Technology Left Behind-The Temptations of Netflix

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Use of Netflix subscription services within libraries has been on the rise in the past few years. The appeal of the Netflix services is clear, providing easy, quick, and inexpensive access to a wide variety of video titles that libraries may not be able to afford to purchase. And there are a plethora of potential uses, including supplementing existing media collections, functioning as an alternative to Interlibrary Loan, and acting as a way to screen potentially costly library purchases. However, the Netflix terms of use specify that DVDs and streaming media are to be used for personal use. Some libraries have argued that their use of the streamed video and the rented DVDs falls within permitted use as acceptable under copyright law, but the company has recently gone on the record stating that library use of DVDs is a violation of its terms.

Netflix Subscriptions

It is clear that Netflix does not offer institutional subscriptions. As a result, libraries using the service take advantage of existing plans aimed towards individual users. Netflix subscription plans include delivery of DVDs via the mail and unlimited streaming of TV episodes and movies over the Internet. DVDs are sent to the user in packaging that doubles as pre-paid return envelopes. With the exception of the limited plan, all of the plans limit the number of DVDs that the user may have at one time but permit the user to swap out DVDs as often as he or she likes. As of November 2010, the company began offering a streaming-only plan that does not include DVD delivery. Videos can be streamed to the user’s television via a variety of devices including the Wii, Xbox360, PlayStation3, or a streaming video player, such as a Roku (http://www.roku.com/). Personal computers can also be used to view the streamed content.

Pricing for the subscription plans varies, depending upon the number of DVDs the individual (or library) wants to have rented at one time. The cheapest possible plan, costing $4.99 per month, allows the user to have one DVD at a time with a limit of 2 DVDs per month. The most expensive plan, at $55.99 a month, permits users to have up to 8 DVDs at one time with an unlimited number of DVDs per month. Complete subscription options and pricing can be found on the Netflix Website (http://www.netflix.com/2010/11/new-plan-for-watching-instantly-plus.html).

Use of Netflix by Libraries

Netflix is being used by academic and public libraries alike. For the most part, libraries appear to be using the subscription programs that permit a larger number of DVDs to be obtained at a one time. While public libraries will let patrons check out Netflix DVDs for personal use, the trend in academic libraries is to limit use of the DVDs to faculty and staff at the university. Usage policies, check-out periods, and fines vary from library to library.

In the April 15, 2008 issue of Library Journal, Lynn Blumenstein reported on two public libraries in New Hampshire, the Sanbornton Public Library (SPL) in Sanbornton, NH and Cook Memorial Library in Tamworth, NH, both of which had set up Netflix subscriptions. A post on the SPL Website dated January 28, 2010 indicates SPL still uses Netflix. With up to three titles available at any point in time, SPL lends out Netflix DVDs to patrons for 3-day periods. The right-hand column of the SPL Website indicates which 3 titles the library currently has rented from Netflix. (http://spinh.com/)

Pacific Lutheran University Library provides information about its Netflix program on its Website, clearly stating that use of the Netflix service is limited to classroom use by faculty. Guidelines are provided as to the type of movie that is suitable for ordering via Netflix, and the checkout policies are clearly defined. Faculty members may check out items for 7 days. DVDs must be returned within 30 days, or the patron will be charged a $50 lost fee. PLU Library’s Website indicates that they currently use a program allowing 6 DVDs to be borrowed at one time. (http://www.plu.edu/~libr/get-help/netflix.html)

Ciara Healy’s article “Netflix in an Academic Library: A Personal Case Study” in the Winter 2010 issue of Library Trends, outlined the Netflix program she implemented while employed at Wake Technical Community College in North Carolina. Healy indicated to the Chronicle of Higher Education that at Wake Technical “she set down strict guidelines for access to Netflix material. DVD loans were restricted to faculty members who planned to use the materials in the classroom, not for at-home entertainment. [Healy] allowed students to access streaming video from the Netflix Website, but only under supervision on a computer in the library.” (Kaya Sept. 2010)

Rebecca Fitzgerald, Acquisitions Librarian at Scheeie Memorial Library at Concordia College in New York, described Concordia’s use of a Netflix subscription in a guest post on Tame the Web (http://tametheweb.com/) in September 2010. Fitzgerald stated that Concordia started out with one account allowing 8 DVDs (the maximum number) at one time. Within a short period of time, a second account was created to handle the large amount of traffic. The library uses Netflix to provide access to popular titles and national released documentaries. As a result, Fitzgerald says, they have been able to focus their spending on more academic materials, such as high quality educational films from Insight Media and Films for the Humanities and Sciences. (Fitzgerald 2010) Fitzgerald has this to say of the service, “Netflix has saved us an enormous amount of money (around $3,000) by allowing the physical rentals as well as instant play.”

continued on page 84
The University of Washington Libraries conducted a three-year pilot project of Netflix services, offering access through its Media Center. However, the subscription has since been cancelled. According to John Vallier, Head of Distributed Media Services at the UW Libraries, the service has not been missed. They have been able to respond to faculty needs through robust collection development efforts. Vallier noted that a service such as Netflix could be useful for a smaller school that could not afford to purchase materials.

**Reaction by Netflix and Librarians**

The Netflix Terms of Use specifically state, “The use of Netflix, service, including movies and TV shows made available to you by us, is solely for your personal and non-commercial use.” (http://www.netflix.com/TermsOfUse) In addition, Netflix has indicated that it considers the use of Netflix subscriptions by libraries to provide access to DVDs and streaming video to patrons against its Terms of Use. Travis Kaya’s September 18, 2010 post in Wired Campus on the Chronicle of Higher Education Website stated that “lending DVDs out for faculty members to project on-screen in class or allowing students to watch streaming video from a Netflix account is something the company ‘frowns upon,’” according to Netflix’s Vice President of Corporate Communications, Steve Swasey. Swasey told the Chronicle “We just don’t want to be pursuing libraries. We appreciate libraries and we value them, but we expect that they follow the terms of the agreement.”

In the same piece, Ciara Healy said that in setting up the Netflix program at Wake Technical Community College “she acted according to federal copyright law, which allows faculty members to share legally obtained material in face-to-face instruction.” However, the question has been raised as to whether a court of law would consider a library’s use of Netflix “personal,”

Kevin Smith, Duke University Scholarly Communications officer, told Library Journal, “[T]hose terms of use may indeed trump rights that one has under the copyright law; they are part of a private agreement between Netflix and a user with can create liability only for those two parties if there is a breach of terms.” (Hrad 2010)

In response to recent articles and blog posts discussing the lending or streaming of Netflix videos by libraries, some library folk have voiced their disapproval. Meredith Farkas, Head of Instructional Services at Norwich University in Vermont and author of the “Technology in Practice” column in American Libraries, posted an entry on her blog in which she reprimands libraries. Voicing concern about the legality of library subscriptions, she concludes that “Netflix does not have any institutional subscriptions. Therefore, what the library is doing is in violation of Netflix’s terms of services and opens them up to legal repercussions.” In a September 18, 2010 post on his blog, LibraryLaw blogger Peter Hirtle agrees, saying “I don’t see how a library subscription to Netflix could be considered to be “personal”—not when the purpose of the subscription is to lend the movies to others, rather than watch them yourself (as if a library could even watch a movie).”

**References**


