

## Book Review:

# Van Esler, Mike. *Media Libraries in an Age of Unending Consumption: A Bottomless Pit* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023)

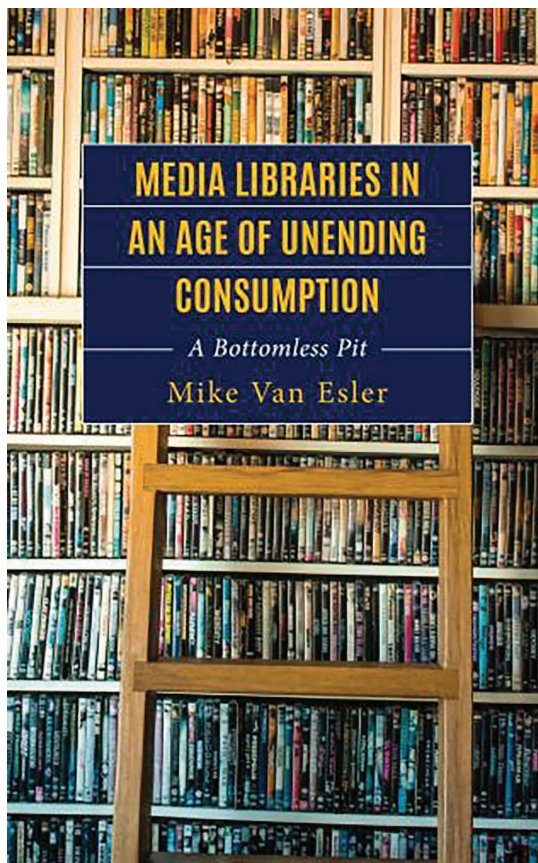
**Peter Arne Johnson**

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

PETE.JOHNSON[AT]UTEXAS.EDU<sup>1</sup>

Submitted to *Media Industries Journal*

December 15, 2024



Streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have long established their brands on the basis of *newness*, *innovation*, and *disruption*. Ironically, however, the underlying basis of their marketing and corporate strategies remains tied to a much older and heretofore undertheorized object: media libraries. Indeed, the media libraries upon which streamers retain subscribers represent the *old*, the *legacy*, and the perpetually *disrupted*—all dirty words in the halls of Silicon Valley. In *Media Libraries in An Age of Unending Consumption: A Bottomless Pit*, media industry scholar Mike Van Esler takes on this paradox, considering how the old and forgotten titles of media's past have been repackaged for a new platformized age of “unending consumption.”

Van Esler, an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, has studied streaming services' branding and discursive maneuverings and their attempts to elide just how similar their practices and discourses are to those of legacy media. Van Esler's new monograph similarly provides a timely historical genealogy of media libraries in US

film and television industries, offering readers a way to better understand the contemporary streaming logics that supposedly manufacture endless choice and frictionless access. Like much of the work in media industry studies, *Media Libraries* “historicizes the present” of the media business through contemporary and historical case studies and adeptly balances political economy with mid-level analyses of industrial practice. The monograph is organized into five thematic chapters that illustrate the continuities and changes in media libraries: a history of media libraries from the silent film era to the cable era, current trends in streaming libraries, a theory of “deep libraries,” the role of anime in library strategies, and the relationship between original productions and library titles.

Van Esler engages with a cross-section of scholarship from media industry history, business studies, science and technology studies, and media theory. Key to the book’s argument is sociologist David Ardit’s theory of “unending consumption.”<sup>2</sup> A product of our contemporary financialized media system, this new “business model” operates by turning consumers into perpetual subscribers, or “renters,” of what they watch and listen to, pushing them further away from physical ownership of media. Dovetailing with this new business logic, the on-demand, subscription-based library business models of streaming services, whether Netflix in filmed entertainment or Spotify in music, construct a “mirage of unlimited content” that “obscures the cost of media consumption” as we spend more for less.<sup>3</sup> Despite this disruption to the business model of media, the library practices of Netflix and its peers are not all that different from those that have long defined media industries.

Turning to US film and television history to trace this genealogy backward, the book’s first chapter charts the continuities and changes in media libraries from the silent film era through the 2000s. Building upon the work of media industry historians, such as Chuck Tryon, Jennifer Holt, Amanda Lotz, Derek Kompare, and most notably Eric Hoyt, and integrating primary source research from industry trade publications like *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, Van Esler identifies two recurring functions of media libraries: copies and derivatives. The former refers to the duplication of a single media text (e.g., selling the VHS tape of a blockbuster movie), while the latter refers to the exploitation of a particular idea to create a new media text (e.g., adapting or remaking an old library title into something new). Throughout film history, both of these functions resulted in old films becoming especially valuable, as they were at the center of many mergers and acquisitions between studios, distributors, cable channels, and other vacillating power players. The introduction of television as a distribution technology in the early 1950s made library assets even more valuable, particularly once the major Hollywood studios were comfortable selling their backlog of titles to television networks by the late 1950s. Van Esler is adept at charting the recurring strategies and cast of characters throughout this history, whether Matty Fox, Ted Turner, or Eliot Hyman. Some of these executives may not have wielded “mogul” status in traditional film historiographies, but they were nonetheless key players in the acquisition, expansion, and sale of various media libraries. The proliferation of new distribution technologies like cable and home video in the late 1970s and 1980s kicked library valuations into high gear, with these outlets providing new “windows” into which rights-holders could sell their titles. Later, streaming services offered yet another window for studios—at least initially.

The second chapter outlines the six primary ways that libraries have provided rights holders with economic value in the streaming era: licensing their titles to external parties to ascertain an ongoing revenue source, building subscribers by making titles exclusive to their in-house platform, inflating their library's speculative value to make a company more attractive as an acquisition target, turning their library into a financialized portfolio of assets that is attractive to private equity firms and hedge funds, improving brand positioning, and driving subscribers to different parts of their parent company's consumer ecosystem (e.g., Apple TV+ and Amazon Prime Video). Different streaming services have used these six strategies to differing degrees for differing reasons, but many of the practices extend the logics of earlier library usage. The primary distinction, however, particularly for Netflix, has been the collapsing of various windows into a single "walled garden," making titles exclusive to the platform (i.e., they are not available on any other service, cable channel, or platform globally). Connecting this trend to Ardit's theory of unending consumption, Van Esler concludes that exclusivity "is a stark departure from previous library licensing norms and resituates audiences as ongoing sources of revenue rather than one-time purchasers or eyeballs to sell to advertisers."<sup>4</sup>

Chapter three further fleshes out this discursive rupture by offering a theory of "the deep library." Van Esler is careful to use this concept as a way to counter, rather than reify, Big Tech's techno-solutionism and "discourses of abundance." Accordingly, he defines the deep library as "the particular collection of films and television programs that are not streamed at a high volume, yet nevertheless serve important functions for the streamer" and are thus tied to "volume rather than completeness, quality, or popularity."<sup>5</sup> The affordances and recommendation algorithms on streaming portals further construct this "illusion" of endlessness in the deep library, even though most library catalogs are characterized by impermanence, finitude, and artificial scarcity. These non-tentpole deep library titles are particularly valuable to new players in the streaming landscape, such as Free Ad-Supported Television (FAST) providers (e.g., Tubi and Pluto TV), which do not require a subscription fee and thereby do not need "buzzy" tentpole original titles to attract subscribers. However, the (re)entrance of advertisers and FAST channels perhaps complicates previous understandings of unending consumption.

Van Esler's fourth chapter departs from the book's preceding industrial-level overviews to offer a case study on the anime genre. Emphasizing the book's theme of continuity, the author argues streaming services followed a playbook similar to that of earlier cable channels like Cartoon Network, which used niche genres like anime as a cheap way to cater to an underserved audience and differentiate its offerings from an increasing number of competitors. A case study on the Sony-owned anime streaming service Crunchyroll demonstrates how other mainstream services still undervalue the genre, despite its ubiquity and popularity. Ultimately, for all of the touted sophistication of their algorithms and deep libraries, streamers outside of Crunchyroll have yet to genuinely figure out niche media libraries, again exposing the deep library as more of a marketing ploy than a utopia of endless choice.

Van Esler continues his discussion of the similarities between cable channels and streaming services in the final chapter by considering what role "new" original productions have played in relation to "old" library titles. Yet again, cable networks and streamers engaged in similar

strategic patterns: starting with inexpensive licensed third-party titles to attract audiences and then producing exclusive in-house films and series in order to establish a distinctive brand identity. Although Netflix and its peers have positioned themselves as disruptors in film and television, Van Esler's critical discourse analysis of original streaming productions demonstrates how streamers were ultimately *adapters* that relied on the preexisting "blueprint" provided by cable. Again, he foregrounds the need to fold in historical precedent into research on streaming portals in order to question the narratives handed down to us by Big Tech, which are too easily accepted as the industry status quo.

Altogether, Van Esler constructs a compelling synthesis of historical and platform-based research on media libraries, offering a sequel of sorts to Eric Hoyt's *Hollywood Vault*, which covers the 1910s to the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> *Media Libraries* also provides a media-specific contribution to sociological and critical political economic research on the conditions of contemporary capitalism under Silicon Valley logics, which continually valorize unending consumption and disruption over continuity. Like much of the work in media industry studies, it puts industrial discourses in dialectical tension with material practice, as well as historical continuities in tension with historical change.

Studying the moving target of the present moment, particularly during the tumultuous period of 2020–2022, however, represents an unavoidable challenge. In the conclusion, Van Esler observes how at the time of writing in 2022, (some) streaming services had moved away from exclusivity over their libraries/IP and started licensing to third parties once again—a reversal of one of the few trends that made the streaming era a disjuncture from the past. The reentrance of advertisers into the streaming ecosystem also warrants a reevaluation of library title valuation and how this complicates deep library strategies. Additionally, as the book synthesizes a great deal of literature and history, only one chapter is dedicated to an in-depth case study—chapter four's discussion of Crunchyroll. Thus, future research could build upon this work to consider, for example, the specific library strategies of other institutions. Other industry methods, such as ethnographic fieldwork or interviews, could also triangulate the findings and provide insights beyond those presented in the trades. In another respect, *Media Libraries* is firmly a US project. While one cannot consider all the different national varieties of library exploitation in a single monograph, a study of transnational library flows could also add to the story of media libraries. These challenges ultimately offer an opportunity for researchers to build upon Van Esler's work and evaluate the broader arc of unending consumption.

Altogether, *Media Libraries in an Age of Unending Consumption* presents a thought-provoking contribution to the study of the trajectory of media industries in contemporary capitalism. In addition to media industry scholars, the book's accessible writing style would appeal to graduate students in media and cinema studies as well as to those studying the history of capitalism. The historical first chapter in particular (or sections thereof) could easily find its way onto film and media history syllabi, while the chapter on anime would be a welcome addition to the increasing number of courses on the animation industry. Whether undergraduates or senior media scholars, *Media Libraries* raises questions and provocations about cultural consumption at a critical historical juncture, when media industries and Big Tech wish we would simply take their narratives as a given.



- 
- <sup>1</sup> Peter Arne Johnson is a Ph.D. candidate in media studies at the University of Texas at Austin. His research focuses on critical media industry studies, U.S. film and television history, and media finance. His current project addresses the development of television financing practices and independent production in the United States from the late 1940s to the present.
- <sup>2</sup> David Ardit, *Streaming Culture: Subscription Platforms and the Unending Consumption of Culture* (Emerald Group Publishing, 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> Mike Van Esler, *Media Libraries in an Age of Unending Consumption: A Bottomless Pit* (Lexington Books, 2023), 6.
- <sup>4</sup> Van Esler, *Media Libraries*, 81.
- <sup>5</sup> Van Esler, *Media Libraries*, 93–94.
- <sup>6</sup> Eric Hoyt, *Hollywood Vault: Film Libraries before Home Video* (University of California Press, 2014).

## Bibliography

- Arditi, David. *Streaming Culture: Subscription Platforms and the Unending Consumption of Culture*. Emerald Group Publishing, 2021.
- Hoyt, Eric. *Hollywood Vault: Film Libraries before Home Video*. University of California Press, 2014.
- Van Esler, Mike. *Media Libraries in an Age of Unending Consumption: A Bottomless Pit*. Lexington Books, 2023.

