Screen reader users and multimodal algospeak communication on TikTok

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Abstract:

Multimodal(ity) on a digital platform like TikTok refers to the visual/video, written/textual, speech/audio modalities through which TikTok users can establish, transmit, and decode meaning thanks to the platform's architecture. On TikTok, algospeak is the multimodal communicative phenomenon whereby users manipulate their communication to evade algorithmic content moderation and censorship (e.g. 'kill' becomes unalive) and it is one defensive tool against the manufactured digital precarity (i.e. deplatforming) resulting from content moderation practices. I present a turn towards critical disability scholarship as a necessary framework to assess how issues of limited or mediated modality access impact communication on platforms for screen reader users. Screen readers (SR) are a type of assistive technology/software that mediate digital media engagement through text-to-speech processing that synthesizes digital text into audible language. I examine the interplay between algospeak practices and SR users with the following research questions:

1. How do SR users of TikTok engage with multimodal English algospeak amid heightened digital precarity?
2. What are SR users' processes of meaning-making with algospeak, including processes of algospeak meaning disambiguation and algospeak production given their possible modality limitations?
3. How algospeak use and/or necessity potentially re-make SR users as digitally vulnerable/marginalized?

I conducted scroll-along sessions with a total of 14 recruited SR users, during which participants scrolled through pre-selected TikTok content containing algospeak. After each video, the participant reflected on the content, its algospeak communication, and detailed their processes of algospeak meaning-making; these reflections were subsequently coded open and axial coding, following a grounded theory approach. The codes were then analyzed and thematically organized. Findings show that SR users exploit a repertoire of algospeak disambiguation strategies to supplement that which is not directly understood through the surrounding content and/or that which is not sufficiently mediated by their SRs. Moreover, factors including (but not limited to) reliance on SRs, sighted capabilities, existing and intertextual familiarity with algospeak as a phenomenon and particularly popular algospeak tokens, and interactive goals like audience intelligibility and information processing load reduction are considered by SR users when it comes to algospeak production. SR users also reconcile this mediated access to strategically multimodal communication as contributing to increased digital precarity. These findings demonstrate how SR users engage with multimodal algospeak on TikTok to maintain (some) access to interactive environments under surveillance and content moderation, while navigating modality constraints that can render their algospeak comprehension and production less effective or impossible and as a result, their (digital) precarity and marginalization further heightened.