The Library's Role in Providing Streaming Video

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Book Title: Guide to Streaming Video Acquisitions
Publisher: ALA Editions
Publication Place: Chicago
Publication Date: 2018-08
Type of Work: Chapter | Final Publisher PDF
Permanent URL: https://pid.emory.edu/ark:/25593/thgdz

Final published version:
https://www.alastore.ala.org/content/guide-streaming-video-acquisitions-alcts-monograph

Copyright information:

Accessed February 19, 2020 5:49 AM EST
While the purpose of this book is to address the logistics of providing streaming video for the library, it is important to begin with this introductory chapter on the need for and purpose of streaming videos in an academic setting. This chapter addresses two intertwined questions: (1) should libraries supply streaming videos? and (2) what do libraries’ students and faculty want or expect, especially in an academic library setting, with regard to streaming video? While it might seem obvious that library users want access to as many streaming video titles as possible, current licensing models and constraints (budgetary, technological, etc.) on the acquisition of streaming videos suggest that an all-in approach may have some drawbacks for libraries in the short or long term. While individual cases may differ, balancing streaming video acquisition with more traditional physical video acquisition models may be a better approach for most libraries. This chapter presents evidence that favors this balanced approach, first discussing why libraries might use streaming videos, then highlighting some case.
studies that illustrate the increasing demand for streaming video, and finally finishing by looking at the ownership versus access debate that lies at the heart of video licensing.

PURPOSES OF STREAMING VIDEO

Why would a library want to invest in streaming videos? Its purposes may include (1) providing streaming videos for class use, (2) providing streaming videos for research, and (3) providing streaming videos for entertainment. These purposes categorize how and why library users consume videos, although unfortunately, any particular view instance or use can be hard to categorize (as is the case with traditional physical video circulation). The distinctions between these use categories become very important, however, once cost and frequency of use enter the equation. A short discussion of each of these categories follows.

Streaming Video for Class Use

While this topic will be covered adroitly by Mary Wahl in chapter 8, I will give a brief overview of streaming video in the classroom. Physical videos often work better for the in-class or viewing-session model because they are usually of higher quality, require less technical expertise, and avoid reliance on a possibly inconsistent Internet connection. However, streaming video’s popularity for class reserves is a result of (or perhaps a cause of) several important trends in education that are increasingly moving instruction outside of the classroom: (1) an increase in popularity of the flipped classroom approach, (2) an increase in distance education, and (3) the facility of streaming video to adapt for students with disabilities. Even outside of these increasingly common situations, teachers find that the ability of all of their students to both simultaneously and asynchronously watch a video outside of class is very appealing. Unless the video needs to be viewed in the shared experience of a classroom, many teachers and students now expect streaming video.

The impact of classroom streaming video on library collections is heavy video use for a few items, often with instructors using the same videos year after year. The many advantages of streaming videos for course reserves, along with the favorable cost-to-use ratio, make the acquisition of streaming videos a seemingly obvious choice, though only if acquisition is affordable (or available at all).²

Streaming Videos for Research

While high-use or popular videos are often used for research (for example, using a video as a primary source in film studies), frequently, the videos used for research are not the newest or most popular titles. Instead, researchers are using videos to get a glimpse of the past: how a locale used to look, how performances were staged, how topics were discussed, what artists looked like, and so on. These types of videos may receive little or no use year after year, but then suddenly they become very important. Research libraries may be the only institutions that are actually keeping and, hopefully, preserving these types of videos. Because streaming video licenses most often stipulate that libraries lose access to the video after the specified term is up, current streaming video models run counter to this type of research use, since low use does not justify the high price of streaming, and streaming services have a tendency to drop titles at any time, especially low-use titles. Some new streaming models, such as patron-driven acquisitions (PDA) programs (discussed at greater length in chapter 4), provide more affordable access to these low-use materials, though libraries cannot predict whether vendors will continue to maintain streaming access to particular low-use videos.

Streaming Videos for Entertainment

Library videos that are used mainly for entertainment can see medium to high circulation, with use usually tapering off as the material ages. These are the staple video type for many libraries. While public libraries have embraced entertainment as a primary purpose for video purchase, in an academic setting, support for this type of video use is still up for debate. Many academic libraries see entertainment as an important reason for acquiring videos—for example, several years ago, two small academic libraries in the University of Hawaii system, UH-Hilo and Maui Community College, successfully promoted library use with a relatively cheap and popular DVD collection. But with the glut of popular streaming videos now available from services such as Amazon, Netflix, and Hulu, this promotional tactic may not work today. However, a 2014 study by Finlay, Johnson, and Behles found that popular DVDs that are also available on paid streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon were slightly more likely to be checked out from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater library than those that were not on streaming services, perhaps because of their overall popularity (2014). This behavior could rapidly
change, however—Morris and Currie found that 51 percent of surveyed library users at the University of Kansas stated they would rather pay $3 or less to view a film on a streaming service than come into the library to check out a DVD for free (2016). With many popular titles now available for institutional streaming licenses from services such as Swank Digital Campus and Hoopla, librarians have the opportunity to cater to the digital appetite, but at a hefty price. Ultimately, each library will need to decide if offering popular streaming videos is a good use of its resources if students can easily find these popular videos on ubiquitous streaming services.  

WHAT OUR USERS WANT

There is no question that physical video circulation has been declining in U.S. libraries. At the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the circulation of physical videos has decreased from over 100,000 checkouts per year at the peak in 2007 to under 10,000 in 2016. While this decline seems to be slowing, it does not appear to have bottomed out just yet. Meanwhile, more and more library users, especially in higher education, are accessing their video content via streaming—for example, in 2016 Netflix accounted for 70 percent of Internet traffic on campuses after 5:00 p.m. (Ferguson and Erdmann 2016). In 2016, the University of Hawaii at Manoa Library completed an IRB-approved online survey studying video use. Of the 180 students, mostly undergraduates, who responded to the survey, 82 percent had access to at least one commercial video streaming service, and 85 percent of those had access to Netflix streaming specifically; both of these numbers are higher than the national average, suggesting that college students are well ahead of the curve for streaming adoption. Not only did University of Hawaii at Manoa students have access to these streaming services, but they used them: 83 percent self-reported that they watched at least one hour of streaming video that week, and almost half (44 percent) of that subgroup reported watching more than five hours of streaming video that week. And despite the large collection of physical and streaming videos available from the library, 66 percent of respondents said they had never searched for a video in the library’s catalog. In other words, in the new reality of streaming video ubiquity, the library has been mostly cut out of video distribution. Morris and Currie found remarkably similar results for student access to streaming services in a student survey at the University of Kansas (2016).

Faculty are showing the same preferences. While a few professors prefer to show the same VHS tapes they have used for twenty years, most faculty seem
to prefer streaming video for their classes. Other librarians have remarked on this preference for streaming video at their respective institutions (Duncan and Peterson 2014; Morris and Currie 2016; Huddlestun 2017). As for using the library to provide streaming video resources, there seems to be a split—many faculty insist that the library provide these videos, while others find dealing with the paperwork, availability, and copyright issues too time-intensive and confusing and would prefer to find a free YouTube link or just not bother.

**OWNERSHIP VS. ACCESS**

As discussed above, libraries have good reasons to provide streaming videos to their users, whether for reserves, research, or entertainment, and students and teachers often want—and even expect—this service. But should libraries actually provide streaming videos? In many ways, the question of whether a library should acquire streaming videos or not boils down to the perennial debate about library ownership versus access.

On the ownership side, libraries want to control their own collections for (1) better preservation and (2) curation, or tailoring to users’ needs. Preservation is a function that libraries provide as a service to society, one that libraries have by all accounts done more effectively than content creators and producers (Tsou and Vallier 2016); the desire to curate is one of the reasons why libraries continue to have local control and ownership of their materials.

Most streaming video models make ownership difficult, however, with consequences for preservation and curation—streaming videos are often not even available for libraries to purchase outright; a few may not even be available on physical media at all (Cross 2016). If streaming videos are available for ownership (often in the form of a “perpetual” license), most often the licenses are expensive—two to ten times the cost of those for physical videos—thus pricing these licenses out of the annual library funding model and forcing libraries to rely on yearly subscriptions. Furthermore, the library is often repaying for content that it has already purchased (for less money) in a physical format such as DVDs. Resource-sharing (such as interlibrary loan) for streaming videos, which is easy when libraries own items, is often impossible due to license restrictions (McGeary 2015). Streaming platforms commonly drop titles every year, which means that libraries cannot expect with certainty that a streaming video will persist in the future, even with a “perpetual” licensing promise. Instead of librarians building collections based on the needs of their communities, the subscription model hands much collection-development...
decision-making to the vendors (King 2014). In the few cases when content providers allow streaming video preservation, this preservation adds additional expensive and time-consuming complications that are not encountered when preserving physical videos, and libraries are often not given significant compensation for this role as preservers of culture.

On the access side, streaming videos create easier access to the materials at any time or from any location that has Internet access—and while most students still have access to DVD players, an increasing number do not. One question that is not often asked in this debate, however, is how accessible streaming video really is. Groups of library users exist who cannot access the infrastructure—an Internet connection fast enough, a device with a big enough screen—needed to watch streaming video, and while sometimes facilities can be provided that meet these needs, libraries cannot always ensure adequate facilities infrastructure, especially for distance education (Smith 2015). Finally, many videos are still only available on DVD or some other physical format, making total reliance on streaming video problematic (King 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

Streaming video is here to stay; the majority of our users expect its convenience and relative ease of use, and many will not even come into the library for a physical video anymore. However, the same users (who are used to accessing large commercial databases of streaming videos for one low, monthly price) often do not understand the heavy cost to libraries or the complicated nature of licensing—in most cases, streaming video subscriptions are far more costly than DVDs over the long term, without the benefits of ownership. Libraries cannot turn their backs on streaming videos and risk losing relevance, but we should educate library users about the high cost of convenience, and we should advocate for the opportunity to preserve videos ourselves. Libraries, which are now in the midst of a serials crisis, should also think hard before they justify another expensive resource that needs to be paid on an annual basis and does not provide ownership. Libraries should lobby content creators, streaming providers, and lawmakers to create an environment in which libraries can own as well as distribute streaming media. In the meantime, for the sake of preservation and tailored collection-building, libraries should not completely abandon the acquisition of physical videos as they pursue streaming video acquisition.
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Notes
1. We note that some teachers prefer the convenience of streaming videos, especially the ability to easily break up the videos into clips.
2. Furthermore, many students will not even watch an assigned DVD that is placed on reserve and held at the library.
3. The high cost of these streaming video platforms, combined with the limited availability of popular streaming services, shrinking library budgets, and the continued cheap cost of popular DVDs, means that physical video may still be the best option for public libraries.
4. University of Kansas libraries decided not to make a commitment to streaming for entertainment purposes, since many students already had access to platforms that provided these films (Morris and Currie 2016).
5. See King 2014. With perpetual preservation in mind, when a library is dealing with a streaming vendor, it should advocate for the streaming vendor to have both a perpetual option and a provision in the contract to hand over physical files for any streaming videos, should the vendor lose access or the company fold.
6. A 2016 survey of 180 students, mostly undergraduates, at the University of Hawaii at Manoa found that 17 percent did not have a way of playing a DVD at home, and 58 percent did not have a way of playing a Blu-ray Disc at home.
7. In a 2013 survey across all classifications of libraries, total spending on streaming videos exceeded spending on physical videos, and respondents indicated that they were planning on spending even more on streaming video in the coming year (farrelly and Hutchison 2014).

References


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