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LET A BILLION READERS (BIRD) FLY



By

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‘If you define the problem correctly, you almost have the solution,’ Steve Jobs once remarked. A quote attributed to Leonardo da Vinci says, ‘Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.’ The Billion Readers (BIRD) initiative at IIM-A draws inspiration from both these thoughts. It first reframed the massive problem of reading literacy in India. Then, for the last 25 years, BIRD has gone after a deceptively simple solution at mega scale and incredibly low cost that literally guarantees to put one billion Indians on a lifelong pathway to daily reading practice, progress, and proficiency.

Reframing the Problem of Reading Literacy

Officially, India has one billion “literates” and 250 million “illiterates.” However, 60 percent of the “literates” cannot read, for example, a newspaper or a simple text. India’s human resource base, therefore, includes 400 million people who can read comfortably, 600 million are struggling readers although we call them “literate,” and 250 million are non-readers. At root, this is an outcome of a primary school system in crisis, decades in the making. As Pratham’s Annual Status of Education Reports (ASERs) have found year after year since 2005, around half of India’s rural children in Class 5 cannot read at Class 2 level. This was before the pandemic.

The pandemic-related school closures effectively shut out 250 million primary school children from even a low-quality education. It has only exacerbated the challenge of achieving foundational reading skills, without which, it is impossible to improve learning outcomes in school or later in life. During the pandemic, educational content delivered on TV and digital devices may have been a supply side accomplishment but was certainly not a demand or outcomes-based success story.

A Simple Solution: Baked in the Red Bricks

BIRD’s core innovation is Same Language Subtitling (SLS) – the idea of subtitling audio-visual (AV) content on TV and streaming platforms in the ‘same’ language as the audio. What you hear, is what you read. SLS suggests Hindi subtitles on Hindi content, Tamil subtitles on Tamil content and likewise on all existing and popularly watched entertainment content in all Indian languages: films, serials, cartoons, and song-based. Generally, TV and streaming platforms offer translation subtitles in a number of languages, but not in the ‘same’ audio language. Although

English subtitles are widely available on English content, that is not the case on most content in Indian languages.

SLS was born at IIM-A in 1996, piloted and researched at the institute ever since. It became a part of India's Accessibility Standards (AS) in 2019. The AS require 50% of entertainment content on TV to carry SLS by 2025. But wait, isn't SLS another supply side intervention? Yes, but the crucial difference is that SLS is added to passionately watched content that will be watched lifelong, with or without SLS. The biggest hurdle of getting weak readers to watch 'educational' content is overcome from the get go. By scaling SLS, BIRD can ensure that one billion TV viewers who watch on average four hours of TV every day, will get sufficient daily and lifelong SLS exposure. The relevant question in this case is whether weak readers' routine SLS exposure actually result in improved reading skills?

Evidence for SLS

Several eye-tracking and impact studies in India and other countries have found that the presence of SLS on popular entertainment content, causes automatic reading skill practice and improvement among viewers who can minimally recognize some letters (e.g., Kothari and Bandyopadhyay, 2014). Regular SLS exposure at home on TV, over 2-3 years, was found to double the number of children in Class 5 who are able to read minimally at Class 2 level. SLS significantly reduces children's likelihood of remaining struggling readers in primary school, but even if they did, they would always continue to read and improve their reading skills throughout their lives whenever they watch TV. The role of SLS is both in prevention and remediation of weak reading skills.

Global Interest in SLS

BIRD at IIM-A is globally the first to propose the use of SLS on mainstream TV entertainment for mass reading literacy. Other countries have leveraged SLS or captioning for media access among the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) and for language learning. The UK and US are now picking up on IIM-A's research on SLS to promote reading among children there via campaigns like Turn On The Subtitles (TOTS) and endorsements by Boris Johnson, Gordon Brown, and Bill Clinton. While it is terrific that other countries are building on SLS work at IIM-A, the primary challenge for BIRD remains, how to implement the policy on SLS widely in its country of birth and nurturance. Indeed that points to a systemic weakness in India, both in the government and the corporate world, to proactively pick up on proven social innovations in our backyard.

Toward System Change

The SLS project at IIM-A has now morphed from an R&D project to BIRD, a system change initiative, supported by Co-Impact. The question that Co-Impact asks of system change initiatives is, "What does it take to enable lasting impact in the world, such that millions of people experience meaningful improvements in their lives and communities?" It takes a strategy and a winning coalition of partners.

First, we recognize that for meaningful improvements in the lives of families and communities, BIRD will necessarily have to focus on girls and women in strategy, implementation, and impact measurement. Our priority will be to implement SLS on content that rural girls aged 6-14 and their mothers consume popularly on TV. Second, BIRD's technology strategy aims to redefine professionally produced 'video' content from an Audio-Visual (AV) to an Audio-Visual-Text (AVT) conceptualization, where 'T' stands for SLS. In other words, a time-coded and

transliterated text, embedded in the video format itself. An entertainment system that has embraced AVT will allow for SLS to be turned on/off at the point of content distribution or consumption. Importantly, an enormous benefit to the entertainment industry is that it will make video inherently searchable. Third, BIRD's evidence-based-policy-advocacy is striving to extend the Accessibility Standards to content on streaming platforms also. The content overlap between TV and streaming is over 90 percent. Logically if SLS applies to content on TV, it should also apply to streaming.

BIRD is actively building a strong coalition of partners across the central and state governments, major TV networks, streaming platforms, and content producers, speech-to-text experts at premier technology institutes like IIT-Madras and MIT Open Learning, and leading civil society organizations in education who can together deliver on the promise of daily and lifelong reading to a billion people in India. The pandemic derailed 250 million children's education and drove them to watch more TV. More TV is not what the world needs but if a billion will watch anyway, they can have their TV and improved reading too as a by-product of entertainment. What will it cost? Only INR 5 per weak reader for a lifetime of assured reading practice.



Prof Brij Kothari

Brij Kothari leads the Billion Readers (BIRD) initiative at Institute of Management Ahmedabad as Adjunct Professor. He took the idea of Same Language Subtitling (SLS) on mainstream TV and streaming platforms for a billion viewers' lifelong reading practice and progress, from concept (1996) to national policy (2019). Bill Clinton called SLS, "a small thing that has a staggering impact on people's lives."