

Jessie L. Seyfer

Arthur F. Burns fellowship report

My Burns fellowship experience was overwhelmingly positive. Virtually everything about the trip was enriching -- even the frustrating times, when I got lost in the city, couldn't get my information across because of my terrible German, or ended up with a plate of mystery meat when I thought I'd ordered a salad. I dig all that stuff -- all the misunderstandings, all the strange meals, coins and procedures a person has to adapt to in a foreign country. For me it's all good, and it's exactly what I wanted from the program.

I was placed with Focus Online, the online component of the popular Focus weekly magazine, both of which are headquartered in Munich. Focus Online runs several stories from the magazine, but has its own editorial staff that produces stories throughout the week. Focus Online and Focus magazine are both technically owned by the same company, Hubert Burda Media, but as a relic of the dot-com era, Focus Online is run by one company (Tomorrow-Focus AG), while the magazine is overseen by another, and the two publications are in different offices. Apparently the web site and the magazine used to not interact at all, despite having the same name. Staffers at the website told me that cooperation has improved in recent years, as has the overall quality of stories on Focus Online, which I'm told used to have a bad reputation journalism-wise.

I'm not sure why I was placed with Focus Online, but it turned out to be a good place for me. I suspect I ended up there because early in the application process I asked the Burns people a question about online media. I don't think my question was ever answered, and the Burns folks must have interpreted my question as a request to be in an online media outlet. In any case, I wasn't disappointed, because I'm interested in the development of online journalism. I do, however, think there should be more transparency in the placement process. I was not the only fellow to wonder how they ended up at one media outlet over another. It would help to know a bit more how that process works.

The people at Focus Online were very friendly, and the newsroom staff was small, about 30 people total. I interacted with the same 10 or so people on a daily basis. It was good that the staff was small because I never felt overwhelmed or overlooked. Also, my desk was in the main newsroom, which kept me a part of the action.

In particular I must credit a good deal of the success of my fellowship to Fabian Mohr, a 2005 Burns fellow who also works at Focus Online. It was Fabian who made sure my desk would be in the main newsroom. He also introduced me to everyone at the site and frequently made sure I would not be working or having lunch alone. He also facilitated meetings with people at Focus magazine, and asked whether I was feeling good about the fellowship along the way. As a former fellow himself, he was keenly aware of the factors that could make a visiting journalist feel comfortable or isolated. I think it helps considerably to have a former Burns fellow working where new fellows are placed.

At Focus Online I was able to meet my journalistic goal for the trip, which was to be a productive member of the staff. I'd also hoped to have a piece appear in a renowned American publication, and I pitched a couple stories to the Financial Times, but unfortunately both stories fell through. I felt good that I'd pitched the stories and made the contacts, though, because I'd never sent a freelance pitch before. I wrote six pieces for Focus Online (one additional story is still in process). They were on technology topics, but many of these stories also had cultural shadings. For instance, one of the first stories I did was on the slow adoption of so-called Web 2.0 Internet sites. Web 2.0 sites generally display reader-generated content, such as video, blogs or photos. Many of these sites also have a strong social element, and invite users to connect and comment on each other's content. In the United States, the U.K. and France, these sites have been enjoying huge popularity, but in Germany that just hasn't been happening. Some experts chalked it up to Germans being generally less enthused about the idea of putting personal content up for public inspection; others thought the sites would catch on in time, but hadn't yet because of language barriers. Stories with these cultural shadings allowed me to get a sense of the collective German psyche.

I had no trouble, generally, reporting, because my stories were about technology and business and everyone in those spheres speaks good English. Some of my quotes from non-business people were a little weak because my subjects weren't as good at putting their feelings into English, but the stories still turned out well. My colleagues would translate the stories and put them up on the site, where they enjoyed a respectable number of hits.

In writing my stories I got a much better understanding of the business world in Germany. Working at Focus online also gave me the chance to see that online journalism outlets in Germany are struggling to find a workable business model in much the same way as in the

United States. Many crucial questions remain unanswered: How much are readers willing to pay for content? What aspects of the content makes them willing to pay? What kinds of advertising bothers or confuses readers? How can online news outlets make the most of the Web format and the ubiquity of online video? How can an outlet present ads to readers without being intrusive? How best to capture the popularity of user-generated content, such as blogs, without losing our reputation for well-produced stories?

All these questions bear heavily on the future of journalism and are scary for a lot of people who are used to the old models of daily journalism. Yet at Focus Online, the staff had a certain maturity about online journalism. None of the staffers there feared bloggers, or worried much about journalism dying. Some had been there since the late 1990s and had weathered the many experiments with online journalism that had succeeded or failed miserably. They didn't seem saddened or caught off guard by the notion of frequent experimentation, as so many newspaper journalists (in the U.S., at least) seem to be. In 2000, I worked briefly for Wired News, an online journalism site that carried no affiliation with Wired Magazine, even though it shared a logo with the magazine, and was located at <http://www.wired.com>. So Focus online's odd relationship with Focus magazine was not all that surprising to me. At Focus Online staffers approached their work with intelligence and a lighthearted excitement about the new business and journalistic territories they were exploring. Their new editor in chief, Jochen Wegner, was given great latitude and enough money, it seemed, to try new things (such as Fabian Mohr's video and photo-submission project, Focus Live). Wegner, a former Focus magazine reporter, is a trusted name in the business and started jonet.org, German's first (and only, I think) online journalism organization.

I don't know if this is a complaint, per se, but I really wished that I spoke better German coming into this fellowship. I sometimes felt it was insulting to German colleagues that I didn't need to have much language training before arriving. But then again, if fluent German had been a prerequisite, there's no way I would have been able to be a fellow. Perhaps the Burns committee might consider giving fellows a month of intensive German training ahead of their fellowship.

Overall, there's very little that I think should change about the fellowship. I appreciate the opportunity to be a part of the program, and I look forward to being an active part of the Burns alumni network.