

Streaming Film: How to Serve Our Users

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Abstract:

Streaming video is an integral part of the curriculum for many academic courses. While faculty may have used DVDs in the classroom, the increase in online course instruction and the expectations of students comfortable with using streaming video in their personal lives has led to instructors making more requests of librarians to supply films—both instructional and feature—through streaming. Staff at the University Libraries of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) responded to this need as they worked across departments to create efficient workflows, worked with distributors and conducted a pilot project to learn more about the current streaming film environment, established policies, offered technical support, and shared information with faculty by a variety of means.

Keywords: streaming video | DVDs | faculty | public performance rights

Article:

INTRODUCTION

Film has been growing in popularity as a component of academic education. The use of instructional and entertainment films in the classroom continues to expand at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), and faculty are contacting the University Libraries when they want to acquire both DVDs and streaming film. As more courses are offered online, streaming video options are needed to provide access to films. This article will describe how librarians and staff are meeting that need as they learn to navigate the streaming media environment with increasing expertise, test possible solutions to identified needs, work directly with distributors to find the best film collections and acquisition models, and develop new policies and procedures to provide answers on funding and access as well as facilitate film use by faculty in both teaching and nonclassroom settings.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

The Libraries have a growing collection of streaming resources that are available by a variety of means. Ambrose Video, which includes the BBC Shakespeare Plays, is licensed for perpetual access; Alexander Street Press collections, such as American History in Video and Dance in Video, were purchased and subsequently require an annual hosting fee; NC LIVE, the state's eresource platform, provides PBS video content; and Films on Demand is a subscription that provides humanities and social science films and documentaries. With Swank Digital Campus an advanced payment is made and a value is assigned per credit; semester-long use of selected feature films is charged at the rate of one credit per film. With these and other options, the Libraries offer links to the packages through the databases A–Z list. Records for individual titles are accessible through the catalog, with the exception of Swank Digital Campus, where access is offered via links posted on the Blackboard learning management system to authenticated students in any course using a selected film during a semester.

A LibGuide on streaming films is available from the library website at <http://uncg.libguides.com/streamingfilms>. It offers more details on subscribed sources as well as free resources and pay-per-view options. There is a section for faculty that outlines special ordering options for specific resources. Information on policies is posted on the LibGuide, too. Libraries staff can direct instructors to this page, but these resources have not yet met all the needs of the faculty.

WORKING WITH FACULTY

Streaming films has become a popular pastime in recent years, particularly among current college student populations, as they access many commonly used streaming sites, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. Viewing popular feature films on these sites is accomplished with great ease through the use of various mobile devices. One of the greatest appeals for viewing the latest films from these streaming sites is the 24/7 availability they offer, along with the option to view films from virtually any location with a personally owned mobile device. These convenience factors along with instantaneous access to popular film has, perhaps, contributed to a greater demand by students to acquire the latest mobile devices for their viewing experiences. Mobile devices also function as tools for communicating with others, as well as accomplishing a great many other tasks in and out of the classroom.

University faculty members are quite aware of the proficiencies their students have gained in this rapidly advancing age of electronics. They know their students are often fully engaged with their electronic mobile devices, as some students have great difficulty turning them off. It can be challenging to keep the student engaged with other activities in the classroom, so faculty are beginning to expand areas where students are already engaged with current feature films by offering students instructional or educational films pertaining to the curriculum that may also be

streamed. This process is much more complex and time consuming than traditional streaming of popular feature films, as this article will attempt to explain.

It is important to consider what may be fueling the need to stream films for classroom uses. During difficult economic times when many university systems are experiencing financial hardships due to shrinking budgets, a number of classes may be eliminated, while remaining classes are expanded to larger sizes to accommodate more students with fewer teaching faculty. Many faculty are also required to teach more online courses to accommodate distance education students who are not able to physically meet for traditional classes due to work, family, geographical locations, or other commitments that prevent them from attending traditional face-to-face classes. With these things in mind, faculty are also trying to find creative ways to more efficiently utilize valuable time in the classroom, and with the additions of online courses, they are asking students to view films outside of class, so they might discuss material in a later class or prepare an assignment around a particular film, as in the flipped classroom model. It is also difficult to ask a large traditional class to view a DVD at the library in their free time when there may only be one or two DVD copies available at the library for the entire class. Everyone may not have the chance to view it, when it is constantly in use by another classmate. These are many of the common reasons why faculty want students to stream films outside the classroom.

To get started in the streaming process, UNCG faculty can begin searching for films they wish to stream by visiting the streaming films LibGuide found on the University Libraries website. Here they will find all of the free and library-funded subscription streaming sites available to them, with a variety of popular instructional, educational, and even feature films that may be streamed by copying and pasting the film link to their password-protected Blackboard page for students to access. Commonly used streaming sites are Films on Demand, which offers various films on the humanities and social sciences, and Swank Digital Campus, where classic and popular feature films can be added and renewed each semester when faculty submit an online request form. While there are many films from which to choose on all of the offered streaming sites, a specific title may not be available for streaming on any of these sites, so the faculty will need to submit a request to the University Libraries for the specific film they want to stream.

Many times the library owns the physical DVD but does not own the streaming rights, so the acquisitions department will need to purchase the rights for that DVD, and if the library doesn't own the DVD, it must be purchased with the accompanying streaming rights. This process can be time consuming; it involves locating and making contact with the distributor, who holds the rights to the film. Prices for an individual DVD with rights packages can typically range \$150–\$399 for a single film. It is essential that faculty submit their requests to allow staff ample time to locate the distributor, discuss the costs of purchasing the rights, and determine whose funds will be used to cover the costs involved (either the library or other departmental funds). In addition, staff must obtain written contracts that state the terms of the rights, submit the paperwork to have the DVD purchased and shipped, and then allow enough time to have the digital streaming file prepared from the actual DVD that eventually gets shared with the

requesting faculty as the digital streaming link. The process can and often does vary from distributor to distributor, so it is wise to allow adequate time to gather and prepare needed materials from start to finish. The entire process usually cannot be accomplished in a matter of days, but more realistically over several weeks.

RESPONDING TO A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Circumstances in the summer of 2013 expanded the Libraries' response to streaming film needs. The distance education librarian began receiving more and more requests for help in acquiring streaming rights for films and in understanding which rights applied to particular teaching settings. With her other responsibilities, the librarian was unable to be the sole resource for faculty seeking information, since the research and correspondence were taking an increasing amount of time. A factor that triggered the increase in requests was linked to one of the university's responses to budget cuts and reductions in financial resources: More classes were being moved to the online environment. Some of the instructors teaching those courses were heavy users of DVDs in the classroom. Once the classes moved online, DVDs were not an option. In addition, instructional films and feature films on reserve for a class cannot be checked out of the library by students to view off site; those films may only be viewed within the library, which is impractical for distance learners. The Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures was particularly affected, since their faculty relied upon media as an important component of their instruction. The DVD of a film in the library collection could not simply be ripped and made available online via streaming, as that is not allowed under copyright without permission.

Very few of the DVDs in the collection were purchased with streaming rights, so this new emphasis on making films available online required seeking out those who offer the streaming rights. For instructional and documentary films from distributors who work with libraries, rights may be easily purchased from their online site. Sometimes a discount is available for institutional customers who had purchased the DVD in the past. Streaming rights for feature films are not as easily secured. Resources such as the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>), which lists film credits, can offer productive leads. Regardless of whether the right organization or individual is identified, it became apparent that there may be no response to an inquiry even after repeated appeals. This may be especially difficult with foreign feature films. In cases where streaming rights could not be acquired, faculty members were reminded of the resources we made available through various sources. The use of only segments of a film rather than the whole without securing rights, which is allowed under Fair Use and the TEACH Act, was not an option that appealed to most instructors.

Additional issues emerged, such as the cost of streaming rights. Who pays that additional charge? And it is more typical that streaming rights are granted for only a limited time, often one to three years. That would mean additional costs in the future as well as the challenge of tracking those terms, so the university would remain in compliance.

Following initial exposure to the issues academic libraries face in securing streaming film rights for faculty, the Libraries took active steps in formulating policies and procedures that would streamline workflows and inform faculty about streaming film options.

The first step was gathering the right people within the Libraries. The newly-hired assistant dean for collection management and scholarly communications invited the distance education librarian, the head of acquisitions, the acquisitions specialist, and the multimedia technician to a meeting to discuss issues and concerns. She then arranged for two conference calls and a meeting with experts who could provide background information: a veteran media librarian, a film distributor who works with libraries, and a lawyer for the university. Questions were answered, and those involved gained a better understanding of the environment of academic film streaming. Responsibility for working with faculty on acquiring streaming rights for films moved from the distance education librarian to acquisitions in consultation with the multimedia technician, who is the public services contact with faculty for films and scheduling.

A pilot plan led to working with Docuseek2 (<http://www.docuseek2.com>), a streaming media source, in acquiring rights to two films. The library licensed and paid for the rights to two documentaries each for three-year terms. The activity was helpful in making policy decisions. If perpetual rights were available for streaming a film, the Libraries would make those arrangements and payment would be made with the interested department's library collection budget. If shorter terms, such as the fairly typical one-year or three-year terms, were all that were offered, the Libraries would provide contact information of the distributor to the faculty member, and that department would handle arrangements and payment directly. The new streaming policy was posted to the streaming films LibGuide.

As the Libraries were handling the research, licensing, and communication activities related to acquiring streaming rights for faculty, the digital projects coordinator was developing a copyright website for the campus (<http://copyright.uncg.edu>). The instructors section offers information on Fair Use, the TEACH Act, and video in the classroom, including public performance rights. Information on related University Libraries policies is part of that website, so library staff members have both the LibGuide and the copyright website to refer faculty for more information or confirmation of policies. They serve as educational and informational resources to clarify both legal issues and library policy issues.

PROVIDING ACCESS TO VIDEO FILES

Distributors may offer hosting of streaming films, or they may provide the institution an option for local hosting. In the case of local hosting, the library has to decide where to host the files and how the students will access the files. Both of these need to be compliant with the terms of the agreement with the copyright holder or distributor.

One option is YouTube, which has been used at UNCG in the past. There are several problems with this option. Users can download the video easily and save the file. Even if the video is

marked “unlisted,” users can still share the link. It can be marked “private,” but then there has to be a predefined user list, and someone has to maintain that list for each course, causing more work for the instructors. UNCG library staff decided that YouTube was not secure enough to comply with usage terms for copyrighted material. At a minimum, the terms usually state that the video must be in a password-protected environment limited only to students enrolled in the course and that it cannot be downloaded.

Another option is Google Drive. UNCG is a Google Apps for Education campus, so these options may not be available for everyone. You can limit users to just people at UNCG with the link. The video is accessed through Blackboard, and the link is not overtly supplied. Even if someone does find the link, a password is still required to view the video. It can also be set to prevent downloading of the file. This better meets the requirements of our streaming agreements.

Students access the video through Blackboard, which provides consistency as well as security. The video is available in the same place as their other course content and is protected behind their UNCG password. For students to view the videos, the files have to be converted to a format that can be streamed. UNCG uses mp4 because the quality is good, and the file size is reasonable. The file is ripped from the DVD using Handbrake (<http://sourceforge.net/projects/handbrake/files/>), an open source video transcoder, and VLC Player (<http://www.videolan.org/vlc/index.html>), an open source media player. There is also a file that needs to be installed in order to rip encoded DVDs, and the instructions for this are on the VLC Player site.

The files are hosted on Google Drive. Library staff members upload the mp4 file to Google Drive and set sharing to “People at UNCG who have the link.” The file is also set to “Prevent viewers from downloading.” The file is then shared with the instructor on Google Drive, the instructor is set to “owner,” and an email with the instructions on how to embed the file in Blackboard is sent to the instructor. The instructor obtains the embed code from Google Drive and embeds the file in the Blackboard course as an Item under Web Links. For videos from external providers, the Libraries use an in-house proxy server. This is added as a Web Link in Blackboard using the proxy URL.

PUBLIC PERFORMANCE RIGHTS

Beyond contacting the acquisitions department to order DVDs and streaming films, faculty seek assistance in determining availability of public performance rights for films they may wish to show at a film festival or as part of a film series. No such rights are required for personal viewing of a film in one's own home or residence hall or in a face-to-face classroom setting, but public performance rights are required for showing a film to groups other than a class or where the public could attend whether or not admission is charged, unless the distributor or rights holder waives those rights. Many of the instructional films purchased for the University Libraries are purchased through distributors who sell the films with what they term as “educational rights.” A

typical explanation of those rights allows for showing the films to groups anywhere on campus—not strictly in a classroom as part of instruction—as long as no admission is charged. To help in tracking which films are purchased with public performance rights, a public note is added to the catalog record.

Entertainment DVDs and feature films purchased from such suppliers as Amazon or library media distributors, including Midwest Tape, are not sold with public performance rights. When faculty members ask for help in securing rights, the acquisitions staff members ask questions as the first step in researching what options may be available. Questions might include: When do you want to show the film? Who will be attending? How many people are expected? As with securing streaming rights, it can be challenging to find the best resource for securing public performance rights. Contacting a company such as Swank Motion Pictures, Inc., is an option. It is advisable to track correspondence and set a time limit for awaiting a response before notifying the requestor of the status, since requests can go unanswered.

Once an answer is received, faculty must decide whether the cost is something they are willing to pay. For a single showing outside a classroom, the public performance rights may cost \$300 to \$1,000. Any such charges are paid from the faculty member's departmental budget rather than from the library collections budget. Happily, there have been instances when the distributor has waived any fee, such as the case where a faculty member asked to do a film screening in the region at a professional conference. Saving correspondence for each situation helps the library to document its efforts.

Working so closely with faculty on researching and acquiring streaming film has given those in the library a better understanding of current curricular needs and an insight into how students use video as part of their education.