Kanopy

Not Netflix for Libraries, but Close Enough

Date: 26 April 2017

Kanopy is an independent streaming video platform for feature films, documentaries and academic content. Rather than offering subscriptions, Kanopy sells licenses of one year or longer to individual films, and also offers a patron-driven acquisition access model.

Method

A CCL-EAR committee member explored a trial version of Kanopy website that included all available collections, read the vendor's support materials, and attended a webinar. An informal survey on use of streaming media products sent out to community college librarians in March 2017 was also reviewed.

Preview

- **Content**

  Kanopy provides a wide variety of feature films, documentaries and academic videos, over 30,000 at the time of review. Major contributors (called "providers" in Kanopy) of documentary video include the BBC, The Great Courses, PBS, Documentary Educational Resources, California Newsreel, Media Education Foundation, and Medcom. Hundreds of smaller production companies also contribute to Kanopy's collection. Documentaries available include such well-known titles as *Hoop Dreams*, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, Marlon Riggs' *Ethnic Notions* and Ken Burns' *The Civil War*. While not the focus, a certain amount of CTE-directed content is available, including 70 programs on Nursing Clinical Skills, Teacher Education videos that might be of interest to Early Childhood Education programs, and a handful of Criminal Justice training videos.
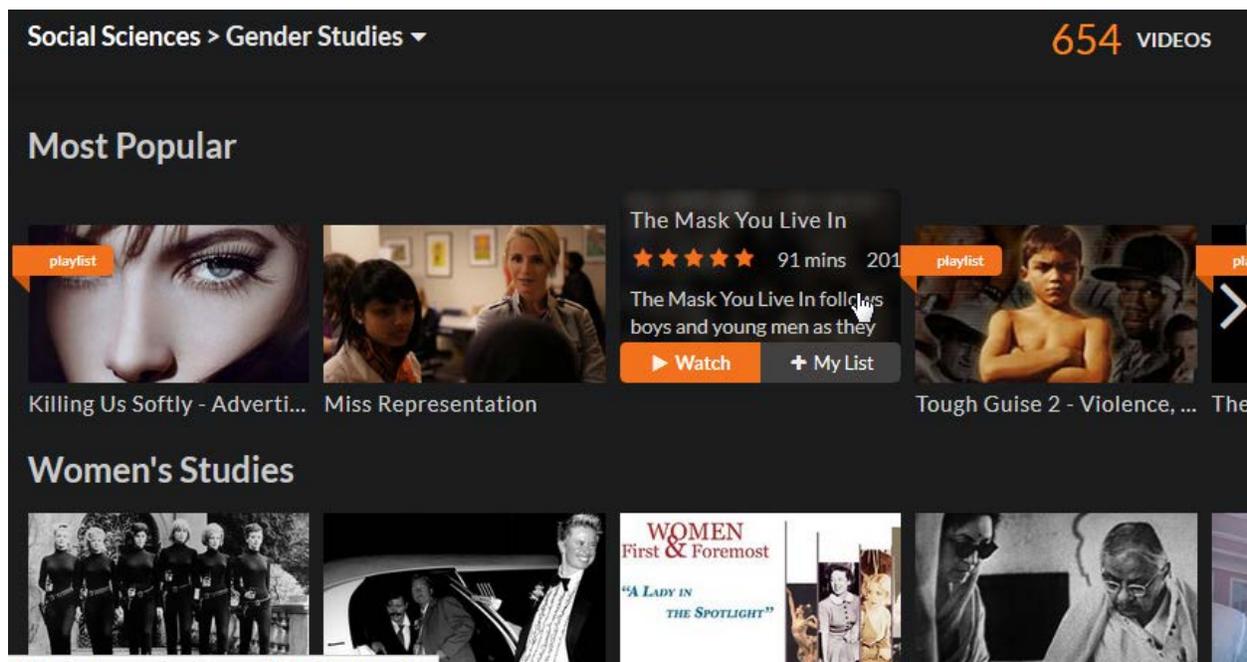
  Feature-film content is abundant and focuses on foreign, independent, and classic films. By carrying ample content from the Criterion Collection and Kino Lorber, both of which are respected DVD vendors for recognized classics of world cinema, Kanopy could easily supply material for a Film Studies survey, from Eisenstein to Kurosawa to Lars Von Trier. It should be noted that only the films themselves are available on Kanopy; extra features from Criterion DVDs, which can be of great interest to students, are not included.

Because Kanopy is not a subscription service, it does not necessarily need to compete on comprehensiveness of coverage, but any academic library will find a great deal of relevant material in it. While no comprehensive title list is publicly available, prospective and current customers may request one from their Kanopy sales representative.

Kanopy provides MARC records, though many of these may be "In Process" records with minimal subject indexing.

● **Interface**

The interface is as slick as this reviewer has ever encountered in an academic product, with plenty of contemporary design elements that encourage the user to explore the content. The landing page features Netflix-style image carousels one can pleasantly spin through; a category menu features a limited but helpful 2-level taxonomy for finding content (e.g. Subjects - Social Sciences - Gender Studies).

Additional filters (Suppliers, Languages, Captions etc.) are available on pages for these categories. Individual title pages display "related" titles, and even if these are not always obviously related, they allow for serendipitous discovery.

Searching works best if you have a known item in mind, as metadata is a bit scanty, although the full text of transcripts is also searched. Keyword search result pages are by default sorted by "most popular", which could create a filter bubble but is also a practical decision given the amount of material available. Search results pages allow for further filtering (such as by decade of production), and while there is no advanced search form, users can click metadata on individual titles to simulate, for instance, a director or provider search. (An unfortunate byproduct of the fashionable "flat" web design is that some of these links do not look like links.)

Video streamed reliably during testing on a broadband connection, with no buffering problems during playback, although in a few cases the title took a long time (more than 30 seconds) to begin to stream. Resolution varied; while some titles met the HD minimum of 720 vertical pixels, many streamed at lower resolution, with a great deal, including all Criterion titles sampled, maxing out at 480p (DVD resolution). A nutrition video from the company Learning Seed streamed at just 240p, but this low-fi performance appeared to be rare. While lagging behind consumer streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon video, this video quality is likely to be considered acceptable by academic users, and compared favorably to Films on Demand for titles held by both services. In some cases videos appeared to digitized from a VHS source, resulting in a poor picture quality when played full-screen. In a few cases, such as the CQ Global Business Video Series, the source-to-streaming transfer was done poorly, making the video content seem more archaic than it in fact is. (Kanopy's explanation of

streaming resolution, in its support article on technical requirements, is unhelpful and at times misleading.) All current web browsers should be able to play Kanopy videos, with no plugins needed. Older, non-HTML5-compliant browsers will require Flash Player.

- **Accessibility**

Captions overlaying the video are available for most films and can even be customized, with options for text color, background, size, font and so on. Users can additionally view a scrolling transcript below the video screen. When encountering a video that has not yet been captioned, users may click the crossed-out "cc" symbol to get to a captioning request form (again, the flat design obscures this capability); the vendor promises that requests will be filled in 2-10 business days (When this reviewer submitted a captioning request, Kanopy fulfilled it within the given time frame.)

Even when a title shows as captioned, it might not be. While nearly all English-language videos sampled were captioned appropriately, foreign-language videos supplied only subtitles, not closed captions (which would convey unspoken sound as well as spoken). Foreign-language films make up a significant share of Kanopy's feature film collection, so this problem constitutes a major accessibility gap. One wonders why Kanopy is content to display a "cc" symbol on thousands of titles that are not, in fact, closed captioned. (A support representative indicated that this mislabeling would be corrected.) In addition, closed captioning for English-language content is not always high-quality. For instance, the opening of *Dreamworlds 3: Desire, Sex & Power in Music Video* depicts a figure singing on screen, but neither the presence of the song nor the clearly intelligible lyrics are conveyed via captions.
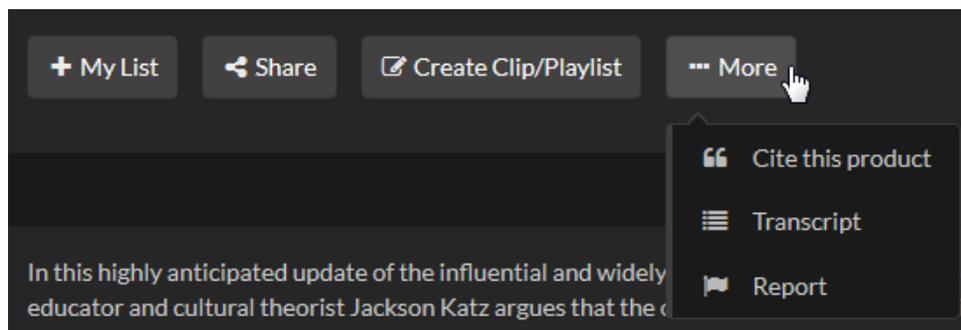
Kanopy provides extensive information about its efforts to meet WCAG 2.0 AA standards, and claims that its video player is completely keyboard-accessible and compatible with JAWS screen-reading software. Nevertheless, an automated checker found dozens of WCAG violations on Kanopy's website, including such basic problems as absent alt attributes and form labels. While Kanopy goes farther than most vendors in talking the accessibility talk, and should be commended for even making such promises, its execution lags.

- **Features**

Stable links to individual titles are provided, as is embed code. The embed code, however, should be used cautiously if at all. First, at least in the sampled trial site, it provided an unencrypted (http) connection, which means it would not display at all in a site running over https, such as Canvas. Second, users encountering embedded content would likely need to sign in through the proxy server before viewing the content, which is likely to provide a poor experience in a small window. Finally, embedded content shows an extraneous link to Kanopy at the top of the window (this link disappears if the user switches to full-screen mode). Kanopy does not provide an LTI tool such as Films on

Demand and certain other vendors offer, which greatly simplifies embedding content into Canvas.

Users may optionally set up their own accounts in order to leave comments, rate films, and create playlists and custom clips, which are then assigned URLs that can be shared with other users from the same institution. Conveniently, users can opt to sign in using their Google or Facebook account rather than establishing separate credentials.
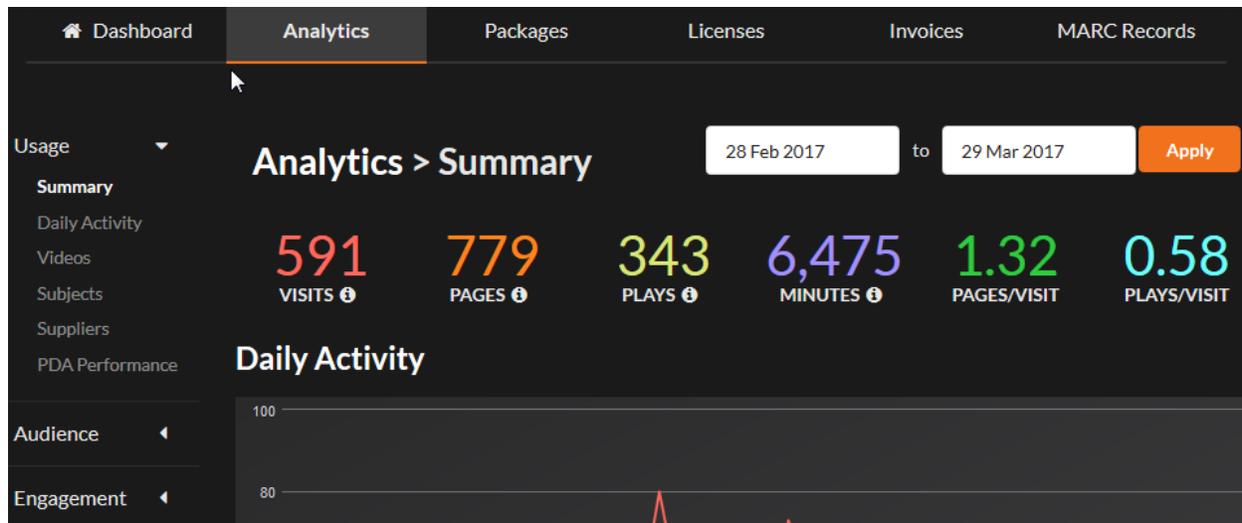

Video pages allow for user-contributed ratings and comments. In some cases comments are supplied by Kanopy staff members, in others cases by users, which even when they are anonymous are accompanied by their institution's name. In at least one case, for *Use of Force: The Case of Eric Garner*, a filmmaker used the comments section to respond to criticism.

Clicking "cite this product [sic]" reveals a "Cite!" button, but if you click it, no citation appears. Kanopy relies on the website citethisforme.com for this feature, but, at the time of review, something in that relationship was not working.

Kanopy currently has no native app for iPhone or Android, but its website uses responsive layout and performs well on current mobile browsers, with pages easily browseable and videos running well at full-screen. In addition, Roku users can install a Kanopy channel and link it to a personal account for the full living room experience (although when tested, captions/subtitles did not work on Roku). The vendor also supplies instructions for using Apple TV and Chromecast to achieve similar results.

The administrative site features a number of usage reports. While no COUNTER-compliant report is available, Kanopy provides instructions for producing a COUNTER-style Multimedia Report. The site also shows usage of features such as playlists and comments and allows one to monitor the status of existing licenses.

If you're looking to add your own creative touches to the site Kanopy has taken so much care to design, you can't--maybe disappointing to some, but arguably a usability win.

- **Cost and Terms of Use**

Kanopy works on an individual purchase model, not subscription. Pricing is refreshingly transparent. Anyone can visit the Kanopy website, search for a video and find the prices listed: $150 for a 1-year license, $350 for a 3-year license. Institutions, however, purchase at a lower rate: $120/1-year, $280/3-year, with 5-year and perpetual licenses also available. Kanopy is remarkably straightforward in administering these licenses; if you purchase a 1-year license and it is on the point of expiring, you can upgrade to a 3-year for the difference in original cost, with no "penalty" for waiting (although presumably prices could rise in the interim). And, remarkably, Kanopy charges no "gimme" annual hosting fee to libraries for the privilege of using its platform; Gale and Proquest might take a note here.

In some cases, shorter videos are collected in playlists that are purchased for the cost of a single film. The Nursing category has several of these. However, a 30-minute episode of a larger series will generally be sold individually, for the same price as a two-hour feature, as will 25-minute Charlie Chaplin silents and other free-standing shorter videos.

Kanopy's patron-driven acquisition (PDA) model will seem enticing to many. Under this system, a library may display the full collection or selected subsets of categories and/or providers to users, with a set dollar limit for total purchases in a period. Any title may be played three times within a 12-month period at no cost to the library. Upon the fourth play, a license purchase will be triggered. Kanopy has a policy of not charging libraries for licenses to films that they have access to elsewhere, e.g. from Films on Demand, with which it has some overlap; institutions should of course seek clarification on the details of this policy.

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PDA comes with certain risks, such as small numbers of users triggering multiple purchases, and Kanopy's definition of a "play" is anything over 30 seconds, which seems a bit stingy given that almost all the titles are more than one hour in length. And if a PDA budget gets spent out in year one, libraries may need to allocate a lot more in year two if they want to do more than renew or upgrade licenses for the same titles. In a survey conducted by the CCL-EAR Committee in March 2017, several respondents reported that managing their Kanopy PDA budget was challenging. But given the high cost of streaming video subscription collections and the obvious limitations of DVD video, Kanopy's PDA may be a cost-effective option for many institutions.

An additional complication is that some of the art-house features on the site are sexually explicit, to a degree that might violate libraries' collection development policies, or even certain institutions' board regulations if the material passes through the institution's proxy server. It is not currently possible to block titles from appearing or being purchased via PDA on an individual basis rather than by collection or provider, so there's no easy fix for this issue if you are faced with such "blue laws". For this reason among many, Kanopy should modify its platform to allow title-level suppression.

Libraries can set Kanopy up using their preferred authentication system; the vendor claims compatibility with all. Each institution is assigned a subdomain of the Kanopy website, [yourlibrary].kanopystreaming.com. Kanopy recommends the library circulate links without the proxy prefix, since the vendor will check for authorized IP addresses and forward to the proxy as needed. The site was tested using the sometimes problematic Innovative WAM proxy server and performed flawlessly.

A review of Kanopy's standard contract and privacy policy revealed no red flags, though libraries should note that the language in Kanopy's standard contract differs somewhat from the terms of use posted on its website. One nice benefit: unlike most DVDs, Kanopy videos [may be shown in group settings](#) (a situation often referred to as "public performance rights"), for instance at campus events, without special permission from the copyright holder.

- **Support**

  Kanopy has a help site with useful articles for end-users and librarians. A contact form is also available. Phone support is not offered to end users. For librarians, webinars focusing chiefly on PDA setup and administration are offered regularly, and sales representatives can be reached by phone and email.

Conclusion

Kanopy has produced an engaging, highly capable streaming media platform with acceptable streaming quality and a strong collection of documentary and feature films. Even though the price per film will be higher than subscription services with vast catalogs, libraries can limit their spending on the product as needed; the price for streaming versions of high-use titles is reasonable; and Kanopy's approach toward transactions is library-friendly. The modern, usable interface inspires confidence that the platform will continue to improve. Responses to the CCL-EAR survey indicated high satisfaction with this product (albeit with some anxiety surrounding costs of PDA). Any institution that currently acquires video content, whether or not they already offer a streaming video subscription service, should strongly consider individual purchases or a PDA arrangement from this vendor. Libraries should however be aware that captioning of content is far from complete and that foreign-language titles are subtitled, not captioned.

Other Reviews

Bergman, B. J. "Kanopy." *Choice: Current Reviews For Academic Libraries* 54, no. 2 (October 2016): 186.

Swoger, Bonnie J. M. "Kanopy Streaming." Library Journal 140, no. 16 (October 2015): 109-110.

Recommendation to CCL-EAR Committee: No Further Review