



radio

ACTIVITY

It may be true that you can't always believe what you hear—unless you've tuned in to listen to the work of these Carls, who are making names for themselves in public radio

By Burl Gilyard

Joseph Shapiro '75

“Radio is the ultimate storytelling medium,” says Joseph Shapiro '75. “You get drawn into somebody’s world more deeply when you hear his or her voice.” After nearly two decades reporting for *U.S. News & World Report*, Shapiro joined NPR in November 2001 to cover health, aging, disability, and family issues.

Some of Shapiro’s favorite radio reporting work appeared in a series called “Housing First,” which examined the role of housing in the lives of people with disabilities. For one report, Shapiro told the story of a woman in Kansas trying to get out of a nursing home with the help of the Topeka Independent Living Resource Center, run by a disabled activist. “These are people who had often been institutionalized themselves,” says Shapiro. “And now they’re coming out and helping other disabled people.”

Shapiro also traveled to Shreveport, Louisiana, to tell the tale of Oxford House, a drug and alcohol treatment center run by its residents. The story traced a friendship between an older man and a younger man. The relationship became strained when the younger man relapsed and was kicked out of the house, and ended with the younger man still struggling with his addiction. He was readmitted to Oxford but got ousted again after another relapse. “I hope listeners got a sense of how tenuous recovery from substance abuse can be,” Shapiro says.

Listen to the stories mentioned by Shapiro at www.npr.org/news/specials/housingfirst/nprstories/020806.kansas/index.html and www.npr.org/news/specials/housingfirst/nprstories/020716.oxford/020716.oxford.html.

If all the news has started sounding the same to you,

it may not be your imagination. Congress and the Federal Communications Commission have been wrangling for months to determine how much media control a single company can have, and a few corporate giants have been working tirelessly to secure a bigger piece of the media pie. For some, the struggle has been the catalyst to switch from Big Media to an alternative: public radio.

While no one was paying much attention, the nation’s on-scrappy public radio stations have become a big deal. In March 2003, *Time* magazine noted that while overall radio listenership in the United States is on the decline amid competition from other media, the audience for public radio is growing steadily. National Public Radio, best known for its news programming, including *All Things Considered* and *Talk of the Nation*, has more than doubled

its audience since 1991—some 21 million listeners tune in to its programs each week. Public Radio International, which distributes programs including *This American Life* and Garrison Keillor’s *A Prairie Home Companion*, reports that more than 13 million hear its programs weekly.

Jenny Lawhorn, spokesperson for the Washington, D.C.–based NPR, argues that a greater demand for serious news in the wake of the election drama of 2000, the 9/11 tragedy, and the war in Iraq has served to draw listeners to public radio’s news programming. “Public radio . . . [has] provided people with news, information, and entertainment programs they can’t find anywhere else,” says Lawhorn. “We’ve found that once we get people to tune in, they

Stephanie Curtis '92

Since joining Minnesota Public Radio as an intern in 1994, Stephanie Curtis '92 has done a little bit of everything. She worked a stint as a producer for MPR's documentary unit, American RadioWorks. She serves as MPR's resident "movie maven," recommending—and panning—current and not-so-current flicks. And in October 2001 Curtis started cohosting *Sound Money*, working with MPR economics editor Chris Farrell. *Sound Money* is carried on approximately 150 public radio stations, spanning the country from Florida to Hawaii. Curtis has hosted the show for roughly two years. (As the *Voice* went to press, MPR planned to move *Sound Money* from St. Paul to California, with plans to relaunch the program with a new host.)

Sound Money aspires to provide common sense, down-to-earth financial advice. Curtis says that one of the ongoing challenges is finding fresh angles for oft-repeated topics: Taxes, retirement, and debt management are perennials. For Curtis, the highlight of the show has always been the personal give-and-take with callers. "It's the heart of the program," says Curtis. "A lot of the financial advice programs, even on public radio are impersonal. The hosts don't sound like they care about these people. There are a lot of advice shows out there, but it's usually 'Buy, sell, hold'—easy answers."

Sound Money, she says, can often go beyond the bounds of finances—even when the show rarely strays from financial topics. "One of my favorites was a guy who called from Tennessee," she says. "He and his wife had been married for more than 20 years. He said, 'I want to save and my wife doesn't want to save. How can we work together on this?' They'd called for marriage counseling."

Visit www.soundmoney.org to listen to Curtis's stories for the show, or visit www.mpr.org and search for "Movie Maven" to listen to some of her top film picks.



SAL SKOG

stay with us. Public radio is one of the only bastions of localism left on the radio. The noncommercial aspect of public radio appeals to people a lot."

While detractors suggest that radio doesn't hold much weight in comparison to television and Internet options, radio has remained a remarkably flexible medium. You can now listen to broadcasts on your computer or subscribe to satellite radio—the cable TV of radio. The SIRIUS satellite radio network includes public radio programming.

Public radio has also offered a fertile career path for many Carleton graduates. Joseph Shapiro '75, David Welna '80, and Martin Kaste '91 currently work as reporters for NPR. Stephanie Curtis '92 and Julie Siple '96 both work for the St. Paul-based Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), whose national programming and volunteer membership make it the largest and most successful regional public radio network in the country.

Collectively, these five Carls spent little time hanging out at the on-campus radio station, KRLX. Carleton doesn't offer a journalism or communications degree. Shapiro majored in American studies, Welna in Latin American studies, and Kaste, Curtis, and

Martin Kaste '91

After several years working at Minnesota Public Radio, Martin Kaste '91 landed his dream assignment in March 2000: covering South America as a Rio de Janeiro-based reporter for NPR. The switch from St. Paul to South America might seem radical, but Kaste's mother is Brazilian, and he is fluent in Portuguese.

One of the more dramatic stories Kaste has covered since landing in South America was the economic collapse in Argentina that reached a crisis point in December 2001. Argentina had embraced American-style free market economics, but continued to run up large debts until the system collapsed. President Fernando De La Rúa resigned in disgrace as savings accounts across the country were frozen and riots erupted. "It wasn't just abstract politics," Kaste says. "In Argentina, what was happening on a day-to-day basis directly affected whether people could afford to pay their tuition or their light bill. They went through five presidents in a week."

The upheaval made him more appreciative of the economic stability of the United States. "It's amazing to watch a whole economy, a whole society, just dropping off a ledge. It's an accelerated laboratory experiment in basic economics," Kaste says. "It was an incredible reminder that nothing is guaranteed. It's very easy to think, growing up in America, that the basics are safe. I don't think there are any guarantees. There's a lot for us to learn there."

Listen to Martin Kaste in a report on "Normal" Life in Colombia" at www.npr.org/news/specials/notebook/2003/08/kaste.colombia.html?loc=homebucket and "Brazilians Claim Father of Aviation" at <http://discover.npr.org/features/feature.jhtml?wfid=1395246>.

Siple all majored in English. While different roads have led them to the same business, all five agree that public radio can be an antidote to the mile-a-minute news and traffic drive-bys of contemporary commercial radio. In an age of brash talk radio, wacky morning shows, and shock jocks, Shapiro believes that there is a hunger for essential news and real stories that resonate with listeners. "News on commercial radio has sort of disappeared," says Shapiro. "I think that's one reason why NPR's listenership is up 50 percent in the past seven years."

In the wake of industry deregulation, commercial radio stations have been increasingly swallowed up by media conglomerates such as the San Antonio, Texas-based Clear Channel Communications, which now owns more than 1,200 stations.

Critics lament that many radio stations now feature cookie-cutter programming formats, devoid of much personality or content. Many have found public radio to be an oasis in that media desert.

Welna, who currently covers Congress for NPR, is sometimes struck by the lack of competition he encounters from other media. "I've really been surprised by how little attention is paid to the legislative process. While the United States has an open form of government, the amount of outside scrutiny is amazingly small, considering all the things that are being decided [in Washington]," says Welna. "I was surprised to find out that there are fewer people covering Congress in broadcasting now than there were 10 years ago, even though there is a proliferation of TV channels."

David Welna '80

David Welna '80 has traveled to most corners of the Western Hemisphere for public radio. He began working for NPR as a freelancer in South America in 1982 and landed in Washington, D.C., in January 2001 to cover Congress.

Welna recalls sitting in his office at the Capitol watching a broadcast of Senator Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party on C-SPAN when some remarks made by Senator Trent Lott caught his ear. Lott seemed to be lamenting the failure of Thurmond's segregationist bid for president in 1948. Welna quickly assembled a one-minute report. "I immediately did a short report for a newscast at NPR and we had it first," says Welna. "It was interesting to see how so many of my colleagues who were there heard it and didn't report it. I thought it was going to be a big story in the morning papers and nobody said anything."

Soon enough the story exploded and doomed Lott's career as Senate Majority Leader. Welna speculates that other correspondents may have initially shrugged off the comments because reporters depend on having regular access to congressional sources. "If reporters don't take those comments and put them in some kind of context and put them out there for people to listen to and judge," says Welna, "there's not that much accountability."

Listen to Welna's report on Trent Lott's resignation at <http://discover.npr.org/features/feature.jhtml?wflid=886426>. Visit <http://discover.npr.org/features/feature.jhtml?wflid=1342240> to hear a recent report on a bill designed to repopulate dying towns.



JOHN NOLTNER

Curtis, best known as the recent host of the MPR-produced *Sound Money*, says that public radio programming offers listeners a less frantic, more in-depth alternative to modern commercial radio. "Commercial stations have to worry constantly about their ratings," says Curtis. "Because we aren't trying to cut away to commercials, we can actually take the time to talk about issues." Quirky documentary programs that feature stories that take time to unfold, like *This American Life*, wouldn't stand a chance in commercial radio.

In-depth discussion doesn't mean that public radio is dry, though. Its news and feature stories are often rich with real-life drama. "Probably the most exciting story I've ever covered was the

botched coup against [Venezuelan president Hugo] Chavez," says Kaste. "It was a surreal few days. When there's a grab for power in a country, all of a sudden you realize how vital the media are," says Kaste, noting that the Venezuelan media had a reputation for being notoriously anti-Chavez. The attempted coup to oust Chavez in April 2002 failed: Chavez returned to office within a few days. In that environment, says Kaste, the world—and Venezuelans themselves—depended on independent media accounts to find out what was happening. "Domestic media institutions had been sucked into the political process. As outsiders, we could still do our work."

Julie Siple '96

“I think public radio

is looking for people who can think clearly, can write really well, and are interested in current events,” says Julie Siple '96. “I get to work on such a wide variety of things, it’s like being a perpetual liberal arts student.”

Siple works behind the scenes rather than in front of a microphone. An associate producer for Minnesota Public Radio’s local broadcast of NPR’s *Morning Edition*, Siple works with local host Cathy Wurzer creating local segments for the program. She conducts research, writes copy, and produces and edits interviews. Occasionally, she directs the show.

While her work often revolves around researching stories for the next day’s broadcast, Siple has enjoyed getting a chance to work on longer projects. In 2001, MPR did a series of interviews with five women who were re-entering the workforce as part of the Welfare to Work program.

“We sent Cathy Wurzer out to ask them about how they got where they were and what decisions they made along the way,” says Siple, who edited the lengthy interview transcripts into eight-minute question-and-answer sessions.

“What I remember most is that a couple of the women were afraid to go back to work and were really intimidated by the process,” recalls Siple. “I hadn’t realized the level of fear that some of the women had in their lives. Instead of just looking at statistics, I got a sense of what five women were dealing with and how it was affecting them on a daily basis.”

SAL SKOG

Siple first dabbled in journalism during her senior year, when she worked briefly at CNN as an intern in Washington, D.C. Behind the network glitz, Siple says, the experience actually soured her somewhat on the profession. “I didn’t enjoy it,” she says. “I knew after that experience that I didn’t want anything to do with [television] journalism.

It was too much about getting a story and getting it first, and not about understanding what’s going on out there.” Public radio is in a very different business, Siple says, “There’s a conscious effort to provide some sort of context, and I think that’s lacking in some other forms of journalism.”

In the end, public radio may succeed because it connects with listeners by focusing on stories, not sound bites. It’s a modern-day equivalent of telling tales around the fire, and people connect with it because its story-telling capabilities—the sounds, the cadences, the structures—are just like those we’ve used for millennia. “I look for good personal tales,” says Shapiro. “They become ways you can tell a larger story.”

BURL GILYARD, a Minneapolis freelance journalist, is a frequent contributor to the *Voice*.