

Feature Article

COUNTER: Getting the Measure of EBooks

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Abstract

This article is based on a workshop given by the author at the 2007 UK Serials Group Conference, entitled "Understanding, Implementing and Using the COUNTER Code of Practice for Books and Reference Works". Ebooks seem set to flourish in 2007, with great interest from publishers and librarians alike. The COUNTER Code of Practice for Books and Reference Works, first released in 2006, provides standardization that can help with the tracking, comparison and analysis of ebook usage. Publishers and aggregators of ebooks and online reference works are urged to adopt and implement these standards at their earliest convenience; and feedback is actively sought from all interested parties.

Putting the "e" in Books

April 2007 was a busy month in the UK for conferences and seminars, and discussions of ebooks were prominent, if not the key focus, at many. During one memorable week in April, five different events took place, including the London Book Fair; the UKSG conference; the Library and Information Show (LiS); a seminar organized by the International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers (STM) entitled "The e-book Journey: Current Paths and Future Roads"; and the first meeting of a new international academic library conference, "Exploring Acquisitions", held at Cambridge University and sponsored by Cambridge University Press, Lindsay and Croft and YBP. It was a busy week for many, but an interesting one.

A transformation is underway in ebooks. Both publishers and librarians are now turning their attention to them in a more focussed way. Ebooks users, particularly the millennial generation, prefer electronic resources and want access to these wherever and whenever they need them. JISC has recently launched its national ebooks observatory project to explore the impact of ebooks, to observe behaviours of users and to develop new models to stimulate the ebooks market. This project will focus on core reading materials in e-format in four subject areas.

According to Dan Penny, Outsell/EPS analyst, publishers have now moved from discussing how to make books available online to how best to market and sell them once they are available. Establishing the right business model(s) will be key, as will the ability to make the ebook content discoverable. Interesting developments will integrate book content more tightly with other online resources. Penny reports that, in 2007, we are likely to see "many more ebook chapters indexed by PubMed, Scopus and others, bringing together book and journal content where researchers can find and use it." [1]

Professor Dr. Martin Hofmann-Apitius, Head of the Department of Bioinformatics at the Fraunhofer Institut for Algorithms and Scientific Computing, spoke at the recent STM Book 2.01 seminar about scientists' use of book content, and the innovative applications his institution has produced to interpret chemical resonance structure diagrams in scanned text in a way that can then be used for experimentation and online experiments. He urged publishers to go beyond the simple concept of turning books into ebooks.

Rather, ebooks should be treated as online data that enable publishers to provide valuable tools and services rather than just static text. [2]

Ebooks are clearly on the 2007 agenda both for publishers and librarians. Meanwhile, Google and Microsoft continue apace their mass digitisation of books. Ebooks will soon be available on a grand scale.

The Need for Meaningful Measures

With the burgeoning number of electronic resources including ebooks, librarians want to measure the use of these resources in a more consistent way so they can better understand how the information they buy from a variety of sources is being used. But the challenges of successfully tracking, comparing and analyzing usage are multi-faceted.

Not all providers make online usage statistics available, and where these are available, they are provided in a variety of ways. Librarians might receive their statistics through e-mails from the publisher or on the publisher's website. Collecting and collating these statistics can be time-consuming. For example, a librarian must keep track of the various URLs and passwords necessary for retrieving usage statistics; where statistics are not available online they must frequently chase their provider to ask for updated statistics; and in some cases the library must filter the entire title list for their subscriptions. Once collected and collated, often through a tedious manual manipulation of a spreadsheet, the analysis of the data presents further challenges. The terminology used by vendors varies, and the definition of searches and sessions is open to interpretation. In addition, numbers alone cannot inform librarians whether the users retrieved the information they were looking for, or whether it was enough or too much. [3]

COUNTER for Standardised Measures

In response to demand from librarians, who were addressing questions regarding usage of online journals and databases, the COUNTER organisation was formed in 2002. [4]

COUNTER has established open, international standards and protocols for the recording and exchange of vendor-generated usage statistics that are consistent, credible and compatible. These are encapsulated in the COUNTER Codes of Practice which have been adopted by a significant numbers of vendors. Under the direction of Peter Shepherd, COUNTER is now well established, and includes wide representation from the community in its governance structure.

The Codes of Practice cover areas such as the data elements to be measured; definitions of these data elements; content and format of usage reports; requirements for data processing; requirements for auditing to ensure authenticity and to provide confidence; and guidelines to avoid duplicate counting when intermediary gateways and aggregator services are used.

These standards enable librarians to reliably compare usage statistics from different vendors; to make better-informed purchasing decisions, and to plan infrastructure more effectively. Publishers and intermediaries will be able to provide data to customers in a format they want, to compare the relative usage of different delivery channels, to aggregate data for a customer using multiple delivery channels and learn more about genuine usage patterns.

Two Codes of Practice are now available:

1. Journals and Databases
2. Books and Reference Works

The first of these has been widely adopted for measuring ejournal and database usage, with more than sixty compliant vendors. The second is relatively new, being released in March 2006 and, as at April 2007, implemented by four vendors: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Greenwood Publishing Group, Coutts (MyiLibrary) and Xrefer. [5]

COUNTER for Books and Reference Works

Unlike the COUNTER Code of Practice for Journals and Databases which was initially developed in direct response to demand from librarians, the Code of Practice for Books and Reference works anticipated the demand for usage statistics. Indeed, it is still early days for most libraries in terms of ebook development and use, and many questions are being asked about the what, why and wherefore. This is an ideal time for information providers to offer standardised usage statistics that can help provide at least some of the answers being sought.

The Code of Practice for Books and Reference Works builds on the extensive work done in developing the Code of Practice for Journals and Databases, particularly in terms of the terminology used and the format of the reports. However, unlike journals, the content unit for books and reference works was not immediately obvious and required considerable discussion. Two content units that have been defined are:

- Book title
- Section request

A “section” request is defined as a request for a subdivision of a book or reference work, typically a book chapter or reference entry respectively. Further granularity is likely to be required for effective ebook usage analysis, but the experience gained from the implementation of the initial set of COUNTER reports will be helpful in determining future requirements. Feedback is actively sought from all interested parties.

Release 1 of the Code of Practice defines six reports [6]:

1. Book Report 1: Number of Successful Title Requests by Month and Title (BR1)
2. Book Report 2: Number of Successful Section Requests by Month and Title (BR2)
3. Book Report 3: Turnaways by Month and Title (BR3)
4. Book Report 4: Turnaways by Month and Service (BR4)
5. Book Report 5: Total Searches and Sessions by Month and Title (BR5)
6. Book Report 6: Total Searches and Sessions by Month and Service (BR6)

Vendors implementing these will implement only those that are relevant to their service. For example, BR3 and BR4 are applicable only in cases where there is a limit on the number of simultaneous users for the service.

<i>Vendor</i>	<i>BR1</i>	<i>BR2</i>	<i>BR3</i>	<i>BR4</i>	<i>BR5</i>	<i>BR6</i>	<i>Reports available in XML?</i>
Blackwell Publishing Ltd		Yes		Yes		Yes	Yes
Greenwood Publishing Group	Yes	Yes			Yes		No
MyiLibrary		Yes	Yes			Yes	No
Xrefer		Yes				Yes	No

Blackwell, the most recent of the compliant vendors, benefited from the availability of the XML DTD specification. It is expected that other vendors will implement this capability, particularly as it is a prerequisite for emerging standards such as SUSHI.

SUSHI (?!)

Standardising the recording and communication of usage statistics across vendors is a giant step forward. However, the tipping point for widespread adoption will likely be when such data can be exchanged seamlessly between vendors and their subscribing libraries. Help is at hand. A recent initiative, now supported by the industry's standards body, NISO, is SUSHI or Standardized Usage Statistics Harvesting Initiative. [7] SUSHI provides a standard protocol for the exchange of COUNTER-compliant statistics reports from the vendor to the library. With the automation of this exchange of usage data, the user-mediated collection of usage statistics, which can be extremely time-consuming, can be eliminated.

The SUSHI protocol is of great interest to librarians, publishers and also to vendors of Electronic Resource Management (ERM) systems, all of whom are well represented on the standards committee. An academic librarian respondent to a recent survey for The Charleston Report (TCR) summed up the advantages, "SUSHI, when enabled, will not only give us an accurate cost-per-use figure, but it will do so without a lot of manual labor on our part. It should work in conjunction with our existing library management system and spit out numbers and figures at us, instead of us having to do all the work!" [3]

The success of SUSHI is not dependent on the implementation of ERM systems in libraries, but ERM systems will facilitate this. Other SUSHI clients that can be used independently of an ERM system are likely to become available. The SUSHI protocol was released by NISO in September 2006 for trial use and is currently being field-tested.

COUNTER and Technological Innovations

Staff from the University of Illinois at Chicago recently compared the effects of moving from non-COUNTER to COUNTER-compliant statistics within the same databases. They published their results in an article in the January 2007 issue of *College and Research Libraries*. The study also explores the potential effects of technology innovations such as metasearch, RSS feeds and alerts on the numbers, and finds that "innovations in

functionality may have changed the meaning of sessions and searches.” The analysis also suggests the following principle: “innovations in electronic resource functionality will necessitate advances in electronic resource usage measures to describe use meaningfully.” [8]

While the study at the University of Illinois used database usage statistics, it is likely that technology innovations would similarly impact statistics for ejournal, ebook and online reference work usage.

COUNTER reports should be made available by the publishers and aggregators alongside existing proprietary usage statistics reports, at least for a reasonable period to allow for ongoing analysis of usage over time. COUNTER reports from some vendors have shown significant variations in the number of searches and sessions when switching to COUNTER stats.

Just do it!

As publishers and aggregators develop new ebook and reference work platforms, they should ensure that COUNTER-compliance is a non-negotiable requirement from the outset. Many providers now releasing ebooks already offer COUNTER-compliant ejournal and database usage statistics, and this experience should be applied to the ebook platforms. COUNTER standardization is what librarians need and want, and librarians should be actively demanding compliance of all their vendors.

COUNTER has become a key building block for new services such as the statistics aggregation tool, ScholarlyStats, from MPS Technologies, and for the creation of new standards such as SUSHI. It is a collaborative initiative and any recommendations for changes to existing reports as well as suggestions for additional reports will be well received. Business models for ebooks and reference works online are changing and further experience in using available COUNTER reports will offer good insights into new requirements.

Publishers and aggregators should “just do it”!

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