

HOWARD BERKES

INVESTIGATIVE RADIO

NPR's Howard Berkes returns to his roots

PHOTO BY STEPHEN VOSS

His calm, measured tones discussing coal mine safety or preventable grain silo deaths can make the heart of any news geek with an NPR tote bag go pitter-pat.

National Public Radio listeners have heard Howard Berkes' voice on *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered* and *Weekend Edition* and will hear that voice in the coming weeks when his latest investigation into mine safety hits the airwaves. Berkes returns to KLCC and Eugene where he got his start when he gives his talk, "Typewriter to Twitter: an NPR Reporter's Journey," at 7 pm Wednesday, Nov. 12, at 175 Knight Law Center on the UO campus.

What drew you to public radio journalism?

[Laughs] I have to go back 40 years. I had actually been interested in journalism. I was trying to figure out what do with my life. I'd had a career change; I was interested in a career change. I was working at the University of Oregon bookstore, actually, and KLCC had advertised these workshops, training sessions for volunteers. I had been listening to public radio and listening to KLCC, and I thought that might be an interesting thing to do.

I very quickly developed a strong interest in the art of radio, in the power of radio, the ability to engage listeners with active sounds and scenes. Radio is a medium you sort of see in your head, and that really grabbed me early on.

There was a freelance producer working out of KLCC at the time, M'lou Zahner Ollswang. She was very creative. In fact, she sort of created that cinema vérité, radio vérité style that other people came along and used later at

NPR and public radio — the idea of narration and just sound and people's voices carrying a story.

I learned a lot from her. I saw myself more as a radio artist in the beginning, but the opportunity to make money — because I quit my job to volunteer full time at KLCC, I wasn't being paid — so the only way to make money was to sell to NPR. At first I sold news spots and then feature stories, some of which were more creative and some more newsy.

NPR cutting its environment team has been talked about a lot lately. Is that something you could speak to given your reporting on rural issues?

The truth is that, generally speaking, you could name any beat at NPR and there will be many stories beyond the reporters assigned to those beats, done by other staff reporters, done by member station reporters and freelancers. That's always been true.

I had the rural beat for 10 years, there were lots of other reporters on staff and at member stations also doing stories that fit the rural beat during that time, and that was great and that was not a bad thing. Our coverage of any particular subject is not restricted to the number of people assigned who have a title of being the beat reporter.

Your talk is going to be about the transformation of news media from "typewriter to Twitter." Are you ever nostalgic for the "old school" way of doing stories?

I'm not nostalgic for the days when in order to file a story I had to take a canning jar wrench and unscrew the mouthpiece of a pay phone. And then hook alligator clips

to the pay phone and then plug that into my tape recorder to file my story.

I don't miss those days.

What technology, digital media and social media have made possible is the ability to do a lot more, more quickly. To find more sources of information more quickly. To discover more pieces of information, especially documents and data, more quickly. To file more easily. These days all we need is a recorder and a laptop and a cell phone signal, and we can file from pretty much anywhere on Earth.

There are also significant challenges that have come with new technology and digital media, not the least of which is verifying the quality of information that you get and the legitimacy of the sources that you use.

Can you tell me a little about your current project?

I'm working on something that I started exploring more than two years ago. It involves mine safety, which is something that I have focused on for the last four years on and off. In the wake of the Upper Big Branch Mine disaster in West Virginia, I got very interested in mine and workplace safety and how coal mine safety is regulated.

I started with a partner, *Mine Safety and Health News*. We started looking at one particular aspect of regulation. We kept asking a question: "Well, it would great if we could do X. If we could find certain kinds of data, that would be really much more meaningful if we can show there was a regulatory failure." It would also be nice to show what are the consequences of that failure. We could suggest there was a problem with enforcing the regulation, but couldn't figure out what the consequence was.

We worked on that on and off a couple years, then a year ago August, an intern, Anna Boiko-Weyrauch, a grad student at the University of Missouri journalism school, started at NPR, and she specialized in computer-assisted data reporting. She was assigned to me, and I was working on this project full time. We showed her what data was available, government-provided raw data, and she was able to see a way we could demonstrate a consequence. It took us months to figure out how to do that with confidence, with data integrity, as she put it.

Having this young — in her late 20s — data-proficient reporter turned this whole project around. She has these skills that an old fart like me struggles with, but this is second nature to her. I've worked with other reporters who are also very data savvy, and have a set of skills that I never had. It's really exciting what they are able to do. It gave us the ability to demonstrate what we believe are consequences.

The ability to work with documents and to work with data makes you much more effective as a journalist. It lets you really be able to ask the most important questions you can ask. It lets you dig deep into: Are institutions doing what they're supposed to be doing? Are politicians doing what they're supposed to be doing? Are government agencies doing what they're supposed to be doing? Are corporations doing what they're supposed to be doing? Are they telling you the truth?

Data and documents are a very powerful way of discovering whether we are being lied to.

I was actually going to ask you about government transparency.

Every day, when you open up a newspaper, watch TV news or listen to NPR, there is an example of a government official, corporation or a government agency caught doing something that contradicts what they say they were all about, or they said they were doing. There's been a shift, a devolution of power, from the federal government to the states. There's actually fewer reporters covering state and local government, but more money and power has flowed to those places. People do stupid things, things to cover up their inadequacies, their greed, whatever it is. That stuff goes on, and who else is out there but journalists who try to root that stuff out, try to get at what the truth is. ■

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.