


Amid India's OTT boom, platforms still keep the disabled in the dark

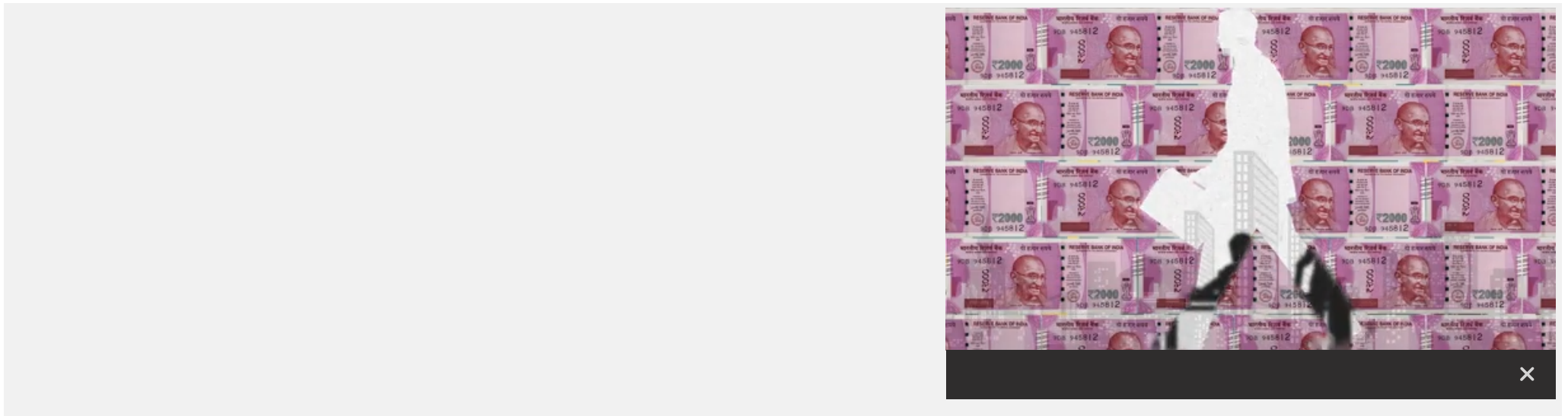
The IT Rules say that streaming services should, “to the extent feasible,” make their content accessible for viewers with disabilities. But a large gap of accessibility exists on streaming platforms.

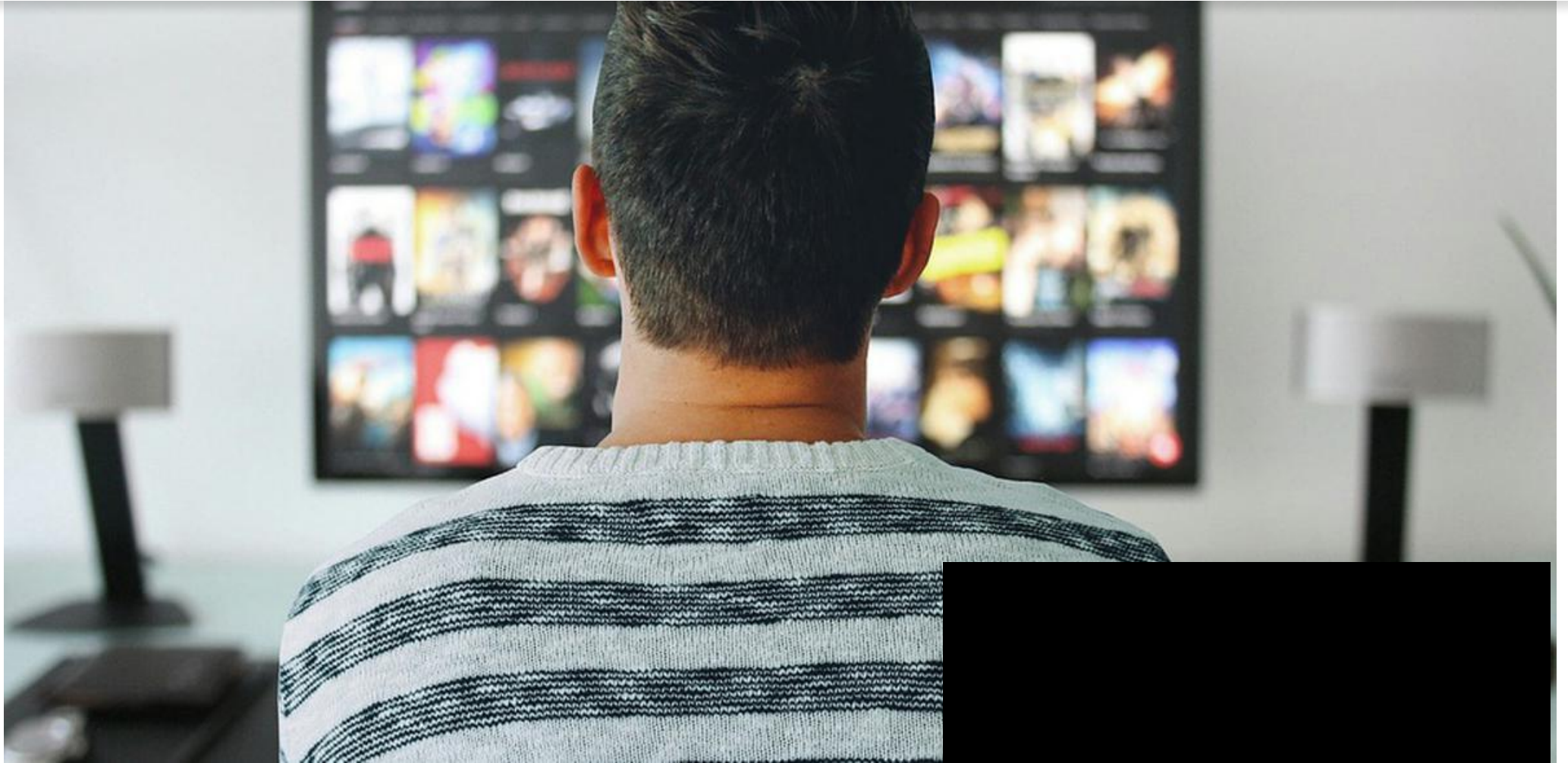
May 20, 2023 08:31 am | Updated May 22, 2023 12:20 am IST - NEW DELHI

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The IT Rules, 2021 cover a vast swath of the internet, from regulating social media to discouraging platforms from letting users post what the Government considers objectionable. They also require platforms to submit to a three-tier grievance framework to address user complaints on websites. One area that has not received much attention (or compliance) is their pitch for accessibility.

nudge to “take reasonable efforts to improve the accessibility of online curated content transmitted by it to persons with disabilities through the implementation of appropriate access services.” These are a likely reference to two key technologies: closed captioning and audio description.

Closed captioning

Closed captioning, unlike regular subtitling, describes the sounds and background music score in a film or TV show, an important resource for deaf and hard of hearing people. Audio description tracks describe what’s happening on screen for blind and visually impaired audiences.



Why are people unhappy with OTT streaming apps?

While the IT Rules Code of Ethics pushes for these technologies to be more widely accessible, those run by Indian firms — have largely not done so. The most glaring example is the Indian Premier League on JioCinema, the highest-streamed sporting tournament in the world. When television rights, announced in March that they would release a subtitled feed for the visually impaired. JioCinema has not made a similar accommodation. (A Jio spokesperson did not respond to requests for comment.)

International platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV+ fare better. In an agreement with the American Council of the Blind (ACB) in 2016, Netflix started

Accessibility gap

This is not the case for licensed content, even on platforms which otherwise have a good track record on accessibility. While Netflix has an Audio Description feed for many Hollywood films — US studios sometimes produce such a feed in-house, and then provide it to streaming platforms upon request — the vast majority of theatrically released films in India that are not produced or financed by a streaming platform don't have an audio description feed.

Even when such a feed is made, it doesn't always make its way to the small screen. For instance, the Rajinikanth-starrer *Kabali*, which had an audio description track produced for it by a radio station for a theatrical screening, isn't being streamed on Amazon Prime Video with that track as an option.

The situation is similar for closed captioning in the same language — outside of original films and series commissioned by international platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, there is no same for the majority of licensed content on Indian streaming platforms. Indian-est of Information & Broadcasting largely do not have either closed captioning in t content, let alone originals.

The gap may soon sting many would-be viewers as streaming grows rapidly in that there are 63 million deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) people in India, and n eyesight or blindness.

'Extra expense'



impaired people can use closed captioning and subtitles,” Dr. Murray said. “But the problem is that many of them would prefer sign language, because sign language is a language in and of itself with nuances that get lost when the subtitles are just a transcription of what is happening on screen.”

Of course, streaming services don’t currently provide either option. “In the digital product world, there’s a reluctance to pay much attention to accessibility, as it needs an extra expense,” Dr. Murray said, pointing to firms’ reluctance to invest in accessibility. While there were accessibility standards for webpages, Dr. Murray pointed out, similar standards for applications lag behind in adoption.

The IT Rules’ Code of Ethics says that OTT players should, “to the extent feasible,” provide for accessibility. “There is no way of enforcing [this provision], because there’s no legal implication,” Dr. Murray said. “It largely depends on the goodwill of the people creating these products.”

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