

India must seize this low-hanging fruit

English subtitles on TV content will help many learn the language and increase media access among the deaf



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Almost all English language content shown on TV in India – movies, serials and documentaries – is with English subtitles. What you hear is exactly what you read, otherwise known as ‘Same Language Subtitling’, or SLS. English SLS on mainstream TV entertainment in India started around 2007. Over the last decade, it has become an accepted, liked and even necessary part of the viewing experience of millions of viewers. The implementation of and positive reception to English SLS is due to a perfect confluence of interests. Most viewers in India find it challenging to follow the flow of American, British and other unfamiliar English accents. English SLS helps the viewers “catch” the dialogue better. Viewership is impacted positively, and hence, English SLS became the norm on all English language TV networks.

There are a couple of unintended consequences of English SLS on TV. For non-fluent speakers of the language, English SLS, is both, an opportunity to further one’s learning of the language, and perhaps more critically, an altered context in which English language learning just happens subconsciously. Arguably, English SLS, is the most effective English language learning intervention in India, on a mass scale, and one that nobody intended.

The other unintended benefit of English SLS on TV is enhancing media access among the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH). There are an estimated 63 million DHH people in India. Of these, roughly 6 million English readers have directly benefited from English SLS. The remaining 57 million non-English speaking DHH viewers, have minimal access to SLS in Indian languages.

The benefit of SLS to the DHH community, is more than incremental. It is the dif-

ference between not following the dialogue at all to actually having full access. As a hearing person, just imagine watching entire movies on mute, day after day.

Recently, the Supreme Court directed the government and the private sector to implement the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. The Act specifically mentions differently abled people’s right to a cultural life and recreational activities, including, “ensuring that persons with hearing impairment can have access to television programmes with sign language interpretation or sub-titles.”

The challenge is implementation, but, there is now a legal and rights-based framework for advancing SLS in all Indian languages, on both, national/state and private channels. It would be a missed opportunity to view the importance of SLS as serving any single purpose. There is scientific evidence that SLS on TV serves three major national goals: improved reading skills and literacy, promotion of Indian languages, and media access among the DHH.

While any one of these goals justifies a scale up of SLS nationally, the trifecta of benefits makes it a compelling proposition. Seeing SLS as a package of national ‘goodies’ influences the design and implementation of this powerful, yet deceptively simple solution. Closed-Captioning (CC) in the US, for example, was conceived narrowly as serving the DHH, so its display did little to make the captions attractive and purposeful for the hearing also.

India needs a subtitling solution that is cost-effective, technologically easy to implement and adds value to all viewers. Under the disabilities Act, broadcast policy needs to extend this model to Indian languages. Private TV channels are unlikely to voluntarily embrace SLS solutions for media access, reading/literacy and Indian language promotion. They are even more unlikely to want to pay for it.

A pragmatic way to facilitate widespread implementation of SLS is to monitor its implementation by all channels, as per the disabilities Act, but, allow private channels to pay for SLS under the 2% Corporate Social Responsibility mandate, enshrined in the Companies Act, 2013. The power of SLS to positively impact hundreds of millions of TV viewers in India is real. Subtitles are a low hanging fruit for India’s development, if our planners would care to pick them. SLS is also mandated now. But before the government can enforce this mandate, it will have to take the lead in implementing SLS on its own channels.

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