

Die Legende des Baverikan ("The Legend of the Baverikan")

What the Burns fellowship taught me about moving forward in journalism: A program summary.

By Ben Cannon

A pair of smart-looking young magazine staffers approach the corner of the island of four desks I'll be borrowing for a few weeks until its rightful owner returns from vacation. It's Day Three of a six-week stay with Munich-based *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, the weekly supplement to the big paper out of Bavaria, one of Germany's top three.

I happened to land at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, or SZ ("ess zett," in German), magazine thanks to a recommendation from Arthur F. Burns Fellowship co-orchestrator Frank Freiling in Germany. The magazine has a reputation for its edge, daring and thoughtfulness, and appeals to a slightly more literary set of Germans. ("My girlfriend keeps every one of them," one hipster working in the Munich film industry told me.)

But to the two guys approaching my desk, each of them dressed dutifully in all black.

"We have decided that because we have an American here, we are also going to make a version of the video in English," says Till, a sharp-minded 29 year-old from Nuremburg who focuses on technology and youth trends. Next to him stands Marc Bauman, a tall, dark, and athletic early-30-something who recently began reporting and blogging for the SZ website. The youthful pair were assigned to make a video about the special issue going out in a few days with Friday's paper. Some months earlier, the editorial team had decided to present an issue laced with some of the latest augmented reality technology. Invisible bar codes printed into the paper would prompt a smart phone to reveal some otherwise hidden messages, not unlike a magic decoder ring used by schoolboys to unlock secret messages in the nickel comic books of yesteryear.

So, for example, using only your naked eyes to look at the cover photo of the upcoming issue you saw a woman covering her face with her hands, rendering her unrecognizable. But by holding a smart phone over it with the assistance of a specially-made free app, the bar code automatically triggers a short video of the woman pulling her hands apart to reveal her identity. It's the smiling mug one of country's top television anchors, the Katie Couric of Germany, if you will.

"Just watch us do it and then you can do it in English," Marc says as he and Till take a seat in front of the camera. The two writers were stiff in front of the camera and I saw they needed a little direction. It immediately occurred to me that, by virtue of my sheer American-ness, I somehow held a better understanding of what makes for 'good T.V.' Germany, after all, appropriates many television shows from the U.S. Many of them are watered-down sitcoms and crime dramas, which become even less compelling once they are dubbed-over into German by the country's deeply entrenched voice-over industry, which I would combat if I a German citizen with nothing better to do. But I digress.

So I took a crack at presenting the augmented reality issue on camera and both versions were soon sent to some technology blogs and simultaneously posted on YouTube. Because the SZ is among the very first magazines to release a special augmented reality issue for an app phone, the videos grabbed the magazine some attention on technology blogs around the world for a few days.

Anyhow, the English-language version far surpassed the German-language version in the number of YouTube clicks, yet is still more popular in Germany than it is other countries, meaning many Germans have chosen –or been funneled to– the English-language version. Whatever the reason, some people at the magazine decided to have me give an online video preview of each issue. And so began my unexpected brief journey as a video presenter for a leading German magazine.

While at the SZ magazine, I also had a few opportunities to write some freelance stories for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* youth publication, *Jetzt*, German for “now.”

But writing generally took a backseat during my stay and perhaps it would be helpful to dig into that a little. Anyone preparing to embark on a Burns fellowship should establish a set of program goals. I happened to know that I would not have a home organization to contribute to because just before the program began I parted ways for good with my former newspaper, and anyway that paper's regional focus made it a less than ideal platform for stories from Germany.

So I thought I would be able to hustle once I got to Munich to find publications that might have an interest in some freelance stories from Bavaria. Although I made some valuable media contacts during the orientation in Washington, and even more once I settled into Munich, it still proved to be very difficult to pitch stories to major outlets as an unknown writer. Six weeks is not much time to establish yourself as a freelance foreign correspondent, and I soon realized if I devoted too much time pitching story ideas to American ideas, I would miss the opportunities right in front of me.

Meanwhile, at the magazine, I was being warmly accepted into the fold of a tight-knit group of some of the sharpest young journalists –all of them under 50– writing in the German language. Speaking of the language, I had some trepidation going into the fellowship about my own shortcomings understanding German, and even more so speaking it. Although I have some background in the language, my German had never evolved much beyond that of a precocious tourist or, among my German-speaking friends, a party trick. So I welcomed the intensive two-week course through the renowned Goethe Institute once we arrived in Germany. While the course elevated my command of the language to new heights, it was still sub-par for working in a professional setting, especially one where people are so sophisticated, as well as playful, when they communicate. I knew that no two-week language course in the world could prepare for that kind of environment and I was eager to start at the magazine and so a part of me wanted to skip the second week of class and at least introduce myself at the magazine a week before they expected me. Nonetheless, I stuck to the original plan.

My first week, I made it clear to editor in chief Dominik Wichmann that I was concerned about the weakness of my German and asked him to what degree I should focus on improving it during my stay. To my great relief, Wichmann encouraged me not to “let language be an issue,” he said. “We all speak English here.” If I harbored guilt about not being able to communicate in their tongue as well as they could in mine, Wichmann understood, I may have lost some of the richness of the entire experience. I counted myself very lucky to have such an understanding boss, himself a Burns alumnus, and knew that not every Burns fellow would feel as valued in other newsrooms around Germany as I did in this new shiny high-rise on the outskirts of Munich.

Although my German did improve, and a few staffers were eager to teach me some necessary words and phrases, I quickly found that I was valuable to magazine as a native English speaker.

Hence the videos, which appealed to the much wider English-speaking audience, which, remember, includes most Germans.

At the magazine, I was treated not as an intern but as a special guest whose treatment by the staff was invariably friendly and respectful. I believe something about my presence shook many of their impressions about the spectrum of Americans and as such I was encouraged to really take a big swing with the videos. I even came up with a name for my character and the series – the Baverikan. It was from some of the staffers, and from Wichmann himself, that I heard for the first time in my life that I could be, or already am, a kind brand. I mulled over this for a while. Could marketing myself as a brand make me into something like circus bear trained to ride a bike around in circles? Eventually I came to the conclusion that I rather relished the thought of not simply be a reporter who writes facelessly for a living, but also using my personality to open new journalistic doors, including video presentation and who knows what else.

Although it's important to establish those Burns goals, I would encourage anyone heading to Germany to be open to identifying new goals along the way. I may not have finally written my debut for the *New York Times* while I was in Munich, but I did learn that I have an opportunity to diversify my bag of media skills. In such a treacherous time for journalists across this country, what could be better than that realization?

What's more, I was able to establish myself as an American journalist in Munich, but not necessarily by my own doing. At the tail end of the program I received an unexpected call from a successful Munich businesswoman who got my name from "a friend of a friend." She wants me to help her develop an English-language narrative for her company's website redesign. I'm back in the States now but you can bet your bottom dollar I am strongly considering a move to Munich to establish myself as freelancer who provides English-language text and video narrative development and presentation. It may not be straightforward newspaper or magazine reporting like we were once used to seeing, but what does it even mean to be a journalist anymore? I will continue to pitch and write the kinds of stories I want to do, but now I feel more nimble and am discovering an entrepreneurial streak I never knew I had.

Each Burns fellowship is going to be a very different experience from the next. I would encourage any future fellow to aim high, but arrive with his or her eyes truly open to maximize the experience. It's a once and a lifetime opportunity and it can be quite a ride. Do your homework and remain confident, even if confidence, to quote a men's room wall I once read, "is a magic trick."

Regards,  
Ben