

Potential Difference

Redesigning Public Radio for a Changing Society

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By Torey Malatia

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This spring, Chicago Public Radio, news and information WBEZ-FM 91.5, will launch a new radio station by splitting off one of its repeaters, WBEW-FM 89.5 in Chesterton, Indiana, which is by Lake Michigan, just to the southeast of Chicago. This new radio station will refashion WBEZ's public radio mission to a target audience formerly unreachable by WBEZ.

This new station will be built on community radio sensibilities, but without the characteristic schedule of special interest shows. In fact, it will have no shows at all. Like a music station, it will be structured on a continuous, seamless stream. But by no stretch of the imagination would a listener call it a music station.

The station's local talk-based format will be completely devoted to Northwest Indiana and Chicago metropolitan area culture, issues, and selected music. It is not a news station. There are no newscasts.

It offers no branded public radio content. It will not use the Chicago Public Radio brand. It will not cross-promote WBEZ. Likewise, WBEZ will not cross-promote it. And without exception, it will never refer to itself as a public radio station. And since it doesn't tell the audience it is public radio, it won't show its cards by doing public radio business—it will not have pledge drives.

There will be a web site, but it would be wrong to say that it's the station's web site. Really, it is the web site's radio station. The site is Vocalo.org. This is also how the radio station always identifies itself.

The name is an invention, essentially "Vocal" with an "o" at the end. It rhymes with "Zocalo," a Spanish word which in Mexico refers to a town plaza, and in Colombia refers to the infrastructure that stabilizes the foundation of a



Pictured atop Chicago Public Radio's lakefront headquarters are :Vocalo's first seven hires.

large building. The colon before the "V" is intentional—a trademarked emoticon.

The creation of :Vocalo, and significant changes to our centerpiece service, WBEZ, was motivated not only by a desire to create something new, but by the recognition within Chicago Public Radio that the core assumptions on which our work had been based might no longer be valid.

Admittedly, these parallel initiatives we are developing are as likely to fail as succeed. On the road we are traveling, the pavement ended several miles back. This is far more exhilarating than it is disconcerting. We feel well grounded as we move forward.

The four years of planning, audience and market research that informed these approaches may help to explain our determination. We also firmly rooted our strategies in a clear articulation and analysis of our institutional mission. We've tried as much as possible to build plans around our strengths, and to know the risks and the rewards with specificity.

This is a partial record of the factors, theory, and strategies that guided us. As you make your way through this, you'll notice that, seen atomistically, there are no real discoveries here. The social theory that follows is pretty well known, and has been more thoroughly and expertly detailed by others. The broadcast principles are rudimentary. In the main, these are established concepts.

What we have done, we hope, is fuse these creatively into a new molecular structure. And, to invert the old joke, we did it for our health. All of this is built to answer particular challenges we recognized in our relationship to our audience.

We present our account knowing that there are hundreds more stations grappling with issues similar to ours. Our hope is that there may be something of value for other stations in this story. Ideas here may prove helpful or not. Some may be inapplicable to other markets, other broadcast institutions. But these ideas and the process of generating them has given us an exciting direction to pursue, a truly transformative one. If successful, it will provide lasting value to both our core audience and a new generation of Chicago area residents.

If you choose to explore no further, here is the gist of it. At Chicago Public Radio, we came to the conclusion that we are groundless to supply public service radio to new audiences until we are willing to question what we do now ruthlessly. We must unwaveringly abandon the notion that the way we have performed to date—producing work that has earned us awards, recognition, achievement, and community support—will be effective for new audiences, if only stylized and promoted better.

This is why, for example, we were not interested in installing a “young sound” over our content to attract new audiences. It is also why we decided not to develop shows that are aimed at specific groups —Asian-Americans, Latinos, African-Americans, and so on. We found our challenges required solutions that were primary, from the ground up. We found that we had to learn broadcasting all over again.

Questioning the fundamentals is unsettling, and once entered into, pretty endless. But, sooner or later, all institutions are compelled to do it. After the process, this questioning points to a direction of collective work and action that transforms the future from something to which one must be reconciled, to a new reality in the making. A forward force of our own manufacture.

Questioning Our Necessity

Tradition means that the question of the legitimacy of tradition shall not be raised.

— Cornelius Castoriadis

The favorite question of facilitators conducting strategic planning goes, “Is what we do working?” There is actually an unspoken bigger question underneath, “Is what we do necessary?”

In planning, the normal avenue to answering this latter question is indirect. One studies the competitive environment, the strengths and weaknesses of the institution, the immediate and long range opportunities, edits the mission statement, and the question is then presumed to be satisfied.

In 2003, after the release of the 2000 census, we at Chicago Public Radio made this second question—the one of our necessity— overt and central.

We began with an exhaustive process of looking at our effectiveness by analyzing audience use. We tracked in depth audience growth versus the number of potential listeners in the service area. We also studied the demographic and geographic range of those in our audience and compared this to the same characteristics for the region overall. We then studied a full range of regional planning documents that gave indications of how the service area population was projected to change over the next decade.

Among the issues confronted was this one. We had the third largest cumulative weekly audience for a single public radio station at that time —about 550,000 listeners. This audience was nearly 50% core. But these numbers were stubbornly static. Listenership had reached a ceiling.

Moreover, demographically and geographically, both core and occasional audience represented only a portion of our service area. Most of the audience, and almost all of the membership, resided in the same territory —the north side of the city or north suburban neighborhoods. The Chicago Public Radio audience was 91% white, 5% African-American, and 4% Latino.

Meanwhile, the 2000 census demonstrated that suburban areas had grown at a rate three times that of the City of Chicago proper. It also revealed that the entire metropolitan area was more multi-racial and multi-ethnic than ever before, making our station demographics even less representative of community makeup than we had thought.

Census data show that whites comprise less than 60% of the Chicago metro population, African-Americans 19%, Latinos 17%, and Asian-Americans, 5%, making 41% of the population of our service area non-white. The immigrant population since the 1990 census had increased 61% by 2000. The number of Latinos living in our service area had increased 73% since 1990, and 143% since 1980.

The disparity between the demographic characteristics of audience we were attracting and the composition of the service area in general was disturbing, even if one took into account that as a public service broadcaster we were not expecting mass popularity.

In previous planning, this kind of issue was dismissed as a national problem—it legitimately is. But in the context of our structured questioning about being an essential institution in Chicago, no such evasion was possible.

To be generating service useless to the majority of residents in our service area was to face superfluity. It was a coincidence, but reassuring, that shortly after the end of our planning process Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Commissioner, Jonathan S. Adelstein, in an open letter composed during the national FCC localism initiative of 2004, challenged all stations to the same task we had one year earlier begun to pursue. His words are a plea for stations to becoming more inclusive in their service, “dedicating the resources to discover and address the unique needs of every segment of the community. It means being alert. . . . It means being accessible.”

The Chicago Public Radio board of directors has been deeply committed to the primacy I and my staff give to original production, and to taking the associated creative and financial risks. The board was amazingly receptive to this unusually severe self-critical planning, which, though thoroughly grounded in mission, was clearly directed at seminal change.

The process was driven by the Chicago Public Radio staff. The board joined with staff and our significant community advisory council for our sessions. The completed plan was approved in June 2003.

It called for us to generate concepts and fresh architecture over a four year period to strengthen WBEZ and to create an additional broadcast service. Work on the additional service came near the end of the timeline. It had its genesis last winter. During its development it been renamed three times, at first, “The Street,” then “The Secret Radio Project,” and finally :Vocalo.

Our blueprints for both WBEZ and :Vocalo were staff generated. They were tested, disputed and enhanced by the business and community leaders on our programming and planning committee of the board, and our community advisory council.

And we were aided by an outside group of brilliant and passionate specialists, some of the best friends and analysts one could work with: Peter Laundry of Chicago-based Doblin Group, Slover-Linett Strategies Company, Karen King at the National Public Broadcasting Archives, Optaros, Chicago-based Faust Associates, the Chicago Technology Cooperative, Benjamin Walker, Kurt Cherry, Edie Rubinowitz, Jake Shapiro of PRX, and the 1,500 volunteers who participated in our SecretRadioProject.com web site and 13 planning meetings throughout the metro area.

We did the following. First, we accelerated our process of diversifying the board of directors, the community advisory council, and the staff of Chicago Public Radio. Our institution needed to house people who understood multiple perspectives if we were to be honest with ourselves about our progress.

Second, we conducted an exhaustive research project on the attitudes of existing listeners and potential listeners, with particular emphasis on people of color in our service area.

Third, WBEZ-FM 91.5 was converted this January to an all news and information format. All of its reporters, talk show producers, hosts, and editors were combined into a single editorial department, based on standard pressroom structure.

Fourth, we established three out of six planned satellite bureaus throughout the region, where reporters are permanently stationed at storefront offices to establish daily relationships and contacts, and mentor local interns.

Fifth, we funded paid, nine-month fellowships for promising minority talent identified by partner community institutions, community centers, and staff at community planning meetings.

And sixth, we created :Vocalo.

Our goal in creating :Vocalo is to build an entirely different radio station using the Internet as a primary portal. We believe that an integral fusion of IP and broadcast media is a valid avenue to realizing our mission for attracting and serving a poly-cultural audience.

To do this, we dedicated one of our repeaters, WBEW in

Chesterton, Indiana to broadcast the distinct service. The station, a class A FM, currently reaches a population of about 400,000 in a small portion of Northwest Indiana. After an approved power increase is implemented, coverage will expand to serve all of Northwest Indiana, a densely populated, highly diverse area that is economically, socially, and environmentally tied to the Chicago metropolitan region.

Northwest Indiana has always been a part of our service area, but as it continues to experience significant demographic change from rural to urban, its need for an arena like :Vocalo is well-timed. In the process of increasing power, the signal will also cover much of the City of Chicago proper, offering the opportunity to treat shared issues in a more comprehensive way.

Questioning Our Technology

The first task is to demythologize the rhetoric of the electronic sublime. Electronics is neither the arrival of apocalypse nor the dispensation of grace. Technology is technology.

— James W. Carey

If one explores mission deeply, then broadcast, Internet, indeed multiple technologies can all be seen to have distinct value for public service licensees, because they provide several avenues for creating discrete audience experiences, and they work more powerfully in combination.

Questioning institutional necessity brought us face to face with the dire predictions, from the popular technology columnists, bloggers, and even leaders in our industry that broadcasting is rapidly headed for obsolescence.

Memorably, well meaning adherents of these views in a series of roving national group meeting hammered broadcasters with these fears until attendees felt like dusted rugs on a clothesline. All of this forecasting about impending change has validity, but the fearful national discussion is based on linear reasoning. The threat posed by new technologies is real. The threat, indeed we feel the certainty, is that, even with the advent of HD multi-casting, the primary use of broadcast as a mass distribution platform will eventually lose primacy. A strategy became possible for us when we recognized that broadcast has inimitable assets to offer services in multi-platform distribution architecture.

That's why, in re-defining our role as a content creator, agnostic of distribution method, we renewed our commitment to broadcast. Broadcast's unique strengths coupled with IP based platforms creates even stronger

possibilities for audience access and audience experiences than each alone.

Every technology liberates the otherwise restricted ambitions of users. Take telephony, for example. After 1876, with the invention of the telephone, the dream of holding a real time conversation with someone geographically distant was realized. By 1976, the ambition of doing this while driving in rush hour was satisfied. By 1986, hand held mobile phones allowed this same activity while walking through a construction site, and by 2006, while mingling with friends at a cocktail party.

Ambitions are realized through each technology or each refinement of a technology with attendant experiences that are unique. And that's why it is a false notion that the advent of a new technology rapidly supplants existing ones. People are slow to surrender technological experiences that are familiar to them.

As those who are devoted to the highest and best use of the assets we manage, we must use technologies—broadcast, Internet, podcasts, e-communication. This is the way in which we orchestrate the experiences we offer the listeners. Characteristics of broadcast will remain unchallenged by newer technologies. But in time it may no longer be possible to continue to use broadcast as a provider of a complete audience experience.

As I'll explain later, we found that radio and the Internet each offer access that is unduplicated by the other and are both necessary to realize a specific kind of ambition, to make it possible for listeners to be heard. This was a key that opened doors for our most recent work.

Questioning Our Mission Act 1: The Mandate

The “sense of community” of a society with a strong public life, is born from [the] union of shared action and a shared sense of collective self.

—Richard Sennett

The recasting of mission in a changing environment can be a significant and laborious group effort. It was for us. Our staff, board, and advisory council decided finally not on revolution, but on reformation. We recommitted ourselves to the community service model. The hard work along the way was to make lucid this well-known, basic broadcast mission, and to define it in terms of today's societal needs.

A mission is chosen. A mandate is imposed. Because

broadcast institutions hold an FCC license, our purpose —like it or not—has already been partially defined by FCC mandate. All licensees are required to serve “the public interest, convenience, and necessity” in order to justify the occupation of the portion of spectrum that we have been granted the right to use.

This, of course, applies to all broadcasters, commercial as well as non-commercial, but has for years been so loosely enforced by the FCC as to be quickly dismissed in conversations about broadcast mission. But we felt that this could and should be the heart of a public radio mission. For us, it became the centerpiece of our thinking.

The public interest, convenience, and necessity rule is nothing new. This language first appeared in the 1927 Radio Act, and was repeated nearly verbatim in the 1934 Communications Act.

The Radio Act established public ownership of the airwaves. At the time, this was driven by two things. First, the commercial basis for the American system of broadcasting threatened to establish commercial “property rights” on spectrum unless regulated by statute. Second, the scarcity of spectrum in the early AM-only days of transmission required licensing cycles if any licenses were to change hands at all.

The Act offered the American people the public service requirements by which the right to use their broadcast spectrum would be frequently assessed, assuring Americans that the profits of licensees would never be realized at the expense of the public good.

Even at the outset, there were questions raised about the meaning of this vague mandate. The Federal Radio Commission clarified the intent behind the words as early as 1928, and by 1946, the renamed Federal Communications Commission reiterated the definition in a 59 page booklet entitled, “The Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees.”

In it, the commission outlined clearly its interpretation of this mandate that broadcast licenses are issued “not for the purposes of furthering the private or selfish interests of individuals or groups of individuals.” It also stated that the FCC viewed the standard of public interest, convenience, and necessity from the point of view of those who receive the service —the audience. This was to remove from the broadcaster the final right to justify the service provided under this standard.

More significantly, it defined the audience to whom the

licensee was accountable as “the entire [emphasis in the original] listening public with the service area of a station, or a group of stations in one community.” The text goes on to concretize the function of universal relevance to the service area in ways that are atypically lucid for most Federal regulations:

In a sense a broadcasting station may be regarded as a sort of mouthpiece on the air for the community it serves, over which its public events of general interest, its political campaigns, its election results, its athletic contests, its orchestras and artists, and discussion of its public issues may be broadcast. If . . . the station performs its duty in furnishing a well rounded program, the rights of the community have been achieved [emphasis in the original].

Nine years ago, Erwin G. Krasnow, in a briefing paper for the National Telecommunications and Information Association, referenced the FCC’s Program Policy Statement of 1960 as a detailed restatement of this general concept. Here, the FCC again stated that the service area is the broadcaster’s prime responsibility and the universe that the FCC would test to measure the licensee’s public service programming.

Krasnow points out that in this statement the FCC lists as the most prominent priorities in program service the “opportunity for local self-expression” and “the development and use of local talent.”

The NTIA summary paper also cites this from the Policy Statement: “The public interest standard consists of a diligent, positive and continuing effort by the licensee to discover and fulfill the tastes, needs and desires of his service area. If he has accomplished this, he has met this public responsibility.”

In practice, this mandate of serving the public interest, convenience, and necessity was enforced rigidly only at the outset. Over a 50 year period, the FCC became gradually less stringent about penalizing licenses using this yardstick and, since it is vague, chose to interpret it in increasingly broad strokes, favoring the licensee almost without exception.

By the 1980s, the mood of strict measurement at the FCC had nearly disappeared. In 1981, the FCC removed a significant amount of tangible requirements by which compliance with the standard could be ascertained, in its changes to radio rules.

This culminated at decade’s end in the 1987 repeal of the Fairness Doctrine. By the 1990s, commercial broadcasters

were lobbying forcefully for fresh regulatory rules, saying that the public interest, convenience, and necessity mandate was outdated in an era of spectrum abundance—with AM, FM, UHF and VHF broadcast service channels available, indeed, in operation in every community.

Nevertheless, the FCC and, Congress itself, in the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which substantially revised the 1934 Act in light of the rise of cable, the Internet, and wireless telephony, restated this mandate for broadcast licensees prominently. So, while the FCC may have tended to enforce the standard less strictly by the end of the 20th century, it apparently had no intention to dispense with the standard as it plunged into the 21st.

Federal regulators' seeming schizophrenia in preserving their standard at every opportunity while increasingly loosening its enforcement has been explained as the result of regulators using the marketplace as a guide to broadcast regulation. But even if the standard will never be enforced rigidly in a political climate massively influenced by commercial media companies, its validity as a worthy goal of non-commercial broadcasters remains.

We, who embrace a public service mission, can find in this mandate a meaningful direction and way to measure our work. As commercial mass media changes, relevant community service becomes more rare. There are other definitions, to be sure, of what public service means and how it should be crafted; but building our mission by embracing this, our fundamental FCC mandate, is a viable, logical foundation.

Application of this standard requires that one understand the relevant choices that one has to match one's service to the fluid requirements of each growing and changing community and ask: What is the greatest need in the public interest of our service area today?

In the end, we chose to rebuild our service model around civic health, by providing an arena of information and interaction that fosters civic engagement, a phrase that was fairly new to us and radio in 2003, but recently seems to have rapidly risen in prominence in public radio system discussions about public service.

This model seemed right for the metro Chicago area, a community in which disinvestment in news and information sources by media companies was becoming commonplace, especially among owners of commercial electronic media.

We have some peculiarities: we are, with KERA, Dallas, and

WABE-FM in Atlanta, in the unusual position of being the primary public radio service in a major market, without a full power public service non-commercial competitor. In original programming, our *métier* was narrative-based—news, information, and documentary. It was also where the highest market opportunity and community need lies.

This brought us squarely to a place of high complexity, and of which we had superficial knowledge: the role radio might play in adding to the quality of life as a resource for the exchange of ideas, opinions, and cultural expression. We researched this concept, and with the help of specialists. Our motivation for exploring these issues was to seek clarity that would guide us in one specific way—building our services with relevance.

As mentioned above, the FCC gave us a social mandate in exchange for use of broadcast technology on the public airwaves. It seemed to us that this required we have some understanding of both media and society. We sought direction that was analytical, not sensational. We sought concrete potential in ideas, not today's conventional wisdom.

So, temporarily, we excused ourselves from the give-and-take of bloggers, public radio discussion groups, book-tour technology authors and the elevator speeches of well-known media consultants. We turned to the academy.

What follows is a selection of some principles we drew from cultural anthropology, sociology, and human geography over the past three years. Let me say now that all an outsider can derive through such a brief exploration of these topics is at best a handful of ideas. These are professional fields of scholarship, in which postulates and decades-long lines of reasoning are in constant fission. Anyone who knows these subjects well will immediately see that what we have discerned here is terribly incomplete, overly simplified, and, at best, a single point of view.

We merely offer ideas that provided us insight into what public service means for broadcasters in 2007.

In this exploration we tried strike a reasonable compromise between attempting to be sensitive to the complex debate of experts, and to be mindful of grounding the concepts in on our own practical experience in broadcasting and interactive media.

Questioning Our Mission, Act 2: Democracy in the Public Interest

Communication alone can create a great community.
— John Dewey

The notion that public service broadcasting is, can be, or should be an essential component of democracy in America is long-lived. Community-focused radio and television broadcasting is often linked by media activists to the preservation of freedom itself in the political and social fabric of American life.

These ideas emerged in radio's infancy. In June 1930, Federal Radio Commissioner Ira Robinson gave a stirring speech to the Institute for Education by Radio at Ohio State University in which he memorably proclaimed that radio broadcasting "is the greatest implement of democracy yet given to mankind."

The creation of the American public radio system by the FCC in 1945 was preceded by intense advocacy employing this rationale. A centralized, federally funded broadcasting company, like the British Broadcasting Corporation, was without congressional or white house support even in the most liberal days of the New Deal. But civic leaders and educators lobbied hard for a decade and a half to see that the FCC reserved spectrum for public radio.

Eventually, as the nation came to see the importance of an educated, informed society in fighting the rise of totalitarianism worldwide, even the most ardent of Washington's supporters of commercial radio's aversion to the establishment of a public system changed their tune. The 20-channel set-aside on the new FM band codified the American public radio system.

Once and for all, each community knew it had spectrum available to build a non-commercial educational public service radio station as a source of community information and culture. John Studebaker, Commissioner of the U. S. Office of Education, expressed it best when he wrote in 1936 that "we must learn how to gear this powerful twentieth century instrument of mass communication to the high aims of social order."

The framework of these ideas was widely embraced in public broadcasting circles up through the 1960s. These sentiments inspired much of the rhetoric in conference topics, scholarly writing and working documents as disparate as the 1946 Pacifica Prospectus and the 1967 Carnegie Commission report on public television.

In the last few decades of the 20th Century, however, ideals like these fell out of favor with all but community public stations.

Until now. In an attempt to reposition public broadcasting as distinctive and unduplicated media service, the concept uttered by Ira Robinson is rapidly being rediscovered by broadcasters. To some station leaders, these selfless notions seem a relief, a remedy from the erosion of audience interest as a consequence of the era of consultants and format formulas.

Stations that had comfortably relied on acquired programming to build their service identity now are finding multiple distribution technologies offering what were formerly their franchise vehicles to their audiences. Slowly but surely, the industry atmosphere around acquisitions has changed from talking about custom product to off-the-rack merchandise.

In this climate of national product ubiquity, many broadcasters see original local production and service as their sole competitive strategy.

It is somewhat unflattering to the public service model that through these market considerations, public broadcasters have accidentally stumbled upon something that American cities have never needed more. Disengagement among the American public is at its cynical apex, as few vote, few offer time to shepherd schools, support arts organizations, volunteer at social service agencies. Public service broadcasting's idealistic role as a resource for community involvement and the democratic process may have suddenly become very practical. Public service broadcasters may be the most important resource in helping their cities with the enormous task of building civic engagement.

Ideas like this are very old, and also draw from Jeffersonian principles. Activists for mass media access like Robert McChesney and Noam Chomsky have for years stressed the importance of independent media to democracy's future. Also, NPR's Kevin Klose—a name normally not uttered so effortlessly after Chomsky's and McChesney's—has a ritual of positioning public broadcasting's role as that of fueling an informed democracy when he speaks at public gatherings.

The recasting of public broadcasting's function in this way, though, is at odds with the attitudes of all but a segment of our core audience. In our audience research here in Chicago, none of the occasional listeners and the majority of core listeners thought of radio as contributing to the democratic process, even after facilitators prompted them.

Viewed in detail, it also becomes clear that although free access to information is a central ingredient in democracy, information does not ensure democracy or even support democracy.

Common sense helps us here. Democracy certainly needs, as one of its essentials, free dissemination of information and open criticism of public policy. But most importantly, as its very life, it needs something we broadcasters cannot control. It needs action. It requires citizens, in communities, vote, volunteer, build coalitions and organize for change. When this action is restrained by external forces, or abandoned through civic apathy, democracy is at risk.

To be clear, citizen action is what the word “engagement” in the term “civic engagement” means. It does not mean civic curiosity or civic concern. It means participating in the role of citizenship, not through pursuing the knowledge of facts and the formation of opinions solely, but through involvement.

Media cannot make civic engagement happen. Indeed, some theorists like sociologists Robert Putnam and Richard Sennett have stated the inverse— that mass media serves to substantially reduce civic engagement. Interactive media, often praised by its promoters as ideal in this regard is actually seen by many social anthropologists as possibly a greater contributor to disengagement.

Lastly, there’s a little problem in this idea for us. We journalists find prompting civic engagement antithetical to our traditional principles. Journalists do not attempt to inflame the public, nor try to steer their choices and mold their actions. Only propagandists are devoted to those things.

Thus, this laudable goal of keeping democracy alive and healthy as a first principle of public broadcasting is rigidly couched in the realm of lovely, but perhaps unrealistic rhetoric.

One chooses to be engaged or disengaged, one cannot be forced. With one choice you participate in the advancement of civic life, and civic history. With the other you withdraw and take what comes from those who are engaged. In a society when individuality is celebrated and cherished, and rightly so, civic engagement is often replaced by individual, rather than social, solutions to challenges.

The consequences of disengagement affect the community and the individual. For the latter, it involves the ceaseless ritual of convincing oneself that the outside world is unworthy of effort. For the former, the citizens upon

whom social health depends are apathetic or participate in a fragmented fashion and fail to reach acceptable compromises. The society is then unable to move forward: “There is a nasty fly of impotence in the sweet ointment of the kind of freedom that has been shaped through the pressures of individualization,” writes Zygmunt Bauman, “the corrosion and slow disintegration of citizenship.”

Questioning Our Mission, Act 3: Space and Place

We think, and sometimes feel, that we belong to Internet communities, but we are not sure how or in what ways, or whether belonging matters.

—Steven G. Jones

This brings us to the word “community,” central to all of our discussions in public service media.

At first glance, there are competitive conceptions of community that directly affect the relevance of public broadcasting’s mission. There is, of course, geographic community, the bit of territory we call our home town. But we also know that the Internet, cable services, satellite broadcasting have all brought us the ability to feel part of a much larger global community. The commerce we engage in on the web, the information we can access, the social networking we can find comfort in, all has a global reach.

And so geography is proclaimed dead by various best selling books and national articles ebullient with Internetphilia —droll jargon coined by consultant Korrina Patelis. Exaggerated though this epitaph of real estate is, there is no denying that the Internet has completely eliminated geography’s former boundaries restricting individuals to the communication, commerce, research, and social interaction one finds in close proximity.

Individuals in mind-numbing numbers are part of virtual communities or what Steve Jones calls “cyber-society.” Remarkably it was 1968 when the late J.C.R. Licklider and R.W. Taylor, envisioned the formation of “communities of interest” through computer mediated communication made possible by the networking of computers. Few predictions have been more prescient.

The multiple tools of today’s rich media have amplified this notion of an interactive world of cyber-societies, blogs, forums, sites that house uploaded videos, text, and photographs are virtual neighborhoods and towns where users reside in dwellings of forums, collections of autobiographical archives and personal pages.

The enthusiasts say these are the communities of true democracy. Here individuals express themselves without timidity. Here everyone is equally important and active. Each person is free to share her or his likes and dislikes, advocate for causes, report on topics or events, and distribute information the world should know—all unfiltered, in honest, direct terms.

There are no limits in virtual society, even on one's identity. No opinion is screened or censored. These are societies in which personal freedom is the core mission. To call this non-geographic space misses the point. This might be all geographic space, or none of it. The occupants all have territory as part of their experience, but whether referenced or not, it is not a central aspect of commonality, nor is it an avenue used to access relationships.

The vacuum created by the absence of territorial boundaries is now occupied by personal locale, and it celebrates personal autonomy with intensity. The “geography” of web 2.0 is a map of “Me,” “My,” “You,” and the lower case “i.” One is never at the mercy of this space; one commands it. Migrating is free of hardship and heartache. One simply vanishes from one's current cyber-community and re-emerges into a new one.

Then there is traditional society, or, “organic community,” a term sociologists sometimes use to avoid distinguishing geographic community as “real.” (The question of legitimacy of cyber-society is pointless. For users, virtual community is real and to suggest otherwise is to dismiss its formidable allure). Society—organic community—is what we think of when we picture ourselves encountering other people, those familiar to us and those who are strangers, in our cities and towns. It's the world outside our doors, in our neighborhoods, our streets and avenues.

Society occupies specific geographic space, real soil-through-the-fingers territory, capable of being viewed from different angles, perceived and valued differently by different individuals, but, fully formed. This is organic landscape, a setting not imagined into being, not portable, not easily altered or influenced through our efforts. This territorial environment we'll call place.

Place makes its presence known, even if we choose to ignore it. If cyberspace is where possibilities are limitless, place is where possibilities are restrained. One has to deal with it, Edward S. Casey wrote, “in its stubborn, indeed its rebarbative, particularity.”

Yet for all of the advantages of socializing in cyberspace, there is primeval hunger for place, “the material, local

presence,” as Jean-Luc Nancy sees it. Place still resonates powerfully as the trigger for personal and societal memory. As Casey believes, it is where “nearness” is perceived and possible, the intimacy of face-to-face daily encounters.

There is no question that the FCC mandate of localism is geographically based, and remains firmly so. The most recent clarifying documents by the commission on this are byproducts of the implementation of Low Power FM allocations in the first half of this decade.

Led by then-FCC Chair Michael Powell, a series of national hearings on public service squarely confirmed the FCC's 1946 definition of public interest measurement by those residing the service areas—giving primacy to geographic relevance.

Refuting criticism that the FCC had far too liberally allowed consolidation under the 1996 Act, the proclamations issued use some of the strongest statements about the critical nature of distinctive, non-centralized service in the corpus of FCC record.

Localism “requires stations to be responsive to the particular needs and interests of their communities,” reads Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein's 2004 statement. He continues, “Localism means providing opportunities for local self-expression... It means dedicating the resources to discover and address the unique needs of every segment of the community.” Chairman Powell is more definitive in these documents. “Fostering localism is one of this Commission's core missions.”

As clarifying and reassuring as this is, it's not a good place to stop our exploration. Yes, this mandate drives broadcasters to emphasize place. Yet all around us, we see the increasing disconnection to place in the daily lives of many in our community and country. Thus, it seems that we have been mandated tickets on the slow train to irrelevance.

We kept looking for more motivation to invest in place than this. It must be something that comes not from regulators on the outside, but from the lives of the listeners in our community. Seeking it proved very difficult in the fog of Internetphilia swirling around us. And the surface view was not encouraging.

Research with the most loyal public radio users over the last half decade makes it clear that core listeners would be unaware of what Powell described as a fundamental FCC mandate. That is, unprompted, the core audience does not rank localism very high, if at all, in public radio's “core mission.”

So, back to the questions: in our digital world, in an interdependent global society, in a world of transnational economics and, especially with the support of individual autonomy through IP device access, is there a reason for our listeners to be connected to their geographic community, society itself?

Some—not us—answer this by saying, they have to. If listeners are not redirected to place, society will fail, communities will fail. Denis McQuail describes the efforts of some North American and European broadcasters to build community through radio using the tenets of a socio-political movement called communitarianism. These stations answer (or gently evade) the above questions, by stressing the obligation the citizen holds to place.

Communitarianism is attractive because it excites one's nostalgia; it promises a return to the close, mutually supportive community. To do this, it relies on principles articulated by John Dewey and Alexis De Tocqueville, holding individualization and personal autonomy as antithetical to community building.

That is, communitarians see the individual's desire to be different eroding the strength of the social whole. True citizenship, in this view, requires us to shed differences for the common good and build civic unity in real towns and cities--real places.

Others may disagree, but we strongly feel these ideas are completely inappropriate for public service broadcasting. In our view, public broadcasters should not proselytize about community obligations. People will become engaged in place when it is beneficial to them to do so. And it would be outrageous and detrimental to demand that people sacrifice their differences to seek commonality. Commonality in our communities is both impossible and completely undesirable. As we will argue later, it is difference that creates a strong community.

So why, beyond mandate, should broadcasters focus on our listeners' need to know about, care about, and become actively involved with the place they live in? The answer is citizenship. Not citizenship as a classification, not citizenship as an obligation, but citizenship as a practice. Place is citizenship's universe. Only place allows for citizenship.

Thus Internet space cannot substitute for territorial place in serving the mission we had chosen, civic engagement. At some point, no matter what technologies Chicago Public Radio might employ in public service media, we had to point listeners to place as the field where the citizenship

means something. In spite of all of the internet's democratic spirit, and its celebration of individual freedom and expression, computer mediated communication and virtual community is operationally disconnected from democracy.

Why? The instruments and institutions of democracy, those that actually retool policy, law, welfare, education, and economic opportunity, can be observed, but not touched from cyberspace. The courts, the legislatures, the agencies that guide our communities, the elected bodies that provide our services, enforce our laws, distribute resources for the education of our children and support our cultural expression are stubbornly rooted in soil, assigned to territory. In Greek democracy place and politics are united in the same word: the community over which citizens had dominion was called the polis, from which the word "politics" is derived.

So, even if localism were not lucidly defined as part of our FCC mandate, public service broadcasters must connect audiences to place. Without connection to place no individual can practice being a citizen. Only place allows us to be political.

This is not to deny that politics are alive and well in cyberspace. The internet has been monumentally significant in galvanizing interest and multiplying efforts in organizing, activism, raising funds, staging interactive town halls, breaking news and fact finding, petitioning, and campaigning.

But the politics we are exploring are not those of today's give and take, veto threats, lobbying, accusations and admissions, Democrats, Republicans.

We are discussing the social meaning of politics, politics as the engine of democracy, a right of citizenship —the political process. As Zygmunt Bauman defines it, politics represent those actions "in which meaningful and effective interventions can be made into the way our collective life is lived."

When it comes to the political process, the actual advancement of society, to the implementation of reforms, laws, and legislation, cyberspace is mere rehearsal in the political process. In our democracy, place is the source of political power.

Here geography reigns. To illustrate, the city, region and state where one is registered and verified represents the arena of the highest level of one's ability and authority to shape processes and laws. As one becomes more distant from these centers of citizenship, one's participation is

massed with increasing numbers of citizens and becomes less instrumental in shaping outcomes than one would desire. More distant still, in global affairs for example, the citizen leaves the sphere of political power entirely.

Our use of the word “power” here is also particular and seminal. The English word, “power,” has a Latin root, *posse* from the verb *potere*, meaning literally “to be able.” This Latin word refers to the ability to wield force, to control or influence.

In the first democracy, the Athenians used a different word to describe civic power, *dynamis* from the verb *dynasthai*. This also is “ability,” but in a very different sense: this is the not ability to apply force, but the ability to create growth, energy, or movement (e.g., from this same root come the English words, “dynamic” and *dynamo*”).

Our identification with a specific place remains as central to the democratic process today as it did in the Greco-Athenian world. Political advocates in Internet space may use power —*posse*—the power of pressure and force, but it is only once they become civically engaged in a place, that their judgments are institutionalized through the democratic process. They now can volunteer; they now can vote. They become citizens in a democracy wielding *dynamis*, the power of forward movement, progress, and growth.

As Peter Fuss explains, democracy brings people together to act in concert with the fundamental political power they share together. It is an act of freedom “whose success relies heavily upon the arts of persuasion and mutual accommodation.” Hanna Arendt in *On Revolution* goes further, maintaining that this very process of sharing one’s constitutionally granted power with that of others creates an augmented power, directed through institutions of authority to change the lives of all.

Arendt also sees this as different from *posse*, the power of pressure—that power individuals or large groups use in mobilizing for causes. She holds fundamental political power more significant than pressure, or *posse*, because it maps future history: “All political business is, and always has been, transacted within an elaborate framework of ties and bonds for the future—such as laws and constitutions, treaties and alliances—all of which derive in the last instance from the faculty to promise and to keep promises in the face of the essential uncertainties of the future.”

Cyber-society has muscle: through blogs, advocacy web sites, e-petitions, forums and viral messaging, one’s opinions on various political and social matters can be shared widely

and loudly; one can create public awareness, and pressure officials. But one’s authority, one’s *dynamis*, in affecting future change is absent, unless one finally participates in the democratic process through sovereign institutions in society, in place.

Questioning Our Mission, Epilogue: A World of One’s Own

Myspace.com, a place for friends.

— Slogan, Myspace.com

There are friends and enemies. And there are strangers.

— Zygmunt Bauman

Internet users desire to affect change, to change tastes, to advance ideas. The sense of outcome, of power, and political action on the internet is strong. It is not surprising that Myspace.com invitingly calls their recently introduced political activism section “Impact.” The Internet is a lodestone for the kind of sensibilities that drive the public broadcasting core, but it directs those sensibilities into self-selected hallways. The assumption becomes that a critical mass of commonality yields communal achievement.

This, we believe, is not only misguided, but a severe challenge to the civic health of modern communities—that is, communities in places. Individualization, isolation, disenchantment with the political process has curbed communication between people in the places where they live and has rerouted much of it to the space of cyber-society. There, commonality is the generator of communication and is valued as the highest motivation for relationships.

When we ourselves adopt commonality as our personal standard, which does not take long when attracted to cyber-social networking, the differences one inevitably encounters on the streets of our cities are made all the more unattractive and threatening to us.

This curtails the flow of communication, the sharing of different views, the ability to reach compromise in society itself. In time, civic engagement—involvement in the cultural and political life of places—becomes a reality for fewer and fewer of the residents.

Each of us has already elevated commonality in our daily lives. Commonality is so seductive that we even attempt to maintain time in cyber-society while our bodies go through the motions of moving through society itself.

We surf Blackberrys and respond to cyber-communication in the midst of being confined in a meeting, in a place, with others who requested our presence. Our bodies are there; true, but our minds blur what is happening in this place to incorporate the comfort of virtual space.

We maintain cell phone conversations as we commute alone or in crowded vehicles. We select items from the aisles of a grocery store while guiding our carts through the clusters of strangers. We text-message at all moments of repose, alone, in a park on a lovely day, in the lobby of a theater at intermission.

We do these things with the motive of staying “connected,” of not losing touch. But to do this we readily disconnect from place. Throughout our public day we seek ways of living in a portable, familiar world while at the same time excusing ourselves from interacting with an unfamiliar corporeal one. All of this disconnection from surrounding reality limits our energy, communication, and engagement in the polis —the city and communities that depend on our attention, consideration, and participation.

The solution for many is to create, in place, what they value in space. When commonality erodes in cyberspace and our differences with fellow cybercitizens grow, we merely leave and re-emerge in a more affirming space on the web.

In place, the same action results in the planned development, the “cul-de-sac” neighborhood, the gated community. In places like this, neighbors create micro communities of commonality. Here there are shared values, protection of standards, safety, and the exclusion of “others” who might be insensitive to the quality of life being protected.

And these “cities-within-the-city” are attractive to an increasing number of individuals. But there is a price to be paid.

Beginning as early as the 1960s, these controlled “communities of interest” in real places have been studied by cultural anthropologists, urban planners, and sociologists like Richard Sennett.

Over the years it has been consistently noted how the civic disengagement that brings these individuals together can result in developments or neighborhoods with very high levels of intolerance, suspicion, elitism, and bigotry.

In Sennett’s classic work on this subject, *The Uses of Disorder*, he documents how among other things, planned communities such as these drive residents to a state of

constant vigilance. The goal of security, of knowing that the desired isolation has not been subverted within, nor has been threatened by the strangers without, frequently rises to a primal, shared fear.

In all cases, residents of these artificial communities in real cities live daily with uneasiness. Ironically, Sennett found the anxiety described above to be seldom experienced as intensely by those living in the crowded, diversely populated neighborhoods outside the gated walls.

Society’s strength is based not on similarities, but on differences. This becomes clear when one considers our freedoms, our laws, and our political process. All were designed to recognize to protect, and to benefit from, individual difference. Democratic politics have never demanded commonality. They are crafted so that we retain our differences but compromise on a shared goal.

This kind of process is rarely found on the Internet. And even when it is, as in a town hall meeting, for example, there is nothing preventing escape, instant migration. In place, being engaged means dealing with what, and who, is around us. In place, we must practice compromise and confront disagreement. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, the requisite that yields broad civic engagement, healthy cities, and a thriving democracy in the 21st Century is developing the capacity to live in a world of differences.

Aristotle in his *Politics* said as much; he stresses the importance of difference, and is suspicious of commonality: “There is a point at which the polis, by advancing in all unity, will cease to be a polis; but will none the less come near to losing its essence. . . . It as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or reduce a theme to a single beat.”

We’ve tried to share with you our view that for public broadcasters, serving geographic community — our local social environment — is what the FCC means when it talks about “public service.” We’ve seen that this is central to the mandate of licensee to operate in the public interest, convenience and necessity.

We’ve also seen that stressing the importance of local place is central to pointing listeners in the direction where they can make real progress happen, through contributing to the society, and participating in its culture. And through the real power to change the future through the political process they are managing their city and their nation.

The FCC mandate is all the more challenging, not only because it limits the definition of community to places, but

it also represents a massive challenge in building relevance into one's public service offerings: human beings are not similar to each other because they happen to be in the same city.

That's good, and something to be preserved, but a tall order for content. If aside from a common place, residents share few other commonalities with most of their neighbors, then public broadcasting, after years of targeting and narrowcasting needs to decide how to serve heterogeneity.

Questioning Our Audience

America is too big to see itself. But radio has enabled America to hear itself.

— James Rorty

To discover an avenue to service that might attract a more heterogeneous listenership, we commissioned a two year study that compared the expectations, opinions, and experiences of WBEZ's existing audience with the attitudes of those listeners who had the potential to make use of our station, but who chose not to. This non-listener research was specifically targeted to study potential listeners of color in our service area.

Our researchers made use of all existing Chicago Public Radio research, and extensive studies that had been conducted nationally by the CPB and NPR to set up the characteristic that would determine what factors defined this potential. In brief, here is how it worked.

First, we selected non-listening subjects for eight focus groups based on a minimum number of characteristics that might be indicators that the individuals selected were potential listeners. We were looking for commitment to residency in the area, concern about the area's future, and the need to learn about the area, the nation, and the world.

For commitment to the area we used indicators of stability, a lower middle class income and length of residency. For concern, we filters these subjects for volunteerism of any kind, attending community policing meetings, volunteering at schools or libraries, and so on and voting regularity. For desire to learn, we screened for college education or the equivalent (such as completion of community college or technical college programs), and daily media use. In addition we screened at least radio use of 3 hours per week.

We divided these non-listener groups into all Asian-American, African-America, Latino, and mixed racial and ethnic groups, of balanced gender and age mixes. Facilitators were different for each of the groups chosen on

their research training with the specific races or ethnicities of the subject groups.

The participants were asked to listen to WBEZ for one week and keep detailed diary of their reactions to our programming. They then discussed these diaries in two-hour sessions.

After conducting the focus immersion groups, we sent, from an address not associated with Chicago Public Radio, a thirty-one question survey to 20,000 listeners in the region. The survey's questions were designed to further explore non-listener issues raised during the focus sessions. We received 2,155 completed surveys from this phase of the research.

The most important lesson was that information and discussion about our shared place, our local community, is an intense interest of the non-traditional potential public radio listeners we seek to attract.

African-American, Latino, and Asian-American non-listeners in our surveys and focus groups placed their highest value on local service. They sought it in our broadcast day rabidly and they held it to high standards, not of production quality, but of accuracy and relevance.

They were highly critical of what they heard. Unlike our traditional core, which has minor interest in local issues and is more captivated by national and international topics, minority listeners seek connection with place in almost all parts of public affairs programming.

Acquired programming, so critical to our success, proved to be a center of dissatisfaction with these listeners. It also made the station's local service mission less credible in their eyes. This is possibly because non-local acquisitions airing at prime listening times served to shape the overall impression of what Chicago Public Radio was all about.

Our original productions, which have won widespread acclaim among the core as comprehensively dealing with the local community, clearly did not counterbalance this non-local skew for minority non-listeners. Their general displeasure was best expressed by a participant who remarked with disgust, "Chicago Public Radio is not about Chicago."

There was, though, something else. Many of these non-listeners were already biased against the idea of public broadcasting. I am not talking here about a bias fueled by perceptions of public broadcasting having a left-leaning political slant. That did surface with a few participants, but it seemed disconnected from this larger bias. And the bias

was deep. The NPR and PBS brands, our own “Chicago Public Radio” brand, and the terms “public radio,” “public television,” and “public broadcasting,” were seen very negatively.

While these predisposed listeners were predictably critical, other listeners, who had no familiarity with our service and had not prejudged it, they also found displeasure in the same issues as the predisposed.

Nearly all tested listeners felt the station was not for them, and was not trying to be for them—that those very things that our core audience treasures and we regard as our most celebrated work, were seen by these listeners to be uninviting. The other side of this coin was that the station was aimed at somebody else —“other people.”

Some could articulate who this “other” target audience was—the well-to-do, the intelligentsia—but most did not try. The recurring theme was that it just wasn’t aimed at them. These listeners found us covering issues they cared about only rarely and then not as thoroughly as issues aimed at this “other” audience. The style and pacing they heard, the interviews, the commentaries were largely not attractive and compelling.

Remarkably, those programs we see as our most entertaining and most appealing to new listeners, like our own *This American Life*, *Wait, Wait...Don't Tell Me!* along with Minnesota Public Radio’s *A Prairie Home Companion*, and even WBUR’s *Car Talk*, were perceived to be just as clubby as NPR’s weekly debrief with Cokie Roberts.

So there is no misunderstanding, let me reaffirm that I am merely reporting what the focus groups and the follow-up survey participants told us. The dedication to excellence of our national producers and the great achievements of our Chicago Public Radio production staff remains unchallenged by this report. What we have learned has more to do with determining the avenues we must use to attract minority audiences in our community than it does with the success or failure of our present work.

Most interesting to us, though, was the concluding remarks of our participants. Almost universally, participants in the focus groups, believed in the mission of Chicago Public Radio—what we were trying to do but, in their eyes, failing to do. These perceived goals, which were not provided but accurately derived from a week’s listening were important to them, and viewed by them as being critical to civic health.

This was confirmed in the follow-up survey. African-Americans, especially felt that the city could never move

forward without some media outlet bridging the gaps among different groups of residents so that they might work together and solve the city’s problems.

Questioning Our Approach

We set great ostensible store by intellectual innovation though in fact we resist it...though we value the rigorous adherence to conventional ideas, we never acclaim it.

— John Kenneth Galbraith

As a system of independent stations, our approach to diversifying the appeal of public radio programs has been derivative and linear; basically, we re-package established ideas and approaches. Our national vendors follow this practice as well and provide programs where the content is limited to issues of a specific ethnic, racial, or cultural group, with a host who is from the targeted minority community. In all other respects, from style to sensibilities to structure, these programs have an underlying chassis on which one could build any established national program.

Since we, public radio, have created these minority appeal programs —since they came from our production factories —we are confident that these vehicles will prove the seductive portal that will bring diverse audiences into the mainstream of our service portfolio. The premise is that our programs are successful because of their integrity and quality and that these qualities are capable of drawing anyone to them. Once listening to our minority-targeted program —the logic goes —these audiences will keep listening to the mainstay program which follows in the schedule and soon will enjoy all we have offered to our core for years.

Our research in Chicago showed us that this approach is ineffective at best, and at worst draws attention to the half-hearted effort at diversification it represents. To minority listeners, a program in our schedule, even one with 55% minority appeal is invisible. This program will be couched in hours of shows before and after with perhaps 5% to 7% minority appeal. For those whom we are attempting to reach, this is a neon sign that says our sensibilities are driven by non-minority listeners. It suggests that the minority appeal programming is not offered for their benefit, but for ours. It makes us feel better, because we are trying.

At Chicago Public Radio we abandoned the idea that strip programming is a useful design for a service that celebrates diversity. The stratification of programming for multiple target cultures within the schedule of such a station

—that is, offering different shows about different groups —reinforces the segregation of these points of view in society. It works against our notion that diversity enriches public decision making. This meant we had to structure a broadcast stream that integrates different points-of-view, cultures, interests, and ethnicities into the content, at all times.

By this point it was clear that we were no longer talking about remodeling this old public radio house. We were going to raze it.

Finding Our Architecture: First Rendering: The Elevation

The city is that human settlement in which strangers are most likely to meet. —Richard Sennett

Happily, the blueprints for construction of a new service that inspires civic engagement could now be imagined. First, we would build our concept on the differences, not the commonalities, in our service area. The work of Sennett and others gave us confidence that to have people share their differences would not further fragment the city, but on the contrary, exchange information, develop insight and understanding that could build a community more tolerant of differences.

In such a community, residents can work for outcomes that respect the rights of difference. The differences we would deal with were to be much deeper than those of opposing political agendas, but those of perspectives —of people from different ethnic groups, races, economic classes, geographic areas, different cultural experiences.

Second, we would create a service of broad relevance. This is harder, because it means that we would have to log and track the stories we tell, the issues we cover, music we play and the like to be sure we are doing the hard work of hearing all voices and reflecting them equally in our service. We are committed to doing this systemically, not through stratified “multi-cultural” strip programming, but through a comprehensive poly-cultural approach to all production.

Third, we would use the technologies that reach our audience and redirect them to place. These technologies would be employed in ways that capture attention and elevate difference as a prime attraction. They would highlight stories of ordinary people and their actions. These technologies would be structured to turn isolation into interaction, encourage repeated and prolonged contact, and

provide a resource of stored energy for users’ ongoing civic and cultural needs.

All three of the above features of this blueprint — the elevation of difference, the centrality of poly-culturalism, and our technologies positioned to exchange and transmit of stories of place—are now deeply inset in our two services, WBEZ and :Vocalo. In fact one of them, the third ingredient, became the mold from which we cast :Vocalo.

Finding Our Architecture: Next Rendering: The General Floor Plan

Contemporary humanity speaks in many voices . . . The central issue of our times is how to reforge that polyphony into harmony and prevent it from degenerating into cacophony. Harmony is not uniformity; it is an interplay of a number of different motifs, each retaining its separate identity and sustaining the resulting melody through, and thanks to, that identity. —Zygmunt Bauman

In “Electronic Networks and Civil Society,” German sociologists Barbara Becker and Josef Wehner saw that broadcast alone has the opportunity “to reach an unlimited number of people in the same form and at the same time.” This is what individuals using social networks on the Internet desire but cannot achieve on the web. As liberating as the Internet is, Becker and Wehner continue, “users never know if they have reached a mass public or not.”

The ambition to be heard by all, to have one’s voice or creative work beamed to everyone at the same time remains the hidden highest goal of all, including Internet users. This is not motivated only by ego, but also impact. The desire to make a mark.

Everyone understands on an innate level that being heard is what gives meaning to the right of free speech. Only by being heard can we have the faintest hope that what we have to contribute might really make a difference to society.

There is wide communication of ideas, expression, and issues on the Internet. But yet there remains the need for another medium of communication — a medium that allows for mass presentation of selected ideas. That medium is broadcasting. This touches the nerve of mass media activists.

Abuse is possible in this: mass media providers can filter what is widely distributed to serve their own political, religious, or social ends. But even activists would say that

this is also where public broadcasting can earn the public's trust and loyalty by not abusing this license.

Becker and Wehner stress that mass media remain an important translator "supporting specific kinds of selection and inclusion" in bringing the concepts found in volume and variety of expression on the Internet to the entire community.

The integration of broadcast's unifying simultaneity (but lack of access) and the Internet's broad, deep, trusted contact (but bias toward fragmentation) seemed like the marriage of opposites. This could help us make an exciting set of experiences that in the end could make our community stronger.

We knew this path would have value, and not just to WBEZ. And, the time seemed right to introduce a radical version of this technology "marriage" for Northwest Indiana, to serve its needs on our Chesterton station, since we could now improve that signal for those listeners.

So we began last spring to develop the idea of a union between web and broadcast, serving the same mission, aimed at a diverse audience that was likely to be younger than our WBEZ core, as a consequence of building the idea so integrally around the web.

There are many models for the intimate association of the web and broadcast. Christopher Lydon's superb *Open Source*, a radio program about ideas where web conversations and postings shape the program and lead to an afterlife extension of the broadcast experience, is public radio's finest achievement in this realm. And there are other unions like this outside of public radio.

There have been terrestrial radio stations that broadcast podcasts as most of their schedule, and other experiments, and no doubt there will be more. In cable television, there is *Current TV*, a cable television channel featuring videos created by users. There will be others.

We wanted something else—outcomes more specific than those produced by these projects. Our sound, our site, and the content we presented had to reflect the poly-cultural region we serve. We wanted to build our idea on the concepts of co-construction, but as much as possible to center all this on narrative.

For us, the most notable and inspiring work in this vein has been done abroad, by the BBC. In an article I wrote for *Current* in 2002, I praised a program on BBC Radio 4 called *Home Truths*, the product of the late John Peel and a gifted staff.

This show, which was cancelled on Peel's death, was based on contributed personal stories (in a pre-upload era, users provided these through text on the Internet or through voice mail). The CBC's superb *Outfront* is another inspiration. Both of these programs are based on narrative.

But unlike shows, which are a concentrated and finite experience, we wished to create a full service resource that provided the community with an ongoing set of experiences that performed the Chicago Public Radio mission. Therefore our challenge was to craft all of our creative structure on the base of our mission and to be sure that all of the points of audience contact of :Vocalo—the two mass technologies of broadcast and web and all events and partnerships—advanced that mission.

In short, the marriage of IP technology and broadcast for us, had to, at all times, inspire listeners and users to civic engagement.

Our first task was to design a relationship between a radio station and a web site differently, using web 2.0 social networking as an inspiration of how that might be best achieved.

To aid our thinking, we inverted our notion of a web site as a supplement to radio listening. We had to think, as did Ken Freedman of WFMU in New Jersey, that radio listening can as easily be an offshoot, enhancement, or supplement to the web experience as the other way around.

The technique would not be to just promote the radio station on the site. We hoped for an intersection through which potential audience can be reached, intrigued, and attracted to our radio station and then travel back to the Internet again.

Building this intersection meant that we had to have a web experience that blended seamlessly with the direction of travel—a social networking site that fulfills the expectations of a sophisticated web user today.

We must use both the site and the broadcast service to direct users to the community in actual society in our service area and beyond, inspiring them to become civically engaged, through stories of people making a difference, in their own way, through action. We believe this can be done without becoming advocates or activists ourselves.

The use of events as the third component of :Vocalo came from this notion of pointing back to society, place, and action. Just as importantly, it provides contact with the listeners in the service area who depend on the broadcast

service because they are unable to, or don't care to, access our web site.

Our events are conducted twice a month and roam throughout the geography of our region. We conduct these at venues provided by our partner institutions or community groups. Our hosts and the public meet. While we also convene serious town meetings on issues at public settings, the regular events are highly informal, gatherings with music and food and lots of communication.

In addition we offer telephonic options for off-line interaction and are in the process of completing designs for audio kiosks to be placed throughout the area, in collaboration with institutional partners.

Thus the three fold service in brief is the triad of broadcast, IP-based media, and events.

Our underlying technique to provide access to audience, the vehicle we use to drive that audience in every direction through the intersection, is narrative.

:Vocalo functions as a link, through narrative, among people who occupy a common place that affects their daily lives but who are likely, in an individualized society, to be unknown to each other.

:Vocalo is about the people we live among, people who are different from us, and different from each other. Because they are different, they are all the more critical to understand. It is with these individuals that we will work in our shared city and our country to create progress.

This mission is the filter through which our output passes, but it is never proclaimed, never preached. The thoughts I've recorded in this document to share with you, our professional colleagues, drive our purpose but are never talked about on air, not even in passing. We simply strive to make them real in our work.

Finding Our Architecture: Floor Plan Detail

IP-Based Media: The Web

The :Vocalo web site is the main point of entry, our intersection in the thoroughfare used by many socially-conscious, curious individuals. While five years ago, a divide in Internet access existed between our core audience and the non-listening target audience we outlined above, our research demonstrates to us that this divide has been closing quickly.

Nevertheless, the Internet filters out some of our target audience, and therefore, as mentioned above, the events and non-Internet interactive paths, like voicemail, call-ins, and field recording are intensely pursued.

Vocalo.org on the web might be considered a local resource and social networking site with hyper-local and shared interest sections. It does what Internet does best, allowing users to seek the information they need, craft islands of common interaction and opinion, and make their mark as individuals. The site allows for personal web pages, blogs, uploading of video, audio, pictures, or text or the linking to these features.

The web site is built to meet the expectations of web 2.0 regulars. It allows for personal pages or links to them, personal blogs, where one can upload video, audio, photographs, and post text. This can be done using underlying architecture in the site itself, or by linking to other sites like YouTube, Flickr, MySpace and others. Media other than text that is posted is also housed in a media database that allows people access to all uploaded videos for example, and gives other users an opportunity to critique them. There are only a few rules about posting, restricting these and few others to keep the filtering of the site to a minimum. In addition, one can create communities of common interest — forums, resource pages and so on.

Our goal is to use the technology of Internet social networking exactly as it best functions from the user point of view. Commonality and individualism are the strength of these sites. That's why people seek them out. So we allow and encourage common areas, common interest forums, specialized resource pages.

Into this chemistry we add the :Vocalo hosts. Among their tasks is not only to maintain their own host page and blog but to visit other personal pages or common community pages. They do this regularly. Their goal is not to post their own opinions, or take a community to task, but to point users to other conversations, forums, videos, audio pieces elsewhere on the site that have a relationship to the thread in question.

“Cross-posting” is the bit of web jargon that describes this, but not really sufficiently. We call it “crossing the streams” in honor of Chicagoan Harold Ramis of *Ghostbusters*. The goal here is to do more than provide a link that regular users of that section might wish to explore. It is to haul them to the highlighted material.

But for the fact that they are hosts, well known to :Vocalo users by their ubiquity on the site and on-air, and for the

glimmer of hope that the way regulars respond to the host's "crossing the streams" could be used as an imminent broadcast, the regulars would boot the interloper from the page.

No doubt, in spite of these advantages, the hosts occasionally will be given the hook by the regulars. But they will reappear, any one of them, but only when connections can be made.

The hosts copy audio files, video files, whole threads of conversation and paste these into the real estate they used for their surprise visit on the individual's or the community's page. They perform a parallel posting in reverse, using material from the page they've "crashed" to indicate to the referent community that the "crossing" has been done. This provides two opportunities for discussion and interaction and cross-posting by each set of users.

Hosts do this respectfully and always with a productive motive. It's hard to skim over. And, invariably, the material the host is introducing represents in some way a different perspective to each community's dominant view. These users know the broadcast is structured in this way—exploring opposing lenses, different experiences, economic classes, races, ethnicities—and thus a "stream crossing" to something different will be expected, and, we believe, accepted.

Thus, a platform that is best used to create areas of individualism and commonality can be stirred, and used to perform our mission of bringing all perspectives into the consciousness of the :Vocalo population. The Internet remains fragmented public space and which, in the words of Barbara Becker and Josef Wehner, house "partial publics."

Our Vocalo.org site, like its broadcast component, is an attempt to create, through the presence of trusted hosts, and a broadcast service that explores differences as an underlying theme, opportunities for what Richard Sennett would call "strangers meeting."

Broadcast Media: Radio

On air, public radio's mission is at work without the proscenium of public radio's identity. All segments and selections are in the 5-7 minute range and are archived on line in searchable repositories. These segments are selected and produced for a long shelf life, allowing future broadcast, posting in multiple internet locations, as well as downloading to mobile IP-based devices.

:Vocalo.org moves. To the ear, the station is simply a host, leading the listener through a series of short segments,

no longer than seven minutes, a collage of commentaries, personal stories, local satire, music, verity field drop-ins, call-in segments, and ample use of audio, text, and threads uploaded to the web site.

It has a wide, attractively incongruous range of content styles and voices. Our goal is to make an exciting and entertaining meeting place on the radio, one that is inextricably linked to the meeting place that is our web site.

The hosts are selected for their understanding of social dynamics and community chemistry. They are to have a dynamic spirit, a natural vocal quality and way of communicating, a background in creative work, and exceptional understanding of Interactive media and the mindset of Web 2.0. Radio production skills, and radio experience, are among the least important of the qualifications on which candidates are chosen.

We encourage our on-air personnel to host in the best tradition of Web 2.0. The approach is altruistic, not egoistic. Every voice in every segment is presented with respect, familiarity, and comfort. We never make fun of stories or commentaries.

Our hosts were chosen as persons, not radio personalities, with the notion of attracting the participation of all listeners, many of whom become passive when the dominant character of a radio station is the host on air. Our hosts are present and interesting, but their job is not to draw audience to them, but to draw attention to the real "star attractions" —the stories and cultural expression they are presenting, content that fascinates because it is genuine and from people who, just like them, are residents here.

Behind our choices though, are the ideas of diversity, difference, and action. Our hosts choose material, collected at our events, uploaded to Vocalo.org, or produced by the :Vocalo staff to inspire cross-cultural understanding and civic engagement, strictly operating under the mandate of public service.

Even though our function is not a journalistic one (we consider our work narrative, not citizen journalism), we recognize that appearing to take sides, or to prefer certain voices to others, will erode our value as a meeting place for all. We attempt to do all of this at a level of energy and creative influence that the visionaries of civic agency had written about since radio's creation.

It attracts audiences and users through the primeval seduction of the personal story, a visceral leveler of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and age, coming as Susan Douglas'

explains from human “preliteracy.” :Vocalo provides a non-threatening arena in which users may tell their stories, make their presence, thoughts, and personalities known in community. It then selects these stories for broadcast to create a cross-cultural picture of the service area. It stresses differences, not commonalities, because differences fuel both the diversity of voices and build cross-cultural awareness of points of view. This structure stems from the mission directly, but the mission remains well concealed.

There, through the stories of those active in our community, we can demonstrate that the ambitions of users in cyber-society, whatever they are, indeed can be achieved, but they must be achieved in society itself. In place.

It is driven by what Douglas calls “exploratory listening,” except here one explores not spectrum, but voices. This principle was used in some of most celebrated documentaries and *This American Life*. These are distinctive, unpredictable, and genuine voices, those of citizens uploaded to :Vocalo.org or collected by our producers at events throughout the service area.

We use broadcast in a curatorial way, celebrating the range of creativity and opinions among our fellow residents. We refer back to our web site as the place where we offer a forum for many voices. But we influence civic health through our broadcasting, making sure that voices are not just speaking but heard—that there is a person reading, listening, or viewing Internet posted material.

The listener would hear nothing to indicate that the station was a public or even community radio station. The term “listener-supported” is never used. There are no pledge drives. Although there are underwriting announcements—offered following FCC rules—there is no formulaic set-up. Because there are no shows, original or acquired, and no acquired segment material that requires public radio producer identification, there is no alphabet soup—NPR, PRI, APM, even Chicago Public Radio, our own brand, are all absent.

Our desire was to do public radio’s mission without sounding like public radio. Although in this way we do not capitalize on any of the stature earned by our own public radio station or national vendors, we also do not carry any of the expectations that this image brings. And we are free to attract the many listeners who react negatively to brands like NPR and PBS or public broadcasting in general.

:Vocalo is fueled by stories from people who have something to share—art, music, commentaries, points of view, positions, concerns, triumphs, and humor—

something that says something about them. They are stories of involvement. Most importantly, they tell of making a difference, bringing attention to ideas and concerns. Their stories bring into the realm of possibility the notion that civic action is—for some—a daily part of living.

When face to face participation with others through artistic expression, volunteerism, activism, and cooperative effort seems more like a daily part of life, then, without advocating for specific types of action, :Vocalo can provide the interest and inspiration that may build a vital city. When we celebrate differences of opinions, viewpoints, and concerns, we begin to build a consciousness of the value of difference, and just possibly set the stage for a less fragmented city.

The public service we provide is to bring together, virtually and actually, the whole range of strangers who occupy (and have stewardship over) the same specific place. We reach them where they are right now. We convene them through multiple community partnerships, activities and events. And we fully exploit the attractiveness of internet social networking.

On WBEZ we offer this through the area’s sole full-service news and information radio station, with broad-based coverage of our service area and public interactivity. And, on :Vocalo, Chicago Public Radio’s public service non-commercial mission, unchanged, is being presented in experimental, distinctive approaches, free of the rituals of traditional mainstream public radio.

Our aim and our hope is that the universality of the stories told will fuel the process of draining fear out of confronting differences. We intend to create a place in which each individual’s story is offered in a context where it is equal with all others. This respect for individuals is not only to provide a trusted, welcoming service, but to send the message, as Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, “that it is precisely the guarding of other identities that maintains the diversity in which one’s own uniqueness can thrive.”

This interaction and inspiration among the individuals who use our service, not our prompting, is to be what ultimately inspires civic engagement. Action in a place, by more Chicago area residents in civic affairs, community events, and cultural expression, is the outcome we hope to have helped make possible.

As we experiment with these concepts on :Vocalo, we will begin to adapt those that resonate and are suitable in the original production we offer on WBEZ, within the more formal journalistic rigors of our flagship service. We are well on our way in WBEZ’s emphasis on community

enterprising in our professional newsgathering, where we have established area bureaus, moderated multiple community meetings, and funded internships of new talent recruited, not by us, but by community partner organizations.

Questioning to Come

But the essence of the public space does not refer only to ‘final decisions;’ if it did, it would be more or less empty. It refers as well to the presuppositions of the decisions, to everything that leads to them.

— Cornelius Castoriadis

Manna

:Vocalo will be funded in its first two years through significant foundation grants and Chicago Public Radio venture funds. On an ongoing basis, although the station will air underwriting messages, the web is the primary source of funding for the service, largely through advertising, e-commerce, layered subscriptions for institutional restricted use, and donations.

Metrics

Briefly, our metrics include comprehensive web behavioral, coming Arbitron PPM mobile media and cross-media analysis, conventional Arbitron data—especially those of cumulative audience and demographic, gender, and age composition—“Buzzmetrics” and revenue generation. We are also centrally involved in prototyping a new measurement system for cross-platform initiatives, which is in development by Chicago’s Doblin Group.

The quality of life metric reigns: we must make progress in realizing our goal of contributing to the civic health of our community. This can only be measured through professionally conducted area surveys, which we will conduct every two years. This metric is our priority because it is only in this way that we can determine if we are answering the most urgent public interest, convenience, and necessity needs for our service area.

Merit

Our desire to serve the public interest, convenience and necessity of our region in an essential, indispensable, unduplicated way, led us to reexamine our purpose, practice, and production. We re-forged both our stations to be relevant arenas for the exploration of issues and cultural expression about local, national, and world events representing the full range of voices of the polycultural population of the Chicago metropolitan area.

I’ve mentioned some of the ways in which WBEZ is to do this—satellite bureaus, paid fellowships for promising journalists who are representative of our city’s diversity. But also serving WBEZ’s evolution in this regard is the work we are doing on :Vocalo. What we learn there will immediately enrich our enhancement of WBEZ’s service. As listeners traditionally not attracted to public radio, or radio at all, the daily exposure to public radio’s mission in practice on Vocalo.org just may provide an appreciation of the spirit of that mission in all media. We may help to create the next generation—a young, poly-cultural one—of public service media users.

:Vocalo is an integration of IP-based media, community events, and radio broadcasting. All these three vectors together represent the sum of the parts. They are designed to create their effect interdependently. The mission cannot be fulfilled with any one component operating alone. They capture and benefit the audience in complementary and mutually dependent ways, and they prompt use that oscillates among all three.

Our staff, board, and advisory council started this by discovering that in spite of purchasing excellent programming from vendors like NPR and PRI, and in spite of our being the creators of some of the best and most celebrated production and journalism in public radio, we were viewed as irrelevant by large portions of our changing community. This was disconcerting, and we took a lesson in that feeling of disquiet and disorientation.

In the end, both of our broadcast services, WBEZ and :Vocalo, must be resources designed to be relevant to all. No one, because of her economic class, the location of his home within the service area, her race, gender, ethnicity, background, or point-of-view, should feel unrepresented in our work. Nor should they sense being unwelcome as a listener and user.

Beyond providing listeners with enjoyment and satisfying their curiosity, stations should be a meeting place which inspires listeners and users to do the work of building a stronger city as they think best.

The Sum of the Parts

Media that live in . . . communities that exist not to profit from their neighbors but to serve them.

—Paula Kerger

We talk about the public radio system. This is a metaphor. There is no such entity. As a collective of independent radio stations, we share our common New Deal birth, but little

else. We must be individual, because we serve communities that are individual.

We stations are a system only functionally. When we perform well, each station providing relevant service to our communities, we can be a most effective system indeed. The success we achieve in inspiring inclusive civic engagement is additive. More participation in the political life of American cities and towns adds to the health of our democracy as a nation.

In 1946, Charles A. Siepmann was what we would call today a media scholar. A former BBC director, Harvard lecturer and FCC consultant, he published extensively on radio's cultural impact. Alarmed by growing commercialism, he reminded the radio industry of the social mandate of licensees in a book somewhat nervously entitled, *Radio's Second Chance*:

The FCC's recognition of the importance of fostering the pride and maintaining the vitality of local communities reflects an attitude cherished throughout America and vital to the well-being of democracy... [For] vigorous community life is vital to a proper understanding of practical democracy. Democratic principles are liable to become remote and meaningless abstractions unless exemplified and practiced in the circumscribed familiar field of local life. It is there that democracy's lessons are best taught. It is there that the ordinary citizen, through personal participation, may find the tangible analogies for principles and policies on which he is called to pass judgment in the wider, more complex context of national and international affairs.

Perhaps now it is public radio's second chance to be a more relevant resource that entertains, educates, and broadens cross-cultural understanding in our communities of license.

If public broadcasting loses its vitality, the reason won't be that new technologies have swept away the radio tower and the need for wide-reaching wireless media. The cause will be our own rigidity in neglecting to join broadcasting with new media that can enliven and enhance the content we produce. We have effectively disconnected from those we are mandated to serve. Until we wrestle our content out of the vise of tradition, we will be incapable of helping our communities ignite the ideas that support their evolution.

To some people, the FCC's mandate to broadcasters—to serve the public interest, convenience and necessity—may be frustratingly nonspecific, but I've come to realize that it holds us more accountable than if it strictly defined what we

should do. Every station serves a different place, each with a population that grows and changes. Embracing this mandate for service is constantly challenging because we must incessantly question the value of our work as our service areas evolve.

This evolution should be our compass, perpetually guiding us to anticipate and answer community needs. It should electrify our daily, determined re-invention of media in the public interest. ■

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