



Key Issue

Usus: a collaborative initiative between publishers and librarians to improve electronic resource usage statistics

How statistics are used

It is hard to overstate the importance of electronic resource usage statistics to the information ecosystem. Libraries want to know if their patrons are actually using the resources, and publishers and vendors want to be able to show the value of the resources they provide. Although it is rarely the only piece of information that is considered, resource renewals and related purchases often rely heavily on usage statistics, and the most interesting information can often be found in the details. What titles from a package are being used or not used? How has usage for this product changed over time? How did users get to the resource in the first place? Historically, such a small amount of information has been available to track physical format usage – primarily data about circulation and reshelving – that information providers have become happily greedy for all of the potential ways they can better understand what their users want and need (while still maintaining user privacy) and remain useful and relevant in the incredibly competitive information environment we live in today.



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Statistics standards, tools and challenges

The key to scaling up the possibility for easily shared usage statistics has long been recognized to be standards. Two of the key components are COUNTER (Counting Online Usage of NeTworked Electronic Resources), which provides standards for how online usage statistics are recorded and reported, and SUSHI (Standardized Usage Statistics Harvesting Initiative), which provides an automated way of gathering usage reports into local systems. There is no question that these standards have helped make the process better. COUNTER in particular continues to evolve to deal with new formats, such as e-books and multimedia content, and continually improves the way usage is tracked and reported. The most recent release, COUNTER Code of Practice 4, has metrics that are dramatically different from previous releases – such as using record views and result clicks for databases rather than relying on searches and sessions – and COUNTER has stepped into interesting new terrain with Release 1 of the COUNTER Code of Practice for Usage Factors, which will use article-level data to develop a usage-based measure of journal impact.

'COUNTER has stepped into interesting new terrain'

Applications and tools that import, digest and analyze usage statistics are also of great importance. Every library would like the magic solution that effortlessly pulls in usage, processes it efficiently and accurately, and provides it via an analytics dashboard that is easily manipulated to answer the question at hand. Although that may be a dream that is still far off, there are a number of products – both commercial and open source – that make life easier for libraries in many ways. Some consortia also go to great lengths to provide usage statistics for their member libraries, and there is a new initiative within the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) to partner together to build a commonly shared and supported operational capability for the collection, storage, formatting and dissemination of usage data by consortia.

'Every library would like the magic solution that effortlessly pulls in usage'

98 However, even with these useful standards, tools and initiatives, the collection of usage statistics continues to be a major burden for libraries. Things often do not work the way they are supposed to, and processing what should be a standard usage report can be quickly derailed by a character or naming problem in the file, a questionably high or low number in the report that cannot be easily explained, difficulty separating out usage from various resources contained in the same file, or problems with achieving true SUSHI compliance and operation. Also, as much benefit as the new releases of the COUNTER Code of Practice bring, the transition from one release to another can be bumpy, resulting in delays in libraries receiving statistics.

New forum for collaboration

It is here that Usus, a new community-led forum for libraries, consortia, publishers and vendors, hopes to make a difference. Usus¹ was established in 2014 to provide a gathering place for all of these groups to share and discuss usage statistics issues, developments and solutions. In order to ensure that multiple perspectives are represented at the highest level of this initiative, members of the initial Supervisory Board have been pooled internationally from both the library and publisher worlds. The Board is currently comprised of Simon Bevan (Cranfield University), Melissa Blaney (American Chemical Society Publications Division), Anna Creech (University of Richmond), Lorraine Estelle (Jisc), Anne C Osterman (Virtual Library of Virginia), Oliver Pesch (EBSCO Information Services), Kari Schmidt (Montgomery College) and Mark Tullos (ProQuest). The emphasis is on partnership – not on the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ dynamic that can get in the way of real solutions. And although Usus is supported by COUNTER – with Project COUNTER providing the initial funding to build the website and offer a travel award for librarians to generate interest – Usus is editorially independent of COUNTER. [*The travel award winning entry, by Nancy Bennett, is published in this issue.*²]

‘The emphasis is on partnership – not on the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ dynamic!’

The goal of the Usus website is to be a place to resolve issues with COUNTER compliance through publisher/librarian partnership, provide hints and tips about problems commonly faced by people who work with usage statistics, and discuss areas that could be improved, making the process easier for everyone involved. Although a major focus of the site is COUNTER statistics, it is certainly not limited to that. There are many ways in which librarians and publishers seek to understand more about users’ behavior, such as through proxy log or website analysis, and all of them can be improved through collaborative discussion.

‘Although a major focus of the site is COUNTER statistics, it is certainly not limited to that’

Usus also plans to be a facilitator for in-person conversations at major conferences relevant to usage statistics. Supervisory Board members gave a presentation at the Electronic Resources & Libraries Conference in February 2015, and they will provide a similar session at the NASIG Annual Conference coming up in May.

Call for participation!

A call to all those usage statistics practitioners out there: come and join us! Contribute your tips and tricks for collecting, processing and analyzing usage statistics to the Usus website, send in your usage report issues so that the Supervisory Board can work with the relevant vendors to solve the problems, and be a part of the conversation by sending in news and opinion items. Together, we can create solutions that benefit everyone.

Reference

1. Usus: <http://www.usus.org.uk> (accessed 28 January 2015).
2. Bennett, N, Could we ever get rid of usage statistics?, *Insights*, 28(1), 83-84; DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/uksg.222>

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