Streaming Video Collections in Libraries

Although perhaps one of the most common forms of media in Western popular culture today (think YouTube, Facebook, and NetFlix), streaming video has experienced far more reserved, unnoticed, and limited implementation within library contexts. This is in great part due to a number of issues, the most frequently reported of which include the unconventional nature of the medium itself, unfamiliar and inconvenient delivery models, complex fees and licensing, and a lack of user awareness and accessibility.

The Unconventional Nature of Streaming Video in the Context of Library Collections

Streaming video is a form of digital video wherein, rather than the user downloading it in its entirety for playback on his or her personal computer (or public terminal), the file can be viewed instantaneously at any point given sufficient internet connectivity and system specifications. It can be viewed in a web browser depending on the file type and applicable plugins or via various software platforms; some vendors such as Films on Demand, as subscribed to by the University of Western Ontario (UWO) libraries, provide the latter convenience, while those like Overdrive, as subscribed to by London Public Library (LPL), require the download, installation, updating, and setup of specific proprietary software (such as the Overdrive Media Console) in order to open the proprietary file type (in this case .ODM – Overdrive Media).

Now, while streaming media has proven to be in great demand by many library user bases due to its superior convenience over analogue and other digital formats, this convenience comes with its own pitfalls. First, the use of existing formats persists, necessitating the maintenance of expanded support and equipment for multiple media collections – Barbara Bergman cites that "VHS tapes will remain a viable educational medium for several more years

and therefore […] the classrooms continue to require videotape players."[1] Second, as the

American Library Association (ALA) notes, "media resources have complex cataloging routines

and lengthy bibliographic descriptions. They have physical characteristics that require unique

processing. Therefore, media resources take more time to catalog and process than most print

resources."[2] The ALA further suggests that MARC records for streaming video packages are

often unreasonably priced and insufficiently informative – it recommends that their acquisition

be considered carefully. Third, factors such as the user interface (and, or, proprietary software),

bandwidth, and technology infrastructure "determine the capabilities for streaming video,"[3] and

can limit, for example, maximum potential video quality due to the inherent nature of streaming

video compression – Gary Handman claims that "there are limits to the quality of the image

you're gonna get via streaming—no matter which codec you use."[4] And fourth, a certain element

of tech savviness is required of both users and library staff – my foray into the viewing of

Overdrive streaming video through LPL resulted in approximately one hour of figuring out

viewing requirements, finding and downloading software, installing updates, downloading

various support files, and troubleshooting the Overdrive Media Console without ever actually

being able to successfully view the desired video. It is important that extensive quality control

testing is performed by library staff in order to provide effective service and avoid wasting its

valuable resources on unusable products.

Delivery models

        In addition to testing the technical knowledge and adroitness of users, librarians and staff

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[1] Bergman, Barbara J, "Making the Most of Your Video Collection: Trends in Patron Access and Resource Sharing," *Library Trends* 58:3 (2010): 346.
[2] American Library Association, "Guidelines for Media Resources in Academic Libraries (2012)," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/mediaresources.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Handman, Gary, "Re: [Videolib] evaluating library hosted streaming video," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.mail-archive.com/videolib@lists.berkeley.edu/msg02432.html.

themselves must be familiar with the format in order to comprehend and evaluate the various

complex options made available in terms of the delivery of streaming video services. It is first

important to note that presently, there is understandably little evidence that streaming is preferred

over DVD by librarians save for the purpose of distance education (a significant market for

streaming media).[5] Some methods of streaming video delivery via the web include "online social

networks, streaming media servers, digital satellite systems, and a host of rapidly developing

technologies."[6] The literature suggests that two models are most prominent particularly among

academic libraries – streaming from a local server and streaming from a remote vendor-

maintained server.[7] A number of libraries prefer to convert, host, and stream their own video

collections locally, or even purchase streaming packages from a vendor, yet appropriate

maintenance of file hosting authority.[8] There also exists the uncommon and controversial "just in

case" delivery method that simply involves the conversion of client-owned materials by a

vendor, bereft of licensing obligations.[9] There is also a popular trend of purchasing streaming

video packages that often leave little room for customization of individual title selection (often

by theme or subject), and regardless of much vocalized dissatisfaction in general, the majority of

surveyed librarians predict that the streaming format holds the future for educational videos.[10]

Licensing

A significant intimidation factor in the subscription to and purchase of streaming video

products is the overwhelming selection of available licensing models. These include flat-fee in-

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[5] Reynolds, Jo Ann, "Re: [Videolib] DVD vs. streaming," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.mail-archive.com/videolib@lists.berkeley.edu/msg09254.html.
[6] American Library Association, "Guidelines."
[7] Handman, Gary and Lawrence Daressa, "Streamed Video Licensing: Issues and Challenges for Sellers and Buyers," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/vod08b.pdf.
[8] Owens, Shelia D, "Re: [Videolib] DVD vs. streaming," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.mail-archive.com/videolib@lists.berkeley.edu/msg09258.html.
[9] Handman and Daressa, "Streamed Video Licensing."
[10] Bergman, "Making the Most of Your Video Collection," 343.

perpetuity (pay once, keep forever), flat-fee term (pay for a pre-determined duration – usually

1.5 years), graduated-fee term (cost based on user variables such as concurrent users and type of

institution), standing-order (access to a vendor's entire catalogue for a term period), curated

collection (access to a subject-specific collection), and pay per view in various forms.[11] This

concern can be combated by close collaboration with vendors and other library systems that

already deal with or have thoroughly researched the advantages and disadvantages of all options.

What is understandably of more concern is testing the waters of copyright and fair use

limitations with a format that is still relatively new and foreign in the library context. Bergman

cites that many librarians are concerned about how the digital licensing of streaming video will

limit the capability for resource sharing;[12] the ALA says that interlibrary loans are a vital

functionality of collections, yet that streaming video licenses more often than not do not permit

such loaning of content.[13] And while Shelia Owens recommends the purchase of "perpetual,

lifetime, life of format"[14] rights whenever possible, Handman and Lawrence Daressa predict that

"the traditional 'buy once, use in perpetuity' model will most likely not fly [because of] existing

filmmaker/distributor contractual arrangements."[15] Not only that, but exorbitant ongoing

subscription costs are largely impractical as many libraries continually find themselves "facing

substantial budget reductions."[16] There is presently much contention over what constitutes fair

use, and as Jessica Rosner points out, even librarians are unaware of the correlation of rights

between streaming digital content and that in print[17] – oftentimes lackadaisical and quotidian use

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[11] Handman, Gary, "White Paper on Digital Video Licensing in Libraries," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/whitepapercomments.pdf.
[12] Bergman, "Making the Most of Your Video Collection," 343.
[13] American Library Association, "Guidelines."
[14] Owens, "DVD vs. streaming."
[15] Handman and Daressa, "Streamed Video Licensing."
[16] Bergman, "Making the Most of Your Video Collection," 343.
[17] Rosner, Jessica, "Re: [Videolib] Follow-up question regarding the purchase of digital streaming rights for videos: Trying to resolve an internal debate," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.mail-archive.com/videolib@lists.berkeley.edu/msg06641.html.

dulls our perception of digital media in contrast to that of a traditional, analogue nature.

Handman and Daressa recapitulate that licensing models for print materials "have been in play

for several decades[, while t]he licensing of online, on-demand video content […] is a new and,

at present, ill-defined concept and practice."[18] It is simply a freshly explored medium in library

contexts and in great part, time and experience will help to solidify expectations and standards.

Another obstacle that librarians face in the licensing of streaming video is inordinate fees.

While popular vendor Alexander Street Press does not appear to list their prices publically, Film

on Demand averages between $100 to $200 per title for three years of streaming service,

including public performance rights.[19] And while many librarians have been found to complain

extensively about this, Deg Farrelly has a number of optimistic insights about the cost of

streaming video: Arizona State University's (ASU) Fletcher Library usage statistics indicate that

only 4% to 6% of the acquisitions budget was spent on streaming video, yet that same streaming

video composed 25% of the collection's circulation for that year;[20] research has shown that 40%

to 60% of print works in academic libraries are never circulated, while only 3% of VHS tapes at

ASU have never been borrowed;[21] and the cost per use of titles at ASU averages 50 cents.[22]

Farrelly further makes a compelling justification for the steep cost of streaming video:

"Expensive? Yes. Do I think it's worth it? Let's see.... No check out, no check in, no shelving, no

MIS-shelving, no unavailability because the item is checked out, no damage, and ability to link

into Blackboard course shells for hybrid and distance courses.... Yup, I think it's worth it."[23]

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[18] Handman and Daressa, "Streamed Video Licensing."
[19] Films on Demand, "Films for the Humanities and Sciences."
[20] Farrelly, Deg, "Re: [Videolib] justify budget increases," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.mail-archive.com/videolib@lists.berkeley.edu/msg06609.html.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Farrelly, Deg, "Re: [Videolib] Statistics on streaming video," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.mail-archive.com/videolib@lists.berkeley.edu/msg03642.html.

Awareness, accessibility, and visibility

Despite the myriad technical barriers that establish streaming video as a less than ideal format from the perspective of librarians, Fran Gray, Research and Instructional Services Librarian at UWO libraries, cites the primary challenge in subscribing to video streaming packages as "promoting them to our users so that the usage will begin to justify the cost."[24] She states that virtual films are less visible than physical objects and that "students and faculty don't think to check the library catalogue for a film."[25] Upon consultation with my colleagues, all questioned were unaware that UWO libraries or LPL subscribe and provide access to streaming video services; I myself was unaware prior to the commencement of my research. Jane Hutchison suggests that indiscoverable media is useless media,[26] while Martha Sanders and Bob McQuillan state the importance of a library catalogue user interface that provides single text-box searching (such as Encore) for all subscribed library materials to aid in serendipitous information discovery and the promotion of digital content.[27] They note that electronic media is often grouped together, stating that one solution is the relabeling of digital formats.[28] Perhaps another contributor to media invisibility, Bergman recounts, is that, historically, video collection access has been primarily for faculty, while access for students has been very limited.[29] In order to raise awareness and visibility, service promotion must be engaged in by library staff via relevant means, be it social media platforms, traditional community outreach, or programming offerings, depending on the type of library and the perceived needs of its community. Valuable and

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[24] Gray, Fran A, e-mail message, July 17, 2013.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Hutchison, Jane, "Re: [Videolib] Statistics on streaming video," accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.mail-archive.com/videolib@lists.berkeley.edu/msg03650.html.
[27] Sanders, Martha Rice and Bob McQuillan, "On Beyond E-journals: Integrating E-books, Streaming Video, and Digital Collections at the HELIN Library Consortium," *The Serials Librarian* 62 (2012): 192.
[28] Ibid, 193.
[29] Bergman, "Making the Most of Your Video Collection," 336.

expensive new services such as streaming video should be advertised on the catalogue website in order to best contribute to optimal user satisfaction.

Advantages and Disadvantages

While this paper has looked briefly at a number of the primary challenges posed by streaming video in libraries, there are myriad advantages as well as further disadvantages that should be noted. Advantages of streaming video include: public performance rights included in subscription contracts, closed captioning and read-aloud functions that increase accessibility, no additionally required equipment or storage space, materials cannot be lost or damaged like DVDs, it is accessible 24/7, and it avoids the necessity of purchasing additional and replacement copies.[30] Meanwhile, additional disadvantages include: an annual commitment, not all content is of equal quality and packages often include material that is of no value, and package content will vary as license agreements change.[31]

Conclusion

While it is clear that streaming video has shown much potential while simultaneously producing understandable frustration for various reasons in the library community, in order to truly appreciate the format, it is essential to both understand that the needs of each individual institution and its user base will determine, among other key factors, the delivery, licensing, and promotion of relevant materials and products as well as the fact that, as Handman and Daressa state, streaming video is simply a new, misunderstood phenomenon that will become more comprehensible with increased experience and time.

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[30] Handman and Daressa, "Streamed Video Licensing."
[31] Gray, e-mail message.

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