Streaming video at the University at Albany Libraries

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine the options for streaming video service available to libraries and determine which platform would best fit the needs of the University at Albany Libraries.

Design/methodology/approach – Usage data and faculty and student feedback about the streaming video collections already in use by the libraries were compiled to evaluate current needs, and information was gathered about a selection of additional streaming video platforms to be considered.

Findings – It was determined that a multi-disciplinary collection with a patron-driven-style subscription model would be the best choice to add to the libraries streaming video offerings.

Research limitations/implications – This study focuses on the needs and experiences of the University at Albany Libraries, but the methodology can be used by other institutions assessing their own collections.

Originality/value – Most of the current literature related to streaming video in libraries focuses on building new collections, with little discussion of adding to existing collections – a gap which this study aims to fill.

Keywords Academic libraries, Collection building, Case study, University at Albany, Vendors, Streaming video platforms

Paper type Research paper

Tracing its roots back to 1844, the University at Albany is a research institution with a student enrollment of over 17,000 in nine schools and colleges. An Association of Research Libraries member, the University at Albany Libraries owns more than 2.2 million print volumes and approximately 6,000 videos in physical formats. Streaming video is a relatively new introduction, and understanding the optimal products for student and faculty use is a complicated matter.

Streaming video as a format brings with it a number of collection development challenges. No one vendor provides access to all of the titles the campus needs. As noted by Ferguson and Erdmann (2016), librarians can select individual titles as requested by faculty, add discipline-specific packages or look to patron-driven or demand-driven acquisition (PDA or DDA) models with broader discovery pools exposed to the campus community. Content can be purchased for the life of the file or licensed, commonly with a one- to three-year term, and the cost of individual titles can be high.

The University at Albany Libraries’ first streaming video resource, American History in Video – a collection of primarily documentary and contemporaneous newsreel footage – was purchased in 2010. It was well-received by faculty and students in the History department, who were early adopters of streaming video in the classroom.

It was several years before additional subject-specific video resources were added. In 2014, the University Libraries added Psychotherapy.net, selecting a 40-title collection of videos relevant to social work, as requested by faculty. Psychotherapy.net offers a collection of more than 300 titles, and we have been able to modify individual selections annually based on curricular needs. In 2015, three science resources – JoVE Behavior and JoVE Neuroscience, both peer-reviewed video journals and JoVE Science Education Database – were added. JoVE resources demonstrate experimental techniques and concepts to researchers and students in a visual manner. Latin America in video, a collection of over 400 titles was added in 2016.

As the popularity of commercial providers such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Video skyrocketed, the demand for expanded academic offerings rose from faculty and students, and the Libraries looked to increasing access to a broad base of titles. In 2015, EBSCO began to include a substantial collection of Associated Press video clips of primary source and documentary footage with several popular research databases, but unfortunately the usefulness of this collection has been severely limited because of the unavailability of persistent links (EBSCO Information Services, 2017).

In the same year, the Libraries began a PDA license with Kanopy, which hosts a large collection of quality films, including content from Criterion Collection, Great Courses, Kino Lorber,
PBS and many independent film producers. A title is licensed for a one-year term once it has been viewed four times. Kanopy has proved very popular with faculty and students at the University at Albany. As licenses for individual films tend to be high, Kanopy has allowed easy access to a broad range of titles while only requiring payment for films that are watched.

During 2016, the Libraries subscribed to Ambrose Video, a database of educational content primarily in the arts and humanities. The PBS Video Collection second edition was also acquired with a one-time payment for a multi-year license of the package of documentary films and series such as Frontline and NOVA. These two packages offer videos of interest to a number of departments on campus, but both are relatively small and the source of the films is limited. The Ambrose package mostly contains content produced specifically for the academic market.

With the on-campus demand for streaming video from both faculty and students continuing to grow, the Libraries wanted to assess the state of our current offerings and evaluate new products and acquisitions models to determine our future direction. With limited funding for new resources and a few years of experience with the format, it was an appropriate time to examine the adequacy and usage of our current video offerings and determine whether the libraries should pursue additional broad-based distributors or more specialized, discipline-specific content, and whether there was a clear advantage to purchasing or to leasing content.

**Literature review**

For librarians in the initial stages of implementing streaming video at their institutions, Duncan and Peterson (2014) provide an excellent overview of the basics of licensing and providing access to this format. Helpful appendices include FAQs, a sample license agreement and a checklist for troubleshooting playback problems.

Because no one distributor offers all the content libraries need, librarians have to examine their options carefully. Farrelly (2016) provides a useful overview of existing licensing models for major streaming video vendors and notes that most libraries desiring a larger collection will likely need to offer content from several vendors and manage multiple license types. Libraries may decide to include subscriptions to large video databases, provide smaller, more specialized collections, add individual titles or use a combination of approaches. In cases where libraries seek to reformat hard copy videos to streaming media, most do so by obtaining electronic copies from distributors (Farrelly and Hutchinson, 2014).

Some titles are not offered by any commercial vendor and acquiring and providing access to them can be complicated. Cross, et al. (2014) report on efforts to develop policies and streamline workflows for acquiring streaming rights and providing access to videos in that category. The authors note that their need for this additional workload was driven by an increased emphasis on teaching online classes at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, along with the growing use of the “flipped classroom”, where students are expected to view films prior to attending class. They observe that expensive public performance rights must be obtained for films not restricted to classroom or individual viewing. To control their costs, public performance rights must be paid from departmental budgets at UNCG, not from the library budget.

Farrelly and Hutchinson (2014) report that by 2013, 70 per cent of the academic libraries they surveyed offered some type of streaming video services, and that the majority of those libraries had converted at least some of their physical holdings to streaming format. Furthermore, they found that spending on licensed collections of streaming video was significantly higher than spending on individual titles. In a follow-up survey, Farrelly and Hutchinson Surdi (2016) found that the number of academic libraries offering streaming video has climbed to almost 85 per cent and that libraries favor the subscription model for most of their expenditures.

Further, Farrelly and Hutchinson Surdi (2016) stress that librarians need to ensure that streaming offerings are included in discovery tools and do not require users to search vendor platforms individually. While most collections include vendor-supplied MARC records, about 15 per cent of libraries did not report cataloging streaming video. About 40 per cent of libraries responding to this survey reported that the catalog is the primary access point for streaming titles, with 24 per cent using a discovery layer.

Morris and Currie (2016) describe a project at the University of Kansas (KU) Libraries to explore the possibility of providing campus access to feature films in streaming format, and noted the lack of an affordable distribution model targeted to the academic market. Students were surveyed about their access to popular streaming services like Netflix, Amazon and Hulu Plus, and their willingness to pay a small fee to rent a film for course-related viewing. Most students reported having access to at least one service, and a small majority of students indicated that they would prefer to pay to rent a film rather than borrow a DVD copy from the library. Librarians at KU decided not to add a service for streaming feature films as a result of this study.

**Current streaming video usage**

The University at Albany Libraries currently have access to several streaming video collections, most of which are licensed on a yearly basis. Analysis of the usage of these collections is an important factor in the Libraries’ decisions about subscription renewals. Comparing usage between platforms can be difficult because, although COUNTER offers a standard multimedia report for this purpose, not all vendors provide COUNTER-compliant usage reports. However, statistics for some variation of number of video plays are typically offered. Of the collections listed in Table I, four – Ambrose Video, American History in Video, Latin America in Video and PBS Video – provide the COUNTER MR1, while the rest use their own proprietary usage reports.

Toward the end of the Libraries’ first year of the Kanopy PDA program, an assessment was conducted to analyze usage. Kanopy offers a wide variety of analytics for examining various aspects of both usage and user engagement, and it was clear from the data gathered that usage of the collection increased throughout the year as patron awareness of the resource spread. Usage during the second semester was over four times that of the first semester. As the license for each video is triggered only after four plays, a significant amount of this usage occurred without ever triggering a purchase. Of the videos used during the first year, only 6 per cent were triggered and licensed.
Usage of Latin America in Video and Ambrose Video was quite low. Ambrose Video was added in 2016 and some disappointing changes made to the vendor platform after it was licensed made accessing films counterintuitive. An alternate landing page was configured and usage will be revisited. Drop-off in use of Latin America in Video is also triggering investigation with faculty about curricular use.

**Potential video streaming vendors**

To evaluate potential vendors, it was essential for the Libraries to compile a list of attributes most preferred for future additions. Table II describes these attributes and divides them into primary, secondary and tertiary attributes. Primary attributes consisted of the number of titles, types of licensing models and length of licenses available. Secondary attributes included the percentage of content exclusive to each platform, the availability of MARC records, and the ability to view usage statistics online. The tertiary list included unique features and characteristics exclusive to each platform.

Table II illustrates the differences between each vendor. Because the University Libraries support the university’s diverse curriculum and the Kanopy model was popular with both faculty and students, multi-disciplinary collections were preferred over subject-specific. In terms of licensing, PDA models with one-year subscriptions were preferred over other licensing types for managing costs.

Secondary attributes are not listed, but still had an impact on the overall assessment. The ability to view usage statistics online was offered by all potential vendors, except for SAGE Video, which requires direct communication with a representative. All potential vendors also offer MARC records, although timing of MARC records to be sent varies from vendor to vendor. Closed-captioning and transcription services are offered by every vendor considered, but the quality of such services is difficult to evaluate without experience with the product. The percentage of exclusive content in each vendor’s collection was evaluated to look for any overlap. Deduplication of records, especially for demand-driven products, will likely be complicated. In this aspect, SAGE Video had the most exclusive content, followed by Film Platform and Alexander Street Press. Information for exclusive content in Films on Demand, Swank Motion Pictures and Docuseek2 was unavailable.

Although tertiary attributes are not listed in Table II, the unique features offered by each platform contributed to the final recommendation. This information included features such as the ability to attend Q&A sessions with film directors through Film Platform, the opportunity to obtain rights to 40 titles for the life of the file at the end of the subscription by Docuseek2, the availability of live help chat through Films on Demand and the variety of video formats offered through SAGE Video (such as documentaries, lectures, interviews and raw observational footage).

**Feedback**

Faculty and staff were invited to give feedback on the current collection of video streaming platforms at the University at
Albany. Feedback from this particular group of users covered technical issues such as trouble collecting MARC records in a timely manner, the short length of trial periods, the disappearance of videos when the vendor’s rights to the films quietly end and the lack of standardization in troubleshooting assistance across platforms. One comment from a faculty member mentioned poor transcription and closed-captioning services from Kanopy and suggested that a vendor such as Alexander Street Press may provide better quality because of human input as opposed to computer-generated transcripts.

Comments from students at the monthly Student Advisory Committee meeting were collected and considered in the final recommendation. The Student Advisory Committee is made up of a group of graduate and undergraduate students who meet informally with library staff on a regular basis to provide input on collections and services. These comments ranged from technical issues to insights into usage and interest in streaming services. When asked how many students used streaming services through the Libraries, only two out of 12 were aware of these services. Most students indicated that they would be interested in learning more, although a few said they were more likely to use TEDTalks, Netflix or Hulu. For the students who had used video streaming through the university before, the biggest problem involved compatibility with a Mac computer and an older version of Internet Explorer. Both issues were resolved by receiving help from a librarian at the time, and using a different Web browser. Several students who had never used these streaming services before expressed interest in the services and said they would be specifically interested in documentaries and creating playlists. One student suggested that it would be helpful to feature a playlist of movies on a monthly basis to promote the platform.

Conclusion and final recommendation

Evaluating video streaming platforms with the intention of adding them to an existing collection is a relatively new concept. Whereas most studies focus on building new video streaming collections, the case study conducted at the University at Albany focused on assessing the addition of a vendor to an existing collection of platforms using a two-part process. This process involved assessing the current collection through usage statistics and user feedback and filtering potential platforms through tiers of preferred attributes.

During the assessment of the current collection, statistics showed an increase in viewership in most platforms after the first year, with Kanopy as the most popular platform. Conversely, usage of Latin America in Video and Ambrose Video was low overall. These platforms may benefit from additional promotion efforts. Feedback from students, faculty and staff revealed technical issues with current platforms and facilitated the decision on the final recommendation for a platform.

The second half of the case study consisted of compiling information for each vendor and comparing it to three tiers of preferred attributes. These tiers consisted of primary (licensing information), secondary (other features) and tertiary (unique features) attributes.

Based on the information gathered in this paper, the next logical choice for a platform for University at Albany to strongly consider is Alexander Street Press’ PDA program. In addition to the PDA subscription, the PDA program collection has a variety of multi-disciplinary titles from a wide range of distributors and a number of titles exclusive to the platform. Alexander Street Press was also reported to have high quality closed-captioning services and technical support. It is worth mentioning that the University at Albany has subscribed to three collections through Alexander Street Press in the past with successful results.

References


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