

The impact of new digital technology on film societies and the community cinema sector

British Federation of Film Societies: CINEMA FOR ALL

1. Background

This paper presents a range of thoughts about

a) the possible impact of recent developments in digital distribution and exhibition on the film society and community cinema sector (referred to throughout as film societies), and

b) likely demand among film societies for digital downloading and D-Cinema in future.

The paper draws upon input from 27 film societies who responded to an article posted on the BFFS web site (which was also emailed to the BFFS mailing list) setting out some of the main issues surrounding digital downloading and D-cinema. 18 respondents mainly use DVD for screening purposes, while the other nine use 35mm (although some of these also use DVD to widen the range of films they can programme), ensuring a healthy diversity of perspectives.

Section 2 of this paper presents a brief summary of data from the 2008 BFFS annual survey describing the current film society screening landscape, based on information about projection formats and venues. This helps to place within context the extent to which film societies will be able to take advantage of new technology in future.

Section 3 then looks in detail at the issues concerning the likely uptake of digital download services, while section 4 summarises views on the possible impact of D-cinema roll out.

Section 5 draws all these strands together with concluding remarks about where the balance of evidence lies, and what the key drivers of uptake are likely to be.

2. The current landscape

According to the 2008 BFFS annual survey:

DVD is currently the most common screening format...

- The most commonly used format among respondents was DVD (used 'usually' or 'sometimes' by 85% of responding organisations).
- Fewer than one third (29%) still used VHS, and this was the usual projection format for only 1%.

...although a significant minority usually project using 35mm.

- Over one third of respondents (37%) usually project using 35mm, and 13% sometimes use 16mm.

Two-fifths of all societies are based in rural areas, where high-speed broadband access is likely to be more limited...

- 40% of film societies operate in rural areas (12% in remote rural locations more than 10 miles from a large settlement).

...nonetheless, the majority of film societies have a web site or an email address, indicating a degree of basic computer proficiency necessary for downloading.

- Most respondents have an online presence: 61% gave a website address, while a larger proportion (87%) supplied an email address.

Film societies tend to use the same venue for each screening, and this is most likely to be a public building (eg civic centre or village hall)...

- The vast majority of film societies use only one venue for screenings (90%).
- A further 8% regularly use two venues, and the remainder used between three and six sites.
- Public buildings (civic centres, village or town halls etc.) were the most common type of venue used by respondents (30% used them).

...venues that are likely to have digital projection equipment already installed, or that may upgrade to it in future, are used by a significant minority of film societies.

- Other common venues include school halls or college/university lecture theatres (18%), theatres (14%), cinemas (13%) and mixed arts centres (13%).

3. Digital downloads

In order to prime the discussion we asked film societies to consider a number of issues surrounding the uptake of digital download services in future, as follows:

We understand that Filmbank currently operates a download service for hotels, bars etc. What if this was to be made available to film societies and community cinemas: is there demand?

Downloading dispenses with the need for physical transportation (no delivery or sending back to manage), but you need a high-speed broadband connection to do it efficiently. If a service was available for film societies and community cinemas do you have the technical capacity and knowledge to manage the process?

Over time, downloading has the potential to make a wider selection of titles available. Is this a good enough reason to invest in technology to enable fast downloads?

Some distributors have already experimented with simultaneous theatrical and download releases. This could become more common, shortening release windows across the board. Is it more important to get a film as soon after theatrical release as possible ('early window'), or to guarantee film societies and community cinemas get high quality copies, and not sub-standard releases?

Current consumer download rental services employ digital rights management (DRM) software to ensure the digital copy can only be used within a certain time-limited period (eg LOVE Film allows you to keep it on your hard drive for 7 days before playing, and once playback has started it can be viewed as many times as you like within 24-48 hours). What impact might this have on film society and community cinema bookings? Are you at all concerned about the risk of piracy if DRM is not implemented?

Responses covered a spectrum of opinion that ran from moderate scepticism about the benefits of downloading to an open-minded willingness to consider the merits of the case. There was no evidence of outright hostility to the idea, but by the same token no-one that responded was strongly enthusiastic. This probably reflects the lack of detail about what such services might offer and how they will be administered, priced and so on.

There is evidence of demand for digital download services, although it is qualified by a number of factors...

Film societies are pragmatic by nature. Usually working with limited resources, the sector has a history of adapting to take advantage of new screening technologies wherever means permit, provided there is a demonstrable benefit to their audiences.

Within this context, the prevailing attitude towards digital download services is generally positive. Knowing the high quality results that can be achieved by

experienced projectionists from DVD, most film societies will consider using such a service if it can deliver digital copies that meet the following criteria:

- high quality picture and sound that can be projected on a large screen and through different sound systems (low resolution digital copies are not an option);
- reliable service;
- straightforward and user-friendly administration;
- reasonable film hire charges.

“[We’d use downloading service] if the technology was simple to use and picture quality was good for big screen projection.”

A number of more established societies have firsthand experience of the effect that new technology can have on established set ups, and they are willing to consider digital downloading as a way to guard against obsolescence in future.

“We went to DVD projection on [a] large 22 foot screen in 2003 and it saved our bacon. After 30+ years on 16mm, we were down to a minimal choice, and poor quality of prints was losing us members. We are unlikely to have equipment to download direct from distributors in the near future but are keeping an open mind...”

The potential benefits of digital downloading to film societies include: lower overall film hire fees, more reliable delivery than DVD by post, with lower risk of in-transit damage, perfect digital copies and programming flexibility...

A number of respondents made it clear where they see the potential benefits of a digital download service over packaged media:

- Lower film hire fees

Licence fees are not expected to be any different from those paid for DVDs (although a decrease would, of course, be welcome), but respondents felt there could be considerable savings from the fact that downloads do not need to be sent or returned through the post.

“Key to us embracing such technology would be a cost incentive. i.e. a DVD to screen costs c. £100-150.”

“Our ideal would be to have access to any film we wanted by download, to be able to negotiate a licence to show it quickly and simply online, on terms that are fair and take into account our size and circumstances.”

- Reliable delivery

Postal services can delay the receipt of DVDs, but this should not be an issue for digital downloads (provided the service is not disrupted for technical reasons).

“Digital downloads would be a step forward rather than getting physical delivery of discs – provided the quality and reliability was OK”

“It is nerve-racking if posted DVDs arrive late.”

- Perfect copies

Although the amount of data that can be held on a DVD (and now Blu-ray) is sufficient to allow very high quality copies to be screened, the discs themselves can suffer from physical damage (eg scuffing and scratches), causing the sound or image to corrupt on playback. This is a particular problem for popular titles, which may pass through the hands (and equipment) of many users before being withdrawn from circulation. Often film societies only discover the extent of such damage during the screening, when it is too late to do anything about it.

“Another problem is that the more popular DVDs often have drop-outs or pixilation due to surface damage.”

In contrast, a downloaded copy perfectly reproduces the original digital source, so this problem should not arise. And as a downloaded title could be made available much sooner after it has been hired, film societies will have more time to test the copy before screening.

- Flexible programming

Last minute changes to a programme should be easier to accomplish using digital downloads, as a new title can be selected and downloaded reasonably quickly without having to rely on the postal service. This facility could also allow film societies to keep their programme flexible without having to fix it too far in advance (although many choose to do so, so they can advertise their season to maximise attendance and ticket sales).

“We could also vary our programme rather than fix it for the season from September to April. It would also allow "previewing" (I assume) before we buy the title.”

- Early window screenings

Opinion is divided about the added value of being able to screen titles closer to their theatrical release.

A number of respondents made it clear that such an option would make them consider using a downloading service, as they could attract audiences with the promise of watching new releases while they are still fresh in the mind.

“I believe that an 'early window' would be beneficial but not at a loss quality/sub-standard.”

“Yes - this is the key issue, being able to show the film when it comes to the cinemas.”

"[W]e are eager to get films in the window where they become available before going on general DVD retail release. We operate on a purely theatrical basis so we are technically in competition with commercial cinemas. However, a monthly film in a rather remote village hall with an audience of 40-60 isn't much competition! Anything which could bring us up to date releases sooner, such as digital downloads, would be of great interest to us. We would have no problem with the technical aspects of this. We use Filmbank a lot and would definitely use a download service if it became available. This might also encourage us show films more frequently- ie fortnightly instead of monthly."

"The point about early release is valid, we have real problems with sourcing modern films that appeal to audiences. By the time Filmbank can supply it, either the audience have got the DVD or they have seen it more than once. This tends to limit organisations like us to show popular rather than current films."

However, a number of responses to the contrary suggest that this is not considered an important factor for all film societies:

"Early release not that important to us."

"Getting newly released films is not a high priority for us - we are not trying to compete with the commercial cinema."

"We don't think that speed of post-theatrical release is that important, although it is one factor."

"Early window is not an important consideration. We set up a programme for a whole year in advance."

"We have to select the films for our season, which starts in September and runs to May by the June preceding the September start. Therefore for our 'Committee must have seen rule' to be adhered to it means the latest film we can put forward for our season tends to be one that was released six months previously. Therefore the opportunity to show a film from the 'early release window' is an irrelevancy."

"As we publicise our films to be shown several months in advance there would be no advantage in a wider selection of downloads, including the recent releases. It isn't very important therefore that there is a shortened release time."

- Wider choice

There are mixed views about the benefit of having access to a wider selection of titles. While some feel this would provide an incentive to use a download service, others are perfectly satisfied with the range of titles currently available on DVD.

"We may have watched 0.001% of all DVD titles, and perhaps 1% of the ones we are interested in, so we have a bit to go at without downloading."

"[We have] never had a problem getting a title we want."

"If downloads would allow us wider choice i.e. classic films including silent, operatic/ballet performances as well as being able to show the best of "foreign films" and mainstream films closer to the release it would be to our advantage - if the price was right."

The option to burn digital copies onto DVD or another medium for use with existing equipment was cited as a pre-requisite for digital downloading...

Film societies interested in downloading would welcome the flexibility to use a PC or laptop, hard drive or DVD to store and screen a downloaded title (live streaming is unlikely to be an option in the foreseeable future, due to the need for very high broadband connection speeds).

The ability to burn a title to DVD would, for example, enable a committee member with a high speed broadband connection at home to download titles and pass the digital copy on to someone else for screening purposes.

"The ability to write the downloaded film on to DVD-R/ DVD-RW would be attractive, so that it can be played - within a defined time period - on a DVD player rather than a PC."

In a related vein, one respondent suggested that the account with a download service should not be restricted to only one destination computer:

"Would need to have a secure login to download films that is not tied to a specific Society client computer. Being able to use a number of Society members' computers in different locations should enable local ISP communication problems to be avoided."

A counter-argument was mounted by another respondent, who suggested placing responsibility for downloading with a small number of the most technically able committee members with high speed broadband access may offer less flexibility than handling DVDs:

"Although download and writing to media would be very useful it would have to be done by a committee member in advance of the screening; i.e. another job for the committee and since we are all working at present I do not see us having time to do it. Plus the technically aware committee members are frequently abroad. So although they would end up being the ones to do the downloads what would happen if they were not there? i.e. handling a DVD can be done by anyone."

...but even with this facility, a number of barriers exist that may prevent the wider adoption of downloading services by film societies, including concerns about picture and sound quality, broadband access, payment options and distributor support...

- Picture and sound quality

Film societies aim to provide their audiences with the very best big-screen viewing experience they can offer. This imperative is not simply a function of technical purism - it is vital to ensuring audiences enjoy the presentation and return for future screenings. In other words, it is a key contributor to their sustainability.

“What we do want is the highest quality of video and sound. Our members need incentives to come out to see the film with other friends and be sociable with other people or they will be staying at home to watch in comfort there.”

With this in mind, film societies are only likely to take up digital downloading services if they offer the highest quality digital copies, capable of projection on large screens and that are compatible with various industry-standard sound systems and set ups.

“We do have high-speed digital links and could manage the technical process of downloading films. The main question we have is will the quality of the downloaded film be high enough?”

*“Playing off laptops etc doesn't necessarily generate the best result for large screen presentation. There is the issue of proper sound reproduction too. You must have something that generates *centre* sound. Stereo isn't suitable for widescreen.”*

“Downloading or not downloading is a red herring. It doesn't matter how films are delivered - the important thing is that they should be of high quality. Opting for lower definition downloads (such as those supplied to hotels, etc) suitable only for domestic TVs would be a step backwards.”

“[We use] an upscaling DVD player and 'top end' HDMI Digital Light Processor. We project onto widescreen format with a screen width of 4.2 metres. Our audiences consider the quality is very good, but it certainly would NOT be if the quality of the movie was downgraded to make it 'down-loadable'. Current domestic downloaded films are appalling on a large screen.”

It is worth noting that poor quality can blight the presentation of films on DVD, an issue that has been raised with Filmbank in the past. Inferior 'early window' DVDs are occasionally supplied to film societies and a number of respondents said they would consider switching to a downloading service if the quality of digital copies could be guaranteed.

“We are concerned about the sound quality of some of the DVDs we are receiving...We could not accept a diminution of either sound or picture quality.”

- Broadband access

Downloading large audio visual files requires a high speed and reliable broadband connection. In 2008, 56% of UK households had access to broadband, with the highest speed connections available in urban areas that lie within a short distance of a telephone exchange (for ADSL) or that have fibre optic cable services in place (source: Ofcom, *Communications Market 2008*).

Mobile broadband is a relatively new development, with the potential to reach rural areas not well served by ADSL or cable services. However, data transfer speeds are much lower than through fixed lines, and the services are also more expensive at present.

The government's review of the UK's digital economy and infrastructure currently underway¹ has proposed the establishment of a universal service obligation for broadband, to ensure everyone in the UK has access to a high speed connection (up to 2Mbps) by 2012. However, until that becomes a reality it remains the case that access to high speed broadband will remain patchy across the UK, especially in rural areas where many film societies operate.

This point is not lost on film societies, many of whom voiced concerns about the cost, speed and reliability of broadband when considering download services:

"Most film clubs will not have broadband access in their own name. The capacity will typically have to rely on a member's goodwill. If so this will cause contractual confusion because the service being used will not be for the broadband user's use.

We could almost certainly find a member or members willing to download onto their PC or laptop, and then either make a disc or bring their laptop to our meetings. But is it worth the trouble, and how high a broadband speed is desirable to make the process 'efficient'?

"There is also the issue of unreliable broadband, both in connectivity and speed. Rain and snow cause our entire village to lose connection, and most of the time our 'High Speed' service is no faster than standard broadband."

"We live in rural Somerset with very slow broadband speeds. I doubt that downloading would be an option for us for the foreseeable future."

"We have the technical knowledge but having a high speed connection would be a problem for a lot of Film Societies including ourselves. Broadband connections are nowhere near where they should be in this country."

"Downloading a 6 to 8 MB DVD will take a while over normal broadband. It will than have to be burned to (dual-layer??) DVD. Sounds like it is a lot less easy than opening an envelope from a distributor and posting their DVD back to them."

¹ Digital Britain, see: http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/broadcasting/5631.aspx

“As we are buried in the Cornish countryside miles from the local exchange download speeds are rather slow for direct viewing in real time, so it would be necessary to download onto a hard drive and onto a DVD beforehand. A tedious job for anyone. Satellite broadband would be different I guess but I have no experience and I know of none in the village. The hall we use has no broadband access facility anyway.”

- Payment system

Consumer download services require a valid credit or debit card for registration purposes. Not every film society has a credit or debit card, and a lack of alternative payment arrangements could limit the demand for download services.

“Service will often depend on credit cards. Even well-established film clubs will not have access to this type of financial instrument. I know, I've tried. It is not fair to use a member's credit card for such purposes. Not only does it cause risk re cash flow, identity etc. there is contractual supply confusion too.”

- Distributor support

Film societies are only likely to use a downloading service, and invest in the necessary kit, if the majority of distributors make their titles available for download.

“Only about half of our films in this (our first) season have/will come from Filmbank: is it likely that the others (eg BFI) would go for downloads?”

...However, the use of digital rights management solutions (DRM) to minimise the potential for file sharing and film theft does not pose any significant concerns for film societies.

Given the ease by which digital files can be shared online, a number of approaches have been taken by content providers to protect their intellectual property. These include software that restricts the number of devices a digital file can be stored and played on, as well as code that limits the time period within which a digital file can be stored and played once it has been downloaded or accessed for the first time.

Respondents who commented on this aspect of the downloading experience were sympathetic to industry efforts to tackle film theft, and do not see the imposition of DRM solutions as a barrier to taking up downloading services in future.

“I don't see any disadvantage with DRM as long as it doesn't cause any technical problems. We appreciate the concerns over piracy and are happy to go along with anything that keeps this to a minimum. Time limited activation would suit us fine - in fact if it made possible a wider range of more recent releases we would welcome it.”

"Whereas I personally find DRM irritating, I can see why distributors would want to use it. The LOVE Film restrictions (7 days and playing as many times as required in 24-48 hours) would suit the way that our society works."

"Piracy will always be a problem of course but it's not our concern as a Film Society. I'm used to this DRM situation having used iTunes and Love film for downloading films. I don't see how it would affect Film Societies in anyway the guidelines that are currently in places work well in my eyes and would do so for Film Societies."

4. Digital cinema (D-cinema)

Over one third of film societies known to the BFFS project on 35mm, and the uptake of D-cinema in the commercial exhibition sector may have major implications for their ability to offer 35mm projection in future, as equipment becomes obsolete and the availability of prints declines.

We asked film societies for their views about the potential impact of D-cinema on their operations, based on two key questions:

If you project using 35mm, are you enthusiastic or concerned about the rollout and uptake of digital exhibition?

One outcome of the widespread adoption in the mainstream theatrical market might be a decline in 35mm print availability. How real a threat is this to your current operations?

Opinion is divided about the merits of D-cinema roll out and the implications this has for film societies currently screening using 35mm...

Sceptics point to the slow uptake and the likelihood that 35mm will be around for a long time to come, minimising the threat to film societies that wish to continue using 35mm:

“Not really a threat yet. Because of the lack of digital standardisation and the fear that today’s technology may quickly become expensive obsolete garbage 35mm remains the universal industry standard. From Bombay to Birmingham, if you’ve got a 35mm print you’ll be able to show a film. And long may that last!”

On the other hand, some societies are far more open to the idea of change, provided D-cinema can match the same presentational quality of 35mm, and remains a cost-effective alternative:

“I would be quite enthusiastic about digital exhibition, assuming the quality is comparable to good 35mm prints. Obviously, any decline in 35mm print availability would be a very real threat to our current operation; it could threaten both the cinema [we operate in] and the club, but on the other hand it might be the incentive required for the owner to install digital projectors.”

“We are enthusiastic about the rollout and uptake of digital, so long as it is affordable. It all boils down to costs really. The technology in itself is not a problem, but can it be afforded by film societies?”

There may also be a financial incentive in favour of a move to digital, as D-cinema does not require payment of a hefty print deposit, unlike 35mm.

“Out of nine showings in the current season, I think we are using 35mm only twice. This is partly because some distributors require a hefty deposit for 35mm.”

...There is already some evidence that the availability of 35mm prints has been affected by D-cinema roll out...

One respondent, whose society previously screened exclusively on 35mm, has seen a marked change in availability of prints, and in consequence has had to use DVDs for around one quarter of recent performances.

“Should we not be able to move to digital services due to the cost of both setting-up the system and purchase of equipment etc, we would have big concerns if there was a decline in 35mm availability.”

Certain types of film may only appear in digital format (eg some classic re-releases), which may have a negative impact on societies with 35mm capabilities:

“We present a mixed diet of classics and contemporary films. The BFI and Park Circus supply the majority of our prints but we note that re-issues of classics are sometimes only offered in digital formats (the recent re-releases of Olivier's Henry V and South Pacific being examples). This is a trend that is likely to increase and, unless an affordable high definition alternative to 35mm is introduced, will seriously hamper our operation.”

Even where availability of titles on 35mm remains unproblematic, there is some concern that the quality of the prints in circulation may diminish if new ones are not struck by distributors:

“There doesn't seem to be a problem getting hold of 35 mm prints for all the films that we wish to show, but we are concerned about the quality of prints may get worst if the demand for them decreases. This would be a significant threat because we cannot afford to purchase a sufficiently high quality projector in the premises that we currently use. We would either have to move to a smaller venue or obtain a grant to buy the necessary equipment.”

...but for film societies operating in venues with alternative technology, this is not necessarily a problem...

“We mainly project in 35mm but we are fortunate in that we hire our venue, complete with 35mm equipment, from a commercial operator. He will be the one primarily concerned with the uptake of digital technology if 35mm films become obsolete in the near future. We have the ability to project DVDs in high quality using our own player and digital projector. The vast majority of our members are perfectly happy with the quality of the sound & vision from a DVD and if we were forced to make even greater use of this existing technology, it would not present a problem.”

The quality of projection from a DVD source is not up to everyone's standard, and the limited availability of titles on Blu-ray does not currently present a viable alternative to 35mm. In this regard, the only alternative is D-cinema, but the cost of conversion is likely to be too high for most societies and/ or venue owners:

“We currently project 35mm. We have experimented with DVD projection but have found it to be dramatically inferior in terms of picture quality and we do not see it as a serious contender to replace 35mm. We intend to test Blu Ray HD but know that there are relatively few titles available in this format - and even fewer can be licensed for non-theatrical use. We are acutely aware of the coming of digital cinema and are very concerned as to the effect this will have on our Society. The current cost of converting to professional standard (jpeg2000) cinema technology is prohibitive and, in common with many independent and arts cinemas, we have to regard this as most desirable but most unlikely.”

Film societies wishing to convert to professional standard D-cinema projection face the same practical issues as any exhibitor: they must work within the constraints of their venue, and balance these demands against available resources. A simple cost/benefit analysis can show whether or not the move to D-cinema is feasible without unduly compromising picture and sound quality:

“[T]he main problem with digital format for us is the poor quality at the projector prices we can afford. We show films in a lecture theatre that is quite long, and when we looked at digital projectors the quality was worst than the 35mm projectors that we use.”

...and one possible advantage of D-cinema is the option to programme other content alongside feature presentations.

Proponents of D-cinema point out that programming digital content can be much more flexible as it is freed from the constraints of sourcing and transporting 35mm prints. This extends to the type of content that can be screened, including streaming live events (opera, ballet, theatrical performances) and any other digital content of interest to local audiences (provided rights and classification issues can be overcome).

“One great opportunity that digital projection offers, of course, is flexibility and the possibility of feeding in local material with minimum effort (notices, trailers- even advertisements!)”

Surprisingly few respondents mentioned this in connection with film society activity, which may simply reflect a lack of awareness about the range of programming options available through D-cinema.

5. In summary

"I really can't emphasise enough that film societies must not get left out of the high definition revolution. We will lose audiences if the picture on the screen is poorer than domestic HD and vastly inferior to that at the local multiplex."

As befits our role, the BFFS remains agnostic about the relative merits of different screening technologies; this is a matter for film societies to decide for themselves, taking into account local factors including available resources (eg money and venue) the interests and technical skills of committee members, and audience requirements and expectations.

As such, we do not seek to champion any particular format over another, although we have an obligation to ensure public agencies and commercial suppliers with a vested interest are aware of the full range of views across the film society and community cinema sector, so they can take account of them in their planning and decision-making.

This discussion paper brings together evidence from an informal consultation on the impact of digital technology, and data from the most recent BFFS annual survey. The picture that emerges is complex, encompassing a variety of views and reflecting the fact that every film society is different. There are, however, areas of common agreement, from which we can derive some basic principles underpinning film society practice.

Chief amongst these is the requirement that when hiring a film, irrespective of format, film societies value good picture and sound quality, reliability of service and programming choice above all other considerations.

DVD, and now Blu-ray, is capable of delivering on the quality front provided a film society can afford equipment to enable adequate big-screen projection and sound reproduction in their chosen venue, and their volunteers are sufficiently au fait with getting the best from the equipment. But physical media like DVDs are vulnerable to wear and tear, and in some instances film societies are supplied with 'early window' DVDs that do not meet the high standards of picture and sound quality they expect.

Evidence suggests that most film societies are willing to continue screening on DVD (and Blu-ray as it becomes more widely available) in the face of a downloading alternative, provided they receive a reliable service. Put another way, frustration with poor service levels may be the prime motive for considering downloading as an alternative to DVD, so long as it can deliver improved quality, reliability and programming choice.

Even if a film society is tempted in future to use a download service alongside, or instead of, packaged media, there are a number of practical issues to address (like the speed of broadband connection available locally, and the availability of computer equipment and technical skills suitable for the task). Further work is needed to assess the extent to which film societies have the capacity to

download films efficiently and cost-effectively; the feedback we received suggests this is not a feasible option for many societies at present.

The issues surrounding D-cinema roll out are similarly complex, but they assume a different character because the move to digital exhibition is not so straightforward for film societies operating in a venue they do not own. In all likelihood, the decision to switch from 35mm will be out of their hands; they will simply have to deal with the consequences if such a course is taken by a venue owner.

Nonetheless, there is genuine concern among societies that project mainly or exclusively in 35mm about the impact on print availability as D-cinema becomes more widespread in the commercial sector. Some are more sanguine than others, content to adapt by screening DVDs or Blu-ray, or bite the bullet and explore D-cinema options in earnest.

One final word. Although our informal consultation sought views about the impact of new technology, many respondents explained that much could be done to improve the level of service they receive without recourse to new digital formats.

For example, respondents made it clear that a number of the problems associated with DVD (and Blu-ray) hire (poor quality copies, unreliable delivery, postage costs etc.) can be overcome by simply granting film societies a licence to screen whichever version of a title they can source (eg a shop bought copy). In other words, a great deal can be done to improve quality, reliability and programming choice simply by making licensing arrangements more flexible for packaged media.

“Might use Filmbank download service, but would rather be allowed to buy a DVD and project that.”

“We would much rather dispense with the bother (and uncertainty) of physical transportation by having an arrangement whereby we simply pay the performance fees- ideally to a single body such as the Performing Rights Society-and then use our own discs. We always have a standby 'private' DVD in case the ordered copy doesn't turn up (once so far from Filmbank) or looks in bad condition (also once so far from Filmbank). Two other distributors have given permission for us to use our own copy.”

[end]