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Biz of Acq — Shooting the Rapids — Navigating Changing Video Formats

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Do you remember where you were when the war ended in 2008? The war between two competing high-definition video formats that is: Blu-ray and HD-DVD. Both battled for marketplace supremacy and the hearts and minds of consumers everywhere, but it all ended rather quickly once HD-DVD ceded the fight to Blu-ray. This and other video-related developments of late may have left many of you wondering just what the implications might be for your library and its video collection.

There is certainly plenty enough change to preoccupy us with these days in academic libraries, no less so for video. And while there is no such thing as a “typical” video collection, by examining the evolution of video in academic libraries, we can all better position ourselves to understand and navigate changes such as those involving video formats, as they arise.

In the beginning...the seed for video collections in academic libraries was planted nearly 80 years ago. That’s when we find colleges and universities in the United States establishing film collections — 35mm, then later 16mm and 8mm — in various departments around campus, though not necessarily in the library. After World War II, the campus library gradually begins to play an increasing role in assuming (cataloging) control for these collections. Up to this point film collections are still comprised of a physical film on a reel, requiring a projector for viewing, and this will continue for some time to come.

The next big shift was a change in format, from film to videotape. In the early 1970s **Sony** introduced the U-matic videocassette tape and player, which despite its cost and size, eventually found its way to quite a few campuses and academic libraries. Muted enthusiasm for this format hindered its widespread adoption, thus sealing its fate. And though it was short-lived U-matic undoubtedly paved the way for what was to come.

The first major skirmish between competing video formats came with the introduction of Betamax (1975) and VHS (1976). While many felt Betamax was the superior of the two formats, VHS eventually won out, with **Sony** hanging on and finally retiring Betamax in 1988. Together though they launched what came to be known as the home video revolution, the impact of which cannot be overstated.

Where before the options for watching a Hollywood-type film (outside of a television broadcast) typically were limited to theatrical showings, home video changed the equation

by allowing individuals to purchase or rent movies for viewing within the comfort of their own home, not to mention allowing for the recording of television broadcasts. And far from destroying Hollywood’s theatrical film market as was feared by many a studio executive at the time, the home video market only increased consumer demand for all that Hollywood had to offer.

For academic libraries in these early days, video acquisitions were often shared with other departments or units on campus, with names such as Media or Video Lab, Learning Resource Center, Instructional Resource Center, Educational or Technology Lab, etc. These past two decades have seen more and more academic libraries integrating these external and discrete video collections (or starting their own) within their walls — thus providing greater control and facilitating access to these rich and diverse teaching and learning resources.

Despite its limitations and drawbacks, VHS has fought off its share of challengers (remember Laserdisc?) and has lasted for nearly 30 years. By the end of 2008 VCR production had effectively ceased, yet videotapes are still being produced. For certain kinds of educational, documentary, and media or performance art films, VHS is often the only format “in print” or available for a given title, with many of these being supplied by smaller independent filmmakers, vendors and distributors. VHS finally ceded its position of home video dominance to DVD only relatively recently, capping a run that will likely be unequalled by any subsequent video format. *Variety* published a mock obituary for VHS in November of 2006: “VHS, 30, Dies Of Loneliness.”

With the arrival of DVD in 1997 came the promise and delivery of movies with vastly improved picture and sound quality over VHS. Much like its cousin the music CD when it first appeared the previous decade, consumers voted with their pocketbooks and the adoption rate for DVD (evinced by disc rentals and sales of players) eclipsed all previous video formats. In less than ten years, the number of U.S. households with DVD players had surpassed those with VCRs.

The initial wide scale acceptance, availability, and affordability of VHS followed by DVD in the consumer marketplace, coupled with the growth of film studies on campuses and the integration of video into course curricula throughout the 1980s-1990s-2000s, has led us to where we are today, with video collections now an accepted and integral part of most academic libraries.

And now in 2008 there comes yet another new format — high-definition video, and Blu-ray is leading the charge. Offering again a vastly improved picture and sound over standard DVD, along with increased multimedia capabilities, greater storage capacity, and expanded content and features available both on the disc and online, Blu-ray was hyped to be crowned the new format king. And that may happen in time, but it certainly isn’t a slam dunk at this point.

A whole host of variables too lengthy to enumerate here have contributed to Blu-ray’s slow adoption rate, but general confusion about the format on the part of consumers, the cost for both players and discs, and the limited number of film titles available top the list. For many people, the DVD format provides a viewing experience that is just fine, and after building personal film collections over time with VHS, and then having to repeat the process for DVD, the idea of starting all over yet again with yet another format could be the last straw for some consumers, despite promises of Blu-ray being backward compatible with standard DVD.

How academic libraries approach the matter of investing in and collecting Blu-ray will remain an individual choice. Aside from existing library policy considerations (mission, technology, budget or collection development), other contributing factors might include inquiries or requests from students and faculty to purchase Blu-ray versions of films, as well as video playback equipment or computer upgrades to Blu-ray in listening/viewing spaces and classrooms around the library and the campus.

Whatever decision a library makes, it is worth keeping in mind that Blu-ray will more than likely be the final physical format developed for video — notwithstanding any further refinements to existing optical disc technology. Over time, streaming and downloading of video content — online through various providers and software applications or through a multitude of connected (and increasingly smaller and portable) viewing and playback devices — will supplant older physical formats. Think about the growth of music downloading; that’s the direction a good deal of video content will be headed.

Streaming media (or certainly the concept) is as old as the Internet itself. The delivery of a data file, be it music, audio, or video from a media server to a desktop, laptop computer, handheld device or cell phone is something most of us have encountered or are familiar with nowadays. Consider the popularity of

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watching video online through Websites like **YouTube** or **Hulu**. Now, combine that with certain demographic and technological trends relating to young people's experience with creating self-generated video and their burgeoning demand for Internet access; all these are ultimately driving student expectations for faster (campus) networks that are always on and always available.

Expectations for what the library can provide within this context will also rise from instructors and faculty on campus, both those in the classroom and those involved in distance education. As those teaching become more familiar with the technology and what is available (especially newer hires), we may see librarians, instructors and faculty initiating partnerships with different campus departments and other stakeholders to facilitate access to subject-specific streaming video content.

Many academic libraries are already sailing the streaming waters, providing access to music (classical, jazz, etc.) and video (theatre,

opera, etc.) through subscription databases. There are issues relating to content delivery and availability, sound and picture quality, as well as copyright and licensing that will eventually be addressed, but we should expect many more library database vendors as well as other educational and documentary video producers and distributors to get in the game and offer either a selection of video titles for streaming, or collections of streaming video content in the years to come. In the end, academic libraries may wind up with as many different sorts of licensing agreements and arrangements with streaming video content providers as there will be different streaming video formats, platforms and providers from which to choose. There will likely be a continuation of the "access versus ownership" debate with streaming and physical media formats similar to that which occurred in academic libraries with the widespread cancellation of print journal subscriptions in favor of online journals.

Looking back then it can be seen that video format changes for the most part have been gradual. The choice has seldom been "either-or"; for many academic libraries, newer video formats complement older formats, with col-

lections often containing and retaining a mix of analog and digital within them (reel film, video tape, videodisc, etc.). Building relevant, wide-ranging multidisciplinary collections over time to meet the teaching and research needs of the university and providing access to those collections is what academic libraries do, regardless of format.

Lastly, some words to consider from the **Consumer Electronics Association (CEA)**:

"Manufacturers develop and introduce products to take advantage of new technologies, and not a demonstrable consumer need, and often the profit motive forces the introduction of competing and incompatible formats. History has shown us that any or all of these factors have retarded consumer confidence, delayed purchases and, in some spectacular examples, destroyed both the market for that product and the companies involved."

"Convergence" from **The Consumer Electronics Association** <http://is.gd/1aAq>.

Just remember, when shooting the rapids, keep your head up and don't stop paddling. 🐻

And They Were There — Reports of Meetings

28th Annual Charleston Conference — Issues in Book and Serial Acquisition, "The Best of Times ... The Worst of Times," Francis Marion Hotel, Embassy Suites Historic District, and College of Charleston (Addlestone Library), Charleston, SC, November 5-8, 2008

Charleston Conference Reports compiled by: **Ramune K. Kubilius** (Collection Development / Special Projects Librarian, Northwestern University, Galter Health Sciences Library) <r-kubilius@northwestern.edu>

Column Editor's Note: *Thank you to all of the conference attendees who volunteered to become reporters, providing highlights of so many conference sessions. In this issue, we are providing the first installment of reports, but there are still more! Watch for them in upcoming ATG issues. Also, visit the **Charleston Conference Website** for handouts and presentation outlines from many conference sessions. The 2008 **Charleston Conference Proceedings** will be available in fall 2009. — RKK*

Preconferences — Wednesday, November 5, 2008

Subscribing to Journals in Community Web Portals —

Presented by **Simon Inger** (Consultant, Simon Inger Consulting); **Pinar Erzin** (Managing Director, Accucoms)

Reported by: **Ramune K. Kubilius** (Northwestern University, Galter Health Sciences Library) <r-kubilius@northwestern.edu>

Inger and **Erzin** presented the results of two funded research surveys conducted earlier in 2008. After a review of the routes to journals (also covered in his white paper on the topic, www.sic.ox14.com/publications.htm), **Inger** described the survey's methodology, which admittedly was biased: N. American, European, and life sciences. Comparisons were made (after down-sampling) with a 2005 survey. After an examination of various behaviours, session attendees were introduced to various portal examples, of societies and those presented as narrow subject niche gateways. **Erzin** described the results of a much smaller sample survey of N. American medical librarians, about their familiarity with portals and the content therein. The session was small enough to include dialog

between presenters and attendees, and was particularly lively during the "Implications for Link-Server Management and Authentication" and "Other Issues" portion of the session.

Negotiating With Vendors: Dos and Don'ts —

Presented by **Buzzy Basch** (President, Basch Subscriptions); **Janice Lachance** (Chief Executive Director, SLA); **Kim Armstrong** (Assistant Director, Center for Library Initiatives); **Adam Chesler** (Independent Contractor).

Reported by: **Christine Ross** (University of Illinois at Springfield) <cmross1@uis.edu>

A variety of perspectives were represented in this very informative panel presentation. To begin, an attorney at law shared basic tactics that translate into any negotiating situation. His most useful tips: to determine your opening position prior to entering the negotiation, to anticipate the best alternative outcome, and to make it an integrative negotiation where both parties could realize an additional benefit. Two consortia librarians provided additional useful tips. The best advice for a successful negotiation included: doing "homework" about the product in preparation for negotiation, having another pair of ears on the phone or in the room during negotiations, and knowing, at a minimum, what you want and what you are willing to give up. Finally, the experts shared strategies for lowering prices. These included understanding the true, or market, value of the service or product sought, "trying" out a product at a lower price tier until it's shown that unlimited access is mandated, and offering a price at the outset of negotiation.

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