NOVARA
CONSULTING GROUP

THE FIFTH PARAMETER: Issue 006: Representation Is Not Governance

Heather Grizzle · June 14, 2026

Representation matters, but it is not governance. Why a seat at the table does not deliver accountability in accessibility innovation.

The Most Common Mistake in Accessibility Innovation

Accessibility movements have spent generations fighting for representation. The demand has been both simple and profound: nothing about us without us. Communities historically excluded from decision-making sought not merely a seat at the table, but meaningful influence over the policies, technologies, and institutions that shaped their lives. In accessibility spaces, this aspiration remains as relevant today as it was decades ago. Deaf people deserve representation in conversations about language access. Disabled people deserve representation in discussions of disability policy. Communities affected by technology deserve representation in decisions regarding its design and deployment. Yet somewhere along the way, a subtle but consequential misunderstanding has emerged. Representation, while necessary, is increasingly being mistaken for governance.

The distinction may appear academic, but its consequences are practical. Representation answers the question of who is present. Governance answers the question of who is accountable. Representation concerns participation. Governance concerns oversight. Representation introduces perspectives that might otherwise be absent. Governance establishes the structures through which decisions are evaluated, challenged, monitored, and corrected. The two concepts are related, but they are not interchangeable. A system can be representative while remaining poorly governed. A technology can include community voices while lacking transparency. An organization can be culturally authentic while operating without meaningful accountability mechanisms.

This confusion is particularly visible during periods of technological change. New accessibility technologies often seek legitimacy through representation. Advisory boards are formed. Community members are consulted. Individuals with lived experience are recruited into leadership roles. These developments are generally positive and often long overdue. The problem arises when their existence becomes the endpoint rather

than the beginning of governance. Representation becomes evidence that governance concerns have already been addressed. Questions about oversight, risk management, transparency, conflicts of interest, procurement standards, and accountability are viewed as less urgent because the right people appear to be in the room.

Such assumptions misunderstand the purpose of governance. Governance exists precisely because good intentions are insufficient. Throughout history, institutional failures have rarely occurred because every participant lacked integrity. More often, failures emerge from systems that lacked adequate checks, safeguards, or mechanisms for correction. Communities place trust in leaders. Organizations place trust in experts. Governments place trust in contractors. Yet trust alone does not eliminate the possibility of error. Governance exists because even well-intentioned actors can make flawed decisions, overlook risks, or become influenced by incentives that are not immediately visible.

The accessibility sector is not immune to these realities. Indeed, it may be particularly vulnerable to them. Accessibility work is frequently mission-driven. Participants often share a genuine desire to improve outcomes for historically underserved populations. Such commitments deserve recognition. Yet mission-driven environments can create their own blind spots. Shared values may reduce skepticism. Community relationships may discourage difficult questions. Criticism may be interpreted as opposition rather than inquiry. Over time, organizations can begin to rely upon reputation as evidence of accountability. Trust becomes assumed rather than continuously earned.

> Trust should strengthen governance, not substitute for it.

Artificial intelligence magnifies these challenges. As accessibility technologies become more sophisticated, institutions face growing pressure to adopt solutions promising efficiency, scalability, and innovation. Vendors seek legitimacy. Governments seek modernization. Community organizations seek influence over emerging systems. In this environment, representation often becomes a visible and attractive signal of trustworthiness. A technology associated with community participation appears safer. A project involving respected advocates appears more credible. Yet none of these indicators answer the governance questions that matter most. Who is accountable when harm occurs? What oversight mechanisms exist?

How are risks identified and mitigated? What standards determine readiness for deployment? How are affected communities informed when systems fail?

These questions frequently receive less attention than discussions of representation because they are less visible. Governance rarely generates excitement. Oversight frameworks do not inspire conference keynotes. Procurement standards do not attract headlines. Accountability mechanisms are often viewed as administrative rather than transformative. Yet governance determines whether innovations remain worthy of the trust they receive. A representative system without accountability can become complacent. An innovative system without oversight can become harmful. A trusted system without transparency can become vulnerable to misuse.

The challenge facing accessibility innovation is therefore not whether representation matters. It does. The challenge is whether representation is being asked to perform tasks it was never designed to perform. Representation cannot replace oversight. Representation cannot replace transparency. Representation cannot replace accountability. Communities deserve leaders who understand their experiences, but they also deserve institutions capable of evaluating decisions independently of those leaders. Trust should strengthen governance, not substitute for it.

The future of accessibility will likely depend upon our ability to hold these two ideas simultaneously. Communities must be represented. Communities must also be protected by governance structures that remain effective regardless of who occupies positions of authority. Representation ensures that voices are heard. Governance ensures that power remains accountable. One without the other produces an incomplete system.

This may be the most important lesson of accessibility innovation in the age of artificial intelligence. The question is no longer whether communities have a seat at the table. The question is whether the table itself has been designed to ensure transparency, accountability, and stewardship. Representation tells us who is speaking. Governance tells us whether the system can be trusted when nobody is watching.

> **REPRESENTATION AND GOVERNANCE**
>
> Representation answers the question of who is present. Governance answers the question of who is accountable.

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.

SUPPORT NCG

NCG does this work without vendor money, so our findings stay ours. If it has been useful to you, you can support NCG's independent work here. NCG is a for-profit company, not a charity. Contributions are not tax-deductible and buy no service or influence.

How to cite

Grizzle, H. M. (2026, June 14). THE FIFTH PARAMETER: Issue 006: Representation Is Not Governance. Novara Consulting Group. https://www.novaracg.com/2026/06/14/the-fifth-parameter-issue-006-representation-is-not-governance/