Against the Grain

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IMHBCO (In my Humble But Correct Opinion) -- Thinking About the Value of Staff Time

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to libraries.[2] Later the group agreed to call the effort the **Standardized Usage Statistics Harvesting Initiative (SUSHI)**. After a promising start, **NISO** recognized the activity in November.[3]

The protocol is essentially a **SOAP (Simple Object Access Protocol)** request/response Web Services "wrapper" for the XML version of **COUNTER** reports. In the protocol a transaction begins when a client service such as a usage data consolidation service or ILS vendor identifies itself to a data provider, identifies the customer whose statistics are being asked for, and specifies the desired report. In response, the server provides the report in XML format, along with the requestor and customer information — or an appropriate error message. We envision a system in which the client system is programmed to automatically retrieve last month's report, for all the **COUNTER** compliant vendors with which the library does business.

While there are a variety of possible requesters, the **SUSHI** model is premised on the notion that a long term solution mandates integrating usage statistics into existing library workflows, and might best be handled within the framework of an **Electronic Resource Management (ERM) System**. Given this background, it should come as no surprise that the librarians on the **SUSHI** working group are all steering group members of the **Digital Library Federation's Electronic Resource Management Initiative**. In fact, **SUSHI** is an integral part of phase 2 of the **DLF ERMI**.[4] Librarians are seeking a comprehensive solution to the management of licensed electronic resources that combines licensing, accurate holdings, orders, and statistics, among other important information from their entire life cycles. We believe models that set statistics apart from the rest of the life cycle of electronic resources are substantially less valuable, since so many factors must be considered when evaluating them.

Status of SUSHI

There are five vendors actively engaged in developing the **SUSHI** protocol: two content providers (**EBSCO Information Services** and **Swets Information Services**), two ILS vendors that offer **ERM** products (**Innovative Interfaces, Inc.** and **Ex Libris**), plus **Thomson Scientific**, which is working on a **COUNTER** statistics component that would link to their journal impact index. The initial emphasis among the development partners is on transmission of the **COUNTER JR1** report.

As we write, the protocol will be offered in production within weeks at **EBSCO** and **Swets**. **III** is making it available in the beta version of their **ERM** module this month. **Ex Libris** will be following later this year with its integration of **SUSHI** in their **Verde ERM** product. Other vendors committed to implementing the protocol in 2006 include **HARRASSOWITZ, Endeavor Information Systems**, **SirsiDynix**, **OCLC**, and **Serials Solutions**. The **Florida Center for Library Automation** and **College Center for Library Automation (CCLA)** from the **State of Florida Community Colleges** are also interested.

The challenge at this point is lining up support among content providers. Beyond **EBSCO** and **Swets**, **Cornell's Project Euclid** is the next content provider on the list to offer the protocol to customers. Early adopters of the protocol stand to gain a competitive edge, since librarian colleagues we speak with are enthusiastic about the potential of the **SUSHI** protocol and are sure to compare it favorably when making decisions about products for purchase. **SUSHI** development kits are freely available for the **.NET** and **Java Web Services** environments. More information about **SUSHI** is available on the project page.[5]

Endnotes

1. COUNTER Website: *http://www.projectcounter.org/articles.html.*
2. In the summer of 2005, the project which would come to be called **SUSHI** started its investigations. Members of the team included: **Ivy Anderson** (California Digital Library), **Adam Chandler** (Cornell University Library), **Ted Fons** (Innovative Interfaces Inc.), **Bill Hoffman** (Swets Information Services), **Tim Jewell** (University of Washington Libraries), **Ted Koppel** (Ex Libris), and **Oliver Pesch** (EBSCO Information Systems).
3. "NISO Initiative to Standardize Online Usage Statistics Harvesting." Press Release. *http://www.niso.org/news/releases/pr-stats-11-05.html*
4. DLF Electronic Resource Management Initiative, Phase II. *http://www.diglib.org/standards/dlf-erm05.htm*
5. Standardized Usage Statistics Harvesting Initiative (**SUSHI**). *http://www.niso.org/committees/SUSHI/SUSHI_comm.html*

IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) — Thinking About the Value of Staff Time

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Those of us who work in acquisitions, serials, or electronic-resource departments are generally pretty good at thinking about the value of our materials budgets. With funding getting tighter and prices rising dramatically every year, we've had no choice but to make hard decisions about which products and services are most important to our users, and many of us have come up with effective (even ingenious) ways of determining which of those products and services will give our patrons the most bang for our budget buck.

But we have another limited resource that has to be managed carefully, and that's staff time. While it's true that prices are rising at a ridiculous rate, it's also true (thanks to the advent of "free-online-with-print" subscriptions and Big Deals) that most of us are providing quite a bit more content to our patrons than we did in the print era. When serials inflation outpaces growth in materials budgets, the result is that those budgets become more "scarce" even if they remain technically the same — we are able to buy less and less with the same amount of money every year. But a similar thing happens to staff time when the amount of content we offer rises while staffing levels remain the same, or when a given unit of content moves from print to online format, requiring more staff time and oversight. An hour of staff time no longer "buys" as much resource management as it did when we had fewer resources to manage, and when the vast majority of our resources were published in relatively low-maintenance print formats.

I alluded to this problem in an earlier column ("No, You May Not Come Train My Staff," vol. 16 #4, September 2004) in which I mentioned that I often decline sales reps' offers to come in and talk to my staff about new and upcoming products. The problem, I said, is not that we don't want to know about their products, but that staff time in our libraries is often severely limited and we may not be able to afford to invest twenty or thirty scarce staff hours in gathering people to listen to a sales pitch. Instead, we need to get product information in written form, so that it can be distributed to everyone and read when they have time.

But this begs a question: it's all well and good to say that staff time is scarce and valuable, but how do we determine what an hour of staff time is actually worth?

There are many different ways of answering this question. I'm going to propose two:

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one that I think is obvious but inaccurate, and one that I think is less obvious but more useful.

Costing Staff Time as a Function of Salary Budget

Suppose that your serials department employs three full-time classified staff at a total cost (including benefits) of $100,000 per year. Assuming a forty-hour work week, that amounts to 120 hours per week, 52 weeks per year. If you subtract four weeks annually for personal leave and holidays, you're left with 48 weeks per year at 120 hours per week, which means that for $100,000 you're getting 5,760 hours of work at roughly $17.50 per hour. (Their hourly wage will actually be lower than this number, because we're taking vacation time and benefits into account in measuring the cost of an hour of their time.) For simplicity's sake, let's round up to $18.

The temptation would be to think that this figure — the direct salary cost — accounts for the value of your staff's time, and therefore that you should set workflow priorities based on that $18 value: the message to your staff would be "don't spend an hour doing anything that isn't worth $18."

But there's a problem here, and that is the fact that this valuation doesn't take into account opportunity cost. A staffer could spend an hour doing a task worth $30, and you might think you're well ahead of the game — but if there was another task awaiting his attention that was worth $50, then you have a problem.

This is why I suggest that instead of thinking of the value of our staff's time as a unit of salary, we look at it instead as a unit of resource available for the management of the materials budget.

Costing Staff Time as a Unit of Collections-Budget Management

By this measure, we'd calculate the value of staff time in this way: given a serials budget of $1,300,000 and annual available work hours of 5,760, it takes an hour of staff time to manage about $225 of the serials collection.

Now obviously, this is far from a perfect measure — if a staff member takes a sick day, you don't lose $1,800 from your serials budget, or lose access to $1,800 worth of information. But I think it's a better way of thinking about *the importance of applying staff time to tasks that really matter*. Instead of simply measuring staff time in terms of direct labor costs, it takes into account the actual value of what is being managed with staff time. To put it another way: staff time is worth much more than the salary we invest in it.

Now, am I suggesting that each of us follow our staff around with a calculator and constantly analyze the value of each of their tasks, keeping a running tally to determine whether they should be claiming or calling vendors or processing orders at a particular moment in time? Of course not. The point of the very imperfect mathematical exercise in which I indulged above wasn't to arrive at a strictly accurate measurement of the value of staff time, but rather to demonstrate the huge difference between the value we attribute to an hour of staff time if we think mainly in terms of salary, and the value we attribute to it when we think mainly in terms of the value of the work that needs to be done.

When it comes to deciding how we and our staff should spend our time at work, it's becoming increasingly important that we look in a very hardheaded way at the value of our time and the value of our tasks. Our time is becoming increasingly expensive. Are we still spending time on processes that are of decreasing value, while failing to take up new tasks or processes that are of increasing value to our patrons? No two libraries are likely to answer that question in exactly the same way. But we should all be asking it of ourselves, and we should be asking it on a regular basis.

I Hear the Train A Comin' — LOCKSS and Portico

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When **The Berkeley Electronic Press** was preparing our first electronic journals in 2000, I talked to dozens of librarians around the world to better understand the market we were entering. I was amazed that the consistency of their questions transcended library size, location, and budget. One question we always heard was whether the journals would be peer reviewed (Yes). Another was would they have the conventions of traditional journals, such as ISSNs, volumes, and issues (Yes, Yes, and Yes). The most difficult question to answer was how could the library be assured of the long-term availability of our content? We were a startup, after all, and our content was exclusively electronic. My answer, something to the effect of "We have money in the bank and a solid business plan," was insufficient to quell these concerns. Even sympathetic librarians wondered what would happen if an earthquake pushed California into the Pacific. What would become of the content the libraries had paid for, the content to which we were guaranteeing perpetual access in our licenses?

Eventually, we scrambled to create archiving arrangements with **OCLC** and the **California Digital Library**. We were thus able to say that in the event of a catastrophic event — financial or climatological — those who had paid for our journals would be able to pull copies to their local servers. These ad hoc arrangements, however revealed a weakness in the Internet-era publishing world. It was apparent that an independent resource, trusted by publishers and libraries alike, was necessary to help secure the long-term archiving of scholarly journals in their electronic form. Call it "assisted archiving."

Fast forward to 2006, and we find not one, but two such resources have emerged. Both **LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe)** and **Portico** provide a mechanism to preserve licensed digital materials. **LOCKSS** was first out of the gate, launching its production code in 2004. Operating at **Stanford** and funded in part with **Mellon** and **National Science Foundation** support, **LOCKSS** is "a community-based effort addressing libraries' need for affordable, robust, reliable means of preserving many different genres of digital content." More than 110 research libraries worldwide, along with 70 publishers of all shapes and sizes participate in the program.

From the libraries' standpoint, participation entails the installation of a "**LOCKSS Box**" on a dedicated PC. The **LOCKSS Box** can be configured in a few minutes with modest technical resources. Once installation of the open source software is complete, the PC is transformed into a digital preservation appliance that performs four primary functions. (1) It collects newly published content from targeted e-journals using a Web crawler similar to those used by search engines. Note that "targets" can only include titles to which the library otherwise has access (i.e., journals to which they subscribe). (2) It continually compares the content it has collected with the same content collected by other appliances, and repairs any differences. (3) It acts as a Web proxy or cache, providing readers in the library's community with access to the publisher's content or the preserved content as appropriate (with steps taken to ensure content is readable by new Internet browser versions). (4) Finally, it provides a Web-based administrative interface that allows the library staff to target new journals for preservation, monitor the state of the journals being preserved, and control access to the preserved journals.

With the exception of the cost of purchasing the dedicated PC and the human cost of running an update of the software twice a year, the libraries have no outlay associated with operating the **LOCKSS Box**. They may

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