

YA Films: Idle Entertainment or a Valuable Part of Your Collection?

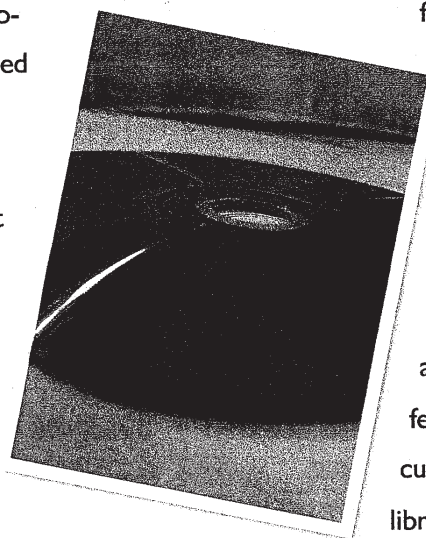
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Libraries are not just books any more – and they haven't been for at least 25 years. Libraries embraced the media revolution long ago. Most North American libraries have had media materials in their collections since the 1960's and audio-visual materials have been officially considered "equal" to their print counterparts since the American Library Association (ALA) officially recognized them in 1975 (Morris, Ayre & Jones, 2005; Scholtz, 1989). It almost goes without saying that today's libraries should include films – especially in collections for media-savvy teens.

Most libraries tend to agree. While there are few statistics from Canada, in U.S. public libraries, the budget growth for audio-visual materials is outpacing that of overall materials. According to a 2005 *Library Journal* survey, the budget for videos and DVDs increased 7.3 per cent over 2004, with the budget for overall materials increasing only 5.8 per cent (Oder, 2005). An earlier U.S. survey found that in 2000, on average, 9 per cent of public libraries' budgets were allocated to teen audiovisual materials and that they comprised 8

per cent of libraries' collections (ALA, 2001). According to a recent U.K. survey, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of libraries surveyed had plans to expand their audio-visual collections in the future (Morris et al., 2005).

However, there are still those who grumble that films are inferior to books and that the library should encourage reading, not more evenings of blankly staring at a TV screen. And DVDs, the most common movie format in libraries today, are not without their challenges. Theft, damage and the high demand for new feature films make this format a difficult and yet important part of public libraries' young adult collections.



The DVD challenge

According to *Library Journal's* 2005 audio/video survey, many U.S. libraries have concerns about DVDs. While 33 per cent of respondents (from 402 libraries) were still purchasing VHS, most had either switched entirely to DVDs or were planning to phase them out in the next few years (Oder, 2005). One of the main challenges they

faced was theft and damage. One library in Lawrenceville, Georgia had 17,000 DVDs, 44 per cent of its collection, stolen, and another library in Michigan lost \$92,000 in CDs and DVDs when thieves removed their radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags and sold them at local stores (Oder, 2005).

If they weren't stolen, then they were damaged, claimed respondents.

Many library authorities felt that the DVD format just isn't durable. One library director claimed that a typical DVD only lasts 15 to 20 checkouts, while another claimed she gets a longer life out of her DVDs: about 40-50 circulations. (Oder, 2005).

As a result, libraries have grappled with charging fees for borrowing videos. Only about 15 per cent of U.S. libraries surveyed charged a fee, which was usually a dollar (Oder, 2005). Due to professional ethics, most libraries in North American have rejected this option. However, in the U.K., the majority of libraries charge users to borrow audiovisual materials (Morris et al., 2005).

Age restrictions on videos are another consideration for public libraries. In the U.K., 18 per cent of libraries surveyed do not allow children to bor-

row any videos or DVDs – and age limits varied from 11 to 18, meaning that in some U.K. libraries, teens would not be able to borrow films at all (Morris et al., 2005). While statistics are not readily available for Canadian libraries, the Halifax

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Public Library system in Nova Scotia uses the provincially regulated film classifications to determine age limits. So a child (0-13) or a young adult (14-17) could not check out a movie that is rated "Restricted" (Alison Creach & Denise Somers, personal communication, April

2007).

Why include films in your YA collection?

Despite DVD frustrations, most librarians will agree that young adult collections should include films. Teens are used to getting their information from television and why not reach out to them through the medium they enjoy? As the ALA recognized more than 30 years ago, videos should be equal to books as a standard information source. As Walt Crawford, columnist for *American Libraries* (as quoted in Flowers, 2004, p.104) states "Videos make awful substitutes for good books. Books make terrible substitutes for good videos. Libraries should include both, along with other media, as they serve the mission of each library."

Most libraries are aware that videos and other audiovisual materials increase circulation statistics. But, perhaps more importantly, they also attract new patrons and raise the library's profile in the community (Oder, 2005; Morris et al., 2005). The following quotes from a U.K. user study reinforce the value of a film collection:

- o Libraries are great – they allow me to borrow material I can not afford to buy
- o Viewing videos allows us to spend more time as a family
- o I have learnt lots of new skills using them
- o Videos have helped me to improve my fitness (Morris et al., 2005, p.567).

“Many children ... have been saved from lives of ignorance simply because they were at first encouraged to enter their local library to check out a movie”
-J. Tyler Balance (2006)

Feature vs. Non-Fiction

Some traditionalists may argue that libraries should carry films, but only the educational, non-fiction variety. Even as early as the 1980's, this was becoming an issue in public libraries. Pitman (1989) has a message, which still rings true today, for those who “truly believe that feature films are the domain of the local video store, or worse, that movies are nothing more than idle entertainment” (p.37). He believes that there are two wrong assumptions underlying that philosophy. He states:

The first, and most dangerous, is that books are what libraries are all about. In days of old, AV librarians could toss this attitude off

as quaint or naïve. Today, however, a librarian who thinks this way is displaying simple ignorance, and should either switch professionals or put in for an early retirement...

The second assumption is that video stores are covering the waterfront when it comes to fiction video. Even if we dismiss the wretched selection of children's videos that the typical video store has to offer, the video

store owner is in business to make a buck, not to actively search out quality feature films that are either genuinely entertaining or serve to illuminate the human condition in some way” (p.37).

J. Tyler Ballance (2006), a former board member of the Bell-

Whittington Public Library in Portland,

Texas, also believes in the importance of including contemporary and feature films in library collections rather than only “the most bland PBS and BBC productions” (p.10). He says that once patrons are given the option to borrow new DVDs, the library will attract new citizens, many who may not have books in the household. But once they start using the movie collection and become familiar with the library, they very well might start checking out books too. He states, “Many children...have been saved from lives of ignorance simply because they were at first encouraged to enter their local library to check out a movie” (p.10).

If collection and spending statistics are any indication, most U.S. public libraries tend to agree that it's important to include feature films. On average, entertainment films (feature and TV shows) make up 68.5 per cent of U.S. public libraries' film collections and account for 71.6 per cent of their VHS/DVD budgets (Oder, 2005). They also comprise 80.2 per cent of film circulation (Oder, 2005). Of non-fiction videos, the most circulated

category is how-to/instructional (Oder, 2005).

But Pittman (1989) is also weary of those who buy only "bestsellers"

thinking that the library can compete with the local video store. He urged film selectors to be more "choosy." This advice is certainly still viable today when libraries face hundreds of holds on "new releases." Having multiple copies of the latest hot movies is not viable for most public libraries, but having a selection of the best, most interesting films is certainly within their means.

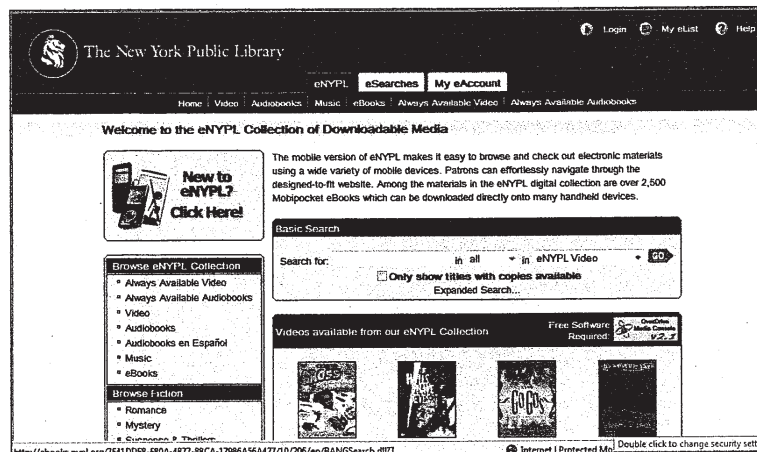
Looking to the future

While some libraries have just recently stopped collecting VHS, many are looking to a new medium: downloadable video. According to *Library*

Journal's 2005 survey, 18 per cent of libraries are interested in providing this option now, while 49 per cent might be interested in the future (Oder, 2005).

The New York Public Library has already begun offering its patrons free downloadable films 24 hours a day (Ries-Taggart, 2006). Through eVideo, a web-based circulating service, digital videos can

be downloaded onto patrons' computers or wireless devices. Patrons may borrow up to 12 titles at a time and can keep them for seven days. After seven days, the



titles expire and are automatically checked back in so another patron may borrow them (Ries-Taggart, 2006). For more information and to browse the more than 200 available films, visit: <http://ebooks.nypl.org>.

Some are hailing these downloadable videos as a solution to the theft and fragile nature of DVDs. Others are still weary. What does seem certain though is that library film collections, in one format or another, are here to stay. After all, as Flowers (2006) notes: "If your teen collection does not include videos, you are definitely living in the past" (p.103).

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