COUNTER

Release 5.1

The Friendly Guide to

COUNTER for Open Access

This is part of a suite of Friendly Guides demystifying Release 5.1 of the COUNTER Code of Practice

The complete series is:
- Introducing COUNTER Reports
- Introducing COUNTER Metrics
- COUNTER Attributes, Elements, and Other (Slightly) Techy Things
- COUNTER and Open Access
- Becoming COUNTER Compliant
- COUNTER for Consortia
- Changes in Release 5.1

Note: for ease of reading we have used plain English in all the Guides. For technical reasons, the Code of Practice itself uses underscores to link words – thus Data Type is actually Data_Type, and Total Item Investigations is Total_Item_Investigations.

What you'll find in this Guide

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Why use COUNTER for OA?

COUNTER is a collaboration between report consumers (libraries, consortia) and report providers (publishers, aggregators) to ensure that all usage of online scholarly content is measured in a consistent, credible, comparable way regardless of how it has been licensed or who has funded it. One key driver behind us building COUNTER Release 5.1 to better facilitate OA reporting is the claim that OA drives increased usage: without using the same metrics, measured in the same way, it's very difficult to justify that claim.

Return on investment

People tend to think about COUNTER reports as one of the inputs information librarians use to evaluate subscription content, but COUNTER metrics do have a role to play in evaluating the investment libraries are making in OA.
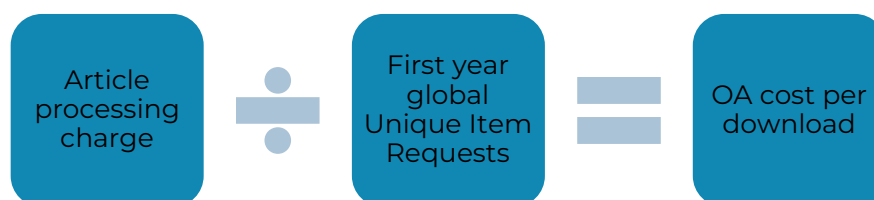
Cost per download

One of the ways libraries have traditionally relied on COUNTER usage reports was as a basis for calculating cost per download. As an increasingly large component of scholarly output is being made OA, libraries and funders are becoming increasingly interested in the equivalent calculation for OA content. The typical calculations are...

Subscription cost per download

Annual subscription price ÷ Annual institutional Unique Item Requests = Subscription cost per download

OA cost per download

Article processing charge ÷ First year global Unique Item Requests = OA cost per download

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There is a caveat here: measuring only the first-year cost of OA may not be a fair comparison, as paying for materials to be made OA is an investment in perpetual openness.

The key difference between the calculations is whether the Unique Item Request metrics are for a particular institution, as they are for a subscription cost per download calculation, or for the whole world as in an OA calculation – take a look at Reporting to The World for more information about that difference.

Impact

We think that usage data should be one of the ways we measure impact. At the moment, citations and altmetrics are often used as proxies for impact:

- Citations are very direct. A citation means the work has been found and (hopefully) read and found useful by a scholar. They are, however, quite laggy and in some fields take decades to accrue.
- Altmetrics typically assess social media and other online activity associated with a piece of scholarship, so while they are more immediate than citations, altmetrics are often reflective of fleeting attention rather than lasting impact on scholarly practice or the wider world.

Comparable, consistent usage metrics of the kind produced by COUNTER-compliant platforms are a third type of impact measure. Unlike citations usage accrues from the day of publication, and unlike altmetrics we can be sure that usage reflects some form of engagement with the original content.

Having said that, we want to be clear that research assessment should be a holistic exercise: none of these metrics should be used alone, and none should be used without an appreciation of the scholarly merits of the work!

Reporting to The World

Most publishers find that a proportion of their usage can't be linked to an institution, so R5.1 includes instructions to attribute that usage to 'The World' – that is, to create a global report.

Linking usage to institutions

Usage is linked to an institution through the processes of *authentication* and *attribution*. When a user visits a publisher platform, the first thing the platform will do – usually invisibly – is check to see whether the user can be authenticated. Recognizing IP ranges is a common method of authentication. There are many others, including Shibboleth, username/password, and GETFTR.

If the user can be authenticated as belonging to an institution, all their usage will be attributed to that institution. If the user cannot be authenticated as belonging to an institution they may still be able to use content and the platform will still track that usage, but it belongs to 'The World'.
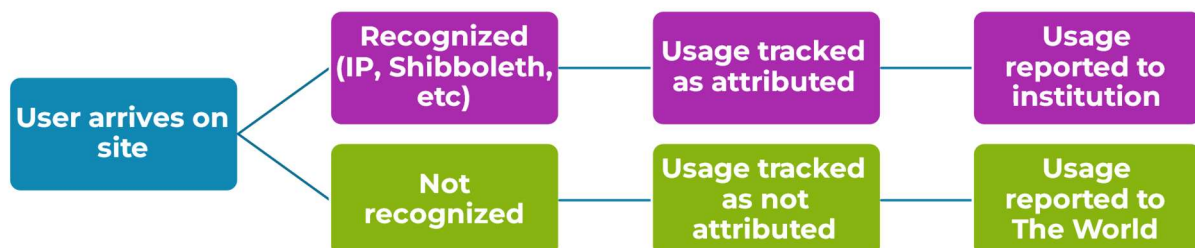

Figure 1. Reporting to institutions, reporting to The World

Building global reports

Global usage of publisher platforms is built up of non-attributed and attributed usage – that is, the combination of usage linked to institutions and usage that is more generally linked to 'The World'. Most publishers track all usage by default, and produce COUNTER Reports by extracting attributed usage per institution, so they have the information necessary to produce a global report.

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Global reports can be broken down while maintaining user privacy and protecting commercial confidentiality using Reserved Elements: geographically by country or country subdivision (e.g. state), and of course attributed versus non-attributed. There's a little more information about that in *The Friendly Guide to COUNTER Attributes, Elements, and Other (Slightly) Techy Things*.

Global Item Reports: the key to OA

Alongside global reporting, OA has made it important to understand usage more granularly, for example at the level of a journal article or book chapter, rather than relying on title level information. In R5.1 we recommend that all report providers, but particularly journal and book publishers, should provide Global Item Reports. That is, we're asking for an Item Report (IR) to The World. IR is a very granular COUNTER Report showing every applicable COUNTER metric for every single item on a platform, with a lot of information about the item itself (e.g. identifier, parent title if any). While the Global Item Report is highly relevant to those offering OA content, it is good practice for all publishers to offer it.

Find out more

There is a lot more information in the full Code of Practice (https://cop5.projectcounter.org/en/5.1) and of course in the COUNTER Media Library (medialibrary.projectcounter.org).

If you have questions that haven't been answered elsewhere, please don't hesitate to email our Project Director: tasha.mellins-cohen@counterusage.org

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