

# The Continuing Relevance of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs to Library Collections

Colin Higgins

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This paper examines the ongoing relevance of DVD and Blu-ray Disc collections to libraries at a time of dominance by streaming video. Using the 2020 HBO Max removal of *Gone with the Wind* as a catalyst for discussion, the study explores the shift from physical to digital media consumption and argues that optical disc collections remain essential to library services. While streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ have transformed film distribution, they present significant limitations, including restricted catalogs, algorithm-driven curation, licensing vulnerabilities, and commercial prioritization over cultural preservation. Library-specific streaming options such as Kanopy and Hoopla offer limited selections, although recent studies confirm that the move toward streaming-preferred collection policies has accelerated. Moreover, research demonstrates that assumptions about the superiority of streaming are not consistently supported by evidence. Physical media provides permanent ownership, superior audiovisual quality, bonus content, and offline accessibility. A growing niche market drives sales of premium releases, while specialist distributors create and serve markets for restored classics unavailable on streaming platforms. Maintaining physical collections aligns with core library values of preservation, intellectual freedom, and equitable access. DVDs and Blu-ray Discs ensure access to cultural content regardless of connectivity or subscription costs, enabling purposeful curation over algorithmic recommendations. Libraries must continue acquiring physical film collections as democratic alternatives to commercially driven streaming services.

## Introduction

For a brief moment in early June 2020, *Gone with the Wind*, a film released in 1939, held the first, eighth, and ninth spots on Amazon.com's list of film and television bestsellers for the DVD, Blu-ray Disc, and 70th Anniversary Editions, respectively. Within a few days, all copies had sold out—at one point, a second-hand Blu-ray Disc was the only version available, for \$334.01.<sup>1</sup>

*Gone with the Wind* is the highest-grossing (inflation-adjusted) film of all time.<sup>2</sup> It is a technically brilliant production, the most ambitious motion picture made to that point, and a faithful cinematic adaptation of a beloved novel. It won eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actress (for Vivien Leigh), and Best Director (for Victor Fleming). Hattie McDaniel won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, becoming the first Black person to win an Oscar. Leigh's performance is compelling and moving; the performances by Clark Gable and Olivia de Havilland are also notable. It was my grandmother's favorite film. However, it is also too long and, in its second half, dull. It distorts

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**Dr. Colin Higgins** ([ch435@cam.ac.uk](mailto:ch435@cam.ac.uk)) is Librarian at St Catharine's College, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1887-7030>.

history and did much to glorify the myth of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. And it is racist, as Black critics have pointed out since its release, and White audiences have recently recognized.<sup>3</sup>

The surge of interest in purchasing physical copies of the film was triggered by the decision of HBO Max, a video streaming service, to remove access to *Gone with the Wind* during the protests following the death of George Floyd, a Black man murdered in May 2020 by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Two weeks after its removal, the film reappeared, prefaced by an introduction from film scholar Jacqueline Stewart, who discussed its artistic achievements and racist historical inaccuracies.<sup>4</sup> HBO's decision sparked a moral and commercial panic, leading to a surge in sales of optical disc copies of the film. This was despite the fact that although *Gone with the Wind* was unwatchable on HBO Max in June 2020, it remained available for digital purchase or rental on other platforms, including Amazon Prime, iTunes, Vudu, Google Play, and YouTube. Anyone who wanted to watch *Gone with the Wind* online could do so.

The ethics of *Gone with the Wind*'s removal and reframing have been widely discussed;<sup>5</sup> as fascinated as I am by the topic, I do not wish to add to that discussion here. For this paper, what matters is the hurried removal from a major streaming service and the subsequent marketplace reaction. The incident, albeit briefly and superficially, prompted many film viewers to consider how they were watching film and to rediscover the advantages of supposedly superseded formats. Simultaneously, libraries were under immense pressure to expand streaming provisions during the pandemic, and some institutions even moved toward streaming-preferred collection policies.<sup>6</sup> This paper challenges the resulting assumption that physical formats have become dispensable.

In the months preceding the *Gone with the Wind* furor, journalists had declared the death of both the DVD and the Blu-ray Disc.<sup>7</sup> The data on physical media sales and their decline in favor of streaming services support these confident statements. For well over a decade, the major corporations controlling the distribution of books, music, and film have promoted low-cost subscription models, offering immediate, inexpensive, and convenient access to cultural productions. For books and music, a countermovement has led to a resurgence, and indeed a revitalization, of physical media. It is now a golden age for the production of vinyl records and hardcovers. By contrast, commercial and consumer pushback against the commodification of film through instant-access distribution has been less visible. Perhaps this is because DVDs and Blu-ray Discs are more difficult to love than records and books. Or because our visual media ecosystem is dominated by a small number of risk-averse corporations, where, in the words of Martin Scorsese, "the art of cinema is being systematically devalued, sidelined, demeaned, and reduced to its lowest common denominator, 'content.'"<sup>8</sup>

The demise of physical media has been predicted for years, long before 2020. DVD sales have declined annually since 2005, while Blu-ray Disc sales have decreased annually since 2013.<sup>9</sup> In the quarters leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, sales were dropping at an annualized rate of more than 20 percent.<sup>10</sup> Although DVD sales, but not Blu-ray Disc sales, increased during April and May 2020, sales continued to decline between 2021 and 2025. Meanwhile, subscriptions to and time spent watching streaming media are not only growing, they are accelerating, although signs of subscription

fatigue have begun to emerge as more players enter the market.<sup>11</sup> Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ have saturated the North American market and continue to add subscribers worldwide. New streaming services, often backed by the major film and television production studios, have proliferated over the past five years. DVD and Blu-ray Disc sales have declined in correlation with the expansion of these services. Many consider films on optical discs to be a superseded format destined to follow the path of the VHS videocassette. In 2024, disc sales fell below \$1 billion for the first time this century.<sup>12</sup>

This paper offers a reflection on the market dynamics, significance, necessity, and current use of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs five years after the withdrawal of *Gone with the Wind*, the earlier media assertions, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the implications for libraries of replacing physical media with streaming media. Film libraries can be expensive to acquire, difficult to catalog, and challenging to manage. They quickly lose relevance. Librarians may feel discomfort at the notion that we should collect films in the same way as we do books. For some time, the rapid emergence of high-definition streaming media services has prompted librarians to question the viability of their physical collections of audiovisual materials.<sup>13</sup>

The case against physical media is clear, and for many libraries and library users, the question has been settled.<sup>14</sup> Five years ago, the Public Libraries Association asked, “Are we reaching the end of library DVD collections?”<sup>15</sup> On-demand streaming video has consumed the mass market for DVDs and Blu-ray Discs; digitally distributed films are more affordable and accessible than their physical counterparts. Companies like Netflix, Amazon, and Disney are part of a global trend toward the “access economy,” where goods and services are rented rather than purchased. These new delivery models, enabled by technological change, the decline of stable personal incomes during the Great Recession, and a shift toward urban lifestyles, are assumed to be more appealing to those raised in the digital age.<sup>16</sup>

What space, then, exists in the economy, society, culture, and the library for the DVD and Blu-ray Disc? A significant one, as this paper will seek to demonstrate. Sales of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs are indeed declining. Nevertheless, collections of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs remain an integral part of our service provision and align with our values. Evidence suggests we live in a golden age for films on physical media—I have some sympathy for this position and believe there is evidence for it. This paper argues for the continued relevance of these formats and asks librarians considering the removal of their film collections on optical disc to reflect on how this decision aligns with their collection management policies and the values of our profession.

## The Rise and Fall of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs

The mid-1970s development of rival videocassette formats—VHS by JVC and Betamax by Sony—created a “format war” that stunted sales until VHS triumphed in the early 1980s. A similar conflict began to evolve in the early 1990s as two rival consortia developed competing high-density optical disc formats. An expert group of information technology industry representatives mandated convergence to a single

standard, threatening to boycott both formats if independent development continued.<sup>17</sup> As Taylor outlines, the DVD was the resulting compromise.<sup>18</sup>

The first DVD was sold in 1996 in Japan. The format was released in the United States in 1997, in Europe in 1998, and in Australia in 1999. By the end of 1997, one million discs featuring 530 film titles had been shipped to retailers. Initial sales disappointed, because not all major Hollywood studios were committed to the format, and many did not release films on DVD until 1999. Sales accelerated dramatically in 1999; by the end of the year, 100 million units had been sold. DVD rentals outperformed VHS rentals for the first time in June 2003, by which time sales of the newer format had surpassed those of the older one. Best Buy, a major retailer, ceased stocking VHS tapes in 2003, and Walmart, the world's largest company by revenue, followed suit in 2005.<sup>19</sup>

This surge and the revenue it generated for the major studios lasted only a decade. Of the forty-two top-selling DVDs in the United States, only one, *Frozen* (2014), has been released since 2010. *Frozen* sold 18 million DVD and Blu-ray Disc copies in the year of its release.<sup>20</sup> Six years later, *Frozen 2*, the best-selling disc of 2020, sold fewer than four million. A dramatic reduction in DVD sales during 2018's "Christmas from Hell" was blamed for the closure of HMV, once the UK's largest music and film retailer.<sup>21</sup> Sales of Blu-ray Discs have been declining more slowly than DVDs, but from a lower base. Outside of North America, the medium never took off as a mass market product.<sup>22</sup> An increasing number of films are being released on DVD, but not on Blu-ray Disc.<sup>23</sup> Many are no longer released on physical formats at all; Netflix has a policy of not releasing the films it produces or distributes on physical media, and most Apple TV+ content remains exclusive to its streaming platform, with limited availability in physical formats.<sup>24</sup> Samsung, which released the first Blu-ray Disc player in 2006, announced in 2019 that it would no longer develop new Blu-ray Disc players for the US market despite being the market leader.<sup>25</sup> John Lewis, one of the UK's largest department store chains, stopped selling stand-alone DVD players in 2018.<sup>26</sup> Today, only a handful of technology companies produce DVD and Blu-ray Disc players. Just before this paper was finalized, Pioneer, recognized for its premium optical disc drives, exited the market.<sup>27</sup>

## **The Rise, and Current Dominance, of Streaming Video**

The reason for the decline of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs is clear to anyone with even the mildest interest in film. Digital distribution, as evidenced by the rise in popularity and economic power of on-demand video streaming services, has consumed the market once occupied by the two optical disc formats. For the price of a single disc, and less than the cost of a cinema ticket, subscribers can obtain month-long access to a streaming service and watch as many films as they like. On-demand videos cannot be scratched, dropped on the floor, fall behind the sofa, or loaned to an unreliable friend. You do not have to put them back in a box, think about where to shelve them, or decide whether or how to interfile your DVDs with your Blu-ray Discs. Your children cannot decorate them with smudgy fingerprints or attempt to balance them on their heads. Streaming services are affordable, convenient, and filled with addictive and exciting programming.<sup>28</sup>

Netflix was founded in 1997 as a rent-by-mail DVD business. Even in its pre-streaming iteration, Netflix had a profitable business model—by 2009, 1.3 percent of all mail sent in the United States consisted of Netflix DVDs.<sup>29</sup> Over three decades, it has evolved into the world’s most powerful film and television production and distribution company, using on-demand video as a profitable revenue stream. In Q4 2024, Netflix surpassed 300 million subscribers with a quarterly revenue of \$10.25 billion, exceeding expectations.<sup>30</sup> Aggressive expansion, strategic deal-making, and an early move into content creation have made it the streaming video service that continues to set benchmarks for the industry.

In less than a decade, Netflix has transformed the creation and distribution of film and television. In 2013, *House of Cards* was the first show produced by Netflix.<sup>31</sup> *Beasts of No Nation* was the first film exclusively distributed by Netflix in 2015. By 2021, the company was spending more than \$17 billion on original content creation, an annual figure it has since maintained (except for a dip in 2023).<sup>32</sup> At the peak of its nascent dominance in the streaming sector, films produced or distributed by the company received 36 nominations at the 2021 Academy Awards—depending on how “production” is defined, this was the second or third highest number in the Awards’ history.<sup>33</sup> At the 2021 Emmy Awards, Netflix productions received an astonishing 129 nominations, winning 44 awards, the most any company has received in a single year.

Amazon expanded from books to video by 1998. At the time of writing, Amazon competes with Apple, Microsoft, Nvidia, and Alphabet to be the world’s most valuable company by market capitalization. It is the second-largest employer in the United States, the leading e-commerce platform, and a major player in fields such as cloud computing and artificial intelligence. Its on-demand video streaming service has undergone several iterations. Launched in 2006, Amazon Unbox transitioned to Amazon Video on Demand (2008), then Amazon Instant Video (2011), and finally Amazon Video (2015). This service, commonly known as Prime Video, offers Amazon Prime subscribers complimentary access to thousands of films and TV shows. The number of subscribers is uncertain—Amazon has always been reticent about divulging commercially sensitive data. But in a 2021 letter to shareholders, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos stated that Prime had surpassed 200 million global subscribers. Amazon now plays a prominent role in film and television production through Amazon Studios and by distributing content via Amazon Originals.<sup>34</sup> Amazon Video differs from Netflix in that it also hosts live sporting events and offers content from other providers through add-on subscription channels. Most films and shows on the site are not free; digital copies must be rented or purchased. Amazon’s various services and technologies form a complex ecosystem; on-demand video is only a part of this system, and analysts remain uncertain about the importance of streaming to Amazon’s corporate objectives. As Bezos has stated: “We get to monetize [our subscription video] in a very unusual way. . . . When we win a Golden Globe, it helps us sell more shoes.”<sup>35</sup>

Disney+ launched in the United States and Canada in November 2019, expanding into European and Latin American countries throughout 2020. On its first day, it gained more than ten million subscribers; by October 2021, this number had grown to more than 118 million. Disney+ primarily focuses on distributing Disney’s own films and shows; therefore, it has fewer productions available to watch than

its two main rivals. However, aggressive expansion throughout the 2010s means that Disney holds the rights to two of the most successful franchises in film history—Star Wars and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It also owns the animation studio Pixar and 20th Century Studios (formerly 20th Century Fox), with its library of landmarks in cinema history, from *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *Cleopatra* (1963) to *Alien* (1979) and *Avatar* (2009). Even without these acquisitions, the Disney archive would still be an enviable commercial property, containing 500 films and 7,500 television shows, many of which had never been made available through Netflix, Amazon, or their rivals.<sup>36</sup>

Unlike Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, which offer extensive selections of original and licensed films and shows, Apple TV+ features content that Apple has produced or commissioned. As indicated by its name, the platform focuses on shows, although it also hosts a small number of high-profile films. Although its library is smaller than its competitors, Apple TV+ stands out because of its high-quality productions and its curated viewing experience. Other significant players in the North American streaming video market include Hulu (now part of Disney), Paramount+, Peacock, HBO Max, and STARZ.

Complex legal limitations and commercial agreements lead to variations in the availability of on-demand video streaming across different countries and regions. Although not strictly an on-demand service, the BBC's iPlayer competes with Netflix and Amazon in the United Kingdom by allowing British television license payers to watch content recently broadcast on the various BBC television stations and has broadened its offerings over the last decade to include classic programming. Beyond North America and Europe, numerous regional streaming services have emerged, catering to local preferences and consumption habits. They offer language-specific programming, distinctive cultural content, and, often, hybrid distribution methods. In India, JioHotstar and Zee5 host both international and local films, along with a range of shows and live sports, particularly cricket. In China, services such as iQIYI, Tencent Video, and Youku dominate the market. Given the challenges faced by Western firms, no major American firms will be permitted to enter the Chinese market in the medium term.

Within libraries, too, streaming is now firmly established. Levenson and Lombardo have reviewed the current state of practice and find that streaming represents the dominant mode of audiovisual access in higher education, even as affordability, licensing, and sustainability remain concerns.<sup>37</sup> Their survey of the field provides crucial context: even as libraries increasingly build collections around streaming, questions remain about the long-term viability of these strategies, especially in relation to equitable access.

## The Failures of Streaming Video

These facts diminish the importance of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs to film culture and to the libraries that provide access to that culture to their users. But they do not make the optical disc an irrelevant or obsolete format. Just as ebooks did not eliminate paperbacks and hardbacks, streaming video has

transformed the film ecosystem without leading to the extinction of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs. There are reasons to continue buying and watching films on optical disc, but there are also reasons why streaming video fails film viewers, whether they be cineastes or casual fans. Before discussing the reasons why optical discs might be preferred over streaming video, I will reflect on the limitations of Netflix, Amazon, Disney+, and their competitors.

The key limitation of streaming video lies in the narrow, commercially curated, and restricted access provided to subscribers. It is easier to watch *a* film than ever before, but the ability to choose *which* film to watch has become more difficult. Streaming video is not like streaming audio—for both, recommendation algorithms purposefully restrict choice. But the choice available to listeners of Apple Music, for example—more than 100 million songs—is on a different scale to the choice available to viewers on Apple TV+—only about eighty films.<sup>38</sup> This difference in scale is purposeful and part of the business model of the streaming platforms. Netflix and its rivals have a different operating model from Spotify and its rivals, and not only because there are far fewer films than songs. Video streaming services are limited both by accident and by design. They are intended to narrow choice, providing the consumer with a kind of Goldilocks content that, in the words of an *Economist* article, is “neither too familiar nor too novel.”<sup>39</sup>

It is worth comparing the two earlier-mentioned services. Spotify has established partnerships with all the major record labels, as well as thousands of independent labels and distributors. This extensive network grants it access to most commercially available songs across a wide range of genres and eras. If a song has been released by a major label, or many indie labels, you will find it on Spotify in almost all cases. Film rights tend to be more fragmented—across studios, distributors, and regional licensing arrangements—complicating the ability of any streaming platform to provide a film library with any degree of comprehensiveness. Netflix restricts the number and availability of the films it offers to control costs, maintain exclusivity, and rotate its content to keep its catalog looking fresh and competitive. Unlike music streaming, the availability of films on video streaming services is selective and constantly evolving.

Although the number of songs available for streaming via Spotify has increased over time, the number of films on Netflix has decreased.<sup>40</sup> And though Amazon’s library is growing, many of the films available for Prime subscribers to watch for free are low-budget, often poor-quality versions of films that are out of copyright. Most streaming films on Amazon need to be purchased, regardless of whether you are a Prime member. Currently, Amazon offers 13,000 films free to its North American subscribers, Netflix offers 3,700, and Disney+ offers 500, with most being their own productions.<sup>41</sup> At its height as a mail-order DVD service, Netflix provided access to 70,000 titles.<sup>42</sup> This represents a 95 percent reduction in available titles.

This shift highlights the trend, noted earlier, toward producing exclusive content rather than licensing third-party films. Disney’s former chief executive, Michael Eisner, noted that Netflix’s chairman, Reed Hastings, “created a business strategy and that was buying everybody’s library. Everybody agreed to sell their library to him which was probably a mistake for them but they made a lot of money on it and

it kept a lot of companies afloat.”<sup>43</sup> As films were withdrawn by studios setting up their own streaming services, Netflix produced more of its own content. Since 2022, more than half of its offerings have been original productions, generated in response to the removal of content from studios with their own platforms.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, these companies were spending billions of dollars on mergers and acquisitions, partly to gain exclusive access to intellectual content, ensuring Amazon and Netflix could not license it. In essence, Netflix was spending tens of billions creating films and shows for their service, while Disney was spending tens of billions to keep content off these services. Over time, this has resulted in fewer choices—both in quantity and variety—as streaming services produce generic content manufactured to attract the broadest audience.

As a for-profit company, Netflix strives to maximize revenue by delivering what customers want. Netflix and Amazon have a corporate interest in catering to audiences rather than challenging them. Netflix has faced criticism for limiting the creativity of writers and directors. However, it is unclear whether these limitations are stricter than those imposed by traditional film and television production companies. Netflix and Amazon produce content, not art; *Vanity Fair* journalist Nick Bilton has expressed a concern that cinema and television are being replaced by “digital wallpaper.”<sup>45</sup> Films with small, niche audiences are often overlooked, as are films that may not have immediate commercial appeal. Finding the right platform to watch a film that is not currently being marketed can be difficult. Acknowledging that he is overwhelmed with content, but lacking choice and agency in his film watching, critic Adam Bowie has noted: “What I don’t know is where I can watch *Inception*, or *Star Wars*, or *Psycho*, or *Gone with the Wind*, or *Bringing Up Baby* on any given day. Are they on Netflix or Amazon? Maybe. Maybe not.”<sup>46</sup> Physical collections eliminate this uncertainty.

## **The Benefits of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs**

For years, DVDs, like the VHS tapes before them, served as a means for film studios to continue profiting from their productions at low cost, long after a film’s theatrical run. DVDs were highly profitable for film studios and distributors—indeed, usually more profitable than earnings from a film’s cinematic release. Theatrical revenue accounted for 55 percent of an average film’s revenue in 1980, but only 20 percent by 2007. Most of the remaining 80 percent was generated from the sale and rental of home entertainment releases.<sup>47</sup> Profit margins on DVD sales were twice those of VHS, while more expensive Blu-ray Discs generated even greater profit for producers and distributors—there is little difference in the production costs for different forms of optical media.<sup>48</sup> Moving consumers from physical to digital media further reduced distribution costs. Stephen Silver has suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic allowed cynical studio executives to move away from physical media even faster and implement aggressive plans to launch new streaming platforms at a time when their customers were distracted and vulnerable.<sup>49</sup> As Heller and Salzman have written, Disney has long been an expert in engineering ownership and non-ownership to maximize profit.<sup>50</sup>

The first DVDs sold in the United States were priced at a discounted rate of \$24.99 (equivalent to \$42.69 at the time of writing). Prices have been declining for twenty-five years. For box-office hits, film

producers no longer seek significant profit from film sales on disc, and consumers show less interest in viewing films via these formats, which reduces demand and thus the price. Both buyers and sellers have moved online, where films can be accessed more easily and inexpensively, benefiting both parties. Producers accept low profit margins on the discs they still sell because cheap DVDs near supermarket checkouts often serve as miniature billboards for theatrical sequels, toys, clothes, lunchboxes, and cereals in nearby aisles, as well as spin-off shows on Netflix and Disney+. The DVD has become a disposable commodity. Thrift stores are filled with them. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the clearances they inspired, it was common to see boxes of DVDs on the footpaths of my neighborhood, free to a good home.

When Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* appeared on the high-resolution 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray format in November 2023, all copies sold out within a week.<sup>51</sup> Nolan—along with directors James Cameron, Guillermo del Toro, and Edgar Wright—has encouraged film fans to purchase optical disc versions of their films rather than watch them on streaming services. In Nolan's words, there is value in “a version you can buy and own at home and put on a shelf so no evil streaming service can come steal it from you.”<sup>52</sup> Streaming has suppressed DVD and Blu-ray Disc sales, but sales figures are only part of the story of these formats and may not signal the impending end of optical discs.<sup>53</sup> A niche market for DVDs, and particularly Blu-ray Discs and the higher-resolution 4K UHD format (whose sales have been rising), has been quietly developing for a decade, expanding as the mass market has declined.<sup>54</sup> A British news magazine may have put it hyperbolically, though not unjustifiably, when it declared, “Don’t believe the sales figures—DVDs are thriving.”<sup>55</sup> The pushback against streaming media is real, and it is both principled and practical.

DVDs and Blu-ray Discs serve a different purpose than streaming video for cinephiles and fans of classic films, as well as the companies that cater to them. Streaming services have little interest in older films; finding many such titles on Amazon Prime can be challenging, while you may struggle to find any on Netflix. Production companies that own the rights to these films are increasingly granting access to their archival material to niche DVD and Blu-ray Disc distributors. These distributors restore these high-quality films, package them superbly, and offer features that help film enthusiasts contextualize and understand them. Film fans are willing to pay a high price for these products. Prominent distributors of older and arthouse films include Criterion Collection, Arrow Video, BFI, and Eureka’s Masters of Cinema. The market is also thriving thanks to smaller distributors such as Kino Lorber, Indicator, and Vinegar Syndrome. Of course, some films are too niche even for these labels, and restoration and release incur costs. However, for many films, particularly older ones, optical discs have become the only means of viewing them, and thanks to the high quality of the restorations, the viewing experience has never been better. Optical disc formats also offer advantages in accessibility, providing consistently available and standardized closed-captioning options. These features are often implemented inconsistently, or are missing, on streaming platforms. Closed captioning displays on-screen text that reproduces spoken dialogue and relevant non-speech audio, such as music cues, sound effects, and speaker identification, ensuring greater accessibility for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers.

Blu-ray Disc and the higher-resolution 4K format are still the gold standard for picture and sound quality. The streamers have been catching up, but only for newer releases. For older films, versions on optical disc are nearly always superior to those on streaming platforms, if they are present on those platforms at all. DVDs and Blu-ray Discs offer several advantages, including bonus content such as commentary tracks and special features, which are sometimes available on Disney+, but never on Netflix or Amazon. Additionally, they provide permanence of ownership and reliable offline accessibility. When you own a disc, you own a disc. You can trust that you can watch it whenever you want and learn more about the films you love by watching the bonus features. When you subscribe to a streaming service, you own nothing, and the films you want to watch are liable to be removed at short notice. Even purchasing a film on a service like Amazon comes with a risk. A notable incident occurred in 2009 when Amazon remotely deleted copies of George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm* from Kindles due to rights issues, demonstrating how digital "ownership" can be revoked without warning. Purchasing via video-on-demand is merely a form of licensing, and purchases may be lost if a distributor is ever acquired, merged, ceases operation, or goes bankrupt. Having a physical item allows for a tangible connection—holding it, touching it, or placing it on a bookshelf; this greater physical engagement enables greater emotional and intellectual engagement. Streaming services depend on reliable internet connectivity and will feature compressed video, most visible in dark scenes, causing sunsets (for example) to look blocky and pixelated. The sound on streaming video is also compressed; on optical media, it is lossless. These limitations raise questions about whether digital streaming should ever fully replace physical media in libraries, especially for patrons seeking high-fidelity content, older and rare titles not offered by commercial services, or equitable access unhindered by bandwidth constraints.

In any case, none of the major commercial streaming services offer subscription models to libraries, and those that do provide a more limited selection of films, a challenge that has been recognized for some time.<sup>56</sup> The most notable service is Kanopy, which offers a curated selection of independent films, classic cinema, documentaries, and educational materials. Kanopy's content focuses on the film ecosystem's more intellectual and artistic corners, with many titles sourced from the Criterion Collection, PBS, and independent arthouse distributor A24. By contrast, Hoopla Digital, operated by Midwest Tape, offers a broader and more commercial selection, including mainstream films and television shows. Whereas Kanopy uses a quota-based access model, Hoopla allows simultaneous access but imposes borrowing limits. It also functions on a transactional model, which may pressure library budgets. The third major player in the market is OverDrive, whose Libby app is known for ebooks and audiobooks; its content tends to be more limited and focused on niche, independent, or educational genres. Less widely adopted, Swank Digital Campus is a streaming media vendor offering a fairly large and diverse catalog, and is a growing player in the academic library market. Compared with major commercial streaming platforms, library streaming services lag in diversity, consistency, and user experience, and they do not make substantial investments in licensing popular titles or creating exclusive content. Moreover, assumptions that users inherently prefer streaming are not consistently supported by evidence. At Penn State University, DVD circulation sometimes exceeded streaming usage of identical titles on Kanopy, contradicting assumptions about universal streaming preference and demonstrating persistent patron

demand for physical formats.<sup>57</sup> It is unclear whether these usage patterns are isolated to this institution or are part of a broader trend, but it offers evidence that complicates the narrative of streaming's inevitability and supports the argument that physical formats continue to serve critical user needs.

## The Values of Librarianship

In his 1946 essay, “Books v. Cigarettes,” George Orwell argued that books, then regarded a luxury, were more economical than cigarettes over time because they had lasting significance and were collected rather than consumed and forgotten.<sup>58</sup> The same logic remains relevant today for DVDs and Blu-ray Discs, which may appear to be a costly investment for individuals or libraries, but prove more cost-effective than streaming subscriptions when viewed over the medium to long term. An optical disc enables permanent access to a film, eliminating the need for third-party services. Similar arguments have been made for music collections, where physical formats like vinyl have experienced a revival, suggesting that the perceived obsolescence of discs may be overstated across different media.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to economic considerations, the cultural importance of physical media aligns with some of the key values of librarianship, including preservation, intellectual freedom, privacy, and access. Streaming services emphasize consumption rather than collection; they encourage passive and forgettable viewing of fleeting content shaped by engagement algorithms. By contrast, a well-managed library prioritizes selecting, preserving, and revisiting physical media based on cultural, personal, or scholarly value. Librarians facilitate democratic access to cultural works; they are not just content distributors. Depending on streaming platforms, with their ever-changing catalogs and algorithm-driven control, undermines our social role. Libraries should continue to collect and preserve physical media, in doing so serving as a buffer against the impermanence of digital content.

Exploring tactile physical media collections in person offers a more meaningful and fulfilling discovery experience than anything provided by algorithm-based streaming platforms. DVDs and Blu-ray Discs are things you can hold, see, and touch. Curation by librarians, and library user borrowing, is purposeful and intentional; it encourages serendipity and cultural risk-taking. As Rachel P. King points out, unrestricted access to physical media in libraries can boost user satisfaction and encourage exploration.<sup>60</sup> In a marketplace where streaming services and rights owners alter the content of their films to update the special effects, remove language and content judged as inappropriate, adjust aspect ratios to fit the bestselling televisions better, or alter any aspect of a film at the whim of a director, producer, or studio executive, optical discs can freeze a production in time, ensuring its artistic integrity. As noted earlier, streaming services have many drawbacks, including licensing limitations and variable availability, which hinder persistent access to many films.<sup>61</sup> Commercial and licensing imperatives can and do make films disappear, without explanation, from streaming services in unpredictable and arbitrary ways.<sup>62</sup> Libraries, by contrast, aim to maintain consistent, accessible, and diverse collections, ensuring reliable access to a wide variety of films, including rarer, older, and harder-to-find titles.

The typical American spends more than \$500 annually on streaming service subscriptions.<sup>63</sup> Not every American can afford this, or even afford a Netflix subscription, and pricing models that used to be

simple are now complex, with tiered subscriptions for multiple users and access to higher-definition or ad-free content. People who cannot afford to watch the latest Marvel film, the latest season of *The White Lotus*, or *Andor* may feel excluded from a culture they want to engage with. Should the library not enable it if there is an easy and inexpensive way to provide free access to this culture for anyone who wishes to do so?

## Conclusion

In June 2020, the brief surge in demand for physical copies of *Gone with the Wind* was more than just a market curiosity; it was a revealing moment that exposed an underappreciated fragility in our digital film ecosystem. Making a cultural landmark temporarily inaccessible on a major streaming platform caused viewers to instinctively reach for the permanence and certainty that physical media provides. Occurring at the height of pandemic-driven streaming consumption, this episode inadvertently demonstrated that reports of the death of DVDs and Blu-ray Discs had been exaggerated.

Although the mass market for watching films has migrated to streaming services, physical media serves distinct and irreplaceable functions that align with the values of our profession. The success of smaller distributors like Criterion Collection and Arrow Video, the sold-out release of 4K copies of *Oppenheimer*, and the activism of directors advocating for physical ownership point to a medium that has found new purpose rather than faded into obsolescence. For libraries, the choice between physical and streaming media should not merely be a practical decision about space, budgets, or patron preferences, and it should not be framed as a binary choice. For all their convenience and affordability, streaming services operate according to commercial imperatives that are at odds with library values. When we outsource our film collections to Netflix, Amazon, and Disney+, we cede control over what our communities can access, when they can access it, and under what conditions.

DVDs and Blu-ray Discs, by contrast, embody the principles of permanence, equity of access, and intellectual freedom that define our profession. They ensure that films remain available regardless of corporate strategy, licensing disputes, or shifting cultural sensitivities. They provide the highest quality viewing experience for classic and arthouse cinema, which streaming services largely ignore. They offer the serendipitous discovery that browsing library shelves allows, free from the recommendations of algorithmic curation. And they democratize access to visual culture, ensuring that economic barriers do not exclude members of our communities from participating in shared cultural conversations.

Just as we would not consider replacing our book collections with subscriptions to Kindle Unlimited, we should be cautious about abandoning optical discs in favor of streaming services that offer less choice, lower quality, and no guarantee of continued access. Although these services kept us entertained during lockdowns, they also revealed their dependence on corporate goodwill, reliable internet connectivity, and monthly subscription fees. Libraries that maintained their DVD and Blu-ray Disc collections could continue serving patrons regardless of bandwidth limitations, subscription costs, or licensing changes.

While studies such as Serrano and Fernandez illustrate the appeal of streaming-preferred policies during crisis conditions, they also highlight the risks of overreliance on licensed access.<sup>64</sup> Also, Proctor's findings on user demand for DVDs complicate the narrative of streaming inevitability, and Levenson and Lombardo remind us that the current dominance of streaming in libraries is not without significant unresolved challenges.<sup>65</sup> Together, this scholarship demonstrates that physical and digital media should not be positioned as mutually exclusive, but as complementary forms of access. For libraries, the choice should be guided not only by efficiency and convenience but by the enduring values of permanence, accessibility, and intellectual freedom.

Five years after the *Gone with the Wind* incident, the case for physical media has strengthened as subscription fatigue sets in and streaming services consolidate around ever-narrower content strategies. Librarians considering the future of their film collections should not ask whether DVDs and Blu-ray Discs are commercially viable in the mass market, but rather whether maintaining these collections serves the values and mission of our institutions. The answer, this paper suggests, is unequivocally yes. Libraries that preserve physical media collections provide their communities with something increasingly rare and valuable: the assurance that cultural works will remain accessible, complete, and unaltered, available to anyone who seeks them out.

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