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International Dateline — COUNTER-based Journal Usage Factor: A Meaningful New Measure?

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Since **COUNTER** was launched five years ago, the standards it has set have greatly improved the reliability and usability of on-line vendor usage statistics and the body of **COUNTER**-compliant usage data is growing steadily. There is, however, still much to be done, not only to help vendors further improve their usage reports and to help librarians to make sense of them, but also to keep the **COUNTER Codes of Practice** up to date with changes in the online delivery of information. **COUNTER**'s current objectives fall into three broad categories. First, to improve further the reliability of the core **COUNTER** data and extend the scope of the **Code of Practice** beyond journals, databases and books. Second, to continue to increase the number of **COUNTER**-compliant vendors. Third, to work with other industry organizations to facilitate the implementation of **COUNTER** and develop metrics based on the **COUNTER** data, which are of practical value to both librarians and vendors. **COUNTER** is currently working with the **UK Serials Group (UKSG)** to investigate the feasibility of developing a new metric — the **Journal Usage Factor (UF)** — based on the **COUNTER** usage statistics. The first stage of this project has been completed and the full report is available on the **UKSG Website**: <http://www.uksg.org/usagefactors/final>. This article describes the rationale for the project, summarises how it has been approached, and lists its principal conclusions.

ISI's journal Impact Factors, based on citation data, have become generally accepted as a valid measure of the quality of scholarly journals, and are widely used by publishers, authors, funding agencies and librarians as measures of journal quality. There are, nevertheless, misgivings about an over-reliance on *Impact Factor* alone in this respect and other, author-centred, citation-based measures, such as the *Hirsch Index* are gaining support. The availability of the majority of significant scholarly journals online, combined with the availability of increasingly credible **COUNTER**-compliant online usage statistics, raises the possibility of a parallel usage-based measure of journal performance becoming a viable additional metric. Journal Usage Factors, could be based on the data contained in **COUNTER Journal Report 1** (Number of Successful Full-text Article Requests by Month and Journal) calculated as illustrated in Equation 1 below for an individual journal:

$$(1) \text{ Usage Factor} = \frac{\text{Total usage (COUNTER JR1 data for a specified period)}}{\text{Total number of articles published online (during a specified period)}}$$

The overall objective of the first stage of this study was to determine whether the Journal Usage Factor concept is a meaningful one, whether it will be practical to implement and whether it will provide additional insights into the value and quality of online journals. The study was conducted in two phases. In phase one, conducted by the author, in-depth interviews were held with 29 prominent opinion makers from the STM author/editor, librarian and journal publisher communities, not only to explore their reaction to the Usage Factor in principle, but also to discuss how it might be implemented and used. Phase two, conducted by **Key Perspectives Ltd**, consisted of a Web-based survey of a larger cross-section of 1,400 academic authors and 155 librarians.

The main conclusions drawn upon completion of the first stage of the study were:

Impact Factor: *IF*, for all its faults, is entrenched, accepted and widely used. There is a strong desire on the part of authors, librarians and most publishers to develop a credible alternative to *IF* that will provide a more universal, quantitative, comparable measure of journal value. It is generally acknowledged that no such alternative currently exists, but that usage data could be the basis for such a measure in the future.

70% of authors surveyed would welcome a new, usage-based measure of the value of scholarly journals.

Confidence in the **COUNTER** usage statistics: while there is growing confidence among librarians in the reliability of the **COUNTER** usage statistics, two current weaknesses would have to be remedied before a **COUNTER**-based UF would have similar status to *IF*. First, the **COUNTER** usage statistics would have to be independently audited to ensure true comparability between publishers. (Auditing will commence in 2007). Second, the number of **COUNTER**-compliant publishers, aggregators and other online journal hosts will have to increase significantly.

All authors and librarians interviewed thought that Usage Factor would be helpful in assessing the value, status and relevance of a journal. These results were confirmed by the much larger sample of authors and librarians in the Web survey. The majority of the publishers also thought it would be useful, but their sup-

port would depend on their confidence in the basis for the UF calculation (Equation 1). Tests using real usage data will be required to establish the components in the UF calculation.

Ranking journals by UF: While the great majority of authors were in favour of ranking journals by UF, there was less unanimity among the publishers. Indeed the publisher responses, both positive and negative, tended to be qualified. The majority were positive, but need to be convinced that the UF calculation would be robust and fair. The minority who were negative appeared to accept that such rankings are going to happen in any event and they would rather it is done by an organization that they trust. Librarians indicated that, if UF were available, it would become the second most important factor (after 'feedback from library users') in decisions in the purchase of new journals, while it would be the third most important factor (after 'feedback from library users' and 'usage') in retention/cancellation decisions.

Organizations that could compile and comment on UF data: there is no existing organization which commands the confidence of both librarians and publishers and has the capability to compile/comment on UF data. Librarians, on the whole, do not trust publisher-only organizations and publishers, on the whole, do not trust librarian-only organizations, to fill this role. Indeed, it may require a partnership between organizations. The type of organization required will depend on the role to be filled. If, for example, publishers were to be responsible for the consolidation and calculation (audited) of UFs, a much smaller central UF organization would be required than if it were to be responsible for the consolidation of usage data, calculation of UFs and publication of UFs.

The majority of publishers appear to be willing, in principle, to calculate and publish UFs for their journals, according to an agreed international standard and appreciate that there would be benefits to them in doing so. Some publishers are more reluctant than others, but would participate if UF were defined and implemented in a way that is acceptable to the market.

In summary, there is significant support, even among established publishers whose journals perform well in *IF* rankings, for the development and implementation of journal UFs. **UKSG** have, therefore, decided to fund the next stages of the study, which will test the methodology and process for the UF calculation using real **COUNTER** compliant vendor usage data. Regular updates on the progress of the project will be found on the **UKSG Website**. 🌱