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Op Ed — The Only (VHS) Game in Town

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In my capacity as head of Media Collections here at the College of Charleston, the big question I get asked these days is, “so, when are we getting rid of those VHS tapes?” This question comes mostly from two sectors — students who have been forced to “endure” a program in this analog format (“What? How do I skip to the scene I want?”) and someone in administration who sees an obvious opportunity to gain more valuable shelf space and give the students what they “really want,” which are more DVDs. Interestingly, the faculty who use and assign VHS programs for their classes are the least likely to ask this question. I think that has a lot to do with the fact that faculty members tend to use the same video programs (on the same VHS tape) for year after year. Plus, they have ownership, since they lovingly picked out and ordered the programs in the first place. It’s a bit of “don’t get rid of MY stuff” syndrome.

Still, what are we to do with these VHS tape things? Here is something you already know: VHS is withering away. DVD — as a format — is king. What’s a library to do, seeing as how we are stuck with shelf after shelf of VHS tapes? First of all, don’t freak out. There is a positive side. But first, the bad news.

VHS format is dying. It’s not completely dead yet. It’s a lingering death to be sure. Yet, dying it is. Actually, “dying” seems a bit morbid of a word. Disappearing sounds a bit better. Being overwhelmed and replaced by DVD is more accurate. A *Los Angeles Times* article of December, 2009 (*VHS Era is Winding Down*) noted that in October of that year “the final truckload of VHS tapes rolled out of a Palm Harbor, FL, warehouse run by **Ryan J. Kugler**, the last major supplier of the tapes.” “I was the last one buying VHS and the last one selling it, and I’m done,” said **Kugler**. “Anything left in warehouse we’ll just give away or throw away.” Gee, that is depressing, not to mention mighty wasteful sounding.

That was nearly two years ago. I know of no major retailer where one can buy movies on VHS now. Though I noticed yesterday that I can buy blank VHS tapes from a tiny selection at **Wal-Mart**, such once ubiquitous items as VHS re-winders and (gasp) VHS players can only be purchased online from specialty suppliers. Dual VHS/DVD players are available at retail stores, but I have noticed that even their numbers (and model selections) are declining rapidly in the last six months. Can you say “8-track?”

Now the good news: Beyond all the format wars that the library must try to deal with, the fact is that we have the unique status of having the largest collection of public VHS players in one place to go along with the largest collection of available VHS material. That is good news? Sure. No one else can touch us. The fact is, though most of the world is going DVD, many titles (especially in the field of Education for some reason) are still only being released on VHS. Besides that, in academia at least, students are still being assigned to watch programs on VHS (it’s that faculty “ownership” thing again). Sure, students coming into Media Collections react with blank stares when presented with a VHS tape. They sort of reach out and touch it gingerly like they are touching a stone-age axe, just before asking how it works. So, how is knowing how to work a stone-age axe a good thing?

We are the only game in town. That’s why. For a relatively short amount of time libraries will be the main (if not the only) concentration of the outgoing technology, as well as the knowledge of how to use it. We can use this fact to our advantage. Of course, we don’t want to end up being known as the “VHS ancient technology” place (There is already a place for that. It’s called a museum). Instead, we are going to become the technology crossover place. We are the grease between the gaps. So, while we are becoming the ever more valuable (and ever rarer) experts in the “old” VHS technology, we will be simultaneously inserting our applicable knowledge of the newer media (DVD and streaming etc.). This is why they will be flocking to us.

This is where libraries step in to save the day. We will learn to effectively leverage our existing technology and technology skills and our new media skills to maneuver in the space emerging between the old and evolving media. In this case it’s between the old VHS and the new, incoming DVD technology and eventually streaming — or whatever supplants that — technology.

Already public libraries are offering books on tape for download, and many academic libraries offer video streaming services like *Films on Demand* and *Alexander Street Press*.¹ Providing the latest technology formats is not the problem.

We are doing that. The problem is in the transition. It is issues like *when* to go to streaming, and *to what degree*, and *what to do* with all of those video tapes? The answer of *when* to do it is easy. Do it now. To *what degree*? It is the same question we have been asking about online journals for the last few years. Answer: take it as it comes — slow and steady. But, start dissolving the idea that we are a place full of things (books and journals), and realize we are evolving into a place for informed and enhanced access — of information things. Many people will continue to see us as a “warehouse” of books simply because that is what we have been for over 2,000 years. But, though they will be coming to us for a long time to get books and DVDs (or whatever form the next video incarnation takes), our ability to ease their transition into the new media formats will impress them with our new identity and function.

Yes, the world is shedding VHS technology and lurching into DVD and streaming. But, who is pulling up the rear, filling in the cracks, and smoothing the transition? Librarians that’s who. We are both societal glue and the caulk between the transitional cracks. Is it not a joy to be a building adhesive material for humanity? But, hey, that’s what we do.

What to do with all those VHS tapes? That is a good one. I hate the thought of pouring gazillions of plastic and magnetic tape into landfills. So far I have not come across an effective recycle or reuse solution. (Although, empty VHS cases do make really nifty pencil holders.)

Our collection mix between VHS and DVD are evolving toward the latter like Homo-sapiens replacing Neanderthal (don’t you just love these analogies?). But, hey, like the human race made it just fine thank you, libraries will too. So, don’t fret the VHS to DVD revolution. Enjoy all the attention while you can. Then prepare yourself for even more. 🦁



Endnote

1. **Alexander Street’s** one-stop streaming video solution for libraries and universities launches later this year. **Academic Video Online** will include 9,000 titles at launch and will grow to include more than 20,000 by 2013 — all cross-searchable through a single interface.