

The big three OTTs should lead the march on accessibility

OTT leaders need not wait for regulatory mandates or courtroom enforcement to do what is right. The three giants of streaming in India have the infrastructure, technological capability and reach to make a positive impact

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Accessibility in digital media is an emerging commercial opportunity that is fast becoming the foundation of inclusive edutainment

“Born accessible” is the new DNA of mainstream video entertainment in India. For all films that come up for certification, the Central Board of Film Certification now mandates the creation of accessibility features such as Same Language Captions or Indian Sign Language for the hearing impaired, and Audio Description for the visually impaired.

The global experience with [accessibility](#) has demonstrated that it benefits everyone, not just Persons with Disabilities. Surveys report that 80-90 per cent of hearing viewers activate captions for non-native language content, thick accents, poor audio mix, or noisy environments. We may all need media access as we grow older.

From the perspective of universal benefit, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting’s Guidelines for Accessibility of Content on OTT have a diluted provision that is being challenged in

the Delhi High Court: “Publishers of online curated content are encouraged to provide at least one accessibility feature for hearing-impaired and visually-impaired users, progressively to the content in their content libraries on best effort basis.”

In corporate practice, when any entity is “encouraged” to put in their “best effort”, it almost always morphs into “bare minimum effort”. For OTTs, it allows them to set an artificially low budget cap and, once spent, the company could claim that it made the best effort within the set commercial constraint.

Internationally, regulators increasingly avoid vague standard terms like “best efforts”. The Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) community fought tireless battles to secure equal access to media. Landmark legislative victories in the 1990s in the US first established captioning as a right on traditional television.

When entertainment migrated to the internet, disability rights advocates refused to let digital platforms slide backward. High-profile lawsuits against early streaming giants like Netflix in the 2010s made the rule explicit. If you stream content, you must make it accessible. Captions were mandated on all content, in both existing library catalogues and newly added programming.

Sixteen years later, in the age of AI, when the cost of accessibility provision on video has plummeted, why is India shying away from mandating it on all OTT content? Why are we satisfied with “encouragement” and “best efforts”, clearly in contravention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016?

OTT leaders need not wait for regulatory mandates or courtroom enforcement to do what is right. The three giants of streaming in India — JioHotstar, Netflix and Amazon Prime Video with a combined 65 percent market share — have the infrastructure, technological capability and reach to make a positive impact.

The big three should adopt a “born accessible” default on all content. By turning on same-language captions on all children’s content by default, for example, they could unlock mass literacy and language learning at scale. Frequent exposure to audio paired with synchronised native-script text effortlessly improves both. Especially in rural India, same-language captions are immediately seen by viewers as an educational opportunity.

The technology is ready, the viewers appreciate it, and the societal benefit is immense. As civil society, courts and policies advance universal access mandates, the big win will come when India’s premier streaming platforms lead from the front and not merely for compliance. Accessibility in digital media is an emerging commercial opportunity that is fast becoming the foundation of inclusive edutainment.

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