Streaming Video Comparison

27 April 2017

Introduction

This review compares seven streaming video products marketed to community colleges. Individual Quick Looks reviews were completed for each of the seven products:

- Alexander Street Press' Academic Video Online
- Ambrose Digital
- Films on Demand Master Academic Package
- INTELECOM Academic Collection
- Kanopy
- NBC Learn - Higher Ed
- Swank Digital Campus

These individual reviews were then used to create this comparison document, which focuses on key elements commonly considered when selecting a streaming video collection. A brief discussion follows each of the tables; readers are encouraged to explore the individual reviews themselves for more details about a specific product.

Overview

Product	Content focus	Access model(s)	Interface, usability, performance	Closed captioning	Video quality	MARC records
Alexander Street Press	🎓	*Subscription, purchase & PDA*	*3*	*3*	*4*	*Yes*
Ambrose Digital	🎓	*Subscription & purchase*	*2*	*4*	*3*	*Yes*
Films on Demand	🎓	*Subscription & PDA*	*3*	*3*	*3*	*Yes*
INTELECOM	🎓	*Subscription*	*2*	*4*	*3*	*Yes*
Kanopy	🎓 🎬	*Single-title licenses; PDA*	*5*	*3*	*4*	*Yes*
NBC Learn	🎓	*Subscription*	*3*	*5*	*3*	*Yes*
Swank	🎬	*Subscription[1]*	*3*	*3*	*4*	*Partial*

Key: 1 = Non-existent / Non-functioning; 2 = Poor / Major problems; 3 = Acceptable / Some problems or shortcomings; 4 = Good / Meets user and institutional needs; 5 = Excellent / Works especially well

---

[1] Subscription access to a set of titles curated by the library each year from the vendor's catalog.

Discussion

The seven streaming video products we reviewed fall into three content categories: large, general interest, primarily educational collections (Films on Demand and Academic Video Online); feature film collections (Swank and Kanopy, although Kanopy is a hybrid academic/feature film product); and small niche collections (NBC Learn, Ambrose Digital and INTELECOM). The first step in evaluating and selecting a streaming video collection is to determine what type of collection is needed. Once content needs have been determined, the different products can be more easily compared based on features, usability, access model and cost.

Annual and multi-year subscriptions remain the norm for streaming video products. Kanopy is the outlier with its focus on patron-driven acquisition (PDA) and individual licenses. In fact, if an institution has any interest in Kanopy content there is little reason not to sign up to purchase titles as needed or institute a PDA pilot (with a minimal financial cap), given that it's free unless a purchase is triggered.

The products varied greatly in their search interface usability and performance, from INTELECOM's poor showing to Kanopy's Netflix-like interface. Most of the products fell somewhere in the middle, with interfaces that had a variety of flaws, such as slow page loads and poor navigation.

Closed captioning is critical to complying with the Americans with Disabilities act and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.[2] In this area, NBC Learn hits a home run with 100%-captioned content that is customizable in terms of font color and screen location. Most of the other products have fully functional captioning, but it's often not quite 100% of content or are subtitles rather than true captions. Libraries should confirm the current state of captioning prior to signing an agreement.

In evaluating video quality the reviewers looked at resolution, choppiness/buffering, and transfer quality of streamed content. The seven products ranged from middling to good in this regard. On the low end, Ambrose, INTELECOM and NBC Learn had substantial content that showed its age, although to be fair, NBC Learn includes content that is literally decades old, which is arguably a selling point for the product. The other products had acceptable video quality, although none provided quality equivalent to high-definition streaming from Netflix, Amazon and similar competitors. Thankfully, we have reached a stage where browser plugins are not necessary for viewing online video content; in adopting these products, libraries need not worry about Flash Player, Silverlight and the like, or compatibility problems with a wide range of devices.

Lastly, most vendors provide MARC records, although in the case of some products the nature of the content is such that it's unclear how useful MARC records would be. For example, NBC Learn is a collection of short clips, many of them news segments, that libraries would be unlikely to load into their catalog. This raises the question of discoverability of NBC Learn's content and suggests the native interface would likely need to be heavily promoted. The

---

[2] The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office issued a legal opinion in 2002 putting colleges on notice that all videos acquired must be captioned.
http://www.htctu.net/divisions/altmedia/captioning/cc/LO_M_02-22.pdf

situation is similar with records for INTELECOM clips. In addition, Swank currently provides MARC records for only a small fraction of its total catalog.

Features

Product	Embed codes?	Canvas LTI tool?	Citation tool	Mobile-friendly access
Alexander Street Press	*Yes*	*No*	*3*	*Responsive web*
Ambrose Digital	*Yes*	*No*	*2*	*Responsive web*
Films on Demand	*Yes*	*Yes*	*3*	*Responsive web*
INTELECOM	*Yes*	*No*	*2*	*None*
Kanopy	*Yes*	*No*	*1*	*Responsive web*
NBC Learn	*No*	*Yes*	*3*	*None*
Swank	*Yes*	*No*	*1*	*Responsive web and iOS/Android Apps*

Key: 1 = Non-existent / Non-functioning; 2 = Poor / Major problems; 3 = Acceptable / Some problems or shortcomings; 4 = Good / Meets user and institutional needs; 5 = Excellent / Works especially well

Discussion

Streaming videos can typically be shared and added to a course in three main ways: embed code, which displays a player on the page; LTI tool, which is essentially an app that can be added to the LMS; and regular hyperlinks. For Canvas users, an LTI tool is the most elegant solution, allowing instructors to easily insert content into their course shells without the need to copy and paste HTML. Embed code should generally be avoided, given that the authentication process in a small embedded window can lead to a poor user experience. If no LTI tool is available, regular linking with a proxied url is the prefered method.

The citation tools used by the seven products, in some cases provided via third-party integrations such as EasyBib, are uniformly unimpressive. None provide MLA 8th edition citations even though that's been the standard for a year. Even the MLA 7th edition citations are prone to errors. NBC Learn's citation tool is difficult to find and Kanopy's didn't work at all. This is definitely an area that the vendors should seek to improve.

Responsive websites aim to provide a good user experience regardless of screen size or resolution capabilities. Websites generally meet mobile users' needs through either a responsive website or an app. Of the seven products compared here, only Swank provides an an iTunes or Android app, while several others have responsive websites. INTELECOM and NBC Learn lack responsive websites, meaning that, while the content is viewable, the overall experience is degraded.

Content

Product	No. of titles	Major Content Providers	Relative Annual Cost	Public performance rights
Alexander Street Press	*62,000+*	*BBC, CBS, PBS, A&E, Medcom, Bloomberg*	*$$$*	*Yes*
Ambrose	*721+*	*BBC, Ambrose*	*$*	*Yes*
Films on Demand	*24,975+*	BBC, PBS, A&E, National Geographic, Nova	*$$$*	*Yes*
INTELECOM	*6,000+*	INTELECOM, Medcom, National Geographic	*$*	*No*
Kanopy	*30,000+*	*Criterion, Kino Lorber, Music Box, BBC, PBS, Media Education Foundation*	*$-$$$*	*Yes*
NBC Learn	*18,000+*	*NBC News*	*$$$*	*No*
Swank	*20,000+*	*Warner Bros., Universal, Magnolia, Lions Gate, Focus Features*	*$$-$$$*	*Yes*

Discussion

Direct cost comparisons between the seven services is complicated by the variety of pricing models employed and the differing nature of the products themselves. Most offer a subscription access model, but even then a simple cost per title calculation offers limited insight since the definition of what constitutes a title varies widely.[3] With that in mind, based on the quotes the reviewers are familiar with, some general cost comparisons can be made: Films on Demand and Alexander Street Press have high annual costs, but generally high-quality content and very low per-title costs. Just keep in mind that title counts may be inflated by the inclusion of less-valuable content. Swank and Kanopy have the highest costs per title of the group, but their content is primarily high-quality feature-length films, and their pricing models mean that they can be exceptionally good value if their content is of interest. For example, with a Swank subscription libraries select the specific films to be included while Kanopy is primarily patron-driven, meaning a license is purchased once a film has been viewed four times. NBC Learn has a high annual cost even though it's comprised of brief clips, some of which are freely available through other sources, making it seem expensive when compared to the other products. Ambrose Digital is moderately priced, but it's a relatively small collection that has some quality concerns, meaning it's probably only of interest to libraries interested in its

---

[3] Cost per use is probably the most meaningful cost comparison metric for an institution, but that's impossible to ascertain prior to acquiring a given product and fully promoting it over a period of time.

exclusive content. Those libraries should consider purchasing titles rather than subscribing, which may be less expensive over the long term. Finally, INTELECOM is inexpensive, but dated content and a poor interface likely mean that it's still a low-value proposition for most libraries.

In terms of sheer numbers, Academic Video Online provides the most content. Yet just as with other library resources, comparing title counts can be challenging given the varying definitions of what constitutes a title. NBC Learn and INTELECOM are comprised entirely of short clips, so that's what their title lists refers to. Films on Demand, on the other hand, has around 25,000 titles but reportedly more than 250,000 segments.

Fair Use exemptions and the TEACH Act allow educators to screen films or segments in classroom settings without running afoul of copyright laws. Distributors often charge a fee for so-called public performance rights, which allow an institution to screen a film outside of a classroom setting. However, several of the products reviewed here permit public performance as part of their terms of service. This is a notable benefit for institutions that make use of it. Note that generally this permission extends only to on-campus showings at which admission fees are not charged.

Conclusion

The seven streaming video products reviewed here vary widely in their content, making an overall comparison difficult. Even so, of the large general-interest subscription products, Films on Demand edges out Alexander Street Press as the better option for most libraries. With regards to the feature film products, both Swank and Kanopy are quality resources and libraries should look into both to fulfill specific content needs. The three other products are unlikely to meet the needs of most libraries at this time.