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OPINION RIGHTS

The Right to Entertainment: It's Time to Notify Accessibility Standards for Television Content



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News broadcast in sign language. Photo: Screenshot from video/DD News

The Supreme Court last week ruled that accessibility is a fundamental right. Therefore, any rules and standards framed by ministries cannot merely be recommendations but need to have a mandatory character with a minimum level of compliance. This includes the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB)'s [Accessibility Standards for TV, 2019](#).

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 states, in no uncertain terms, their right to “have access to television programmes” and to “to participate in recreational activities equally with others”. In theory, every lawmaker, bureaucrat, or corporate media head supports this, yet in practice, compliance is weak.

Flowing from the RPwD Act, 2016, MIB framed the accessibility standards for television in 2019. They recommend that 50% of the general entertainment content (GEC) on every channel – films, serials and cartoons – be made accessible by 2024-25. The industry was given five years for an annual ramp up of 10 %. However, it has resulted in less than 5% accessible GEC on TV.

The critical factor missing in this scenario is that the accessibility standards have not been notified. They remain, therefore, an appeal or a suggestion of good practice but are not mandatory. As a result, some major networks are yet to begin implementation, citing technical and operational difficulties. However, networks like Star and, to some extent, Zee, Sony, and Enterr10 (Dangal) have demonstrated that TV in India, just like in many other countries, can be made accessible.

No country’s networks have made television content accessible merely based on a policy recommendation. In countries that have mandated media accessibility, like the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, around 90% GEC is accessible. Our accessibility standards in comparison are low and should have a mandatory floor instead of a ceiling for compliance.

By not notifying accessibility standards, its implementation is at risk of succumbing to network whims at the expense of India’s 80 million hearing impaired and 70 million visually impaired citizens who have a fundamental right to entertainment.

India’s more than one billion ‘others’ too will gain enormously with the universalisation of accessibility features like same language captions/subtitles (SLC/S) and audio-description (AD) on GEC content. There is ample evidence that viewers will automatically gain from lifelong reading practice, improved fluency and language skills. For an estimated 600 million weak readers (60% are female), for half the school children in rural India who cannot read a Class 2 level text when in Class 5 (ASER), the educational gains cannot be overstated.

A core idea in media access is to make all content accessible at root by including in its licensing and distribution package, separate files for every accessibility feature. The TV networks’ stated technical and operational complexity in implementing SLC/S on all GEC content simply boils down to ensuring a ‘locked’ script – a text file that perfectly matches the audio – for any content that is produced in the future. With this, AI-based

software tools can already generate time-coded SLC/S files and will be able to create audio descriptions in the near future.

The government must notify the accessibility standards for TV, given the poor compliance rate in its absence. However, the onus of reasonable accommodation is on each one of us. The hearing and sighted citizens need to take a 360-degree view of media accessibility benefits considering the fact that disabilities exist in degrees in many around us. Implementation of accessibility on TV could well mean that over a billion Indians – even those with undiagnosed disabilities – will get a chance to strengthen their reading and language skills. Media access is a fundamental right.

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