Netflix in an Academic Library: A Personal Case Study

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Abstract

This is a personal case study of the implementation of a Netflix subscription to augment a media collection at a community college. The implementation process is explained against the backdrop of a particular collection development crisis that gripped the college media collection that year. In these particular circumstances, Netflix turned out to be an excellent, cost-effective solution.

The article describes the workflow created to manage the Netflix subscription, how the subscription was used as a tool for collection development, and the limitations of a subscription compared to library ownership of media. Netflix is an instance of a Web/Library 2.0 service that can work in tandem with a standing collection, especially a just-in-time collection, to provide access to a very wide range of DVDs for instructional use. Netflix is a subscription-based DVD delivery service that offers an elegant discovery and delivery system: subscribers queue up a title on the Netflix website and a day or two later, the DVD arrives via U.S. mail to their door, with the prepaid return envelope included. Since it launched in 1999, growth of this service has been steady, and recently it has doubled, "It took the company eight years to achieve one billion shipments, a milestone it crossed in February 2007, and a bit more than two years to deliver the next billion" (Netflix 2009).

While media librarians may not envy Netflix's gargantuan circulation statistics, we should envy the ease with which users can discover content on their site, compared with any OPAC, pathfinder, guide, or searchable list. Along with software such as iTunes, Netflix has helped set high user expectations for all library content discovery and delivery. What follows is an informal case study in which I discuss the experiences of success-

fully introducing Netflix into an academic library. In 2006, I was a media librarian in charge of all aspects of managing the collection, including cataloging; reserves; library instruction for music, film, and television courses; shelving; and purchasing. The impetus for exploring the use of Netflix was my experience as an at-home Netflix subscriber: "Let's get a Netflix subscription for the library." So general has been the home use of Netflix that the importance of the idea was at once recognized by my colleagues. In what follows, the implementation process is explained against the backdrop of a particular collection development crisis that gripped the college media collection that year. In these particular circumstances, Netflix turned out to be an excellent, cost-effective solution.

WORKFLOW

While it was the case that a Netflix subscription was a simple idea, designing a workflow to deal with it was less obvious. The media collection at the library was treated as a special collection, the majority of which was housed in closed stacks, with a circulating collection of donated, popular films available for checkout. The very first task in introducing Netflix was to obtain administrative support for the idea. The director asked for examples of successful implementations of Netflix at peer institutions. In 2006, a search turned up only one, and that one was unresponsive to my e-mail inquiries. Posting to VideoLib also netted no media librarians then using the service. For librarians today who wish to find Netflix policies and forms used by academic libraries and other librarians working with Netflix, a simple Internet search will return a dozen or more. Even without many examples to go on, the director agreed that we could introduce the service as a pilot program, mainly because Netflix is a relatively inexpensive commitment and I was willing to devise and manage a workflow.

Implementations of Netflix in academic libraries requires a successful answer to this crucial question with regard to subscriptions: "How do you pay for it?" The problem here is that Netflix was a novel service for the library, with a service model that did not fit into any existing library print, serial, and other subscription models. Netflix did not and still does not have an institutional subscription or method for becoming a state contract-approved vendor. After some delay, the solution came in the form of the first "purchase card" or "p-card" issued to the library. The p-card is a credit card, paid from the library budget, that allows one to sign up for a Netflix subscription using Netflix's regular Internet subscription form. Within days of the p-card being issued, a three-at-a-time subscription was paid for to begin the implementation of the pilot project of what became a successful service.

The delay in getting a method of payment provided time for a workflow system to be arranged so that requests could be put in the Netflix queue quickly. The Web services librarian created a form for faculty to re-

quest a Netflix DVD. The request could then be positioned in the Netflix queue based on date needed. In addition, it was possible to now make use of a previously unused media booking module of the library integrated library system. When a request form arrived, a booking request could be created to stipulate the lending period for each DVD on a case-by-case basis. A pop-up note upon checkout was added to prevent other patrons requesting or checking out Netflix films waiting for pick-up.

Once a Netflix DVD arrived, it was placed in an empty DVD case that was barcoded and banded with a paper Netflix sleeve. Because of the three subscriptions, there were three of these cases each linked to a brief record in the catalog titled, respectively, Netflix -1, -2, -3. Because there were only ever a maximum of three Netflix DVDs at any time, it was also easy to create a small "holds" area for them at the circulation desk. The final step in the workflow was to get the DVD back to be returned in the mail.

A random sampling of 2009 Netflix rules and policies found online (for example, at Skidmore College, North Idaho College, Seton Hall University) reveals that many impose fines for overdue Netflix DVDs. In the case of my library, however, faculty members were exempt from all library fines. In stark contrast to library-owned media materials, which many professors considered "their items" and held onto, Netflix DVDs were in fact returned promptly perhaps because of the patron familiarity with the video rental model that was characteristic of Netflix.

A complication that had to be dealt with was that the college expanded one campus and opened a new one in an eighteen-month period. Adding inter-campus lending to the Netflix model was tricky, but extension of the service to deal with this expansion became part of the pilot program because several professors who taught on more than one campus wanted to use Netflix DVDs wherever they taught. In the case of a branch campus request, when the Netflix DVD arrived it was simply sent via intercampus mail to the branch library along with the Netflix return envelope. The librarian at the branch campus was responsible for following the hold, checkout, and return procedures put in place at the main campus. The branch campus librarian was also in charge of dealing with any issues related to overdue materials on his or her campus.

This was the timeline: arrival of a DVD from Netflix's distribution center to the mailroom on the main campus took about two days on average. From there to arrival at the library took one day and then another day for it to arrive at the branch campus. In most cases this process was completed at least a day or two in advance of the day booked for pickup. The system worked well as long as branch campus requests were infrequent. Once requests steadily exceeded the threshold of two or three a month on any given campus, the campus was encouraged to begin its own Netflix subscription.

The "rental model" that, in my opinion, accounted for prompt returns however created a problem of expectation in the receipt of requested ma-

terials. The Netflix website boasted a shipment time of about one day. This is intended for home service and does not take into account the processing time that is needed once the DVD arrives at the library. If the request came from a branch library, this entailed yet a further delay. Patrons, however, expected the same speed of arrival at the library that was one of the hallmarks of Netflix's home service. It was impossible for the library to meet this expectation. However, moving the subscription level up to Netflix's unlimited subscription helped the library buy time for branch campus lending while still being able to meet booking commitments for in-class viewings. This is because an unlimited subscription allowed the next DVD in the queue to be sent without requiring the return of a DVD that has already been received.

Collection Development and Access

As Gary Handman explains elsewhere in this issue, two main forms that media collections take are:

> "Just-in-Case" Collections: Comprehensive standing collections of print and online materials selected to anticipate a broad range of current and future teaching, research, and general institutional needs. While such collections may include materials requested to support specific curricula or programs, they also have broader and longer-term functions: fostering the discovery and use of valuable new resources, and providing and preserving a range of unique materials not widely available in the information marketplace. Because of the expertise required to build "just-in-case" collections, the broad scope of such collections, and the high cost of financing them, this type of collecting is almost always the province of libraries—academic libraries in particular—rather than other institutional support units.
>   "Just-in-Time" Collections: Materials acquired to meet specific and sometimes temporal teaching needs, both in the classroom and for individual study outside of the classroom. (2010, p. 325)

The media collection at the library was an example of a "just-in-time" collection, which Handman further describes as sometimes, "the *only* type of video acquisition supported by a library or learning center" (2010, p. 325 his emphasis). This was also the case at the library where I was media librarian, which was a patron-driven collection and where purchases were determined by faculty request on a title-by-title basis. The media librarian was encouraged to make purchases for the sake of the collection itself, but these were often led by faculty requests or pushed to faculty for consent before purchase.

Netflix, in addition to being an easy, popular service to offer faculty, was also meant to serve as a collection development tool in the following ways:

- The media acquisitions policy was changed to include the stipulation that if a single title was requested via Netflix more than twice, the library would purchase that title and add it to the collection.

- Professors were encouraged to preview a title using a Netflix film before making a purchase suggestion.
- A Netflix film could be used as a second copy available for short-term reserve or when a title was on loan to branch campuses and demand could be used to help determine if a second or third copy needed to be purchased.
- Requested Netflix titles that were already in the media collection, would help stress the fact that the library media collection was convenient and readily accessible.

With regard to the last point above, requests for materials already owned by the college, while infrequent, did happen sometimes because of difficulties of finding media in the OPAC. As cataloger Jessica Schomberg notes:

> Major innovations in computer technology that allow access to full-text searching of title pages or perhaps even the entire monograph cannot help someone discover the contents of non-text based materials, such as an oral interview on compact disc, or confirm that a koala puppet is merely a puppet. Video collections are especially dependent upon detailed catalog descriptions since they are often not browseable, both figuratively and literally. (Schomberg, unpublished)

Because of Netflix's ease of use, provision of images of attractive DVD covers and detailed item descriptions, the Netflix website makes discovery gratifyingly easy, compared to the difficulties presented by the average OPAC. In the case of my library, I often called up Netflix's site rather than search for the catalog record because this allowed us easily to provide patrons with extra details such as long plot descriptions or DVD special features such as director's commentary or to take advantage of Netflix's Cinematch recommendation system.

Given the ease of use of Netflix's service and website and the comprehensiveness of its collection, it was possible that library patrons might become dissatisfied by comparisons with the library's media collections and services. This fear was unfounded. Because, for the most part, the existing collection served the faculty well for instructional purposes, there was no deluge of Netflix requests. So while the Netflix subscription was not superfluous, its role for faculty was decidedly, though conveniently, supplemental. Thus, Netflix's real benefits lay in the expected and unexpected ways in which it worked to benefit the existing collection. At the price of sixteen dollars per month, even if the only benefit of a Netflix subscription was a neat, new library service to offer faculty, it was a good value. When other benefits are added, the Netflix service might well be considered a bargain at twice the price.

Netflix Benefits for the Media Collection

The main—and unexpected—benefit Netflix offered the media collection initially related to a set of circumstances peculiar to the college at that time. Over a period of several years, the department in which film and television studies classes were offered had accumulated almost one thousand items from the library media collection. These were housed in various professors' offices and in a large, locked "media closet." The items involved were mostly VHS tapes that were described as the "crucial texts" of film studies and thus were considered to belong, in a fundamental, perhaps even a moral, sense, to the department. In this uncontrolled environment, there were often multiple, homemade copies and other bootleg copies of these "crucial texts." The problem the library faced was how to reintegrate these materials into the central collection without alienating the departmental faculty and staff involved.

The problem was solved essentially by deciding to ignore, in a sense to abandon, the departmental collection and slowly to purchase new copies of needed items in it as the budget allowed. The idea was not to replace each title but to get the best, most representative current example of the item. With the Netflix subscription it was possible to begin to search for a variety of titles, browsing for example to see what was on offer for college instruction, and comparing this to what was in the collection. Unsurprisingly, Netflix does not carry many titles for the narrow educational market. Netflix's main benefit to the collection was in its function as a collection development tool. While Netflix does not carry many educational market titles, it carries almost everything else and there is significant overlap, especially in the area of documentary films. For instance, Netflix does not offer Film Media Group's *Understanding Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but does offer Ken Burns' documentary *Jazz*, both of which were already held in the collection I managed. But unlike my collection, Netflix has most of Burns' other work as well and offers several suggestions for similar titles including DVDs of live performances from the *Jazz Icons* and *Jazz Legends* series.

Because the college collection was a prime example of a "just-in-time" collection, the majority of items already held were more the *Sir Gawain* variety, which was used regularly once per semester, for a particular English class. But Burns' *Jazz* documentary was used more widely and circulated often. The Netflix subscription allowed me to offer easy access to new titles the collection did not have that could be considered for request and purchase.

In Chris Anderson's now famous 2004 article in *Wired Magazine*, he introduces the concept of The Long Tail, which states, briefly, that in physical places like movie theaters or music stores, items have to sell big—be blockbusters—to justify the shelf space. The Long Tail consists of all those

films and CDs that are not huge hits, which are the majority of all films and CDs that cannot justify their shelf space and so become less available to customers. Anderson notes that this is a commonly known feature of supply and demand but goes on to say that the Internet changes things by allowing greater access to The Long Tail:

> Unlimited selection is revealing truths about what consumers want and how they want to get it in service after service, from DVDs at Netflix to music videos on Yahoo! Launch to songs in the iTunes Music Store and Rhapsody. People are going deep into the catalog, down the long, long list of available titles, far past what's available at Blockbuster Video, Tower Records, and Barnes & Noble. And the more they find, the more they like. As they wander further from the beaten path, they discover their taste is not as mainstream as they thought (or as they had been led to believe by marketing, a lack of alternatives, and a hit-driven culture). (2004)

In so far as Netflix is an example of a service providing access to The Long Tail, it allowed the identification of the kinds of obscure, though not strictly educational titles that might be acquired for the collection but were not otherwise readily discoverable or perhaps had only recently been released on DVD. More specifically in the particular case being reported on here, the departmental collection that was being abandoned mainly comprised VHS theatrical release titles from The Long Tail. Netflix saved the library from having to repurchase all of the titles in the departmental collection by allowing us to test the extent of the demand for individual titles and for purchases to be made based on that demand. Our policy, stated in the library's formal collection development policy, was that any film that was requested more than twice would be purchased. The idea was that faculty requests would allow the collection to be built up in such a way that what was in the department VHS collection would be replaced only if demand warranted it. Furthermore, the existence of the Netflix service meant that nothing needed to be hoarded. It was thus made clear in the collection development policy that library items purchased with library funds would circulate to all patrons.

Conclusion: What Netflix Can Do, What It Can't Do

What It Can Do
Netflix's primary usefulness for academic libraries is as a value-added service. This is true for both just-in-case and just-in-time collections by offering an easy interface for item discovery and access. In addition to its usefulness in collection development, the Netflix service can be used in potentially politically charged situations to prevent hoarding and to ensure that there is general, widespread access to needed materials as in the case presented here.

According to Karen Calhoun's 2006 report *The Changing Nature of the Catalog and Its Integration with Other Discovery Tools,* "interviewees agreed

that today's research library catalogs are not the right finding tools for users. . . . An information seeker's first exploratory point is highly likely to be outside the catalog. Today the research library's task is to switch users in their communities from where they find things to library collections" (p. 37). Though Netflix or any of its more attractive search features were not integrated into the catalog, they worked in tandem with the catalog and collection. Discovery happened on Netflix, and access was had via the catalog and the library's media collection or Netflix itself.

Netflix can also deliver material formerly hidden in "The Long Tail." For a just-in-time collection that relies on patron-driven acquisitions, offering an easy way to discover new titles for purchase, providing supplemental copies of held or checked out titles, and assuring quick turnaround were mutually beneficial services.

What It Cannot Do

Obviously, Netflix cannot supplant a library media collection. This is especially true for just-in-case collections that are driven by faculty requests. Netflix, with its efficient business model, is ultimately a commercial service designed for individual home use that appeals to an entertainment market. It can be adapted for institutional use, as I have shown, but only in cases where it can be taken on its own terms. To expect Netflix to solve fundamental problems that may beset a collection, such as budgetary problems, is ill advised. This is mainly because faculty require educational media titles that they use for face-to-face classroom instruction. These generally are not the titles that Netflix offers, though certain academic departments may benefit from access to the kinds of film emphasized in a Netflix subscription. It is also almost certainly the case that some professors already use their personal subscriptions to get Netflix DVDs for in-class use.

While Netflix, with 100,000 titles in its collection, offers tremendous access, it cannot offer the benefits of ownership. One of the main benefits of academic library ownership of media consists in the fact that the material can be used broadly outside of the classroom for scholarship. Owning a DVD on the shelf encourages extended, repeated, and transformative use that result in a range of benefits for both professors and students. This is especially true for items that have sloughed off The Long Tail, are rare, have been archived, are difficult to find for purchase, and have more scholarly than entertainment value. Librarians are, of course, usually willing to share what they can and to work in league with one another to the patron's advantage. This is antithetical to the Netflix commercial orientation.

Ownership also gives a measure of stability and control over a media collection that cannot be had merely through access to a service such as Netflix. The trade off with Netflix, analogous to the broader move away from print to electronic holdings in academic libraries, is that it provides

easier access to more resources, but this access becomes less reliable over time given the vicissitudes of business models, mergers, terms of service and periodic license, and price negotiations. Though Netflix is always acquiring new titles, including niche and even some educational titles, Netflix Inc., and not the library, ultimately determines when and how they are accessed and by whom. In the infamous 2004 "throttling the queue" lawsuit brought against Netflix, subscriber Frank Chavez "alleged that contrary to its advertising Netflix was employing sophisticated algorithms to prioritize the allocation of its DVDs to its lowest-consuming members with the effect that high-consuming members would receive fewer DVDs per month, reducing the costs Netflix incurred to serve this high-usage group, and increasing its profits" (*Frank Chavez v. Netflix Inc.*, Court of appeals doc, p.3). Before settling out of court with undisclosed terms, Netflix agreed to make changes to how it advertises its service. Currently, Netflix no longer offers an "unlimited" subscription for purchase.

The Departmental Collection

The particular circumstances of the media collection I managed made Netflix an especially attractive solution for the problems the collection faced. The Netflix subscription allowed me to cut loose the thousand items in the departmental collection for which the library had been putatively responsible. These items became the sole responsibility of the department in question and subsequently had none of the library benefits of good cataloging and searching via the OPAC, an easily accessible, organized central location, standardized circulation—and everything else that libraries offer and librarians know how to do.

The library, the media collection, and the media librarian benefitted from an increased profile because of the Netflix subscription. The fact that the Netflix DVDs were not owned by anyone went a long way toward reorienting faculty member's attitudes toward the media collection. Ownership of the media collection within and by the library was firmly reestablished; rules governing the circulation of all media were clearly defined and consistently applied. While a thousand videos were let go, the alternative was access—and in a more attractive DVD format—to over ten thousand. This was effectively a coup.

Netflix, in addition to being the premier example of The Long Tail, is often used as an instance of a Web 2.0 application, primarily because of its Cinematch recommendation service, which connects its head with The Long Tail. Netflix's recommendation service has recently improved as a result of the Netflix Prize, which offered a million dollars to anyone who could come up with a 10 percent improvement to Cinematch's recommendation algorithm. The recommendation service uses customer ratings to suggest movies that they might also like, farther down The Long Tail. In library literature, Library 2.0 is a similar concept, emphasizing

customizability, user contributions such as book ratings and recommendations, and has been succinctly defined as any service "that operates according to the expectations of today's users" (Curran, Murray, & Christian 2007, p.288). In October 2009, Tim O'Reilly and John Battelle, cocreators of the term *Web 2.0,* revisited the idea and published a white paper entitled *Web Squared: Web 2.0 Five Years On.* Netflix is not mentioned in O'Reilly's white paper, though examples used throughout include Twitter, iPhones, and Flickr. While it may no longer be a novel business model, Netflix still succeeds in offering what many library media collections and catalogs cannot.

However, for sixteen dollars a month subscription to Netflix, a library can buy some Web 2.0. When paired with library collections, Netflix can be used to meet user expectations for searching, for recommendations and for access to very long tail titles, while just-in-case library media collections can use it to help provide deeper collection development that meets the instruction needs of a particular campus community. As an attractive, popular user service and as a collection development tool, a subscription can function much like any value-added service in enhancing or at least supplemen ting owned and licensed items.

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