COUNTER: Consistency, Clarity, Simplification, and Continuous Maintenance

Anne Osterman
Virtual Library of Virginia, aelguind@gmu.edu

Lorraine Estelle
Project COUNTER

Oliver Pesch
EBSCO, opesch@ebSCO.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/charleston>

An indexed, print copy of the Proceedings is also available for purchase at:

<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/series/charleston>.

You may also be interested in the new series, Charleston Insights in Library, Archival, and Information Sciences. Find out more at: <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/series/charleston-insights-library-archival-and-information-sciences>.

Anne Osterman, Lorraine Estelle, and Oliver Pesch, "COUNTER: Consistency, Clarity, Simplification, and Continuous Maintenance" (2016). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284316483>

COUNTER: Consistency, Clarity, Simplification, and Continuous Maintenance

Anne Osterman, Director, Virtual Library of Virginia

Lorraine Estelle, Project Director, COUNTER

Oliver Pesch, Chief Product Strategist, EBSCO

Abstract

COUNTER provides a Code of Practice for recording and reporting the usage of electronic resources. The Code of Practice evolves as the information environment develops to meet the needs of the vendors, publishers, and libraries. COUNTER usage reports are an important tool for libraries, recording how often a given resource has been accessed and thus making a vital contribution to collection development and decision making.

COUNTER is now developing of its next release of the Code of Practice, with the objective of addressing changing needs and making the Code of Practice less complex, so that providers of content and of usage analysis tools find it easier to use.

Background

COUNTER provides a Code of Practice for recording and reporting the usage of electronic resources. The Code of Practice evolves as the information environment develops to meet the needs of the vendors, publishers, and libraries. COUNTER usage reports are an important tool for libraries, recording how often a given resource has been accessed and thus making a vital contribution to collection development and decision making.

History

COUNTER, a collaboration between publishers and libraries, released the first COUNTER Code of Practice for journals and databases in 2003. The current Code of Practice, released in 2012, encompasses books and multimedia in addition to journals and databases.

To address the effort involved in downloading COUNTER reports and loading them into electronic resource management (ERM) systems, the National Information Standards Organization (NISO) standard known as Standardized Usage Statistics Harvesting Initiative (SUSHI) was created. SUSHI describes a method that enables machine-to-machine harvesting of COUNTER reports, saving librarians considerable time and effort. SUSHI was released as American National Standards Institute (ANSI)

standard Z39.93 in 2006; it is now on its third release and is managed by NISO's SUSHI Standing Committee.

The NISO SUSHI Standing Committee is investigating the possibility of creating an updated version of SUSHI, one that uses a RESTful¹ interface to deliver COUNTER statistics in JavaScript Object Notation (JSON)² format. This initiative, currently referred to as SUSHI-Lite, will be published as a technical report in the near future. It will be much easier to apply and will help the mainstream web-development community to implement both SUSHI and COUNTER. Since it allows for the retrieval of snippets of usage (e.g., usage for a single journal), it also opens up new opportunities for integrating usage data into more areas of the information workflow.

In 2015, COUNTER supported the setting up of the community website Usus, usus.org.uk, which helps resolve issues with SUSHI and COUNTER reports.

Release 5 of the COUNTER Code of Practice

COUNTER is now developing of its next release of the Code of Practice, with the objective of addressing changing needs and making the Code of Practice less complex so that providers of content and usage analysis tools find it easier to use. The themes of the development are:

- Consistency: In report layouts, between formats, and in vocabulary.
- Simplicity: Fewer standard reports and fewer metric types (metric types measure and report on user intentions, for example the intention to investigate an item of content, or to request one).
- Flexibility: Through filters and reporting options that address specialized reporting needs without creating one-off “optional” COUNTER reports.
- Clarity: Through clearly defined metric types and qualifying actions, processing rules, and formatting expectations.

The Reports

COUNTER will discuss with its stakeholders the implementation of 11 standard reports and four expanded reports. This will reduce the number of possible reports from the 36 currently in Release 4 to 15 in Release 5. The proposed reports are:

The intention of the expanded reports is to allow librarians a way to apply filters and limiters to customize the output to better suit their specific analysis requirement. Release 5 also introduces additional attributes that will be useful in limiting and filtering the reports.

Metric Types and Related Attributes

Release 5 introduces new metric types that better describe a user’s action (or action taken on behalf of a user). These are:

- **items_investigated** and **unique_items_investigated**: Provides a means of quantifying users’ interest in a book, journal, or other content item even if full text wasn’t available or requested. Activities in this category would include viewing an abstract of an article, clicking on an OpenURL link, and viewing the full text. “Items_investigated” is the total count of such actions. “Unique_items_investigated” is the count of content items investigated in user sessions. For example, if a user clicks to see the abstract for an article, clicks again to view its citations, and finally clicks to download the article, the result would be

three items_investigated but only one unique_items_investigated. These new metrics replace result_clicks, record_views and various other specialized metrics.

items_requested and

unique_items_requested: Quantifies the access to the full text or actual content item and reduces the effect of the user interface on counts. In the past, the number of full-text downloads has sometimes been inflated when, for example, a publisher requires a user to view an HTML version of a piece of content before accessing a PDF version. This has made accurate cross-publisher comparisons difficult, and these important new metrics are designed to address this effect. “Items_requested” is the count of the download requests regardless of format, while “unique items_requested” is the count of unique content items (articles and books) accessed in a user session. They replace format-specific metrics such as “ft_html” and “ft_pdf.”

searches_regular: Records searches conducted by users where the user has selected the database. This metric is applied only at the database/collection level.

searches_federated: Counts searches conducted by a federated search engine where the user is interacting with a user interface operating on a different host. Typically, each search is conducted against multiple databases.

searches_automated: Quantifies searches conducted by a discovery service or other automated search agent where multiple databases are searched, and the user hasn’t chosen them.

- **searches_platform**: Records searches conducted by a user on the host platform. In cases where a search was conducted against multiple databases, that search is only counted once for the “searches_platform” metric. The metric only applies at the platform level.

no_license: Records when access is denied because the user’s institution does not have a license for the content.

- **user_limit_exceeded:** Counts the number of times when access is denied because the user's institution has a concurrent-user license for the content, and the limit has been exceeded.

The proposal represents a reduction from 25 metric types in Release 4 to 10 in Release 5.

To support more flexible reporting and simplify the preparation and use of the resulting COUNTER statistics, new attributes have been introduced, and some existing attributes have been enhanced. These are:

- **Data_Type** Describes the level of reporting and/or nature of the material, for example, whether it is a book, journal, multimedia, database, or platform. Contributes to assessment of books versus journals versus multimedia.
- **Access_Type** Indicates if the item the activity applies to was free-to-read or access controlled by a license. Options: Controlled; OA_Gold; OA_Green, OA_Delayed and Other_Free-to-Read. Contributes to assessment of current subscriptions.
- **Is_Archive** Indicates if the item the activity applies to is included in a separately licensed archive (e.g., a backfile). Contributes to assessment of archives and current subscriptions.
- **YOP** Year of publication. Contributes to assessment of archives and current subscriptions.

Platform Report 1	Usage by Month and Platform
Database Report 1	Usage by Month and Database/Collection
Database Report 2	Access Denied by Month and Database/Collection
Journal Title Report 1	Usage by Month and Journal Title
Journal Title Report 2	Access Denied by Month and Journal Title
Book Title Report 1	Usage by Month and Book Title
Book Title Report 2	Access Denied by Month and Book Title
Article Report 1	Usage by Month and Article
Multimedia Item Report 1	Usage by Month and Multimedia Item
Item Report 1	Usage by Month and Item
Item Component Report 1	Usage by Month and Item with Components (in this context, components are downloadable elements within an item; for example, an image or table within an article).

Figure 1. Standard report summary.

The proposed expanded reports are:

Expanded Platform Report	Activity by Month and Platform
Expanded Database Report	Activity by Month and Database/Collection
Expanded Title Report	Activity by Month and Title
Expanded Item Report	Activity by Month and Item

Figure 2. Expanded report summary.

Report Formats

Release 5 aims to provide standard report formats for all data types. In Release 4, report formats vary from one report to the next. For example, the database reports break out usage by metric type, but journal and book reports do not.

The proposed layout would be the same for all reports, with a consistent header, consistent detail, and a consistent vocabulary.

Release 5 aims to provide flexibility through expanded reports that will enable libraries to filter by usage date, data types, section types, and metric types. Additionally, libraries will be able to filter by access types (for example, to eliminate gold open-access content), to filter out archival content (paid for through a separate license to the current content), and to filter by year of publication (YOP).

Sample Use Cases

The flexibility of the “expanded” reports is envisioned to support a number of use cases. For example, if a librarian wants to calculate the cost-per-use analysis for the library’s current subscription and wants to exclude usage of content that was in a licensed archive or available as open access, this can be accomplished by selecting Journal Title Report 1 and filtering the report to include only:

- Data_Type = Journal
- Access_Type = Controlled

- Is_Archive = N
- Metric Type = “unique_items_requested”

This will limit the usage to content available through current, paid subscriptions and exclude content that is otherwise accessible as free-to-read, allowing librarians to calculate cost per use more accurately. Another example would be a librarian wanting to see a list of journals that are not subscribed to but in which users have expressed an interest. This could be done using the Expanded Title Report filtering to include YOP and all title-level metrics. In such a report, titles with high counts of “no_license” and “unique_items_investigated” represent the titles a library’s patrons are viewing. The inclusion of YOP will enable librarians to see if current materials are of more interest than older content, and the Access_Type will inform them if the content concerned requires a license or is free-to-read.

Next Steps for COUNTER Release 5

Developing and maintaining the COUNTER Code of Practice is an ongoing effort. Release 5 is being drafted by an international collaboration of vendors, publishers, and librarians. Their draft work will be published in the first quarter of 2017 for community consultation. The feedback from the consultation will inform the final draft, which will be published in the summer of 2017. Publishers and vendors will then have 18 months in which to comply with the new Code of Practice.

¹ Representative State Transfer (REST), Wikipedia. Accessed November 18, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representational_state_transfer

² JavaScript Object Notation (JSON), Wikipedia. Accessed November 18, 2016, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JSON>