated areas.

In San Francisco

"This is not America" - was the second most told sentence during my stay. And it is probably true: The city has a well working transportation system and even a lot of bikers. You can find organic food stores all over and the most important discussion they had during my stay was the question of recycling. They highly support the democrats and Barack Obama, they fight for the right of gay marriage and seem to tolerate every kind of weirdness one can live.

Therefore it is an open minded, welcoming and relaxed city, which makes you feel at home quite easy. As they like to be as European as possible they are very interested in Europeans, ask a lot of questions and a significant amount of the people I talked to had already traveled a lot. All this to say: It is absolutely great to spend two months in the city, which offers a big cultural program, a lot of open air events during summer and a lot of possibilities for short trips to the rest of California. So there is both a lot to enjoy and to write about.

The only disadvantage are the housing prices, which are still raising even in times of the American housing crisis. As the growth and the development of Silicon Valley brought a lot of young and relatively wealthy people to the city, the prices are extremely high even for shared flats. Since the credit crunch makes it even more difficult to get loans, rents are going up faster.

In the United States

As I only have been once before in the United States this fellowship offered a great opportunity for me in two ways. First of all I could discover how it feels to work as a foreign correspondent, realizing that my skills and my education are working abroad as well. And I had the great chance to get to know at least a part of the country not as a tourist but as somebody who lives and works there.

To make it short: The two months made me even more curious, suspicious and excited about the country as I have been before. I learned a lot about the American culture, the way of life, their habits, their society and their way of thinking. But all that raised a lot more questions - the more you get into a country the more things you want to know. Therefore I will be back some day.