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The visibility paradox: empowerment and vulnerability in inclusivity processes

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Extended Abstract

In the wake of the global Covid-19 pandemic, individuals and organisations have been subject to a growing reliance on digital media technologies and solutions offered by these (Newlands et al., 2020). This has, above all, resulted in a proliferation of video-conferencing technologies such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams. While these technologies have been able to mitigate some of the pandemic effects and therefore become “the new normal” in various sectors, their growing use has also been met with a range of privacy concerns (Newlands et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, this transition to smart working has opened up new pathways of inclusion as underprivileged individuals and communities have previously been excluded from attending or presenting at events due to travel embargos or funding constraints. In particular, international organisations working with marginalized social groups, such as the wide spectrum of United Nations (UN) bodies and agencies, have capitalised on these new opportunities for inclusion and collaboration. As such, this development should provide social benefits, as concerns have been raised around exacerbated inequalities for ethnic minorities

and the working class (Madianou, 2020). This includes the exclusion and even invisibility of the “data poor”, above all citizens in Global South countries (Milan & Trere, 2019). These inclusivity practices should therefore mitigate some of these effects.

This paper uses the case study of a UN process, here labelled “The Forum” [due to preliminary anonymization] based on a visiting research fellowship in 2022. Although UN agencies and their networks have attracted considerable trust from its constituents (e.g. Gilbert & Behnam, 2013), the global pandemic has created a range of unpredicted scenarios in technology use, above all live and recorded video-conferencing tools. This case study illustrates some of the challenges that these new opportunities for inclusivity and visibility have incorporated (in the case study as well as across organisations).

Preliminary findings showed a growing complexity and uncertainty in giving visibility to marginalised, disadvantaged, or largely “invisible” communities, individuals, and initiatives across the globe due to new practices incorporated in response to the global pandemic. These practices included the automatic collection of participant metrics in registration processes, live streaming practices of partially unscripted materials, and the recording and making publicly available virtual sessions. While these opportunities were largely embraced by constituents due to the increased visibility and therefore “empowerment”, based on preexisting trust relationships, they also gave way to gaps in regulation and consequently concerns around what data may be collected as well as how it may be used. Questions were raised, for example, in cases where demographic data from vulnerable groups was collected, and opt-ins or opt-outs were not commonly provided options. Other concerns related to software captions instead of human captioning, issues that were subject (beyond ethical and inclusive decision-making) to human and financial resources available.

This paper reflects on these new practices in light of privacy concerns when (a) these technologies carry the potential to provide much-needed visibility and even “empowerment”, and (b) these technologies are not as robust or privacy-oriented as the international organisations that include them in their everyday work with vulnerable communities. These reflections stem from the new practices being considered the “new normal” and indeed necessary for increased inclusivity. In doing so, it considers potential implications for making organisational technology applications more privacy-conscious.

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