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You don't walk far in Berlin before you encounter a brass marker embedded in the cobblestoned sidewalk. Called "stumbling stones," these 10 centimeter x 10 centimeter plaques mark the homes of victims of Nazi terror. The brass makes you emotionally stumble over a moment in time when hate speech, propaganda and data collection about one's neighbors had terrible consequences.

Given what I do in my day job back in the U.S.—writing about social media, including freedom of speech, misinformation and improper data retention—the opportunity to spend 10 weeks as an Arthur F. Burns fellow in Germany made me a better journalist on these issues.

Talking to Germans—many of whom are far more attuned to issues of privacy and the dissemination of fake news than most Americans—had concrete relevance in helping me gain a broader and deeper understanding of the dangerous subtleties that make these issues so polarizing.

During the past year in the U.S., the biggest stories on my beat have been about freedom of speech, how trolls on social media were spreading misinformation in an attempt to sow division and how a political analytics firm had purchased the data of millions of users of Facebook without their consent.

Like the U.S., Germany is grappling now with where to draw the line between online hate speech and free speech, as well as the issue of how companies collect information. What Germany has to offer this conversation is experience. At a time when many people in the U.S. are only just starting to talk about the privacy they sacrifice when they post to social media, many Germans I met were already quite attuned to this tradeoff. One security researcher told me she never posts images of her children's faces on Facebook.

Today, Germany has some of the most aggressive policies in the world to hold social-media companies accountable for deleting hate speech, rules that many U.S.-based social-media titans have struggled to adhere to.

As one executive at a Berlin-based social-media startup told me, it can take just one post by one person to "destroy the community for everyone else." His steps to remove hate speech from his social-media platform went beyond the legal requirement. His decision to prioritize inclusion above free speech at such an early stage in his company's development differed dramatically from U.S. tech giants such as Facebook and Twitter. They grew rapidly, and then attempted to rein in the communities of millions of users they had created.

My placement at the Handelsblatt newspaper was fantastic. The newsroom operates in German, so I got to feel immersed in local culture. But everyone there also speaks English, allowing me to ask questions and seek help and get guidance. And since the Wall Street Journal also operates a bureau in Berlin, I had the enriching opportunity to work alongside my foreign-correspondent colleagues.

When neo-Nazi riots broke out in the east of Germany, I called foreign businesses based near the site of the clashes. I was curious whether the protests were impacting business in the region. Turns out the protests were a drain for these companies, because many of them need to bring in foreigners to fill out vacant positions, and the protests were making it harder for them to convince people to move to the region.

One of my favorite projects was a joint venture with Dana Heide at Handelsblatt. Together, we wrote about the German government's efforts to increase the funding available to tech startups in Germany. The story combined Dana's relationships with government officials and my ties to data sources to analyze why the government's strategy wasn't playing out quite according to plan.

In the months before I arrived in Berlin, I studied German daily on the app Duolingo—something I highly recommend to all new fellows. This initial (and fun) preparation made it easier for me to absorb the lessons when we started the intensive German classes at the beginning of the fellowship. The language lessons were so helpful that at their end I set up a weekly German class for me and the other newbies to continue our language study for the duration of our stay.

I cannot emphasize enough the benefit of the German language lessons for fellows who don't already speak German. Every new set of vocabulary words unlocked new understandings, from the tenor of a German news broadcast discussing the U.S. Supreme Court nomination, to enabling me to more comfortably attend boxing classes in Berlin.

Wednesdays after our German classes, we went out to dinner as a group, inviting different Burns alums to join us at one of Berlin's cozy restaurants. These conversations with the Burns alums often became highlights of my week.

Now back in San Francisco, I often refer back to these conversations with Burns alums, and the unique experience of reporting in Germany, as I write about how Silicon Valley's tech companies are responding to demands for greater privacy for users. I think about German standards of hate speech as I cover incidents of bullying online, and track American startups that are moving to Berlin.

Looking forward, I can't wait to meet future Burns fellows. Vielen Dank for such a valuable fellowship!

Here are my already published stories from the program. I have several more in the works that I expect to publish in coming months.

How a German Social-Media Company Tamed the Trolls

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-a-german-social-media-company-tamed-the-trolls-1538823601>

Zu Weiß, Zu Männlich – Wie Sich Wikipedia Reformieren Will

<https://www.handelsblatt.com/unternehmen/it-medien/wissensplattform-zu-weiss-zu-maennlich-wie-sich-wikipedia-reformieren-will/23077290.html>

Neo-Nazi Riots Threaten International Business in Saxony

<https://global.handelsblatt.com/politics/neo-nazi-riots-threaten-international-business-in-saxony-959475>