

The Arthur F Burns Fellowship **Field report by Anna Klühspies**

Why ProPublica?

ProPublica is quite unique in the American media landscape: a investigative, donation-financed and independent non-profit newsroom, which has also grown enormously in recent years. Former Burns fellows told me how special the atmosphere at ProPublica is, that research is given the space it needs to do well. is to have time

has become a rare commodity in journalism, including investigative ones. I really wanted to immerse myself in this cosmos and was very happy to be able to continue the tradition of the Burns Fellows at ProPublica after a two-year break due to the pandemic.

Preparation and housing search

I didn't have a concrete idea for a topic beforehand, because I had planned to turn it into one Research from ProPublica to get the best idea of how the work is done there. Even before my arrival I met Editor-in-Chief Steve

Engelberg, who, by the way, is a big fan of the Burns Fellowship, can speak via zoom. Based on my previous research (including a documentary on right-wing extremism), Steve suggested that during my fellowship I could join the internal team "threats to democracy", which

with topics related to election manipulation, populism and right-wing extremism employed.

When it came to looking for an apartment in New York, I was lucky: I was able to take over the apartment from Dave, a US fellow from my year, and myself

was spared the search for an apartment in New York. If it doesn't work out via Fellows from your year, be sure to write to the former "Burnsies" from New York, many can and want to help - and if you don't find an apartment, you might just meet for a coffee.

Arrived in New York and worked at ProPublica

We may well go down in the Burns history books as a "superspreader class", but unfortunately several of us caught Corona during orientation week in Washington, and I was one of them. Of course not a nice start if you really want to start the Fellowship full of energy. Everyone at ProPublica was very understanding, I was able to do a week and a half

finally got to the office later than originally planned to start my fellowship.

My first impression: hardly anyone has returned from the home office. The open-plan office was pretty deserted on my first day, there were maybe ten colleagues present. Nevertheless, I was warmly welcomed by Joanna Kelly, the office manager. Reach out to her with any questions, she is super nice and helpful. She assigned me my own place and I was assigned a MacBook as a work computer, everything was very well prepared and I have

felt very welcome.

You can't change anything about the current situation, but get a little wistful

I already when I think about how the office must have vibrated before the pandemic,

than everyone here has researched and discussed. The emptiness in the office makes it difficult, of course the direct contact with colleagues, which is actually dependent on as an incoming fellow. In a conversation with Jesse Eisinger, the senior editor of the "threats to democracy" team, it became clear that there are currently no offers research that I can help with. But maybe I would find a topic with a German-American connection that I can devote myself to.

At this point I have to say: Although everyone is very nice and cordial, at ProPublica they didn't wait for the fellow from Germany, personal responsibility is really the order of the day here: So I had mine for two months can pursue their own research. But since I really wanted to work on a specific project in order to get an insight into the processes and working methods of my colleagues, I took a different path: I am Went for coffee with as many colleagues as possible. That wasn't just great to get such exciting insights into their work: ProPublica has grown enormously in recent years, for example I have met several times with colleagues from the video team, the documentaries are sometimes produced in cooperation with other stations such as PBS Frontline or Produce Netflix - the insights into their work were very inspiring.

From one of these "coffee dates" (on the magnificent roof terrace, by the way, where you can also take lunch breaks with colleagues) my collaboration on a specific research arose: Ruth Talbot from the data team researched Google ads with Craig Silverman and Jeff Kao. The thesis: Although Google has clear rules not to place any advertising on websites that spread untruths about Covid-19 or climate change, this is exactly what happens: Google places it above all on non-English-language websites and articles that have been proven to spread false information as before advertising and thus partly finances the publishers behind these untruths.

The focus of the research was primarily on websites from countries and regions such as Africa, South America, the Balkans and Turkey. Also from Spain, France and Germany, the team was expecting data, which is why Ruth asked me if I would like to get involved in the research. My tip: If possible, look for topics with a German connection, that's your "unique selling point" and it worked great for me.

For this story, ProPublica partnered with fact-checking NGOs, who provided tables of websites proven to spread misinformation.

Ruth's team developed a scraping tool to extract data from these websites to find out whether Google ads were showing on a website or not. I got into the research at a point in time when it was a matter of finding the best examples from the thousands of hits, i.e. the story

to find and tell. I trawled through Excel spreadsheets, checking what the articles was accurate and whether Google advertisements were still on the websites. It was my first data journalism project and the insights I got were very exciting: Craig and Ruth gave me a short introduction to code reading and I wrote the paragraph on the German research results for the article, which was great fun .

After a first draft was ready, it went into the acceptance loop. The story is worked on in many rounds – and that can take weeks. There is no "hot deadline" set, but rather an approximate period of time in which to publish. Our story is scheduled to be published in mid-October, although this can be postponed again. Team work has

It was great fun, I was fully involved in the research and learned a lot. I can only recommend to every future Burns Fellow at ProPublica: If you approach your colleagues proactively, you not only learn a lot, but also find exciting projects to work on. Even if the office culture

suffered a lot from the pandemic, after labor day (a public holiday in early September) there was a week where different teams from all over the country met in the New York office and it suddenly got really busy and lively, "office happy hours" and joint dinners were organized and so I still have some of the old glory and the great ProPublica spirit

noticed. Shortly before my departure, "Office Wednesday" was introduced: all employees were encouraged to come to the office on Wednesdays, and many did so.

Even though there aren't as many colleagues in the office as there were before the pandemic: grab everyone who comes by: go for a coffee, meet up for lunch or a beer after work, that's how I made a lot of friends and was very touched that many colleagues came to my farewell evening.

new York

New York is back, and how! An incredible city to immerse myself in for two months! Two months is not enough to see everything, but two months is a good start to be more than a tourist in this city. For me, New York exudes an incredible energy that you can't resist: everyone here is so open, friendly and interested. I've made incredibly inspiring, great acquaintances and made new friends: met ex-burnsies for a coffee or got tips from a German filmmaker on how to win an Emmy ("Outlawed in Pakistan" by Hilke Schellmann - absolutely

look at!). Approach people, write to them – anything is possible in New York. I will forever remember this amazing Burns summer!

Conclusion

"We hate it when the bad guys win" - is the slogan on my ProPublica mug, which I'm drinking from while I'm writing this report.

If you're passionate about investigative research, you've come to the right place. The "spirit" of the colleagues alone is incredibly contagious. Everyone who works at ProPublica wanted here. And you can feel that too. Here, the best journalists in the USA pursue the stories that others never want to see published. Here, you can

either pursue your own research completely freely or join projects of colleagues - personal initiative is definitely the order of the day.

Not only do I return to Germany with many new ideas and inspirations

– I am also very grateful to have got to know 22 incredibly great fellows who have made Washington and New York unsafe with me. And our

History does not end here, preparations for a reunion in 2023 are already underway. Thanks for everything Arthur F Burns!