

Burns Fellowship Report 2012
Rachel Stern – Spiegel Online

One week into my seven-week placement at Spiegel Online, I was already having one of the most intellectually challenging and eye-opening experiences in my journalistic career. It was not just because I was driving alone on the speed-limitless Autobahn for the first time, but rather because of the subject matter I would cover that day in the tiny Northeast German town of Göhren-Lebbin.

Golfers from around Germany were competing in a tournament to raise money for educational activities to fight right-wing extremism, which is more pronounced in the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern than anywhere else in the country. It was an overwhelming large topic, but was buried in a small paragraph in a small town newspaper. I had originally read about the event in German, eagerly scouring the pages for ideas.

I then pitched a story on the tournament to Spiegel Online, where I was doing my placement, and they quickly set me up with a rental car to drive there. In a mix of English and often essential German, I spent the day on the golf course with the players, gaining insights into a topic I didn't even know existed before coming to Germany. I turned around the piece the next day, careful not to sensationalize but rather summing up the broad resistance and success of educational efforts against extremism -- a topic no other German media outlet covered.

This story was only one example of how professionally and personally rewarding my nine weeks in Berlin was. I vastly expanded the skills that will always be an asset to me as an international reporter -- the direction I now would like to carry my career. I became better at communicating in a foreign language, digging deep for story ideas in unfamiliar terrain, conducting man-on-the-street interviews, and adding the type of colorful details that stem from an up-close and curious observation of a new area. I now feel confident to pursue tough subjects in all arenas of my reporting: upon coming home to my news website Patch.com, part of the AOL and Huffington Post media group, I broke an investigative campaign finance story that received acclaim from readers all over California. I credit the tenacity I had in covering it to my prior nine weeks in Germany.

I applied for the Arthur F. Burns Fellowship after participating on the Fulbright's week-long Berlin Capital Program for journalists in December 2011. I was impressed by the newsrooms we visited -- and the high-quality reporting they seemed to produce -- and wanted to have a hands-on experience within the German media. I was thrilled when I received my first choice, Spiegel Online, whose international website I had been reading for a number of years.

At first I was surprised to be placed into the Politik department of the German language website, but appreciated the opportunity to receive complete exposure to a German-speaking newsroom everyday, especially since I am actively trying to better my German. Having studied the language for only two years and previously never having previously

lived in the country, I am not fully fluent, so I was not able to contribute daily coverage of events. But Daryl Lindsey, the editor from the International edition who I met for lunch on the first day, was immediately receptive to me pitching ideas to him. Despite his hectic schedule, he took the time to read through my pitches, and invited me to the nearby Spiegel International office a few times to discuss them.

I ended up producing three features for the International Edition, including my first “Golf gegen Rechts” story. In one, “German Capital Embraces Net Newbies and Leviathans”, I explored Berlin’s escalating technology scene and how it’s impacting the local economy. The subject, through which I visited several up-and-coming start-ups around the city, sparked my interest in the topic so much that I made it the proposal of a Fulbright U.S. Young Journalists Program application I submitted two weeks after I returned to California. The other, “Hitler’s Bid to Build Lebensraum by the Sea” allowed me to delve deep into a topic that had not yet been written about in English. A professor is seeking the funding to build a museum in the village of Dieksanderkoog that explains not just the violent outcome of National Socialism, but the peaceful ideologies that led up to it in the first place. I again braved the Autobahn, venturing to the tiny village 1.5 north of Hamburg, and pieced together a story resulting both from my visit, many interviews with historians, and -- perhaps most challenging of all -- reading a 130 page academic report in German detailing the project.

I also wrote one article for the Politik department of Spiegel Online about California’s High-Speed Rail. Having lived and worked in California for most of my journalism career, I already had a large number of contacts for a story, which dealt with the financial and political obstacles the state had to overcome in order to build a rapid transit train system – which especially worked well for the German media since I was able to draw parallels to the Stuttgart 21 project. I pitched it to Roland Nelles and Florian Gathmann, the two editors at the Politik Department who supervised me. Despite their busy schedule, they would often check in to see if I had any ideas I wanted to discuss with them.

Still, I was left to my own devices for the duration of the fellowship, leaving me the valuable time I don’t have in my base of California to write and research a topic in depth. I took advantage of this time, penning on-the-ground pieces for U.S. publications such as Slate and The Huffington Post, the sister publication of my home site. Both were receptive to my ideas, which I researched and executed from scratch. I first wrote the High-Speed Rail feature in English, and translated as much as I could myself. Florian and Elise Buntebart, Spiegel Online’s attentive and helpful editorial assistant, took the rest of the story into their hands, helping me turn it around within only a few days for publication on the website.

Personally, I made sure to take time to explore Berlin and the rest of Germany. I spent a weekend visiting an old friend in Cologne, sauntering through the city’s fascinating old town and museums. Having a strong interest in East Germany, I went to Frankfurt (Oder) for a day, followed by a day in Leipzig, touring an old Stasi office building with another Burns Fellow doing his placement there. I will never forget the festive and very spirited

Oktoberfest in Munich, which followed our Burns' Fellowship Meeting. I must say that the Frank could not have picked a better spot for our reunion!

Overall, I realized how satisfying it was to speak and understand German, and I had plenty of opportunities to practice whenever I stepped outside of the heavily English-speaking Mitte neighborhood of Berlin where I lived and worked. After our short but extremely useful two-week course at the Goethe Institut ended, I took the extra initiative to go to weekly Stammtisch meet-up groups, conducted in German for both locals and internationals. I had heard it could be tough to meet people in fast-paced Berlin, but I quickly met a few good friends this way. I was also lucky to work alongside a friendly and incredibly interesting group of fellow American Burns' fellows. My three Berlin-based colleagues and I enjoyed some fun evenings at local beer gardens along the Spree.

There is only one concrete suggestion I have improve the fellowship for the Americans. I would cut the Washington, D.C. training a day short, giving the American fellows a chance to orient themselves to Germany and receive some rest before taking the language placement test. After over 10 hours of travel on an overnight flight, I had to rush to the Goethe Institut to take it, scoring a level lower than the class I had just taken in San Francisco. The Institut luckily let me attend a higher level -- which ended up being the most appropriate. Of course this does not matter for those who are starting from scratch, but an extra day to minimize jet lag and orient ourselves would be very valuable.

My other suggestions are tips I learned during my time, and would pass on to other fellows.

--Learn some German before arriving in Germany. There is only so much that can be packed into a two-week class. Even with my two-years, I often felt like a child struggling to make sense of an enigmatic language when attending Spiegel Online meetings rapidly discussing the ins-and-outs of world affairs. Without any training, I would have felt completely removed. My background went a long way, from being able to communicate politely around the office (a couple colleagues said it was a "pleasant surprise" to have an American who could speak some German around) so navigating my way in areas where English was scarcely spoken. I had heard that it was harder to interview Germans than Americans, but I was lucky enough to discover the opposites with most Germans politely and efficiently responding to my interview requests. On Monday, I begin the next level class at the Goethe Institut in San Francisco, and hope to have more ease the next time I return to Berlin. Even if you only learn how to request an interview in German, your efforts will be warmly reciprocated.

--Research ideas before you arrive in Germany. I found that nine weeks went by even quicker than I thought they would, and there are still a couple stories (included in the list below) that I am finishing up. You don't have to act on all these ideas, but it will give you fodder to "hit the ground running." Many afternoons after the two-week language course are free, and I was able to use a few of them to write a story, accompanied with photos, for The Huffington Post about a technology factory that's being built in a warehouse that was built into the former Berlin Wall.

--Your time is what you make of it. For most fellows, your time takes a very free form. You are not entering into a typical newsroom with a set structure of daily tasks. For some

people, it can be frustrating to feel like you are left to your own devices, often in an environment where you can't understand everything (or in some cases anything!) that is going on around you. That is why I would advice fellows to take advantage of all the extra time. Pitch story ideas to new publications in the U.S. Offer stories to your supervisors (and find a college student to translate it for an inexpensive rate if they are swamped, which they likely will be). Take initiative with your own ideas. For example, I proposed putting together an "Online Journalism in the U.S." Powerpoint at Spiegel Online, which I presented to the Politik department one day, sparking an interesting discussion with my temporary colleagues. Also reach out to other former Burns alums and tour other media outlets if you can. I arranged what was a fascinating tour of taz – which has a very different structure than Spiegel and most German outlets seeing it is run as a cooperative.

--**Have fun!** Even if you already know people in your host city, make an effort to meet new connections. There are a slew of International groups in most major German cities through Meetup.com and Couchsurfing.com. Travel alone at least once, even if just a day exploring your city. I did this, and found I was more observant to both language and my surroundings, and even came up with a story idea in the process! (Two Countries, One University, as mentioned below).

My time in Germany was immensely enjoyable -- my largest complaint is really that it went by too fast. Having studied German and visited the country several times before my fellowship, I already had a strong interest in living there. But now I would like to return for a longer time to work as a journalist: I credit the Burns Fellowship for sparking that desire, and helping me strengthen the skills I need to be a tenacious, thoughtful journalist no matter where in the world I am based.

SPIEGEL ONLINE International

--"German Golf Tournament Raises Money To Fight Xenophobia", Spiegel Online, August 17, 2012: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-golf-tournament-raises-money-to-fight-xenophobia-a-851073.html>

--"German Capital Embraces Net Newbies and Leviathans", September 27, 2012: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/business/german-capital-embraces-net-newbies-and-leviathans-a-857807.html>

--"Hitler's Bid to Create Lebensraum By the Sea", to be published during the first week of November

SPIEGEL ONLINE Politik

--"Kalifornien Will Eine Hochgeschwindigkeitzug Bauen," September 22, 2012. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/kalifornien-will-eine-hochgeschwindigkeitzug-strecke-bauen-a-855649.html>

Slate

--Former German First Lady Sues Google, Slate, September 20, 2012 http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2012/09/20/bettina_wulff_former_german_first_lady_sues_google_because_autocomplete_suggests_prostitute_when_you_search_her_name.html?fb_action_ids=10100523113632948&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_ref=sm_f

[b like blogpost&fb_source=aggregation&fb_aggregation_id=288381481237582](#)

The Huffington Post

--"Mozilla's Newest Office Used to Be Part of the Berlin Wall," August 8, 2012,

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-stern/mozilla-new-office_b_1752252.html

--"Neo-Nazism Gone Viral"

<http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/502bb57f78c90a1a2f0000c3> (I was a commentator on one of the very first Huffington Post Live talk shows, discussing right-wing extremism in Germany"

--"Two Countries, One University" (piece on Viadrina University, to be published in November)

Mountain View Patch (part of AOL and The Huffington Post media group)

--"Google Opens New Office in Berlin", September 27, 2012

<http://mountainview.patch.com/articles/berlin-google-office#photo-11504421>

--"Gift of Berlin Wall Segments to Mountain View Links Two Cities"

<http://mountainview.patch.com/articles/gift-of-berlin-wall-segments-to-mountain-view-links-cities-further#photo-11473338> (I contributed reporting and two interviews from Berlin)