February 2003

Devil's Advocate -- COUNTER, XML, and Online Serials Measurement

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4273

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I. User
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... can help make sense of separate conversations with Collection Development, Acquisitions, Serials, Cataloging, Database Maintenance, Systems, Preservation, and content partners.

5. The challenge for vendors/libraries is to learn how to shoot the curl of the information wave rather than be pounded into the ocean floor. (The challenge for writers is to avoid sentences like that one, but it's 11:00 AM, and the deadline was at midnight.) Both customers and those who serve customers (and we are all both) must work at the coordination, communication, and information sharing.


As the customer experience becomes more complex and frustrating, there is some risk for all providers of goods and services, including libraries. If patrons or customers receive unhelpful or partial responses or have to extract needed information piecemeal, they'll eventually give up, and will stop using that vendor or library. They'll switch to a competitor (Google!), or stop looking, or revert to the time-honored expedient of watching TV all the time. (Assuming, of course, that customer service can get their digital cable working.) You don't want that on your conscience now, do you?

But there is more good news here than bad. Now that technology, customization, and strategic partnerships have become the very air we breathe, competition can and will shift back toward service, toward helping customers and patrons get what they need from our products and services. The winners will be not only customers, but those organizations that can understand and simplify the customer experience.

The purpose of this article is to elaborate on the major points of my talk at the last Charleston Conference and to discuss recent developments.

BACKGROUND

There was much discussion at the Conference about the measurement of the uses of online journals and databases. All agreed on the importance of this issue and the inadequacy of the current reporting of data on the use of these expensive materials. Ann Okerson ably summarized these problems so I defer to her discussion of the many issues involved.

Given that there is a demand for the collection and distribution of "good" data on the use of online materials, the question now is: how to do it?

I have concluded that the true cost of that unpleasantness in the Garden of Eden was bad data. Before Adam and Eve messed things up, data were good and readily available. Now, we have to work to get good data—by the sweat of our brows. It is hard and expensive work.

THREE STORIES

Probably the prevalent view in the field is that good data come from sufficiently clear definitions. Let me share with you three cautionary tales from work I did with the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in the 80s.

1. Expenditures for automation

At the time, the large academic libraries that were members of ARL were committing increasing portions of their budgets for automation. It was important to find out how much was being spent but there was no category in the ARL data to collect this number. ARL had not collected data on automation expenditures because it was a new and rapidly developing area. Like the matter of the use of online journals and databases, it was an expensive and fast-growing target.

Two committees of ARL each independently decided to find out the answer to the question of how much was being spent by the ARL. It continued on page 93

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
In any case, sometimes it is the working out of differences as the process illustrated in the story about the number of administrative staff members at these two libraries. You can often observe this process by following new variables as they are added to reported data through time. Over time, the variation between the threes and thirty will decline as individuals working on data discuss with colleagues at other institutions details of how the data are compiled and reported. Other kinds of work are involved as people talk to each other, and notice oddities.

So, time is a part of the equation when the data are collected regularly and close definitions as we find in the other two events do not cause reported data to be reasonable.

Second, given the length of time it takes to create the infrastructure necessary to generate data that are reasonable, how do people in other fields get such data quickly? They sample their populations. Sampling was developed as a means of getting data when getting population data are expensive, impossible, or when it is needed quickly.

Librarians seem to sample seldom. There are examples, of course, but it seems that usually when we librarians set out to collect data, we try to collect everything we can think of thereby, I infer, in an attempt to collect what we hope will be perfect data. We try to hit a home run every time at bat. Also, data are good servants but a terrible master and people respond to long forms by answering fewer questions. The reaction to long forms causes what is called “reponder burden.” The highest response rates I have ever seen are to postcard surveys (you mail the responses back on a postcard) with a few questions. People answer those quickly.

We have, then, two major kinds of data collection: samples done where collecting data from all members of a population is difficult and systematic, and long term collections of data such as the ARL or Federal State Cooperative Statistics (FSCS) data. Time series have proven to be the most useful but they are also the slowest and most expensive. And often they are not appropriate to the questions we have. Quick responses now from a sample that are representative of the population are of more use than perfect data next year.

**MORE ON THE PROCESS OF GETTING GOOD DATA**

We also have two major uses of data, in addition to the two major kinds of data collection.

I have discussed before the “support” and “illumination” functions of data in other issues of Against the Grain. To summarize, uses of data for support are those uses for decision support such as justifying personnel levels. Most fields also have the illumination or research function where the “is” rather than the “should” is investigated. Bob Williams, at the University of South Carolina’s School of Library and Information Science would add “problem centered” to this taxonomy because he sees in this term a kind of thing not covered in the other two terms. Problem centered would be a research function where you might ask: what are the precursors to the development of public libraries and then look for or gather data to help answer this question. I include this kind of research in the illumination function here for simplicity.

In any case, the “illumination” function is vital to the production of good data because people do not function in a vacuum. Good data is the result of a process, not a one-time event and lacking this illumination function means that, in effect, library data collection— as a systematic discipline—is rather like the sound of one hand clapping. We do collect some pretty good data—witness the ARL data or the FSCS data to name but two, but they are rarely analyzed. As mentioned, though, we are not so good at things which arise quickly and expensively—witness expenditures for automation and the thing to which I now turn: online materials use.

**ONLINE MATERIALS USE IN ITS DATA CONTEXT**

The importance of the question has led to several efforts to improve data collection on the use of these materials. Peter Shepherd spoke at the conference about Project COUNTER, one such effort and one with substantial vendor and publisher backing. Of course, the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) and ARL are also involved in their own efforts.

NISO’s Z97.7 draft standard does not deal with this question directly but does have variables that touch on it. It is hard to know how all these relate to each other but, in the computer and networking world, there is a saying that God must have loved standards because he created so many of them. I’m with Rodney King on this one: “Can’t we all just get along?”

I have been skeptical of the traditional approach of committees drawing up carefully worded definitions and publishing them, then leaving the field to make sense of the result, for reasons adduced above. The latest Z97.7 standard and Project COUNTER, I think, present better approaches. Z97.7 uses existing work of other entities and Project COUNTER does things at its own pace. I am more in keeping with how data are developed when you are about it for the long haul.

First, its new Release 1 of its “Code of Practice” starts small by picking a few variables which it hopes to survey well. Rather than being beguiled by the prospect of collecting everything one could think of, they try, rather to do a few things well. They may not hit home runs but they will get people on base. The longstanding ARL series started with a few variables which have been added to slowly over the years so the model has good precedent. In time, COUNTER will add variables as bugs are worked out of the system. It initially concentrates on online serials and on databases and provides for a number of demographic variables which I think are going to be important.

Second, COUNTER says it will monitor how the data are collected and tweak definitions as necessary.

Third, it has solicited comments from the field. This is more of a bottom-up approach than the traditional top-down approach. Peter Shepherd tells me that the first draft of this release had more variables but the comments they received led them to cut down the number for the final version of this release.

I am skeptical about some aspects of COUNTER. For instance, I can’t wait to see if vendors will share the information on their product’s usage given the reports I hear that vendors in their contracts with libraries specify that those libraries are not to share data on the use of those vendor’s products.

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Also, COUNTER’s plan to require that results reported by vendors will be audited to comply with the Code of Practice is fascinating. Library data as submitted are traditionally unreported and so we have no precedent but the corporations these vendors, typically, are used to having their financial figures audited so this requirement may not be as odd to them as it may seem in the library world.

Now, I know that those who want perfect data today will be frustrated by the number of variables that COUNTER begins with relative to the hundreds that might be collected but the plan is realistic, systematic, and serious.

I think the concept is good but execution will be another question. For that, we wait. We wait through the first few months or years as bugs get worked out and bad comparisons are made and we get used to what we have and, dare, why did they collect this variable and not that one? That is the way these things go. And we wait as too few try to sample aspects of the problem and write the results up. For a field that organizes the recorded output of the species we rely on Homeric methods—word of mouth—to pass on our information.

Acceptance of COUNTER, ultimately, will probably depend on libraries and acquisitions librarians who will have the option of requiring vendors to comply with the Code. However, truth to tell, it will probably take five years for all the bugs to work out to the point that the data from COUNTER make the most fashions people happy. Some of us will be happy the first year, though. And the more who use the data, the better they will ultimately be.

While this approach will take time, to get enough samples to make sense of what is going on, though, would mean that the library field would have a critical mass of data analysis and it does not. This is the dilemma. What will happen is that it will take time for this all to work out and the demand is now. What will we do in the meantime?

A BROADER CONTEXT

Decision support is the point that people are focusing on now because prices are going up and budgets are going down and decisions about what to retain are being made without data or with spotty data. This is an important question to which I will return presently. There are, though, two broader questions I wish to elaborate on because these broader questions affect the kind of data we should collect.

Library data has historically dealt with plant, infrastructure, and what has come to be called “inputs.” What we have not been able to do is to measure directly the effect of libraries on people. In the E.G. Holley festschrift, I proposed calling the minimum measurable level of this effect the “Holley”—think of it as the subatomic particle of thought. This number would be an interesting one to have and we can begin to approach it if we can measure which articles researchers download and which show up subsequently in cited research. Crude, to be sure, but a start to an ultimate question of the impact of libraries on the populations they serve.

The second vital question is the information policy question. As a free society, we rely on an informed citizenry. How does this citizenry stay informed? What is the balance of rights of citizens as opposed to those who own or control intellectual property? That answer is a partial function of how we get that information and of how much it costs. To know that answer, we need aggregate, national data, in addition to data generated from individual institutions. It is important for you as a librarian to get a hand on what these resources are costing you but it is vital for the nation to know how much is spent and the result as it is also for consortia and for state governments. These resources are costly and agencies with a fiduciary responsibility need to have a handle on the scope and results of the expenditures.

The results of these observations lead us into two directions that were my major points my talk. One deals with the inclusion of demographic data in vendor reports with COUNTER (or any other such standard variables) and the second deals with using XML as a standard method for reporting and exchanging statistics on libraries.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

I am using the term “demographic” to refer to variables that characterize not the actual use of materials but rather those variables that allow analysis and aggregation beyond one institution. Let me elaborate.

Given that national data on online materials use are important, it will be necessary to be able to retrieve data on institutions by type (public, academic), by geographic area (country, state or province, electoral district), size (by budgets or collections) and other such variables. I was concerned that these kinds of items were not to be included in the COUNTER Release 1 and, I hope, they will be included on subsequent COUNTER releases. Like most who will look at this effort, I have my candidates for variables to be added in Release 2 and, wisely, they did not listen to all such suggestions for Release 1.

I was also concerned to make sure that data could be aggregated by vendor, journal, and the like, and that I am glad to see these kinds of demographic variables are included.

XML

A problem we have now in our data is that too often, to use them for anything, you have to learn something else complicated. To work with many data, you might be best off learning SAS. But what if you just want to know something simple? One way to increase the number of people analyzing data is to make using them easier.

With the vendors producing data in so many formats—this one a Web page, that one an email—what do you do if you want to merge them? Chuck Hammer’s has a nifty Web page that shows a start but he does not solve the underlying problem and that is the requirement for a general, flexible, and adaptable data exchange format. If different vendors wish to submit reports in whatever format and the title is always tagged in XML tags as <journaltitle>—Against the Grain—<journaltitle>—people who write programs to fetch the data allowing those who want to use the data to put them into Excel or whatever. Individuals will not have to know SAS to make sense of the data; they merely need a question, a source of data, and utilities to arrange the data in a format they prefer. I plan on working on this question. It is complex but the result, ultimately, is more readily usable data. More about this anon.

CONCLUSION

I think that the matter of getting usable and useful data on the use of online materials is on its way to being solved but it will take time. The question at hand now is: what can we do in the meantime?

The views expressed here are mine alone and not necessarily those of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. —RM

Endnotes
1. Robert V. Williams. Personal communication.
3. JCOLC’s Web page is at: http://www.library.yale.edu/consortia/colog.html.
4. AR1’s Web page on its Measures for Electronic Resources (E-Metrics) effort is at: http://www.arl.org/stats/newmeas/emetrics/index.html
6. Peter Shepherd. Personal communication.