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COUNTER Data: Is it Worthy in 2025?

Nowadays, publishers provide digital products to their customers, including online open access journals, articles, and research papers. Although this makes information widely available, publishers and their customers struggle to know how the resources are being used. That's where COUNTER data helps you! In this article, we are going to discuss the ins and outs of COUNTER data, from its benefits and drawbacks to compliance. So, let's start!



What is COUNTER Data?

COUNTER stands for Counting Online Usage of Networked Electronic Resources. It is an international standard used by publishers, librarians, and other content providers to report how electronic sources are being used.

To put it simply, COUNTER's primary goal is to develop and maintain a single code of practice that enables the usage of online information to be measured in a credible and consistent way. Currently, the COUNTER Code of Practice for Release 5 is the latest standard that's in use.

A Look Back: The Story of COUNTER

Back in 2002, libraries and publishers were making a big shift. Instead of just having physical books and journals, they were moving their content online. Some publishers started offering reports on how their online content was being used, but these reports were all over the place – different formats, different terms, and hard to compare.

Recognizing this challenge, COUNTER was officially launched in 2002. The first set of guidelines, the Code of Practice for online journals and databases, was published in January 2003. This initial guide outlined specific usage reports that content providers and publishers needed to make available. It also laid down the rules for how these reports should be formatted, what metrics (the

things being measured, like downloads or views) should be included, and what kind of technical information (logs) should be part of the reports.

In essence, COUNTER provides the essential framework for understanding how valuable digital resources are being used, benefiting everyone from researchers and students to librarians and publishers.

Over time, COUNTER continued to evolve and improve:

Release 2 (2005): Brought clarifications and extra details to help vendors create reports that followed the COUNTER standard.

Release 3 (2008): Focused on incorporating SUSHI (a protocol for automated report harvesting) into the Code of Practice and enabling reports to be provided in an XML format, making them easier to process.

From 2008 to 2012: This period was dedicated to making the usage reports even more reliable and ensuring that COUNTER was being used consistently by all vendors.

Release 4 (2013): A significant step! It replaced the separate guidelines for eJournals, eBooks, and databases with one unified standard, simplifying things considerably.

Release 5.1 (2022): This is the current standard. It streamlined things by reducing the number of metrics and reports compared to Release 4. It also introduced the concept of a large data repository, making it easier to access and analyze usage data.

The Power of COUNTER Data: Making Smarter Choices

Let's explore the real-world benefits of using COUNTER data. It's a game-changer for everyone involved with online content:

Making Smart Subscription Choices:

One of the biggest advantages of COUNTER data is its ability to inform subscription decisions. Publishers provide libraries with clear reports showing the "performance" of their digital resources – how often online books, journals, articles, and databases are being accessed.

This data is invaluable for libraries:

Justify Renewals: High usage numbers prove a resource is valuable and worth the investment.

Identify Underperforming Resources: Low usage highlights resources that might not be meeting the needs of users, prompting a potential cancellation.

Optimize Collections: Libraries can use this information to build collections that are truly relevant to their users.

By providing transparent, COUNTER-compliant reports, publishers build stronger relationships with libraries, fostering trust and ensuring that valuable resources continue to be accessible.

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Beyond Subscriptions: More Ways COUNTER Data Creates Value

COUNTER data isn't just for managing subscriptions. It offers powerful insights that benefit publishers and improve the user experience.

Understanding Content Performance:

COUNTER data helps publishers see what content resonates most with users. By tracking which journals, eBooks, and databases are most popular, publishers can:

Invest Wisely: Allocate resources to areas experiencing high engagement, fostering innovation and creating even more valuable content.

Identify Strengths: Understand which topics and formats are most successful.

Imagine a scholarly article on "Cancer Treatments: Role of Natural Products" is getting a lot of attention from researchers. COUNTER data confirms this. This insight tells the publisher: "This is a hot topic! Let's invest more here."

Enhancing the User Experience:

COUNTER data provides valuable clues about how users interact with online platforms. This helps publishers improve their design and functionality:

Optimize Formats: If reports show high PDF downloads but low HTML views, it indicates a user preference publishers should consider.

Troubleshoot Issues: A sudden drop in usage can signal technical problems, allowing publishers to address them quickly and maintain a smooth user experience.

Justifying Value and Pricing:

COUNTER data offers concrete evidence of content value. Publishers can use these reports to:

Support Pricing: Demonstrate high reader engagement to justify subscription fees, building trust and facilitating fair negotiations.

Show ROI: Prove the value of their resources to libraries and institutions.

The Flip Side: Challenges of COUNTER Data

However, COUNTER data also has some drawbacks that you should be aware of, such as:

Keeping Up with Changes: Staying compliant with new COUNTER releases (like moving from Release 4 to 5) can be challenging due to evolving requirements and necessary content updates.

Usage Doesn't Always Equal Value: Low usage doesn't automatically mean low quality. Niche, high-quality content for a specific audience.

How to Be COUNTER-Compliant?

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If you wonder how you can be COUNTER-Compliant, here are some tips that you should follow:

- First, join the COUNTER organisation - COUNTER Metrics Limited- and complete the membership application.
- Sign the Declaration of COUNTER Compliance form available on the COUNTER website.
- Publishers need to meet the requirements mentioned in the Code of Conduct and pass an audit to show content (ebooks, journals, and articles) compliance with COUNTER.

Nonetheless, the Code of Practice changes after some time, so publishers need to come up with compliant content accordingly.

FAQs

Do publishers really need COUNTER reports?

Yes, publishers really need COUNTER data reports, especially if they are working with libraries. They help prove the value of a publisher's content with standardised, trusted data, retaining existing customers and helping acquire new ones.

Can I generate COUNTER reports myself?

Yes, if you have a publishing platform that supports COUNTER data and SUSHI feeds, then you can generate a COUNTER report yourself.

What are the disadvantages of not complying with COUNTER?

The disadvantages of not complying with COUNTER include losing the trust of libraries, trouble tracking content performance data, and often missing out on licensing deals.

Conclusion

In today's digital landscape, understanding how online resources are used is crucial. COUNTER data provides the vital insights publishers and libraries need to make informed decisions, optimize content, and deliver a better experience for users. As online content continues to grow, COUNTER's role in ensuring reliable and comparable usage statistics will only become more essential.

CloudPublish is the one-stop shop! It complies with all international standards, including COUNTER and WCAG, which helps you create top-quality content, hosted and delivered in a secure and reliable environment.

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