

AI and Intent: A Note on CTA's 2026 Accessibility Research

Why an AI-powered pair of smart glasses saying “a café” instead of “Starbucks” is the same problem I diagnose in voice work.

CTA published research this June with Access Living, Disability Belongs™, and CommunicationFIRST. Interviews with blind, Deaf, hard of hearing, physically disabled, cognitively disabled, and speech-disabled people, about how AI actually shows up in their lives.

One detail lines up with the distinction I've been drawing between synthetic and human performance.

Two blind interviewees, using AI-powered smart glasses, described the same expectation not being met. The glasses said they were standing in front of “what appears to be a café.” Not Starbucks. Not the place next door to their office. One woman said her glasses never mentioned the ice on the sidewalk ahead of her. Another said the glasses stayed quiet about what a speaker was wearing at an event she was attending.

You know, the glasses aren't wrong. They're accurate. A café is a café. But accuracy isn't what she needed in that moment. She needed the glasses to know her, the way a friend walking next to her would know to mention the ice, or the outfit, or which café.

Getting the words right is a huge and important part of Audio Description. There's also how those words are carried. Knowing what this scene, right now, needs a viewer to feel, and shaping the read around that, that's intent. I think that's what happens when there's no intent behind a read. No “to inspire.” No “to warn.” Just words landing in the right order. When people call a synthetic voice flat or robotic, I think they're naming that missing intent, not missing emotion.

I recognize that sign language interpretation isn't voice performance, its own craft entirely. A separate interviewee in this same research raised real concerns about AI sign avatars missing cultural and legal nuance. Different discipline, same shape: swap out the trained human read, and what goes missing is that connection, and people usually don't name it until it's gone.

SOURCES

CTA, Access Living, Disability Belongs™, and CommunicationFIRST, “AI and Accessibility” (June 2026): <https://www.cta.tech/media/xxehtg4/ctawhitepaperaiandaccessibility630.pdf>

CTA roundtable recording, “Innovating for Access: AI in Daily Life”: <https://www.cta.tech/videos/innovating-for-access-ai-in-daily-life/>

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