Voices dot Com Partners With VocaliD

Today (Feb 25th), via BusinessWire:

*“Voices Dot Com, the world’s largest marketplace for procuring voice recordings, and VocaliD, a leading provider of synthetic voices, have today formed a partnership that will benefit brands looking to create their own synthetic voices for smart speakers and other voice applications.”*

This partnership has significant implications for the voiceover business. The press release clearly states that Voices Dot Com will now have access to VocaliD’s *“cutting edge voice AI products and services …”* and *“businesses will have the ability to procure their own unique branded synthetic voice ….”* With a certain amount of spin, the release continues on to say that Voice AI isn’t replacing talent, but that it *“augments and empowers them to meet the changing demands of the digital voice revolution.”* Voices Dot Com cites 500,000 registered users now having the ability to audition for more jobs with VocaliD’s technology.

The press release gave few facts about how the partnership will work, but we know some things about the two companies involved:

VocaliD: Most came to know VocaliD in 2015 when they actively embraced the VO community, looking for volunteers to donate their voices for AI projects to help those with speech disabilities. Many donated. Synthetic voices are becoming more commonplace every year, and VocaliD are at the forefront of this technology. Many voice talent view the rise of AI speech synthesis as a threat to the industry and their own livelihoods, and will raise red flags each time a large text-to-speech project comes along.

Voices Dot Com: Most voiceover talent are aware of who VDC are and what they represent. As VDC is a major P2P supplier in the voiceover marketplace, World-Voices keeps a watching brief on how they are benefitting their talent roster and the industry as a whole. VDC has often been criticized for its lack of transparency with regards to its charging model (management fees) and the fact that changes to these fees are often made by a simple, and unheralded, change to their Terms of Service. More disturbingly, Article 6 in their Terms of Service (ToS) states that any (non-union) work submitted through their platform is subject to the following, *“… the Talent assigns to [Voices Dot Com] all right, title and interest, absolutely, to the copyright and other intellectual property in or relating to the Talent’s Non-Union Work Product throughout the world, free of all licenses, mortgages, charges or other encumbrances, unless agreed otherwise by the parties in writing.”* This is open to interpretation, but it is a matter of record that work submitted for a particular purpose (web use) has been repurposed by and sold as broadcast, with no further compensation to the talent. It is clear that any work submitted to Voices Dot Com can be reused in a manner which VDC deems appropriate, with no further consideration of the talent.

Voices Dot Com has a massive database of work submitted through them (over ten years’ worth). Do the VDC ToS allow them to use this massive cache of submitted work to be used for the development of AI? Does VocaliD now have access to this cache? The legalities of the ToS have yet to be tested, and the finer details of the partnership are, as yet, unknown ... so no accurate conclusions can be drawn at this early stage.

World-Voices has repeatedly highlighted the fact that the Voices Dot Com lack of transparency and their Terms of Service, specifically Article 6, does not serve the best interests of our membership. AI voice synthesis, to a great extent, relies on the the collection of raw material to feed the machine learning algorithms. Whether this partnership will give VocaliD access to Voices Dot Com’s resources is a matter of speculation at the moment, as is the validity of VDC’s statement that talent will be *“augmented and empowered.”* What do Voices Dot Com and VocaliD gain from this partnership?

At the moment, there are more questions than answers … but I do not see the proliferation of AI speech synthesis as a benefit to the working voiceover talent.

Peter Bishop

President - World-Voices Organization