

## Loud silence on Vocalo

By Lisa Bertagnoli  
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Vocalo.org — the young public radio station aimed at a less wealthy, less white audience than its more traditional counterpart — had its coming-out party at a Chicago Public Radio fundraiser on Feb. 4. But that was two years too late for some supporters of WBEZ-FM (91.5), who are angry that their pledge money was diverted to a project designed to exclude them.

Chicago Public Radio raised funds from WBEZ listeners without telling them that some of the money would go to the experimental station.

Vocalo was launched in June 2007 on [www.vocalo.org](http://www.vocalo.org) and WBEW-FM (89.5), broadcasting to a small area of Northwest Indiana. (The station, which broadcasts from Chesterton, Ind., can now be heard in Chicago.) Its existence was never mentioned on air at WBEZ until the October 2008 pledge drive.

But the new station, operating at a loss of almost \$700,000 on a budget of \$1.6 million in fiscal 2008, was getting half its funding from Chicago Public Radio, which before Vocalo was synonymous with WBEZ. The \$2.2 million spent on Vocalo is just over 10% of Chicago Public Radio's \$20-million annual budget.

The radio silence about Vocalo was no accident. Station management didn't want its base to protest money going to Vocalo. Nor did it want them to participate in its listener call-in format.

"I'm not afraid to say it," says Daniel Ash, vice-president of strategic communications at WBEZ. Faced with a "radically different" product deemed unlikely to appeal to WBEZ listeners, there were fears that donors "would say, 'Not on my dime, not on my watch,'" Mr. Ash says. "There would be pushback."

Also, managers worried that typical public-radio voices — white, highly educated, affluent — might sully what Vocalo was trying to be. It "had to be a safe space" for its intended audience, Mr. Ash says.

But it became another flash point for WBEZ listeners already rankled by what they see as a dearth of music, arts and local issues programming.

"Should I contribute so they can not do local programming, repeat shows and broadcast Vocalo over a tower?" asks Chicago architect Joel Berman, 45. "It doesn't make sense."

Mr. Berman says he donates "considerably less" since WBEZ stopped airing music, and he criticizes the repeat programming aired throughout the day.



Kristina Knoll, left, and her mother, Cynthia Knoll, try their hand at broadcasting at WBEZ's benefit. Photo: Erik Unger

Vocalo's name comes from a combination of "vocal" and *zocalo*, the Spanish word for public square. Its freewheeling, unscripted, user-generated content sounds nothing like the cadenced, careful tones of the mother ship. It broadcasts 60 original hours a week, with listeners and Web site visitors sounding off on random topics like violence in schools or Michelle Obama's choice of designers.

Its quiet launch "was about trying to get this thing off the ground where we could nurture that specialized audience first," says Wendy Turner, general manager of Vocalo. "We always intended to bring on the WBEZ folks."

But from the start, dissent brewed inside the station as well as out. "There are people sitting 20 feet from me who hate the fact that we're doing Vocalo," Mr. Ash says.

Torey Malatia, president and CEO of Chicago Public Radio, says critics had their claws out even before the debut. When he pulled jazz and world music from 91.5 in favor of a news-talk-information format in 2007, angry listeners were promised that 89.5 would pick up the slack as a music station.

But Mr. Malatia had another idea brewing, called "the secret radio project" internally and in the trade, and Vocalo supplanted music as the choice for 89.5 when research showed WBEZ was failing to appeal to community-minded non-whites with incomes of less than \$50,000.

"A lot of people feel that A, there's nothing of interest on public radio, and B, what they do hear feels exclusive and not relevant," says Mr. Malatia, 57. "If we are to be a public service, we should be doing better than 500,000 (listeners) out of 6.5 million," he says, referring to WBEZ's audience in the greater Chicago area.

Cultivating new listeners is crucial, he says, as traditional radio faces steep challenges from the Internet, podcasts and other non-traditional sources.

Vocalo doesn't have an Arbitron rating yet; its Web site so far gets 4,500 unique visitors a month. It hopes to come closer to its 15,000-a-month goal since adding a signal-strengthening tower in November, six months later than planned. It expanded Vocalo's coverage area from 450,000 potential listeners to 2 million.

However, so far Vocalo isn't reaching its intended audience. Its surveys show that 71% of Vocalo's listeners are white — only slightly more diverse than WBEZ's audience, which is 82% white.

A long line of well-heeled guests seemed intrigued by a Vocalo sound booth at the public radio benefit at the Art Institute of Chicago earlier this month, where hosts invited them to record station identifications or funding acknowledgments. It was the first time most partygoers, including Wheaton physician and WBEZ donor Carrie Nankervis, had heard of the new station.

"I think it's a really cool idea," Dr. Nankervis said as she waited her turn at the microphone. "With competition from things like XM (subscription satellite radio), public radio really needs new ideas."

### SUBSCRIBER STATIC

Just more than half of Vocalo's budget for fiscal 2008 came from grants from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation, L'Oreal Paris, Boeing Co. and the Surdna Foundation. The rest came from Chicago Public Radio. And while a group of its major donors, both individuals and institutions, had been informed of Vocalo and its mission, rank-and-file subscribers — plied with patter encouraging them to support their favorite shows — had not, unless they happened to read one of a few media reports on it elsewhere.

When *Chicago Reader* media critic Michael Miner addressed these facts last summer, opposition, small but vocal, began. Several subscribers pulled pledges; one created a blog to post her lengthy correspondence with Mr. Malatia.



Maura Junius, marketing director for Raven Foundation and a WBEZ listener and donor, isn't pleased with what she sees as a move away from arts coverage. Photo: Stephen J. Serio

Consultants to non-profits say it's no wonder some donors were upset.

"I would think WBEZ would have sent a letter telling donors about the new enterprise, and that funds are needed to start it," says Betty Bergstrom, a Chicago-based fundraising consultant. "You have to have transparency with your donors and accountability to them," especially since WBEZ and Vocalo are so different.

"We should have been more aggressive upfront" in telling donors about Vocalo, admits Mr. Ash, who oversees all fundraising and underwriting for Chicago Public Radio. "We could have been more thoughtful about creating a communication plan."

Mr. Malatia, though, says Chicago Public Radio has every right to use donations as it sees fit. "We've been as transparent as you can get," he says. "Our good work is all tied to pledge drives; there's nothing hidden."

Beyond the issue of transparency, listeners say management simply has no business launching another station in light of budget cuts that they say have taken WBEZ's focus off local news and arts. Chicago Public Radio, which projects a \$500,000 budget shortfall for fiscal 2009, laid off 11 of its 125 employees in December. Two were hosts and producers for Vocalo; the rest were from WBEZ.

"I look for WBEZ to expand my world," says Maura Junius, 57, marketing director for Raven Foundation, a Glenview non-profit that studies conflict and violence in society. "They do that on a national and international level, but they're beginning to slip on the local level."

She still donates to WBEZ. But she misses both the nightly jazz and "Hello, Beautiful," a show hosted by Edward Lifson that ran from 2004 to last year and, she says, "melded beautifully with Chicago's vibrant arts and culture scene."

Ms. Junius also wonders why, after creating "rock stars" such as Scott Simon, Ira Glass and Peter Sagal, WBEZ management doesn't create more award-winning programming for the main station. "They're shifting away," she says.

WBEZ airs 17 hours per week of locally produced programming, including broader shows like "Worldview" along with those focused on Chicago, such as "848." That's on par with Minnesota Public Radio, with 18 hours per week, and Wisconsin Public Radio, with 16. By contrast, WGBH, one of two National Public Radio stations in Boston, broadcasts 14 to 19 hours a day of local programming, much of it music.

Mr. Malatia dismisses such accounting because local news is embedded throughout the day in programs such as the national "Morning Edition."

"Producers and editors are in the field all day creating content," he says.

Chicago Public Radio, he adds, has invested \$100,000, not counting reporters' salaries, in three neighborhood bureaus: Englewood, Humboldt Park and Chesterton. A fourth, in West Rogers Park, is expected to open this summer.

### **POINTS FOR CREATIVITY**

There are also public-radio supporters who don't mind a little experimentation, even if it doesn't appeal to them.

Vocalo is "like college radio," says Lance Raphael, 41, a consumer-rights attorney, founder and president of the Consumer Advocacy Center in Chicago and an avid WBEZ listener. "I can tell you with certainty that I would never listen to it."

But he defends Chicago Public Radio's right to try. "We don't have an endowment for the arts with any real fervor, so why shouldn't WBEZ be able to experiment with an alternative format?" he says. "It's a shame they don't have the funding they need."

Barbara Calabrese, chairman of the radio department at Columbia College Chicago, agrees. "We think Vocalo is very cool, and we think it's very visionary," she says. "We think that's what public radio is about — taking risks, trying new things."

She has listened to Vocalo occasionally — "I like some of it; some of it I don't like" — but characterizes what she's heard as young and fresh.

"This is a very big, diverse city with a lot of voices," Ms. Calabrese says. "All I can tell you is that we applaud (WBEZ) for trying."

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