

The larger picture about inclusive programming

India is in a unique position to scale up 'same language subtitling', improving both media access and reading literacy



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The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) recently mandated captioning for TV programming in order to make it accessible to the Deaf or Hard of Hearing population. The decision comes nearly four decades after the United States first implemented captioning for the same purpose. India's phase-wise implementation plan requires all 800 plus channels to start this on at least one programme a week, beginning August 15, 2019, Independence Day. By 2020, 10% of all programming must have captions; the figure is to grow by 10% every year, covering up to 50% of all programming by 2025.

The wellspring

The policy impetus for this decision is rooted in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 which made "sub-titles" on TV a right. The major challenge for the Ministry now is to ensure compliance by all channels, state and private, as set in the time table.

Captioning on TV for the aurally-challenged is not new. Many countries have followed the U.S.'s

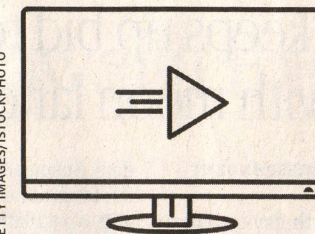
lead. Still, India's foray into TV captioning is significant for two reasons. It is one of the first major countries in the Global South to embrace captioning for media access, Brazil being the other one. But India is the first country where the importance of captioning, or Same Language Subtitling (SLS) has been established for mass reading literacy.

Key goals

At a time when countries are searching for scalable and evidence-based solutions to achieve their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SLS in India, if implemented as mandated, is poised to make a massive contribution to SDG-4 on quality education; this is because quality education, foundationally, depends on good reading skills.

India has a billion TV viewers. The average Indian watches TV for 3 hours and 46 minutes every day, according to the latest FICCI-EY Media & Entertainment report (2019). Film (24%) and general entertainment (53%) are the dominant genres. All of this content is now required to have SLS, in all languages.

Scientific evidence suggests that SLS on TV would serve three goals: daily and automatic reading literacy practice for one billion viewers, including 500 million weak-readers who would benefit the most; Indian language improvement for



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one billion viewers, and, finally, media access for 65 million aurally challenged people.

All English channels in India have been implementing SLS for film and general entertainment content for over a decade. A fascinating study that compared 'dubbing' with 'subtitling' countries of English content on TV found that the population in the latter group has better English language proficiency. English channels in India added SLS on their own to help the Indian ear grasp unfamiliar English accents, causing a rise in viewership. Importantly, the English SLS experience establishes that it is not difficult for the entertainment industry to implement SLS system-wide, if it so desires.

Studies in India are at the global forefront of advancing SLS for reading literacy, having proven in several TV pilots that: SLS causes automatic and inescapable reading engagement even among very weak readers who can barely decode a few letters; regular exposure to SLS leads to measurable

reading skill improvement, and improved reading skills result in much higher rates of newspaper and other forms of reading. With frequent exposure to SLS over three to five years on content that people watch in any case, most weak readers can become functional and even good readers.

Inspired by the Indian experience, there is an active campaign in the United Kingdom to Turn-On-The-Subtitles (TOTS) by default in children's programming. Ironically, while India plans to follow in the footsteps of the U.S. and the U.K. to get started on captioning for media access, the U.K. is drawing on SLS work in India for reading literacy. India is in a unique position to scale up SLS on TV for both goals: media access and reading literacy.

The cost of SLS is negligible for new content when incorporated in the production process itself. To institutionalise SLS on TV, broadcast policy could, therefore, simply mandate it for all new content produced and telecast after a set date.

For more than a decade, the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) have found that, nationally, half the rural children in standard 5 cannot read standard 2-level text. Despite all the system-level inputs on quality education, this outcome measure has stubbornly resisted any noteworthy improvement. If India is to

achieve its commitment to SDG 4 on quality education, we need solutions, backed by evidence, and the collective power of the government, civil society, academia and the industry to implement them.

Other platforms

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has taken the most important step toward mainstreaming TV captioning. Now, together with the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, policy needs to mandate SLS on all digital Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms. Although translation subtitling is commonplace on OTT platforms and they offer SLS in English, none of them has SLS in the Indian languages, such as Hindi subtitles for Hindi content and so on. This is simply because policy does not yet require SLS on OTT.

Civil society has shown how SLS can be implemented cost-effectively. Academia has provided strong evidence that SLS works remarkably well to achieve the multiple goals of media access, reading literacy and language learning. The entertainment industry must play its part by turning on SLS for audio-visual content in all Indian languages. SLS is a right. Let us do the right thing.

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