

The Paley Center vs. UAlbany's University Library: A Comparison

While studying at Empire State College, I cross-registered for several classes at the University at Albany, and frequently made use of the University Library's video collection. In addition to fairly solid holdings in current American DVD releases, the University Library is strong in foreign DVDs and VHS tapes, as well as out-of-print titles on VHS and laserdisc. In the basement, the library has what it calls its Interactive Media Center, featuring audio playback equipment (turntable, audiocassette, and CD,) and many video viewing stations. These are monitors attached to players for all three of the library's major video formats, including stations to play PAL and SECAM videotapes, and DVDs of all regions.

No credentials are required to enter the library, and the VHS and laserdisc collections are stored in non-locking containers on open shelving, making these collections tacitly free and open to the public. DVDs are kept in locking cases, however, and so must be checked out in order to be used. A number of provisions are made to allow students from other SUNY schools, state workers, and users of affiliated local libraries to borrow from UAlbany's libraries, and if you do not fit any of their allowable criteria for usership you may purchase an "unaffiliated user" card for \$50, and gain borrowing privileges for one year.

I recently visited the Paley Center for Media, which collects and provides onsite access to as many TV and radio recordings as possible. Their pricing scheme is somewhat Byzantine: \$10 for 90 minutes in the viewing room, or \$8 for students; \$25 for all-day use, or \$15 for students; a one-year "Scholars Pass" for \$150; student membership for \$50; and a bewildering variety of other "general," "patron," and "industry" memberships. Despite the confusing rates, however,

the staff explained the relevant price points in a coherent way, and it seems that most research needs can be met at a fair price.

Cataloguing

Both institutions have very navigable catalogues, but on the whole UAlbany's is clearer and better organized. Where UAlbany holds multiple installments in a series (as, for an arbitrary example, with the adventure serial *Queen of the Jungle* on VHS,) the catalogue contains a single record for the larger work, but lists each "volume" held individually within the record.

Contrariwise, the Paley Center catalogues each episode and broadcast of a program separately, with records of widely varying quality. A search for *Moonlighting* returns 32 results, mostly episodes of the show, in no discernible order. The first four results, for example are:

"MOONLIGHTING: CAMILLE (TV) (May 13, 1986)"; "MOONLIGHTING: LUNAR ECLIPSE (TV) (May 14, 1989)"; "MOONLIGHTING: STRAIGHT POOP (TV) (March 24, 1987)"; and "MOONLIGHTING: MY FAIR DAVID (TV) (October 29, 1985)". Similarly, when multiple broadcasts of a single program are held, they are not grouped together. These also sometimes reveal inconsistent cataloguing practices, as with their six broadcasts of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, referred to variously as "CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS", "CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS, A", and "A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS". Further, this case reveals another frustrating deficiency in Paley's cataloguing system: approximately 50% of their collections have been digitized and can be viewed onsite, but outside of the building the catalogue makes no reference to which can and cannot be seen. As it happens, the *Charlie Brown* that can be viewed is from 1979, while the original 1965 broadcast remains undigitized. This is critical because the original telecast is said to feature a piece of animation deleted from all subsequent showings.

Websites

The Paley Center's website is very much geared toward promoting events and exhibits, and is slicker and glossier than I have any use for in this context. It is easiest by far to navigate from the bars at the top and side of the site. A search bar to search the collection is helpfully found on many of the site's pages, however, and once you have navigated past the front page, it becomes much more organized and easy to get around. One quibble I have is that the website very firmly warns that researchers "must make a reservation to secure a console. The reservation must be made by phone at least two days in advance of a visit. The Paley Center cannot guarantee console availability to researchers who do not make reservations." When I called for my reservation, the gentleman on the phone seemed rather dismayed that I would bother to call ahead, and rather than have to wait two days I was able to go in the very next afternoon.

UAlbany's site is an ordinary university library website, perfectly unvirtuosic but perfectly functional. It puts little emphasis on the Interactive Media Center's playback area, but the area does have its own page containing a listing of equipment. The whole affair is very low key, but this is a minor gripe since the materials can be borrowed and viewed offsite, and it is only a marvelous extra feature that the library itself offers viewing stations.

Atmosphere and Equipment

Again, it's hard to complain about UAlbany's viewing facilities when they feel like such a lovely bonus in a more or less regular library, but it must be said that they are in some ways not great. The monitors are small – perhaps 12" or 14" CRTs – on small desks in front of moderately comfortable office chairs. The greatest problem is that the stations are situated rather uncomfortably in the middle of the large open floor of a very brightly fluorescent-lit room. I have watched and enjoyed films there, but it is far from an ideal viewing environment.

The Paley's facilities are far more integral to their way of delivering content, and they are nearly unassailable. The viewing room is quiet and dimly lit, and is carpeted and paneled in a way that gives it a very peaceful, cozy feel. Each viewing station is equipped with a mouse, keyboard, monitor, and headphones (UAlbany also provided headphones.) On these terminals, users can search the Paley's catalogue, and click to instantly view or listen to any digitized content that they choose. The monitors are a good size -- perhaps 24" flatscreens -- and the content is digitized at a resolution such that the programs appear broadcast-quality. Only users holding Scholar Passes can gain access to as-yet undigitized collections.

Staff

The staff at UAlbany's library are mostly students from the university, so it may be predictable that your mileage may vary from person to person. Some employees there are wonderful, while others are steadfastly unhelpful. However, as the video collections are largely self-service (and the DVDs need only be checked out by staff,) the experience of using them is affected little by interactions with employees. At the Paley Center I interacted with three employees, all of them very helpful: on the phone the day before, the man who runs the viewing room offered to look up for me whether the program I wanted to view (*John Grin's Christmas*) had been digitized; on arriving, the woman at the reception desk gave me useful instructions on using the facilities and finding the viewing room; and in the viewing room I was met immediately by a fellow who led me to a station, showed me how to use it, explained how Scholar Passes work, and checked in later to see that everything was going well.

Each institution has its strengths and its weaknesses, but I find that in both cases the strengths win out. There are many more programs I hope to see at the Paley Center someday, and if I return to Albany, I would be pleased to use the collections there again as well.