The **COUNTER** Code of Practice – a report on progress

Updated from a briefing session given at the 26th UKSG Conference, Edinburgh, April 2003

In a briefing session entitled 'Working to make online usage statistics more meaningful', Richard Gedye, Chair of COUNTER (Counting Online Usage of Networked Electronic Resources), highlighted the contribution that COUNTER is making to this process. He began by reminding his audience of the benefits that credible, consistent and compatible online usage statistics will bring to both librarians and vendors. This article will describe the philosophy behind the COUNTER Code of Practice, designed to meet the needs of librarians and vendors, and will summarise the latest developments.

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There are many reasons why **librarians** need online usage statistics. First, to support collection development and allow them to answer such questions as: 'Usage of this journal has declined. Should we drop the journal or just its print version?'. Second, to help allocate expenditure more accurately. Third, to develop new purchasing models, especially at the consortia level, that reflect more accurately the value of the publications purchased. Fourth, to generate data that will help them lobby for increased funding. Fifth, to enable them to develop an internal marketing and promotion strategy that stimulates use of the library services and materials.

Vendors will also benefit from better quality online usage statistics. First, it is in their interest to demonstrate that reduced usage of print issues has been compensated for by increased online usage. Second, now that their content can reach customers by a variety of online channels, it is important for vendors to be able to assess the relative importance of these routes on order to develop the right partnerships on viable terms. Third, vendors must react intelligently to customer pressure for new journal pricing models, and need reliable usage data to develop new models. Fourth, vendors need a better understanding of customer and user demographics and behaviour. And finally, vendors need usage statistics to support online product development, as well as

the infrastructure that underlies these products.

The COUNTER Code of Practice is designed to meet the needs of librarians and vendors. The history of COUNTER and the principal features of Release 1 of the Code of Practice have been described elsewhere[1] and it will suffice here to describe the philosophy behind it before going on to summarise the latest developments.

Philosophy of the COUNTER Code of Practice

The philosophy of COUNTER may be summarised as follows:

Start small: the scope of Release 1 of the COUNTER Code of Practice has been confined to journals and databases, as these are the two most important online budget items for librarians. The scope of the Code of Practice will be extended in response to user feedback.

Start with the basics: the usage reports specified in the Code of Practice deal with simple metrics that are within the grasp of all online journal and database publishers.

Compatibility is the goal, not sophistication: it is important that as many publishers as possible are able to comply with the Code of Practice.

Be as prescriptive as possible: this is important to ensure compatibility among different vendor usage reports.

Supplement rather than substitute existing, more sophisticated or product-related reports.

Provide support and advice for vendors and librarians on implementation.

Give librarians confidence in the quality of the data by setting standards for auditing that result in credible data without placing an undue burden on vendors.

Consistent with the above philosophy, Release 1 of the COUNTER Code of Practice was published in January 2003. Since then there has not only been much useful feedback from both vendors and librarians on its scope and content, but publishers of online journals and databases have also been working towards compliance with it.

Feedback from librarians

Feedback from librarians is being obtained in a number of ways. First, via comments to the COUNTER web site, which have come through steadily since the beginning of the year. This feedback has included a number of useful suggestions for enhancement and improvements to be incorporated into the next release of the Code of Practice. The Executive Committee of COUNTER has reviewed these suggestions and has created a shortlist of upgrades that are being tested on librarian focus groups between now and the end of 2003. Among the suggested improvements for Release 2 are:

Usage reports to be broken down by year of publication.

Usage reports to be broken down by type of access to the journal (subscribed/non-subscribed).

XML format for usage reports, to facilitate the merging of reports and consolidation of statistics from different publishers.

Deadline for reporting data to be extended from two to four weeks after the end of the reporting period. This is a more realistic deadline for most vendors.

Provide usage reports at the article level (in Release 1 the lowest level of reporting is at the journal level).

Provide an additional usage report for journals that reports full text HTML and PDF requests separately.

Provide a toolkit that enables librarians to combine automatically the usage statistics from different vendor URLs.

In addition to the above improvements to the Code of Practice it has been suggested that COUNTER could provide training courses for librarians and vendors on the implementation of the Code of Practice.

It is planned to publish Release 2 of the Code of Practice early in 2004 and to implement it in January 2005. This means that Release 1 remains valid until January 2005 and will be the required compliance standard until then.

Implementation of Release 1 by Vendors

By publishing Release 1 of the Code of Practice in January 2003, it was intended that this would allow vendors time to achieve COUNTER-compliant status by the beginning of the 2004 subscription year. An up-to-date list of compliant vendors is provided on the COUNTER web site, but by September 2003, six publishers (Annual Reviews, Blackwell, Ingenta, Oxford University Press, Portland Press, and Thomson ISI) and one supplier of online platforms (Atypon Information Systems) were compliant with Release 1. Many other vendors, including the American Institute of Physics, Elsevier, EBSCO, HighWire Press and the Nature Publishing Group, have declared their intention to be COUNTER compliant before the end of 2003.

Auditing

The way in which usage records are generated differs from one platform to another, which makes it impractical to describe all the possible filters used to clean up the data. Instead, the Code of Practice specifies the requirements to be met by data to be used for building the usage reports. A guiding principle is that only intended usage should be recorded, and all requests that are not intended by the user are removed. For example, all double clicks on an http link within ten seconds of each other will be counted as only one request. Where a PDF-link is involved, this filter is set at 30 seconds, due to the longer time it takes to render a PDF. The proper application of these filters, along with the other specifications of the Code of Practice, will be subject to an audit from 2004. The audit process is now under

development and will be implemented in 2004, once it has been fully tested.

Counter Online Metrics

COUNTER was launched in March 2002 as a 'project' supported by many companies and organizations in the library and vendor world. In 2002 and 2003 it was funded entirely by the generous sponsorship of these organizations. To provide COUNTER with the formal, legal structure it requires to go forward it has been incorporated in England as a not-for-profit company – Counter Online Metrics.

Under this form of company structure COUNTER is owned by its members. Publishers, intermediaries, libraries, library consortia and trade organizations are all eligible for full, voting membership of Counter Online Metrics.

Annual membership rates for 2004 are: Publisher £500 ($750); Intermediary £500 ($750); Library £250 ($375); Library Consortium £335 ($500); Industry Organization £250 ($375).

The benefits of full COUNTER membership include:

> the right to vote at the Annual General Meeting on the direction and management of COUNTER, including the appointment of the Board of Directors,
>
> regular bulletins on the progress of COUNTER,
>
> advice on implementation of COUNTER, and
>
> for vendors, inclusion on the Register of COUNTER-compliant Vendors at no additional charge (provided the vendor meets the auditing requirements for compliance).

As a lower-price alternative to the above, non-voting affiliate membership is available to libraries at £100 ($150) for 2004. Library affiliates will receive the regular member bulletins on the progress of COUNTER.

An application form for COUNTER membership is available on the COUNTER website (www.ProjectCounter.org). This may be completed and submitted entirely online.

COUNTER Founding Sponsors

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AAP/PSP, Association of American Publishers, Professional/Scholarly Publishing Division

ACRL, Association of College and Research Libraries

ALPSP, The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers

American Institute of Physics

ARL, Association of Research Libraries

ASA, Association of Subscription Agents and Intermediaries

Atypon Systems, Inc

Blackwell Publishing

BMJ Publishing Group

EBSCO Information Services

Elsevier

HighWire Press

ICSTI, International Council for Scientific and Technical Information

Ingenta

Institute of Physics Publishing

JISC, Joint Information Systems Committee

JSTOR

Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins

Nature Publishing Group

OCLC, Online Computer Library Center, Inc.

Oxford University Press

PA, The Publishers Association

ProQuest

STM, International Association of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers

Swets Blackwell

Taylor & Francis Group

Thieme Publishing Group

UKSG, United Kingdom Serials Group

Reference

1. *Learned Publishing*, Vol.16, no.3, pp 201-5, 2003.

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