Narrating the Visual: Accounting for and Projecting Actions in Webinar Q&As

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INTRODUCTION

Visual conduct, including the use of gaze to attend to bodily-visual cues and other semiotic resources in interaction, has long been a topic of interest in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA). Past EMCA work has examined visual conduct in face-to-face interaction, shedding light on the use of gaze to secure recipiency, facilitate smooth turn-taking, and create and sustain the local interactional ecology (Goodwin, 2000; Nishizaka, 2000). In technology-mediated interaction, however, participants' lack of access to each other's visual conduct can create fractured ecologies and hinder communication (Heath & Luff, 1993; Luff, Heath, Kuzuoka, Hindmarsh, Yamazaki, & Oyama, 2003). In this paper, we explore how participants' asymmetrical visual access shapes one form of technology-mediated interaction: webinar talk. In particular, we examine how webinar moderators use what is visible on their computer screens to manage question-and-answer components during webinar events.

DATA AND METHOD

Our data come from the question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions of five publicly available audio-recordings of webinars organized by a philanthropic foundation in the US. The participants are foundation representatives and prospective grant applicants, and the webinar platform is ReadyTalk. Each webinar typically consists of one or more presentations on a grant opportunity delivered by the foundation representatives, and each presentation is followed by a Q&A session. During the Q&A sessions, applicants generally type in their questions or virtually raise their hands to call in with their questions. One foundation representative typically serves as the Q&A session moderator—reading out the typed-in questions or selecting an applicant to call in—while other representatives are nominated to provide answers to the applicant questions.

From the five audio recordings of webinars, we collected 17 instances of the moderator doing what we term *narrating the visual* to carry out different actions that will be laid out in detail in the following section. Data were transcribed according to conversation analytic (CA) conventions and analyzed within the CA framework. More detailed information on the transcription conventions, data, and method can be found in the Forum Introduction.

ANALYSIS

In this section, we showcase narrating the visual as the moderator's means to remediate participants' unequal visual access through (1) projecting the next action, specifically projecting sequence closing or initiation, and (2) accounting for a delayed action.

Projecting a Next Action

Our first excerpt features an instance of a moderator (MO) transitioning from the interactive Q&A component of the webinar to another type of activity—a presentation on the foundation's work and funded projects.

Extract 1

58	AT:		the conference has been muted.
59			(2.2)
60	MO:	→	okay, I don't see >any other< questions so,
61			(0.5)
62			I'm gonna (.) take a break for a few minutes
63			and turn it over to Michael to talk about
64			the benefits.
65	FR:		aright well <u>tha</u>nk you Joanne,

At the very start of the extract, the moderator mutes the conference to bring the previous question-answer sequence to a close, and the automated voice (AT) announces that *the conference has been muted* (line 58). We then observe a 2.2-second gap before the moderator states to the audience *okay I don't see any other questions* (line 60). It is worth noting that this marked gap presumably is to allow time for audience members to virtually raise their hands or type in questions, thus expanding the current Q&A session and delaying any transition to another activity. As no visual evidence is present for these two types of bids for the floor, the moderator describes what she sees on the screen as the basis for accounting for her next action, i.e., *I'm gonna take a break for a few minutes and turn it over…* (lines 61-62), once again leaving a small space for audience members to self-select and ask questions or bid for the floor in line 61 with a 0.5-second pause. She then selects another foundation representative (FR) to initiate the next component of the webinar—a presentation on grant benefits.

Besides projecting a closing of a sequence, narrating the visual is also used to project the initiation of a new sequence, and, in this particular case, the selection the next speaker. In the next excerpt, the moderator closes down the previous question-answer sequence by reporting the question asker's understanding and appreciation (notably also an instance of narrating the visual) (line 465) and selects another audience member (AU) to ask her question over the microphone.

Extract 2

465	MO:		(an' we're- he said) got it thanks, um te-
466		→	I see another hand raised now Teisha Camron?
467			Teisha go ahead and hit star seven on your
468			phone?
469			(0.9)
470	AU:		actually you answered my question.=I'm
471			sorry. he[he thank you] very much.

After closing the previous sequence, the moderator narrates what she sees on the screen—*another hand raised*—and announces the full name (presumably log-in name) of the hand raiser (line 466). Then, the moderator moves to select the hand raiser by *Teisha +go ahead*

and gives her instructions on how to make herself heard. It is worth noting that the moderator seems to have already started reading Teisha's first name in line 465, presumably to select Teisha as next speaker; however, instead of simply selecting Teisha at this point with an address term, the moderator cuts herself off at *te-* to first describe what she sees. In this way, she demonstrates her orientation to a webinar moderator's role entailing not merely selecting the next speaker but also informing the audience about the speaker selection process and keeping every participant on the same page at every juncture. Given that the participants do not have visual access to what the moderator can see on her desktop, her narrating the visual fills in the information gap for the audience and serves as a way to virtually point the audience toward the next action that the moderator will likely conduct.

Accounting for a Delayed Action

Along with projecting a next action, narrating the visual is also used to account for a delay in completing an ongoing action—a delay caused by something that other participants might not have the same visual access to. We see an example of this in Excerpt 3, where the moderator is in the process of responding to a question that has been asked earlier by a prospective applicant. However, she temporarily interrupts this response to narrate the visual—a colleague's already typed-in answer to that same question.

Extract 3

249	MO:		.HH <#we had a question here <u>ear</u>lier about
250			(0.2) Blue Zones.=<in a community who
251			had met the standards for Blue Zones. (0.2)
252			.hh u:m. (.) <and was wondering about uh
253			drawing on their successes there. (0.2) .hh
254			a::nd u::m (0.2) I would ju::st (.) a:dd to- I-
255		→	I just see that (.) >$one of my< colleagues
256		→	answered tha:t question$ in writing to the
257		→	particular re- uh (0.2) °uh° (.) person
258		→	POsting the question. (0.2) .HH <but I just
259			want to say we've had a nu:mber of
260			applications in the pa:st?=who were working
261			through the Blue Zones certification process?

At the start of the extract, the moderator announces the question and reports it to the audience (lines 252-253) before initiating her response with some hesitation in lines 253-254. After a brief pause and an inbreath (line 253), we see elongation on *and um* followed by a short pause and an acknowledgement of a prior response cut short *I would just add to-* (line 254). The moderator then repairs this acknowledgement with a narration of the visual formulated as a just-made noticing of a colleague's written response to the original question asker (lines 255-258), introduced with *I just see*. Once the narration of the visual is complete, the moderator resumes her own response with an inbreath and a *but* (line 258). While this inserted narration of the visual primarily serves as an account for the moderator delaying her response with the preceding elongations and cut-offs in line 254, it simultaneously does a couple of other things. It helps the

moderator directly acknowledge a fellow representative's prior response, which we can hear in her smiley voice as she moves away from the microphone (and presumably toward the colleague in question); it helps orient the audience to an already-written response to this question; and it helps the moderator connect her own upcoming answer to this already-written response. It therefore seems that, while immediately serving to account for a delay in her response, the moderator's narration of the visual also helps to bring the different modes of the interaction and the different participants together and keep them all in sync.

Finally, narrating the visual can be used to simultaneously project a next action and account for its delay. And we can see this in our final extract, where the moderator is selecting one question from a list of typed-in audience questions. The moderator narrates the visual to project the next question-answer sequence and to account for needing to "buy some time" in initiating the sequence proper.

Extract 4

110	FR:		no.=I think you made um the points exactly,
111			=Jenny, thank you.
112			(1.5)
113	MO:	→	a::lright, I'm looking at >some of the<
114		→	other questions that are coming i:n?
115			(2.5)
116	MO:		.hh u:::m,
117			(2.0)
118	MO:		.HH (0.2) o#p-
119			(2.5)
120	MO:		a:::lright. how about this one.
121			{((*reading*))- how are who:le communities
122			able to come together to tell their story of
123			creating a healthy culture from multiple
124			angles.}

At the beginning of the extract, a foundation representative brings the previous question-answer sequence to a close with a positive assessment and appreciation for the response provided prior (not shown in the excerpt). After a 1.5-second gap, the moderator initiates a transition from this just-closed question-answer sequence with an *a::lright* (line 113) and projects the next question-answer sequence (lines 113-114) by referring to other audience questions that she has visual access to. Notably, what she narrates is not a static image (e.g., *some other questions that we have*) but rather *some of the other questions that are coming in* (lines 113-114). This suggests that her narration is responsive to the contingent nature of webinar interaction, where applicants can continuously ask their questions. Narrating the visual here not only projects and accounts for the immanent delay in implementing the next question-answer sequence, but it also helps bring the audience, who does not share the moderator's visual access, up to speed on the question reading and selection process. Therefore, here we see narrating the visual as a kind of self-talk (Hall & Smotrova, 2013) which brings the backstage to the front for the audience by projecting an ensuing question-answer sequence and at the same time accounting for a delay in it. With a few more gaps, inbreaths, perturbations, and vocalizations (lines 115-119), presumably while she reads through the questions, the moderator completes the task of *looking at* (and selecting a

question) in line 120, again by first marking the transition with an *a:::lright* and then reading out the selected question to the audience.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, the moderator's practice of narrating the visual is used as a way to remediate participants' unequal visual access in webinar Q&A sessions by projecting the next action and accounting for a delayed action. Given that the participants in our data have very different levels of visual access to what transpires during webinars (both in terms of what transpires in the room and on everyone's computer screens), *what* gets narrated is only what is treated by the participants as interactionally relevant, which in turn becomes interactionally consequential—shaping and facilitating the implementation of an ensuing action.

In a sense, this practice of narrating the visual works to virtually point participants to an ensuing action and remediate their lack of shared visual access. By narrating the visual, webinar moderators can ward off the creation of fractured ecologies (Luff et al., 2003) and ensure that no one on the call is left in the dark. Participants' different levels of access to and participation in the webinar event can be "resynced" and everyone can, interactionally, stay on the same page.

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