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THE FIFTH PARAMETER: Issue 008: The Consent Problem When Accessibility Becomes Something Done To Communities

Heather Grizzle · June 14, 2026

When accessibility technologies become unavoidable, does consent still exist? Issue 008 explores agency, choice, power, and governance in the age of AI.

For decades, accessibility advocacy focused on obtaining access to systems from which disabled people had been excluded. The struggle was understandable. Participation required accommodation. Inclusion required recognition. Access required institutional change. Yet the arrival of increasingly sophisticated accessibility technologies introduces a different challenge. The question is no longer simply whether communities can gain access to systems. It is whether communities retain meaningful influence over the technologies that now shape that access.

Consent occupies a peculiar position in discussions of innovation. It is frequently invoked, rarely examined, and often assumed. Organizations conduct pilot programs. Agencies procure new platforms. Universities adopt emerging tools. Employers implement automated systems. Community consultations occur. Surveys are distributed. Stakeholders are informed. Yet participation in consultation is not necessarily the same as consent. Being heard is not identical to possessing the power to refuse.

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The distinction matters because consent is fundamentally a question of power rather than preference. Genuine consent requires meaningful alternatives. A person cannot freely choose between options when only one option remains available. A community cannot meaningfully consent to a technology if rejecting it simply results in exclusion from services, communication, employment, education, or civic participation. Under such conditions, adoption may appear voluntary while functioning as a practical necessity.

Accessibility technologies create particularly complex consent dilemmas because they are introduced under the banner of inclusion. Resistance can therefore appear irra-

tional. After all, the technology promises greater efficiency, broader reach, lower costs, and increased availability. Opposing such developments may be interpreted as opposition to progress itself. Yet history demonstrates that communities are often justified in questioning systems intended for their benefit. The existence of a noble objective does not eliminate the possibility of unintended consequences.

Artificial intelligence amplifies these concerns. As accessibility technologies become integrated into public infrastructure, the opportunity to meaningfully opt out may diminish. Individuals may encounter systems that mediate communication, education, employment, healthcare, and public services with little practical ability to choose alternatives. The question therefore shifts. Rather than asking whether a technology works, communities may increasingly find themselves asking whether they possess any meaningful authority to decline its use.

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This is the Consent Problem. It emerges whenever decisions affecting a community are made primarily by institutions, vendors, or authorities whose incentives differ from those who must live with the consequences. Consultation may occur. Representation may exist. Governance structures may be established. Yet if affected communities cannot meaningfully influence adoption, modification, or rejection, consent remains incomplete.

The Fifth Parameter suggests that accessibility innovation should be evaluated not only according to performance, governance, or authority, but also according to agency. Communities deserve more than participation in discussions about technology. They deserve meaningful influence over whether, how, and under what conditions that technology becomes part of their lives. Accessibility has long been understood as the removal of barriers. The next challenge may be ensuring that inclusion itself does not become a justification for removing choice.

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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