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Streaming access in a fractured world

Designing LibGuides with student users in mind

Faculty in the University of Baltimore Division of Legal, Ethical, and Historical Studies incorporate multiple modes of learning into their course materials. For many professors, this means that films are shown as part of the curriculum. As we know from professional experience, streaming access to films through platforms like Kanopy has become financially untenable for many academic libraries.

While the RLB Library often loans physical copies of films for use in the classroom, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way that we were able to provide access to physical copies and streaming media. Our Access Services department noted that reserve requests for August 2020 exceeded the number of reserve requests made in August for the last three years. All three authors have fielded more faculty requests for content, facilitated troubleshooting sessions when technology failed, and have educated additional faculty about streaming content since March 2020.

As a result of this changing landscape, a library team with representatives from Reference, Access Services, and Acquisition & Discovery Services met with one history professor to devise a strategy for easier access to streaming media. Student engagement is always paramount and especially important during a time when students are learning remotely. Starting in February 2020, we collaborated to produce shared resource spreadsheets, curate LibGuides with links to streaming platforms, and introduce information about streaming media access to the rest of the division.

Background

Prior to 2009, the RLB Library relied heavily on in-house DVD and VHS players to provide access

to students who needed to view required films for classes. In an effort to make these films available to more students, the library introduced Slingbox, a remote DVD player users could control from home. When they wanted to view a film, students or faculty called into the library to ask someone to place the appropriate DVD into one of the two Slingbox players. There were obvious benefits to remote access using Slingbox, but also many drawbacks related to troubleshooting. The RLB Library worked with our technology department to find direct streaming platforms that would eliminate the need to call the library for film access. As a result of this collaboration, the RLB Library tested and used Sharestream from 2012 until 2016, when we moved to Panopto. Panopto is still used today to share streaming access to films that we own in a physical format.

Because of our shift to Panopto and the licensing of streaming video through platforms like Kanopy and Swank, faculty and students may need to visit several different locations on the library website, in Sakai (our learning management system [LMS]), or in the library building when they want to view a film. With these new modes of access, we have also encountered copyright issues or financial constraints that limit the amount of time that a film can be viewed online. It became obvious that something needed to be done to simplify the film

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request and viewing process for faculty, library colleagues, and students.

Stumbling blocks

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Baltimore chose to teach entirely online through summer 2021 and faculty began looking for ways to continue using films in a virtual environment.

The University of Rhode Island shares an example of appropriate fair use for streaming media conversion for an in-person class being conducted online.¹ Their guide suggests that copies of physical films

can be created for use within the confines of an online classroom. The University of Baltimore follows a similar procedure to comply with copyright laws.

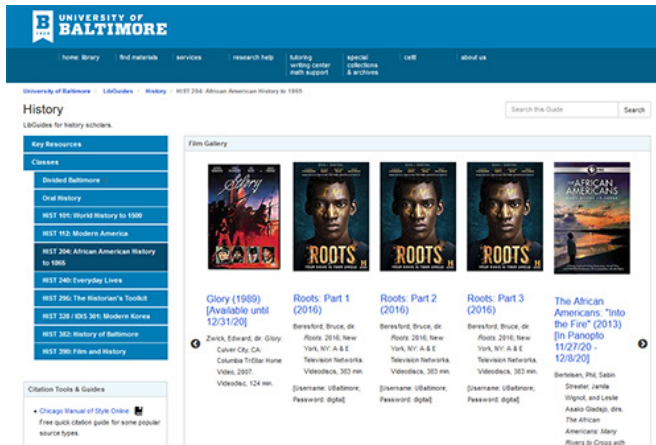
Films that we have purchased in physical format can be converted to streaming content, as long as the film is being used by a specific class for a specific purpose. This process involves submitting a request for each film to our Access Services department, waiting for the film to be digitized by our Office of Technology Services, setting streaming dates, and then alerting faculty when the media is available. The streaming dates determine how long faculty and students can access the media in our LMS. At least 750 lectures or other streaming media have been digitized to Panopto for use on our campus.

Films on streaming platforms like Kanopy and Swank need to be ordered from our Acquisition & Discovery Services department by email or using an online form, then a link is shared with the faculty member once the film becomes available. Often, faculty contact their library liaison from the Refer-

ence department to facilitate these requests or they send a copy of their request to their librarian.

Communicating the correct process to faculty was complicated by our move to a completely virtual environment. Instead of using the procedures developed by the library to facilitate access (i.e., the streaming media reserves request form), faculty reached out to staff throughout the library to request

films. We have all noticed an increase in online communication during the pandemic, resulting in cognitive overload for many of us. Under conditions of stress, we often respond by regressing to preferred courses of action,² so reaching out to the most recent



HIST 204 African American History Film Gallery.

library contact became a default for some overwhelmed faculty.

Additionally, variation in access points and types provided hurdles to user access. For example, stable streaming platforms acted differently on different browsers. When material was embedded in Sakai, some films failed to play correctly. Some students reported issues with playback and login, which were tied to user-related technology differences beyond the scope of our library and authentication errors related to issues at the system level. As mentioned earlier, copyright restrictions can limit streaming access to discrete periods of time, so it often seems like faculty and students lose access to streaming content without warning. Differentiating between films from Panopto, Kanopy, Swank, or open-source sites is easy for library professionals, but difficult for users. It's been a learning process for everyone. One thing we discovered is that copyright restrictions mean that some films can't be shown over Zoom during synchronous instruction. Knowing the platform limitations helps explain process variations but is not a common consideration for typical users.

Because we upgraded to a new version of Sakai recently, faculty have had trouble locating their streaming media in our LMS. Faculty had to find and activate the Panopto tab in Sakai, open the tab once it appeared in their left-hand toolbar, create a “streaming reserves folder” in Panopto, and then request streaming films through the library. Faculty encountered problems throughout this process and reached out to the library, our faculty development center (CELTT), and our Office of Technology Services for solutions.

Financial limitations affected our streaming access to films in Kanopy before the onset of the pandemic, but faculty anxiety about access to streaming media increased once we moved completely

online. As professionals in the service field, we felt compelled to help manage the technical and emotional needs of our users. As a result, our workloads and emotional stress rose during the fall semester.

Streaming rights and copyright compliance have also presented barriers to access for our users. Students need to access assigned films before their class discussion and before writing assignments related to the films. Our current policies limit access to some streaming content from 7 days to 12 months. Students are disappointed or surprised when material is not available at their point of need.

Solutions

In order to facilitate faculty education about existing film access, Debbie Li (Acquisition & Discovery Services) created a LibGuide that helps faculty find films in our collection.³ One suggestion for improved communication involves creating an Access Services LibGuide that leads faculty through the reserve request process with video, visual, and text components.

Another proposed solution involves nominating one person to serve as a triage specialist for streaming media requests. Erin Toepfner (Access Services) has been serving informally in this capacity since August 2020. To communicate this change, we could advertise our shift in services using direct e-mail, social media, and our campus newsletter. Hopefully, this would reduce frustration and drive more traffic to our library homepage.

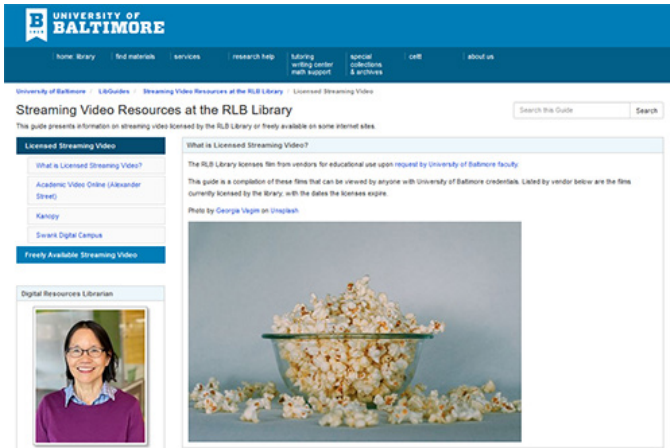
Our main interdepartmental effort this year focused on creating curated LibGuides with citations, links, and availability information for specific class sections.⁴ Faculty responded positively to these guides. We assume that the

visual layout improves the user’s ability to quickly scan and find the material they need.

As we worked with each other and with faculty to create these curated LibGuides, we found opportunities for deeper conversations about course needs, library resources, copyright restrictions, and instruction opportunities. Although it created some unexpected technology issues, LibGuides could be embedded in our LMS. This meant that students could find films, course materials, and instruction session information in one place, instead of having to navigate several platforms.

According to our statistics, History LibGuide course pages had 1,413 views during the Fall 2020 semester, compared to 169 views in Fall 2019. Access Services saw a slight increase in the number of new streaming media requests in 2020, compared to the same time period in 2019. Clearly, creating a more appealing layout and a centralized location drove users to library resources and encouraged

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Streaming Video Resources at the RLB Library.

where materials can be found and can provide guidance on how communities can tell their story and how to preserve them.

When it becomes possible, the team plans to organize exhibitions and events that highlight materials already collected by the project. This will give community members the opportunity to see that their efforts and contributions are bearing fruit and encourage others to get involved.

Notes

1. Marilyn Halstead, "Finding History Where It Lives: Group Works to Document African-American History in Southern Illinois," *Southern Illinoisian*, February 22, 2018.

2. Becky Malkovich, "Finding freedom in small African American communities," *Southern Illinoisian*, October 18, 2011. Southern Illinois was home to several early free black settlements. Several of these communities were settled by African Americans freed before the Civil War. Other

communities were established around the turn of the 20th century when coal mining companies recruited African Americans, usually from Tennessee and Kentucky, to work in the mines.

3. These records were rescued from of the Caledonia Freewill Baptist Church, an African American church located in Olmstead, Illinois, that was being torn down the next week.

4. Michelle Caswell, "Community Archives," *Knowledge that Matters* blog, November 5, 2018, <https://sudikoff.gseis.ucla.edu/community-archives/> (accessed 10/19/2020).

5. The inspiration for the Facebook page came from the success of the Georgia LGBTQ Archives Project as discussed in Morna Gerrard's article, "No Fame Required': Collaboration, Community, and the Georgia LGBTQ Archives Project," in Kate Theimer, ed., *Appraisal and Acquisitions: Innovation Practices for Archives and Special Collections* (Landham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015): 1-15 *z*

("Streaming access in a fractured world," continued from page 376)

their use. We hope to continue this trend after we return to in-person instruction.

Areas for improvement

Our current process developed over the course of the fall semester as we responded to faculty and student needs. This required extended and extensive communication between the Office of Technology Services, CELTT, and (of course) multiple library departments. With so many variables in the process, miscommunication was common, work was sometimes duplicated, and requests took more time and effort. We intend to collaborate with colleagues to simplify our workflow and to learn from the mistakes made during COVID-19 adaptation. This process of self-reflection and peer discussion should help improve access now and after COVID-19.

Summary

LibGuides provided a solution to an issue that complicated student learning and provided a better user experience, which improved student engagement and (hopefully) increased long-term student use of library resources. Working with streaming media during COVID-19 has caused us

to reflect on how we can streamline processes and improve outcomes when we return to in-person instruction. Along the way, we have found ways that we can work across departments and colleges to provide access to streaming media and to improve the process for all involved.

Notes

1. "Fair Use and Copyright for Online Education: Examples: Video," *University Libraries*, University of Rhode Island, updated September 15, 2020, <https://uri.libguides.com/fairuse/examples/video>.

2. Jeff Johnson, *Designing with the Mind in Mind*, 2nd ed. (Waltham, MA, Morgan Kaufman, 2014).

3. Debbie Li, "Streaming Video Resources at the RLB Library," *RLB Library*, University of Baltimore, updated December 2, 2020, <https://ubalt.libguides.com/c.php?g=1093715#-lg-box-25294647>.

4. Sarah Gilchrist, "HIST 204: African American History to 1865," *RLB Library*, University of Baltimore, updated December 3, 2020, <https://ubalt.libguides.com/history/hist204>. *z*