

# Key issue

## COUNTER: for online journals, databases AND books



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The genesis and early development of COUNTER has been described elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Our aim is to develop agreed international Codes of Practice governing the recording and exchange of online usage data for different categories of content. Release 1 of the Code of Practice for journals and databases was published in January 2003; Release 2 was published in April 2005 and will take effect from January 2006. A separate Code of Practice, covering books and reference works, was published in draft form in January 2005; this draft will be available for comment on the COUNTER web site ([www.projectCounter.org](http://www.projectCounter.org)) until December 2005 and the final version will be published in 2006.

During 2005 two of the most important developments on COUNTER have been the completion of the first large-scale study of journal usage using COUNTER-compliant data and the expansion of COUNTER's coverage to online books and reference works.

### **An application of the COUNTER Code of Practice for journals and databases**

Journal Report 1 (number of successful full text article requests) from Release 1 of the Code of Practice has been used in a UK study of online

usage of journals: from several publishers by a number of university library customers. The study was sponsored by the JISC (The UK Joint Information Systems Committee) and carried out under the direction of Angela Conyers and Pete Dalton of the University of Central England. Its principal aim was to provide JISC with accurate and up-to-date data on national use of journals available through the NESLi2 online licensing initiative and to assist institutions in assessing value for money. It has contributed to the development and testing of a methodology for the analysis of usage statistics for the NESLi2 publisher deals. This methodology could be applied to the assessment of usage of other publisher deals and could assist libraries in analysing their own usage data. The summary report has been published.<sup>2</sup> Its major conclusions include:

- The number of full text article requests in the large old universities is considerably higher than for the other institutions.
- Apart from lower overall number of requests and lower costs due to a smaller number of subscribed titles, there is no clear pattern of usage to distinguish libraries in the study, either by JISC band or by type of institution.
- The number of requests in all deals has increased between 2003 and 2004, in some cases to a

considerable extent. A longer time period for analysis is needed to predict the pattern of future growth.

- The balance of usage and costs generally resulted in a similar range of costs per request across all libraries in the study for both subscribed and unsubscribed titles.
- For most libraries the average cost per request is low in relation to the cost of an inter-library loan (£4.99 for the form alone) and normally considerably lower than pay-per-view on the current models (£18–22 per request).
- A comparatively small percentage of titles generated high usage (100 requests or over) across all institutions.
- Titles receiving nil or low use (under 10 requests) were mainly drawn from the unpriced and low price (under £200) range. This indicated good use of most of the titles in the deal, including unsubscribed titles.
- High use titles (over 100 requests) are predominantly those in the high (£400–999) and very high (£1,000 and over) price bands.
- Titles in the STM subject category are the most heavily used overall. This is especially apparent in the highest usage ranges (over 1,000 requests), where all but one or two titles are STM.
- Subscribed titles were used more heavily than unsubscribed titles across all institutions and very few appeared in the nil and low usage ranges (under 10 requests), indicating that such titles had been well chosen by the individual libraries.

### The draft Code of Practice for books and reference works

The draft of Release 1 of the new COUNTER Code of Practice for online books and reference works was published in January 2005. This marks the first expansion of COUNTER's coverage beyond journals and databases. The Code of Practice for online books and reference works has been developed with input from a task force of librarians and publishers with expert knowledge of these products and is the first attempt to introduce a comprehensive industry standard for the recording and reporting of online book usage data. Its overall format and structure are 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 already prescribed in the Code of Practice for journals and databases.

One of the main challenges we faced in developing this draft 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 wide 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 there is no such consensus. 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 draft Code of Practice.

The full text of Release 1 of the COUNTER Code of Practice for books and reference works is freely accessible on the COUNTER web site ([www.projectCounter.org](http://www.projectCounter.org)). It is available for comment until December 2005. Both vendors and librarians are encouraged to review the document and to submit their comments to the COUNTER Project Director. It is planned to publish the final version of this Code of Practice in early 2006.

### References

1. Shepherd, P.T., *Learned Publishing*, 2003, (16) 201–205.
2. <http://www.ebase.uce.ac.uk/projects/NESLi2.htm>

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