COUNTER – increasing the value of online usage statistics

Based on a briefing session given by Richard Gedye at the 27th UKSG Conference, Manchester, March 2004

COUNTER represents a valuable collaboration between all the major partners in the research information distribution community. The COUNTER Code of Practice for online usage statistics has the potential to provide a credible quantification of the value which our community returns for the investment it receives.

In this article Richard Gedye and Tabitha Park review the development and uptake of the COUNTER Code of Practice since its launch in January 2003, with particular emphasis on the market research and feedback which has been obtained from both vendors and librarians. Plans for keeping the Code both up to date but also manageably stable are also outlined.

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A year ago, Richard Gedye addressed the UKSG on the subject of the work that COUNTER – which stands for 'Counting Online Usage of NeTworked Electronic Resources' – had done to help improve the measurement of online usage statistics. Last year's UKSG session was essentially a briefing session on the contents of the newly-launched COUNTER Code of Practice. Richard's presentation this year assumed that most people present were familiar with the aims and scope of COUNTER, namely to deliver to the community online usage reports which could be compared and contrasted predictably with each other. The focus of the presentation was to review progress over the past year, since the Code's release in January 2003, and to look into the future.

What does it mean to be COUNTER compliant?

To comply with the Code of Practice vendors need both to provide a small number of basic usage reports in a specified format, and also to process data consistently according to specific definitions and conventions, e.g. precisely what counts as a successful request for content, what counts as a search, etc. At the moment, becoming COUNTER compliant requires a submission of sample reports and a declaration of compliance by an individual publisher or vendor. Very shortly, proposals will be published for adding an auditing component to the requirements for compliance as an external confirmation that compliance is real and robust.

COUNTER compliance in 2004 – a year of encouraging growth

COUNTER's Code of Practice was initially launched with just two compliant organizations. By the end of last year, 12 publishers had signed up, and by March this year that number had doubled. Members now include online hosts and aggregators as well as publishers. Around 50% of articles published each year in journals indexed by ISI are now produced by compliant organizations. The number of compliant publishers continues to grow steadily.

How challenging is it to become COUNTER compliant?

COUNTER has tried, in developing the Code of Practice, to keep the requirements as basic and

simple as possible. Many publishers have reported that, having become COUNTER compliant, their usage statistics have decreased somewhat; this is not entirely unexpected, given the Code's prescriptions for enhancing the accuracy of counting requests for online pages. For instance, if a specific IP address asks for the same page more than once in 10 seconds (e.g. by double-clicking on a link), only the first click counts. Without that rule, there is a lot of scope for over-estimating the number of downloads. Research suggests that moving from having no rules of this kind to adopting the COUNTER rules on data processing reduces on average the number of requests recorded by approximately 14–17%.

As organizations have started to implement COUNTER procedures they have sought extra guidance from COUNTER. For instance, the 'Search' definition in the Code makes no specific reference to the re-running of saved searches while logged into a site or to the provision by e-mail of the results of automatic searching while the user is offline. (Vendors should include the former in their counts of searches by institutional customer but not the latter.) In other areas, COUNTER has responded to market pressure by refusing to recommend a standard. For example, NISO defines a 'session' as terminating after 30 minutes of non-activity, but many libraries have said that they want the option to adjust this down in their own environments where there is often intensive use of certain online services and huge frustration if a user conducts, say, a five-minute session on a simultaneous user limited service and omits to log off, thus potentially depriving another user access for up to 25 unnecessary minutes. COUNTER's collective opinion is tending towards a view that, under today's technologies and business models, the measurement of session-related data is becoming less useful than it used to be.

Meanwhile, organizations are beginning to request some sort of guide to interpretation of COUNTER-compliant reports – a guide which would say: 'This is what you can conclude from each report and this is what you shouldn't'. This is similar to the health warnings that ISI have long attached to their Journal Citation Reports or what National Rail UK says about the assumptions travellers should and should not make when using their 'live departure boards' train running service.

What has COUNTER's market research revealed over the last 12 months?

Between September and November 2003, COUNTER held a round of library focus groups in London, San Diego, Elsinore and Charleston. Then in December 2003 it held its first round table of publishers and librarians, and since February 2004 it has initiated a pilot programme of library testing of what it is like to use COUNTER reports.

There was an initial concern at COUNTER that publishers would say something very different from librarians about what they wanted. Somewhat reassuringly, however, there was a general consensus about what was wanted. Publishers asked COUNTER not to make the system too expensive or too complicated to comply with, and to make it reasonably stable over time. Librarians said something similar; they wanted to see how much journals were being used, and to know whether they were getting value for money. This requires only quite basic reports which would not change too fundamentally over time, so as to allow easy comparison between time periods as well as between journals and databases from different vendors. Both groups asked for Release 2 of the Code of Practice to be postponed until there had been more time to give feedback on Release I. Participants in December's round table additionally asked whether COUNTER could treat its Code of Practice in the same way that NISO handles their standards, i.e. could a draft of Release 2 be made publicly available on the COUNTER web site for six months, with feedback encouraged from everyone interested in providing it before the final version of Release 2 is agreed.

A fairly universal comment was also that the current 'Level 2' reports were deemed too big to be useful: the volume of data they contained was a problem for both librarians and vendors, and they contained more information than most librarians needed. The majority of the library community simply wants enough information to be able to tell whether a journal is being used. Although there is a small number of people who are interested in much more detail than this for research purposes, it has been agreed that providing enough material for people to do their own research is not COUNTER's purpose. The focus for the future and for Release 2 will therefore be on the core 'Level 1' reports.

The following were among other suggestions made for Release 2:

■ It would be useful to have an extra column for the publisher name. This would make reports from aggregators easier to merge with reports from individual publishers.

■ In the case of databases – like those provided by ProQuest, for example, which provides librarians with access to a large number of journals – it might be preferable to allow the option to remove zero-usage journals from reports.

■ The glossary should be restricted to terms actually used in the reports, and other terms should be contained in an Appendix.

■ It would be preferable to receive one report per file.

■ There should be no punctuation included in figures as conventions here differ between countries.

■ The prescribed date format should be more specific and consistent.

■ When content is accessed via intermediaries, the existing guidance in the Code of Practice on whose responsibility it should be (publisher or intermediary) to provide COUNTER-compliant usage statistics under various different scenarios should be presented more clearly than it is in Release 1.

Feedback from pilot test sites

Problems with reports: There have sometimes been minor differences between the reports submitted for compliance and those actually produced. Identifying these inadvertent teething problems early on has allowed COUNTER to provide rapid feedback to report producers and some quick fixes.

There was some difficulty locating where reports were, which were COUNTER compliant and which were not. These need to be clearly labelled.

Librarians have asked for more help in automating the work involved in collating information from different versions of reports. Accordingly, COUNTER has developed a machine-readable XML DTD, which will be up on the web site very shortly. It is hoped that subscription agents and library systems suppliers will take this DTD and use it to develop toolkits that will help their library customers automate the process of discovering, downloading, aggregating and distilling COUNTER reports from their suppliers to suit their own specific requirements for usage information.

Code for e-books: When COUNTER first launched the Code of Practice they asked whether it would be desirable to have a separate Code covering e-books and this generated very little interest. It was quite surprising therefore how unanimously in favour of a Code of Practice for e-books respondents have been a mere year later. Peter Shepherd, the COUNTER Project Director, is therefore working on a draft Code of Practice to cover e-books, which is due to be published for comment later this year.

Auditing: Auditing of reports was deemed critically important and at the heart of the credibility of COUNTER. There needed to be an element of realism, however. The auditing system should be just rigorous enough to achieve its (fairly modest) purpose but not so demanding that it caused unnecessary and costly major hurdles to compliance.

Richard explained that auditing may be by a Chartered Accountant in the UK, a CPA in the USA, or by an equivalent organization in other countries. COUNTER will also be issuing a Request for Proposal to other organizations and will be prepared to approve other auditing organizations who can demonstrate that they have the appropriate credentials, expertise and resources to undertake the work, as well as offering an appropriately realistic price for the service. The proposed auditing process involves the auditing organization having free access to a vendor's service, conducting a number of transactions, and comparing these with what the usage is recorded as being. COUNTER have set up some test scripts, with professional input from one of the world's leading accountancy firms, and, when finalized, these will form the basis of the work which auditors will be expected to perform.

COUNTER Code of Practice – Release 2

This was published in draft in April 2004, and will be on the web site until the end of September 2004 for consultation and input. The new version of the Code will be valid from 2006, and the changes should be as minimal as possible, though they are likely to be more prescriptive in terms

of formatting than at the moment. Hopefully this will allow most if not all vendors the time to incorporate upgrading to Release 2 as part of their routine online service development programs.

The release will include one new journal report: in response to near unanimous market pressure, Report 1a will breakdown full text requests between HTML and PDFs.

Priorities for 2004:

- draft of Release 2 – released as planned at the end of April
- soliciting feedback on this draft, over a six-month period
- implementing auditing
- draft Code of Practice for e-books, due later this year
- encouraging more organizations to become compliant
- recruiting more members.

When COUNTER was first launched, it was funded by sponsors, but it now needs to be a membership-based organization. This structure was launched last year, and the benefits are essentially having a say in COUNTER's development strategy and having access to advice on implementation whether as a provider or a user of the statistical reports. There are now 120 organizations who have become COUNTER members. These break down as 35% vendors, 28% libraries, 25% consortia, 10% industry organizations, and 2% library affiliates.

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