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THE FIFTH PARAMETER: Issue 007: The Question of Authority

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Who decides when accessibility technologies are ready for deployment? Issue 007 explores authority, legitimacy, accountability, and governance in the age of AI.

Accessibility, Expertise, and the Problem of Legitimacy

Every era produces technologies that seem to arrive ahead of the institutions needed to govern them. Railroads transformed transportation before modern safety regulation emerged. Radio reshaped communication before societies established norms for licensing and oversight. The internet connected billions of people long before governments, educators, and citizens understood how profoundly it would alter public life. Artificial intelligence now occupies a similar position. Its capabilities expand rapidly, its applications multiply daily, and its advocates speak confidently about transformation. Yet beneath the excitement lies a quieter and more consequential question. Who has the authority to decide when a technology is ready to become part of the systems upon which people depend?

The question appears deceptively simple. Modern societies are accustomed to authority structures. Physicians receive licenses. Architects follow professional standards. Aircraft manufacturers submit to extensive certification processes. Public infrastructure projects undergo review and oversight. These systems are not perfect, but they reflect a widely accepted principle: when decisions carry significant consequences for others, authority should not be determined solely by enthusiasm, expertise, or market demand. It must be accompanied by accountability. The greater the potential impact, the greater the need for legitimate mechanisms capable of evaluating risk.

Accessibility technologies occupy a peculiar position within this landscape. They are often presented as tools of empowerment rather than objects of governance. Their purpose is to remove barriers, increase participation, and expand opportunity. Such goals are difficult to oppose. Yet good intentions have never eliminated the need for oversight. Indeed, history suggests the opposite. The more noble a mission appears, the easier it becomes to overlook questions about who possesses the authority to define success, evaluate readiness, and accept risk on behalf of others.

This tension becomes particularly visible during periods of technological innovation. New systems frequently emerge before standards exist to evaluate them. Early adopters experiment. Advocates champion possibilities. Vendors promote capabilities. Institutions search for efficiencies. Communities seek inclusion. Each participant brings a different perspective, yet none necessarily possesses universally recognized authority to determine when experimentation should become implementation. The result is a governance vacuum in which decisions continue to be made despite uncertainty regarding who should be making them.

The vacuum is often filled by visibility. Individuals with influence acquire authority through reputation. Organizations gain legitimacy through familiarity. Technologies gain credibility through adoption. Yet visibility is not the same as legitimacy. History contains countless examples of ideas that achieved popularity before they achieved reliability. Markets reward innovation. They do not always reward caution. Public enthusiasm may accelerate adoption, but enthusiasm cannot substitute for evidence. Nor can influence substitute for accountability.

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Accessibility presents a particularly challenging case because the consequences of failure are frequently distributed unevenly. Those who decide to deploy a technology are not always the same people who bear the consequences when it fails. A procurement official may approve a system. A vendor may market it. A conference audience may celebrate it. Yet the resulting risks may ultimately fall upon individuals who rely upon that system for education, employment, healthcare, emergency communication, or civic participation. The authority to decide and the responsibility to live with the outcome are not always located in the same place.

This reality raises uncomfortable questions. Who determines when an accessibility technology is sufficiently accurate for public use? Who establishes acceptable levels of risk? Who decides when transparency is adequate? Who evaluates claims regarding effectiveness? In many sectors, such questions would be addressed through formal institutions, professional standards, or regulatory frameworks. Accessibility innovation, however, frequently operates within a more fragmented environment. Decisions are distributed among vendors, advocates, procurement officers, researchers, funders,

and community organizations. Responsibility becomes shared. Authority becomes diffuse. Accountability becomes difficult to locate.

The challenge is not a lack of expertise. Accessibility communities contain extraordinary expertise. Researchers contribute technical knowledge. Practitioners contribute professional experience. Community members contribute lived reality. Policymakers contribute institutional perspective. The problem is that expertise alone does not answer the question of authority. Expertise explains what can be done. Authority determines who should decide whether it ought to be done. Confusing these concepts can produce systems that are technically impressive yet institutionally fragile.

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This distinction matters because authority ultimately concerns legitimacy. Legitimate authority is not merely the ability to influence outcomes. It is the ability to justify decisions to those affected by them. A legitimate authority structure can explain why standards exist, how risks are assessed, and what mechanisms exist for correction when failures occur. It creates confidence not because mistakes are impossible, but because accountability remains visible when mistakes happen. Trust emerges not from perfection but from stewardship.

The future of accessibility innovation will depend not only upon advances in technology but also upon advances in governance. Societies have spent centuries developing institutions capable of evaluating safety, managing risk, and assigning responsibility. Artificial intelligence now challenges accessibility communities to consider whether comparable structures are necessary for technologies that increasingly mediate communication, participation, and access. The question is no longer whether innovation will continue. It will. The question is whether authority will develop alongside it.

The most important governance question of the coming decade may therefore have little to do with algorithms, datasets, or performance metrics. It may instead concern a much older problem. Before a society can decide whether a technology is trustworthy, it must first determine who possesses the authority to make that judgment. Until that question is answered, debates about innovation will remain incomplete. We will con-



tinue asking whether technologies work while neglecting to ask who decided that working was enough.

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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