international Dateline -- Usage Statistics for Online Books: What Counts?

Peter T. Shepherd
Project COUNTER, pt_shepherd@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg
Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5306

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
take a greater interest in remote storage facilities than they do collection development. And they have to: Where to put all those books that just might circulate one day? It’s true that print books will always have a constituency; but equally true that today there are a lot of people on campus, some in high places, who would certainly not notice, would likely not care, and might even be delighted if some massive inter-library loan malfunction emptied the library of every last volume.

Always the very first criticism of eBooks is that nobody wants to read one from beginning to end. True enough, but somehow it’s never mentioned, to balance the score, that as a rule nobody wants to read an academic library’s print books cover-to-cover, either. That’s not to say the books (some of them) aren’t used. But, as opposed to what goes on in public libraries, scholars and students are much more likely, having checked out a book, to scan it, size it up, read a chapter or two maybe, check a reference, verify a fact, look at the bibliography, try to find some dimly recalled passage.

For these purposes, anyway, eBooks equal or better their print forebears. Especially when you haven’t visited the library lately and might prefer to do your work from home or office or dorm, or while sitting in a café. Even for other uses, where print is superior, superior still to have eBook available too, for subsequent scanning, checking, verifying, finding.

And speaking of cafes, remember all that cultural weight of the print books? How will the books weigh in on that scale after we have a solid generation or so of students accustomed to walking into a library building and the only books in sight are the ones the people sitting around drinking coffee have with them at the moment? And for whom the digitization of every book in the world will not seem an astounding vision, but the way things always were, about as remarkable as color television? The amazing thing for this cohort will more likely be to hear that the print originals for these online works are all still around, somewhere.

And, that there used to be some doubt, and even debate, about the eBooks. 😕

International Dateline — Usage Statistics for Online Books: What Counts?

by Dr. Peter T. Shepherd (Project Director, COUNTER Online Metrics, Project COUNTER, 39 Drummond Place, Edinburgh EH3 6NR, UK) <pt_shepherd@hotmail.com>

Release 1 of the new COUNTER Code of Practice for online books and reference works was published in April 2006, and marked the first expansion of COUNTER’s coverage beyond journals and databases. This Code of Practice was developed with input from a task force of librarians and publishers with expert knowledge of books and reference works and is the first attempt to introduce a comprehensive industry standard for the recording and reporting of online usage data for these products. In order to facilitate both vendor compliance and library assimilation it was decided to make its overall format and structure consistent with the existing COUNTER Code of Practice for journals and databases. Only the content of the usage reports has been changed and the set of definitions of terms expanded. The specifications for report delivery, data processing, auditing, and compliance are identical to those that have already been shown to work in the Code of Practice for Journals and Databases.

One of the main challenges we faced in developing this new Code of Practice was the lack of consistency among publishers in the ways in which they define, structure and distribute online books. In the case of online journals there was a broad consensus that the most important content unit whose usage should be measured is the full-text article. Even before COUNTER most journal publishers were measuring downloads of full-text journal articles. COUNTER’s main role was to ensure that they all did so using the same standards and protocols. For books no such consensus existed. Some publishers make online books available only as a single file that can be downloaded in its entirety, with no further vendor monitoring of usage being possible. Other publishers allow the downloading of individual chapters or entries, such as dictionary definitions or chemical structures. We felt it was appropriate to cover both these scenarios in the Code of Practice and this is reflected in the Usage Reports listed below. We also felt that the best way to encourage an informed debate what constitutes a meaningful measure of online book usage was to publish Release 1 of the Code of Practice with a limited number of core usage reports, obtain feedback how they work in practice, and include further enhancements in subsequent Releases.

The full text of Release 1 of the COUNTER Code of Practice for Books and Reference Works is freely accessible on the COUNTER Website (http://www.projectcounter.org/cop/books/cop_books_ref.pdf). Its main features are summarised below.

1. Definitions of Terms Used

The original Code of Practice for Journals and Databases contains an extensive list of data elements and other terms used in the usage reports and other parts of the Code. Where possible, existing definitions from NISO, ISO, ARL and other organizations have been used. Among the terms defined are “Vendor,” “Aggregator,” “Search,” “Item request,” “Consortium” and “Consortium member.” This comprehensive list of definitions is proving to be a useful industry resource and is becoming more and more widely used for purposes not directly related to COUNTER. It has now been expanded to cover books and reference works. New definitions include:

- **Chapter:** A subdivision of a book or of some categories of reference work; usually numbered and titled.
- **Entry:** A record of information in some categories of reference work (e.g., a dictionary definition).
- **Reference Work:** An authoritative source of information about a subject: used to find quick answers to questions.
- **Section:** A subdivision of a book or reference work (e.g., Chapter, entry)

As with journals and databases, where an appropriate existing definition exists this has been used and the source, such as NISO (the National Information Standards Organization) cited. The other definitions have been developed by the books task force, using a number of sources.

2. Usage Reports

The Code of Practice provides a set of six basic usage reports that cover full-text requests for a whole title, as well as for sections (chapters, encyclopedia entries) within a title. Searches, sessions and turnaways are also covered. These reports are:

- **Book Report 1:** Number of Successful Title Requests by Month and Title
- **Book Report 2:** Number of Successful Section Requests by Month and Title
- **Book Report 3:** Number of Turnaways by Month and Title
- **Book Report 4:** Number of Turnaways by Month and Service
- **Book Report 5:** Total Searches and Sessions by Month and Title
- **Book Report 6:** Total Searches and Sessions by Month and Service

The report formats, data processing guidelines and delivery protocols are exactly the same as those already in use for journals and databases. Likewise, searches, sessions and turnaways have been defined in the same way as for journals and databases and the usage reports relating to these (3, 4, 5 and 6 above) parallel those for journals and databases.

continued on page 93

92 Against the Grain / November 2007 <http://www.against-the-grain.com>
By September 2007, only eight vendors were compliant with the Code of Practice for Books and Reference Works. Why so few, when there are over 70 vendors compliant with the Code of Practice for Journals and Databases? Several reasons have become apparent. First, there has been much lower customer demand for usage statistics for online books, although there are signs that such demand is now building. Second, online books are at a much earlier stage in their evolution; vendors are still experimenting with a range of technical and business models. Third, even those vendors that are compliant with the Code of Practice for Journals and Databases have found it challenging to comply with the new Code of Practice. In some cases this is due to technical problems; online books are often published on a different platform with different technical capabilities. In other cases the problems are organizational; books are published in a different division than journals and the management has different priorities.

Having said that, the number of applications for compliance with the Code of Practice has increased significantly in recent months.

4. Feedback

Since publication of this Code of Practice we have encouraged, and have received, feedback from a variety of sources (online discussion groups, seminars, etc.), which has proved very valuable. It is apparent that the debate on “what counts?” in online book usage statistics is thickening up, not only as more books are being sold online, using a range of technical and business models, but also as librarians seek meaningful measures of their usage and value. It is already becoming clear that the set of core usage reports contained in Release 1 may have to be expanded. For example, in many cases measuring the number of searches may be a misleading indicator of value and a new metric that indicates the relevance of the search results obtained would be an improvement. This and other suggested enhancements will be taken into account as we begin serious work on Release 2.