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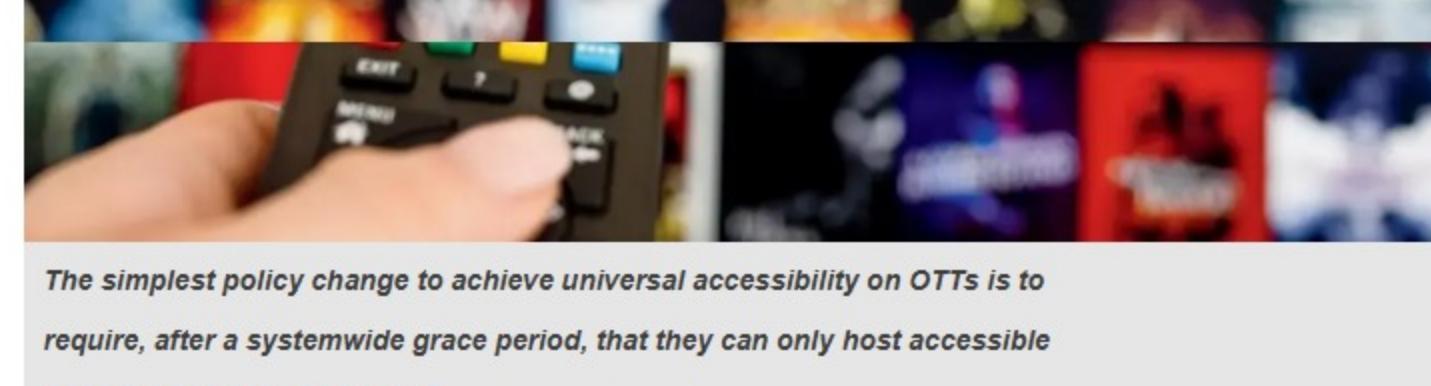
Accessible entertainment for India's development

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Brij Kothari , Tanvi Mohandas | bkothari.vfaculty@sopp.iitd.ac.in mailbag@mid-day.comShare: [f](#) [t](#) [X](#) [in](#)[FOLLOW ON
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The vision of WAVES is to make India a global hub for entertainment content creation. While it leverages India's longstanding strengths in this space, India is also emerging as a champion of accessible entertainment due to a number of legislative and policy developments



The simplest policy change to achieve universal accessibility on OTTs is to require, after a systemwide grace period, that they can only host accessible content. Representative pic

Every day, a billion people in India consume three hours of video-based entertainment. Against this backdrop, **Mumbai** is about to host the first World Audio Visual and Entertainment Summit (WAVES) from May 1-4, 2025. The vision of WAVES is to make India a global hub for entertainment content creation. While it leverages India's longstanding strengths in this space, India is also emerging as a champion of accessible entertainment due to a number of legislative and policy developments.

The build up to **WAVES** is palpable. The PM is inaugurating the summit. A bevy of superstars pack the panels. In this high-octane environment, credit to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) for including a panel on media accessibility. On that panel, longtime advocates of inclusion will give voice to the possibility of making all entertainment content 'born' accessible.

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Entertainment for all

A widespread perception persists that accessibility is only for persons with disabilities. Just like the 'curbside effect', media accessibility features that explicitly serve the deaf, blind, or the hearing and visually impaired also benefit the hearing and sighted. Take Same Language Subtitles/Captions (SLS/C). Besides improving media access for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH), SLS/C has many uses for the hearing: when accents are incomprehensible, or dialogue is difficult to catch in a noisy or even low-volume environment (e.g., baby sleeping), or when someone wants to learn a language. Besides, with age, every hearing and sighted person is likely to experience a degree of impairment, emphasizing the lifelong value of accessible content for all.

India broadens the use case

The US invented captions for television to make content accessible to DHH viewers. The first captioned programme was broadcast in 1980. In 2012, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) vs Netflix case reached a historic accommodation to offer captions on **Netflix**. It paved the way for all English content on Netflix and streaming platforms to have English subtitles. Due to a lack of similar legislation in India, the same did not automatically crossover to Indian language content. However, this is changing fast due to the activism of disability rights groups fighting for their right to media access under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016.

India's experiments with SLS for literacy are a global first, dating back to 1996. The concept of SLS on television for mass reading literacy was innovated at IIM Ahmedabad. The first implementation of SLS on a TV programme, for literacy, was on Doordarshan Gujarat in 1999. Over the last 25 years, there have been a number of SLS pilots in 10 Indian languages, collectively making an evidence-based case for its impact on mass reading skills. Ultimately, the RPwD Act, 2016 was instrumental in MIB framing the Accessibility Standards, 2019 for TV.

As a result, 80+ TV programmes currently comply with these standards. This is a good start but far from achieving the recommended level of implementation. The standards recommend accessibility on half of all entertainment content on TV. Still, it is appreciable that the JioStar network is leading with 37 accessible TV programmes. Zee is next with 20. A full embrace of accessibility on TV can only happen when the standards are notified.

All new content 'born' accessible

The film industry is galloping away on accessibility. Driven by rulings in the Delhi High Court, MIB notified the Accessibility Standards for Films, 2024. This bold policy mandates all films certified after March 2026 to be born accessible. With broad oversight of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), films certified after September 2024 in two or more languages, are mandated to have at least one feature each for the hearing and visually impaired.

The battle for media accessibility has expanded to streaming on India's nearly 60 Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms. **OTT** is accessibility's natural partner because choice is architected in the technology. The simplest policy change to achieve universal accessibility on OTTs is to require, after a systemwide grace period, that they can only host accessible content. That would ensure that all original and third-party content on OTTs, in all Indian languages, becomes accessible.

To paraphrase Nelson Mandela, accessibility will always seem impossible until it's done! India produces a prodigious amount of content in more than 22 official languages, for films, TV and OTT. AI advances in speech-to-text and text-to-speech are rapidly closing in on achieving 90+ percent accuracy in Indian languages. Relative to the production cost, the cost of accessibility on entertainment content is already less than one percent in most cases and is only getting cheaper with AI.

Towards entertainment+

The push for universal media access in India is meaningful, not only for disability rights, but also education. Development professionals have long argued that Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) is a necessary condition for quality education, lifelong access to information, and self-advancement. Over a sustained period, accessible entertainment that improves reading literacy and language ability at nation scale will also contribute to per capita GDP, making a substantial contribution to the economy.

If India is to truly leverage its demographic dividend by 2055 when our window closes, if India is to contribute to the global pool of solutions for achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education, there is a pathbreaking opportunity for the entertainment industry to make its mark in India's progress. Accessible entertainment is fundamentally about everyone's entertainment for everyone's development. The good that happens in India cannot but reverberate globally.

Brij Kothari is an Adjunct Professor at IIT-Delhi's School of Public Policy and leads the Billion

Readers (BIRD) initiative. You can reach him at bkothari.vfaculty@sopp.iitd.ac.in. Tanvi

Mohandas leads BIRD's Legal Affairs.