

How to make streaming media accessible to people with disabilities

Plain Language Summary

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Introduction

Streaming services have changed how people watch movies and TV. 'Streaming' means watching shows or movies over the internet without having to download them first. Billions of people now use streaming services. They use apps like Netflix, Prime Video, HBO Max and Disney+ to get their media.

But these apps can have problems. They can be inaccessible for people with disabilities. Reviews from app users show many problems with even basic functions. These include being able to sign in, find a show and play a video.

This is because there is not a set of common rules for streaming services to follow. This means that some services may have certain accessibility features. But others may not. Even when there are accessibility features, they do not always work well. They may work differently on different devices.

This report looks at how 11 countries are working to remove these barriers. These countries are as follows.

- Canada
- China
- European Union
- Finland
- France
- Germany
- Italy
- Japan
- South Korea
- United Kingdom
- United States

Some of these countries have made progress. Some have strong laws and good systems to make sure streaming services are accessible. Others have weaker rules and systems. This leaves many people with disabilities shut out of digital life.

Understanding the problem

Streaming accessibility depends on 3 different parts. These parts have to work together. Here is a description of each part.

1. The **content** refers to things like captions and audio descriptions. These help viewers who are deaf or blind.
2. The **technology** refers to the way the service is delivered. This is also called the 'platform.' This includes apps, websites and smart TVs.
3. The **hardware** is about the device the service is delivered on. The device can be a stick, a box, a computer, a remote or voice controls.

The whole experience breaks down when any one of these parts fails.

The barriers people face depends on their disability. Here are some examples.

- Users who are blind or have low vision face barriers. There can be unlabeled buttons or no way to turn on audio descriptions so they can access the content.
- Users who are deaf or hard-of-hearing face barriers. These can be missing or incorrect captions. Sometimes the captions are not placed properly. There are few, if any, sign language options offered.
- Users with cognitive disabilities face barriers. These can be issues like confusing menus and busy screens.
- Users with motor disabilities face barriers. There can be small buttons or controls that need precise clicks or gestures to access the content.

Good accessibility laws need to look at all 3 parts and how they work together.

How countries are approaching the challenge of accessibility

Some countries do a better job with accessibility than others. These countries look at accessibility as a complete system. They view the system as having 4 necessary parts. These parts are described below.

1. The system needs clear laws that spell out exactly what companies must do.
2. The system must follow technical standards, or rules, that explain how to do it.
3. There must be regular checkups to see if companies are following the rules.
4. There must be real enforcement. There must be consequences for companies that don't follow the rules.

Here are some examples from different countries. These show what different countries are doing with streaming accessibility.

Strong systems are mostly in Europe

These are the countries in Europe that lead the way in accessibility.

- European Union
- Finland
- France
- Germany
- Italy

They all have good frameworks. They follow technical standards and guidelines. The standards they follow cover more than just websites. They also cover apps, software and physical devices as well as boxes and remote controls.

Finland also has an agency that checks on companies. The agency makes sure that companies are following the rules. The agency can give fines when companies don't follow the rules. They can give orders for a service to be fixed by a certain date. The agency does follow up to make sure the problems were solved.

Mixed systems in the United States and Japan

Other countries have weaker systems. The United States has strong laws for traditional broadcasting. These include things like regular TV and wireless devices. But the system does not do any kind of checkups. Instead, it relies on people filing complaints. This means problems do not get fixed until someone reports them or makes a complaint. For example, it took Netflix being sued before they would caption all their streaming content.

Japan has clear legal rules. Companies are required to give public reports. But the rules are not enforced. It is mostly voluntary. Companies don't get orders to fix things. They just get guidance and recommendations. This system also waits for users to identify and report problems. It does not actively check for problems.

Delayed system in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is an interesting case. It had the world's most effective system for broadcast TV accessibility for many years. There were clear rules for major channels. They had to caption 90% of their content. They had to provide audio descriptions for 10% of their content. But these rules didn't keep up as people moved towards more streaming services.

This meant that users had worse accessibility when they moved to newer services. There is a new law in the United Kingdom now. It will make sure streaming services have to follow the accessibility rules. But this law will not come into effect until 2027.

What Canada should do

Canada already has a strong foundation in this area through the *Accessible Canada Act*. Other laws around broadcasting and online streaming help. These laws give authority to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and the Accessibility Commissioner. They can enforce accessibility requirements.

But there are still gaps. Streaming platforms don't have clear technical standards. There is no system in place to check on companies. There needs to be a stronger way to make sure accessibility rules are followed.

The report recommends 4 key steps.

1. Be clear about what streaming companies must do. Spell out the requirements for apps, TV interfaces, devices and networks. Follow the United States model. This model sets clear duties for different parts of the system.
2. Adopt and follow specific standards. Use the same technical standards as the European Union. Use a best practices document for assistive technology. This would make sure everyone in both countries knows exactly what 'accessible' means. This would also give a way to measure to see if the rules are being followed.
3. Check services regularly. Don't wait for complaints. Test services on a schedule. Publish the results. Show what was tested, what failed and when fixes are due.
4. Use stronger enforcement. Create a system with consequences and incentives. For example, have lower fines for companies that report and fix problems quickly. Have higher fines for companies that ignore issues.

This approach is a good balance. It gives companies some flexibility. But it still holds them accountable. It respects cooperation between government and industry.

Most importantly, it removes the burden from people with disabilities. They won't have to fight for each accessibility fix on their own.

Why this matters

Countries with strong systems get better results. This is because they combine clear rules, regular checkups and real consequences.

There is proof of what works. Requirements backed by specific standards. Regular checkups made instead of waiting for complaints. Real consequences given to companies that are not following the rules. These are not unusual demands. These approaches have been used successfully in many countries around the world.

Canada can do this too. We can make sure people with disabilities can fully take part in digital culture. We can learn from other countries. We can avoid mistakes. We can make changes to laws, standards, checkups and enforcement. The path is clear. The question is whether Canada will commit to making streaming accessible for everyone.

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