Voice biometrics and the value of the sounding voice at the border

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Abstract

This presentation examines how German border authorities use voice biometrics to analyze the accents of undocumented asylum seekers to determine their country of origin and eligibility for asylum. In doing so, the presentation provides a renewed look at the political value of voice by focusing on its actual sounding form, moving beyond abstractions of narrative and discourse. The qualities of voice go beyond what can be spotted in words: The extralinguistic elements of communication foreground embodied and socio-political dimensions. Such dimensions have become amenable to identity-making processes by voice biometrics, requiring a critical account of the datafication of asylum seekers' sounding voices. Voice biometrics operate by a reductionist notion of the sounding voice as a fixed and decontextualized object, colonizing this space of self-narration to construct the speaking subject. This, in turn, operationalizes bordering power that endangers migrant populations by relying on normative assumptions that do not recognize the ever evolving and performative qualities of the sounding voice, while not acknowledging the value of migrants' account about their identity. By assuming the sounding voice as a marker of geographic origin, voice biometrics reaffirm bordering power by undermining migrants' experience and classifying them as data in newly demarcated boundaries of otherness.

Biography

Daniel Leix Palumbo is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen. His current NWO-funded PhD project (2022-2027), entitled "From Spoken Audio to Digital Identities: How AI impacts the interpretation of information communicated by the sound of voice", researches the use of voice biometric technology for decision-making in European asylum procedures. More specifically, it explores the datafication of the sound of voice as an emerging practice to construct identities and control borders. In addition, he is a sound designer interested in developing multimodal research outputs.