

# PROJECT COUNTER: A NEW INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVE TO PROVIDE ONLINE USAGE STATISTICS THAT ARE CREDIBLE, COMPATIBLE AND CONSISTENT

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## **Introduction**

The use of online information resources is growing exponentially and it is widely agreed by producers and purchasers of information that the use of these resources should be measured in a more consistent way. Librarians want to understand better how the information they use from a variety of sources is being used; publishers want to know how the information products they disseminate are being accessed. An essential requirement to meet these objectives is an agreed International Code of Practice governing the recording and exchange of usage data. The objective of Project COUNTER is to develop such a Code of Practice. This article describes the origins of COUNTER, sets its mission in the context of other industry initiatives, outlines the plan for COUNTER, and summarises progress to date.

## **1. Background to COUNTER**

COUNTER ( Counting Online Usage of NeTworked Electronic Resources) has built upon a number of existing initiatives and has evolved in particular from the PALS Usage Statistics Working Group. The Publishers and Libraries Solutions Group (PALS) of JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), the PA (The Publishers Association) and ALPSP (The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers) formed this Working Group in September 2000, with the brief to 'look at developing common standards for the collection and dissemination of vendor-based usage statistics for digital resources.'

The Working Group made good progress throughout 2001 towards a Code of Practice. Most notably, it organised an International Discussion Forum on 22 June 2001, at which some 55 representatives from the publisher, standards and library

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communities came together for a day in London to discuss a set of draft proposals for the Code of Practice. By the end of the Forum agreement had been reached on a number of issues, but others proved too complex to be resolved in a single day, and in the following months it became apparent that a better resourced, truly international effort would be required to deliver a Code of Practice within a reasonable timeframe. The result was Project COUNTER, formally launched on 4 March 2002, and supported by: AAP (Association of American Publishers); ALPSP; ARL (Association of Research Libraries); ASA (Association of Subscription Agents and Intermediaries); BIC/EDItEUR; JISC; NCLIS (National Commission on Libraries and Information Science); NISO (National Information Standards Organization); PA; STM (International Association of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers); UKSG (United Kingdom Serials Group). COUNTER is governed by a 30-member international Steering Group, on which all of the above organisations are represented and which is chaired by Richard Gedye of Oxford University Press. The Steering Group appointed Peter Shepherd, formerly of Harcourt Publishers, as Project Director responsible for the day-to-day management of COUNTER.

## 2. Plan for COUNTER

COUNTER has three main goals: to develop an extendable Code of Practice governing the recording and exchange of usage data; to gain world-wide information industry support for the Code of Practice; to create a sustainable business/ technical model to support COUNTER in the long term.

At its first meeting on 4 March 2002, the Steering Group adopted a three-phase plan for COUNTER, each phase having the following, clear objectives:

- Phase 1 (to be completed by the end of 2002) has three main objectives. First, to develop and roll out Release 1 of a Code of Practice that will provide guidance on, *inter alia*, data elements to be measured, definitions of these data elements, data processing, auditing, output report formats, methods of delivery, as well as methods of combining

usage reports from direct use and from use via intermediaries. Second, to make the industry aware of COUNTER. Third, to define the resources required to develop, manage and maintain the Code of Practice.

- Phase 2 (to be completed by 30 June 2003) will focus on gaining broad acceptance of the Code of Practice, making plans for a service that will be responsible for ongoing management and development, and obtaining funding for that service to the end of 2005.
- Phase 3 (June 2003-December 2005) will be the first period of implementation of the Code of Practice. Here the objective is to ensure that it is adopted by vendors and is updated and extended appropriately, and that its use is promoted widely. It will be decided by June 2005 on what basis COUNTER will continue beyond the end of that year.

## 3. Progress to date

Early in the planning for COUNTER it was agreed that Release 1 of the Code of Practice will focus on journals and bibliographic databases. There are two main reasons for this. First, these two types of content consume the lion's share of many a library's budget. Second, definitions, standards and protocols for the online dissemination of journals and bibliographic databases are relatively well established. This is not the case with e-books, for example, and most other types of content; these will be included in subsequent releases of the Code of Practice as its scope is extended.

It was also decided that the section of Release 1 to be settled first should be the Usage Reports that COUNTER-compliant vendors will provide to librarians and other customers. A task force prepared a draft set of Usage Reports to be tested on librarians and these were made available in an online survey on the COUNTER website ([www.projectCounter.org](http://www.projectCounter.org)) at the end of June 2002. The ten proposed reports are:

### Journals

- Item Downloads by Month and Journal
- Item Downloads by Month, Journal and

**Page Type**

- Total Searches Run
- Time of Day Report
- Day of Week Report
- Total Daily Activity Report

**Databases**

- Total Searches & Sessions
- Time of Day Report
- Day of Week Report
- Total Daily Activity Report

Examples of the Reports, along with the online survey form, will be available via the COUNTER website until 15 August 2002.

Good progress is also being made on other aspects of the Code of Practice, and regular updates will be provided on the website.

**4. Other industry initiatives**

COUNTER has been built on, and liaises with, a number of important, ongoing industry initiatives that have done much valuable work to define customer requirements for usage statistics from vendors. Most notable in this context are the following.

*ARL New Measures Initiative*

The ARL New Measures Initiative has been set up in response to the following two needs: increasing demand for libraries to demonstrate outcomes/impacts in areas important to the institution, and increasing pressure to maximise use of resources.

Of particular interest is the work associated with the e-metrics portion of this initiative, which is an effort to explore the feasibility of defining and collecting data on the use and value of electronic resources.

Further information on the ARL E-metrics project can be found at [www.arl.org/stats/newmeas/newmeas.html](http://www.arl.org/stats/newmeas/newmeas.html)

*ICOLC Guidelines for Statistical Measures of usage of Web-based Information Resources*

The International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) has been in existence since 1996. The Coalition is an international, informal group currently comprising over 160 library consortia in North America, Australia, Asia and Africa; there is a sister European organisation, E-ICOLC. ICOLC has developed a set of Guidelines for Statistical Measures of Usage of Web-based Information Resources. Revised in 2001, the Guidelines specify a set of minimum requirements for usage data, and also provide guidance on privacy, confidentiality, access, delivery and report formats.

For additional information, visit [www.library.yale.edu/consortia/2001webstats.htm](http://www.library.yale.edu/consortia/2001webstats.htm)

*NISO Forum on Performance Measures and Statistics for Libraries*

NISO (National Information Standards Organization) held a Forum on Performance Measures and Statistics for Libraries on 15-16 February 2001 to gather information from the library community and key vendors about the best approach to evaluate the NISO standard Z39.7 on Library Statistics. The forum allowed a diverse group of stakeholders to explore their requirements and vision for describing, measuring, and showing the significance of contemporary library services. A new draft of this standard, which details and defines significant library input and output measures, was released in July 2002. Further information on standard Z39.7 and on the Forum can be found on the NISO website at [www.niso.org](http://www.niso.org)

**5. Further information on COUNTER**

More information on COUNTER, including regular updates on the Code of Practice, may be found on the COUNTER website at [www.projectCounter.org](http://www.projectCounter.org)