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THE FIFTH PARAMETER | Issue 003 | The Scale Dilemma

Heather Grizzle · June 13, 2026

Innovation can solve accessibility problems, but scale alone cannot earn public trust. Why governance and stewardship decide what comes next.

Over the past several months, a recurring theme has begun to emerge across conversations surrounding sign language technologies, accessibility innovation, and artificial intelligence. Regardless of whether the discussion originates in academia, industry, government, or community spaces, participants inevitably arrive at the same conclusion: more is needed. More research. More investment. More infrastructure. More datasets. More participation. More innovation. For communities that have spent decades fighting for recognition, access, and inclusion, this sense of urgency is understandable. Few people wish to become obstacles to progress, particularly when technological advances appear capable of addressing longstanding barriers that have persisted for generations. Yet beneath this collective enthusiasm lies an assumption that deserves closer examination. Increasingly, the accessibility sector appears to be adopting a belief that has become foundational within the broader technology industry: that scale itself is inherently beneficial and that larger systems inevitably produce better outcomes.

This assumption did not emerge within accessibility communities. It emerged from a technology ecosystem shaped by platform economics, venture capital, network effects, and data-driven development. Over the past two decades, some of the world's most influential technology companies have achieved dominance by pursuing growth at extraordinary speed. The prevailing logic became straightforward. More users generated more data. More data produced more capable systems. More capable systems attracted more users. Success became synonymous with expansion, and expansion became synonymous with progress. As these assumptions spread throughout the technology sector, they gradually transformed from strategic choices into articles of faith. Questions about scale ceased to be debated because scale itself became the objective. Today, when accessibility advocates discuss larger datasets, broader deployment, or accelerated innovation, they often do so within a framework that was largely inherited from an industry whose priorities were not necessarily designed around disability rights, community accountability, or public stewardship.

The appeal of scale is not difficult to understand. Sign language technologies face a genuine resource challenge. Researchers frequently cite the limited availability of high-quality linguistic datasets. Organizations struggle to secure sustainable funding. Projects often operate within fragmented environments where valuable work is duplicated, isolated, or abandoned when institutional priorities shift. Compared to spoken language technologies, sign language ecosystems remain significantly under-resourced. From this perspective, calls for larger datasets and faster development appear both rational and necessary. If accessibility technologies are to achieve broader adoption, there must be sufficient infrastructure to support them. If communities are to benefit from technological innovation, those innovations must first exist. Few reasonable observers would dispute these realities. The problem is not the desire for growth. The problem is the tendency to treat growth as though it is the only variable that matters.

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History suggests that technological ecosystems rarely remain neutral as they scale. Infrastructure does not simply support activity; it shapes it. The organizations that build infrastructure frequently gain influence over the standards, priorities, and decision-making processes that emerge around it. Transportation networks shape commerce. Communications networks shape information flows. Digital platforms shape participation in public discourse. In each case, the initial conversation often focused on capability. What can this system do? How many people can it serve? How quickly can it expand? Only later did broader questions emerge concerning accountability, governance, representation, and public interest. By the time those questions were asked, however, institutions had already formed around the infrastructure itself. Dependency had already developed. The conversation shifted from designing systems to managing their consequences.

The accessibility sector now finds itself in a rare position. Unlike many previous technological transitions, there remains an opportunity to discuss these questions while foundational infrastructure is still being constructed. This moment should not be viewed as a choice between innovation and governance, nor should it be reduced to a debate between those who favor speed and those who favor caution. Such framing

oversimplifies the challenge before us. The more important question concerns stewardship. How can accessibility communities encourage innovation while ensuring that the structures emerging around that innovation remain accountable to the people they are intended to serve? How can organizations pursue scale without allowing scale itself to become the sole measure of success? How can communities participate in technological development without gradually surrendering meaningful influence over the systems being built in their name?

> **THE STEWARDSHIP QUESTION**
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These questions are particularly important because accessibility technologies occupy a unique position within society. Unlike many consumer technologies, accessibility systems are often intertwined with civil rights, education, employment, healthcare, communication, and public participation. Their success cannot be measured exclusively through adoption metrics, growth curves, or technical benchmarks. Accessibility technologies succeed when they expand opportunity, strengthen inclusion, and support meaningful participation within society. Achieving those outcomes requires more than technical capability. It requires governance structures capable of maintaining trust, preserving accountability, and ensuring that the interests of communities remain visible long after the excitement surrounding innovation has faded.

The future of accessibility will undoubtedly require larger datasets, stronger infrastructure, and continued technological advancement. On that point there should be little disagreement. The more difficult challenge is ensuring that the pursuit of scale does not quietly displace the values that made accessibility advocacy necessary in the first place. As accessibility technologies continue to mature, the defining question may not be whether we succeeded in building larger systems. It may be whether we succeeded in building systems that remained worthy of public trust after they achieved scale.

TIPS

Know something about a sign language AI system that the public should know? Send it to tips@novaracg.com. Every tip is read by me and kept confidential. If you work in the UK, writing to us is not by itself a protected disclosure under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, so before you share employer information, check your options with Protect (protect-advice.org.uk), the free whistleblowing advice line.

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