

Now at Your Library: Streaming Movies, Music

Manuel Valdes, Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — There's a new source to stream movies and other digital content, and it's not a tech company with tens of thousands of titles. It's something more familiar, and might even be just down the street: the public library.

Often thought of as stodgy brick-and-mortar havens for bibliophiles, libraries are trying out a new service that allows patrons to check out streaming movies, music, TV shows and audiobooks from anywhere they want.

It works similarly to Netflix: Through an app on a tablet or a browser on a personal computer, users can peruse dozens of movies and click on a film to "borrow" it. The content starts streaming, for free.

While libraries are already loaning e-books, the move to streaming is part of a larger shift for them to remain relevant in a digital world where more people are using tablets and smartphones.

Libraries are "meeting patrons where they want to access content," said Kirk Blankenship, Electronic Resources Librarian for Seattle Public Libraries, which is using the service called Hoopla.

The service, from Ohio-based Midwest Tape, LLC, is also being used in Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Topeka, Kan., and several others towns and cities nationwide. Hoopla launched in full in May with 20 library systems.

As of early September, there are about 220,000 people using the app, said Michael Manon, Hoopla's brand manager. The goal is to reach 100 library systems by year's end.

Libraries have always been a source of audiovisual entertainment. A 2012 Pew Research Center survey found that among patrons 16 years old and older, 40 percent visited libraries to borrow movies. Another 16 percent borrowed music.

In the Seattle area, DVDs and CDs of popular titles can have queues of hundreds of people waiting to check them out. E-books have been offered for years now.

"Public libraries do not have the budgets to compete with Amazon, Comcast, and Netflix and will not be able to pay a premium for online content," Blankenship said, adding that DVDs will continue to be the best way to offer popular movies.

Updating and maintaining that physical collection takes time and money. It also means libraries have to pay for the media upfront, while Hoopla allows them to pay per time a title is borrowed.

Those costs depend on the type of media and its release date, and range from 99 cents to \$2.99. Seattle libraries have allocated \$10,000 a month limit so far for Hoopla items and patrons are limited to 20 checkouts a month, Blankenship said.

That limit may change, depending on demand and how usage grows. Hoopla's launch won't affect the stocking of physical DVDs at library branches for the time being, Blankenship said.

Unlike physical copies, there are no waits for patrons who want to borrow a streaming movie.

For Seattle resident and library patron Jamie Koepnick-Herrera, Hoopla has joined her other streaming services such as Netflix, which she uses for movies, and Hulu, which she uses to watch current seasons of television shows. On Hoopla, she found the yoga videos she was looking for.

"I think it provides a great free source of entertainment for families who can't afford to get a movie for family night or for teenagers to have access to that album they can't afford," Koepnick-Herrera said.

Hoopla's movie and television collection is impressive in its numbers: About 3,000 titles.

It is, however, chockfull of B-movies. Some of the newer movies weren't exactly hits in the theaters, such as Keanu Reeves' "Generation Um" and Lee Daniels' "The Paperboy," which preceded his hit "The Butler."

But there are also many older films, including some classics. The choice of foreign flicks is also healthy and with some quality picks. Documentaries, such as "Gasland" and "Restrepo," are some of the top picks for a collection that also includes public television documentaries, like Ken Burn's "Prohibition."

Under the television section, Hoopla offers plenty of National Geographic and British shows, but not much else. There aren't past seasons of many shows, which is one area Netflix thrives in.

There are also educational choices, such as preparation videos for high school advanced placement exams.

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The limit on new movie titles, though, is not something unique to Hoopla.

Even Netflix, with its bigger budget, often spars with movies studios on when to release new movies. And it's not something unique to streaming either. Blankenship said movie studios would delay sales to libraries of new movies, or only allow rental DVDs, which don't contain special features.

"Eventually, it seems inevitable that movies are distributed online rather than through physical media. I expect libraries to stop needing DVDs, but not today, Hoopla or not," Blankenship said.

On the music side, the choices are far greater and newer — about 300,000 titles. New releases like Jay-Z's "Magna Carta," the new Mumford & Sons, Robin Thicke, Macklemore or Neko Case are readily available.

"The music industry is more attuned to the digital," Hoopla's Manon said.

"Unfortunately, for movies and television, the owners are a bit more apprehensive."

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