NOVARA
CONSULTING GROUP

The Credibility Trap: When Early-Stage Deaf and Disabled Governance Work Is Rejected Before It Can Mature

Heather Grizzle · July 7, 2026

Deaf and disabled-led governance work is often rejected before it can mature. The credibility trap, and how due diligence differs from gatekeeping.

Contents

1. Early-Stage Work Is Messy Before It Is Legible
2. The Narrower Margin for Deaf and Disabled-Led Work
3. Due Diligence Is Not Gatekeeping
4. Why This Matters for Sign Language AI Governance
5. The Case for Independent Evaluation Frameworks
6. What Credible Early-Stage Work Owes Its Public
7. What Institutions Should Ask Before Dismissing Emerging Work
8. The Work Ahead

Emerging technologies are permitted to build in public. Emerging accountability frameworks must be permitted to do the same. The asymmetry between those two allowances is not incidental, and it is not neutral.

Every new institution passes through a period in which its substance outruns its presentation. The analysis exists before the letterhead does. This is unremarkable, and in most fields it is forgiven. But for Deaf and disabled-led governance work, the period of early imperfection is treated differently: not as a stage of development but as a verdict. The result is a credibility trap, a circular standard under which disabled-led work cannot be trusted until it is established, and cannot become established because every early-stage effort is dismissed for not already appearing fully formed. This essay names that trap, distinguishes it from the legitimate demands of due diligence, and

argues that the emerging field of sign language AI governance cannot afford to let the two be confused.

Early-Stage Work Is Messy Before It Is Legible

Early-stage work is often messy before it becomes institutionally legible. Websites get revised. Framework names change. Public disclosures improve. Leadership pages are corrected. Intake emails are consolidated. None of this is unusual in the early life of a consulting group, research initiative, advocacy project, or governance framework. It is, in fact, the normal texture of institutional formation. The organizations now regarded as authoritative in accessibility policy, standards development, and technology governance all passed through versions of themselves that would not survive the scrutiny their mature forms now command.

What matters in that period is not whether the work already looks finished. What matters is whether it is being clarified, corrected, and strengthened in good faith: whether errors are acknowledged rather than defended, whether scope is stated honestly, and whether the public record improves over time. Trajectory, not polish, is the meaningful early signal. An organization that corrects its materials quickly and discloses what remains under development is behaving credibly, even when its infrastructure is still visibly under construction.

The Narrower Margin for Deaf and Disabled-Led Work

For Deaf and disabled-led work, however, the margin for early imperfection is often far smaller. A developing organization may be judged not by the quality of its analysis, the necessity of its questions, or the public risk it is trying to address, but by whether it already resembles a fully resourced institution. A stale website reference, a missing biography, a generic email address, or an imperfect public footprint can quickly become a basis for dismissal. The work is not evaluated on its substance. It is rejected because it has not yet acquired the polish that usually requires resources, access, staff, and institutional trust to build.

This is where the trap closes. Deaf and disabled people are routinely told to build our own systems, produce our own evidence, document our own harms, and create our own

> We cannot be trusted until we are estab-

governance tools. The instruction is issued in good conscience, often by the same institutions that have declined to build those tools themselves. But when those systems begin in the early-stage form that all new systems do, they are treated as suspect precisely because they are early-stage. The circularity is complete: we cannot be trusted until we are established, and we cannot become established if every early-stage effort is rejected for not already appearing established. Polish, meanwhile, is not evenly distributed. It is downstream of funding, staffing, professional networks, and prior institutional access, which is to say downstream of the very exclusions that made independent disabled-led work necessary in the first place.

lished, and we cannot become established if every early-stage effort is rejected for not already appearing established.

Due Diligence Is Not Gatekeeping

None of this is an argument against due diligence. Due diligence matters, and it matters more, not less, when the work concerns accessibility, procurement, public trust, and disabled communities. Public-facing organizations should be clear about who they are, what they do, who leads them, what their conflicts are, and how their frameworks are developed. That standard applies to Novara Consulting Group as fully as it applies to any vendor, nonprofit, public agency, or research initiative. Transparency is not optional in this field, and no organization should be exempted from it on the grounds of good intentions or community membership.

But there is a difference between due diligence and gatekeeping, and the difference is procedural as much as it is attitudinal. Due diligence asks for clarification. Gatekeeping treats the need for clarification as evidence of illegitimacy. Due diligence distinguishes between correctable presentation problems and substantive defects. Gatekeeping collapses them into the same category. Due diligence examines the work. Gatekeeping stops at the website. The first posture produces better institutions on both sides of the evaluation. The second produces nothing except a quieter field, in which the only voices that survive scrutiny are the ones that arrived already funded.

Why This Matters for Sign Language AI Governance

This distinction is not abstract. It matters acutely in the emerging field of sign language AI governance, where public agencies, schools, universities, healthcare systems, and disability organizations are increasingly asked to evaluate products that make claims about accessibility, inclusion, automation, and linguistic access. Many of those claims are highly consequential. They may shape procurement decisions, interpreter labor, DeafBlind access, emergency communication, educational access, and civil rights compliance. A sign language AI system deployed in a hospital intake process or a public school classroom is not a novelty; it is an access decision with legal and human consequences.

Yet the public tools available to evaluate those claims remain underdeveloped. Procurement officers are being asked to assess linguistic validity without linguistic instruments, to weigh vendor accuracy claims without independent verification standards, and to judge community accountability without any framework for what accountability to Deaf communities would actually require. The evaluative infrastructure has not kept pace with the commercial one, and the gap between them is where governance failures happen.

The Case for Independent Evaluation Frameworks

That gap is the space in which independent governance work becomes necessary. Vendor-led narratives cannot be the only source of truth about vendor products. Conference visibility cannot be treated as proof of community accountability. Technical demos cannot substitute for procurement scrutiny, and a polished product page cannot replace independent evaluation. If public institutions are going to purchase or endorse sign language AI systems, they need frameworks that ask harder questions: about linguistic validity, deployment context, human oversight, disability governance, and real-world access outcomes rather than benchmark performance in controlled conditions.

Independent frameworks of this kind will, almost by definition, begin outside existing institutions. That is what independence means. They will begin small, imperfect, and unfamiliar, because the institutions with the resources to build them polished have so far declined to build them at all. Early-stage Deaf and disabled-led frameworks should be scrutinized. They should also be allowed to mature. Those two statements are not



in conflict. Serious work improves through challenge, revision, disclosure, and public accountability. It does not improve when it is dismissed before the substance is engaged.

The standard, at minimum, should be consistent. If a sign language AI vendor can iterate, rebrand, revise claims, change partnerships, and update product language while still being treated as innovative, then Deaf and disabled-led governance work should not be disqualified for moving through the same process of development. If emerging technology companies are allowed to build in public, emerging accountability frameworks must be allowed to build in public too.

What Credible Early-Stage Work Owes Its Public

The burden does not fall only on evaluators. Early-stage governance work has obligations of its own, and meeting them is how credibility is earned rather than claimed. Credibility should not mean already institutionally approved. Credibility should mean transparent enough to examine, serious enough to challenge, and accountable enough to correct.

For early-stage organizations, that standard has concrete content. It means naming what is still under development rather than presenting aspiration as achievement. It means correcting public materials quickly when errors are identified. It means disclosing affiliations, conflicts, and independence clearly, so that readers can weigh the work with full information. It means separating what a framework can currently demonstrate from what it hopes eventually to prove. And it means making the work easier to verify over time: publishing methods, documenting revisions, and leaving a public record that rewards scrutiny rather than deflecting it. An early-stage organization that does these things is not asking for indulgence. It is asking to be evaluated on the same terms as anyone else.

What Institutions Should Ask Before Dismissing Emerging Work

For institutions evaluating Deaf and disabled-led work, credibility likewise requires a better standard of engagement than a glance at the public footprint. Ask who leads the work. Ask how the framework was developed. Ask what evidence it uses and what it does not yet claim to prove. Ask how conflicts are managed. Ask which communities



are represented and which are still missing from the table. These are legitimate questions, and serious early-stage work will welcome them.

> **THE RELEVANT QUESTION**
>
> The relevant question is never whether an organization already looks like the institutions an evaluator recognizes. The relevant question is whether its analysis is sound, its questions are necessary, and its conduct is accountable.

But do not confuse early infrastructure gaps with intellectual absence. Do not confuse a developing public footprint with a lack of expertise. Do not confuse unfamiliar authority with illegitimacy. The relevant question is never whether an organization already looks like the institutions an evaluator recognizes. The relevant question is whether its analysis is sound, its questions are necessary, and its conduct is accountable. An evaluation that cannot distinguish between those two questions is not due diligence. It is pattern-matching against privilege.

The deeper issue, in the end, is structural rather than episodic. It is the pattern by which Deaf and disabled people are asked to produce governance, evidence, and accountability, and are then penalized because our work does not yet look like it was produced by the very institutions that excluded us.

The Work Ahead

Novara Consulting Group is continuing to develop the SLAT Index, the Sign Language Access Trust Index, as an independent evaluation framework for sign language AI access, governance, and procurement readiness. That work will require clearer public materials, stronger disclosure language, and a more precise explanation of scope. Those improvements are already part of the process, and they are named here because naming them is part of the standard this essay defends.

But the larger principle stands beyond Novara. Early-stage Deaf and disabled-led governance work deserves rigorous scrutiny. It also deserves a fair chance to become mature, public, and institutionally useful. Rejecting it simply because it has not yet acquired institutional polish protects the status quo. It does not protect Deaf and disabled communities. If accessibility governance is going to be credible, it cannot only recognize authority after power has already blessed it.

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, July 7). The Credibility Trap: When Early-Stage Deaf and Disabled Governance Work Is Rejected Before It Can Mature. Novara Consulting Group. https://www.novaracg.com/2026/07/07/the-credibility-trap-when-early-stage-deaf-and-disabled-governance-work-is-rejected-before-it-can-mature/