

Multimedia Resources Statistics: Understanding Usage of Non-Text Resources

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Introduction

As budget cuts are a constant threat and resource costs continue to rise, libraries rely on usage data to be sure that they are delivering the content faculty and students need. Simultaneously, patrons are increasingly accessing multimedia content in the library, and usage reporting standards, like COUNTER’s Release 4, have adapted to reflect this use.

Questions

Can usage of text and non-text resources be compared according to the same measurements, or does throwing these into the same spreadsheet give us a basket of proverbial apples and oranges? What best practices have emerged, and what gaps remain in current reporting methods?

Method

The case studies below represent interviews with 3 librarians who work with electronic resource statistics at their institutions. Each librarian was asked the same set of questions regarding why and how their institution uses usage statistics, how they define “value”, and how value is connected to usage statistics.

Literature Review

Cost-per-use calculation is the most important reason librarians want access to usage statistics (Josh Welker, 2012). This metric, however, doesn’t explore the full use of digital resources in education (Krueger, Perricci, 2010). It is even possible, in some cases, that a researcher would prefer to not find results for their search (Singleton 2010).

The COUNTER standards for statistical reporting have made huge progress towards evaluating electronic resource usage systematically (Baker and Read 2008). COUNTER standards have room for improvement, however, through continued work on reporting accuracy, standardization, and evaluation of what data is most meaningful (Plum, Franklin, Kyrillidou, Roebuck, and Davis, 2010). It takes time for vendors to adapt their technology to COUNTER updates, delaying implementation for libraries (Matthews 2009), and not every vendor implements COUNTER in the same way (Baker and Read 2008).

“Multi-dimensional” assessment, relying on both qualitative and quantitative methods, is crucial (Plum, Franklin, Kyrillidou, Roebuck, and Davis, 2010; Kyrillidou, Plum, Thompson 2010; Linda Hulbert , Dani Roach , Gail Julian 2011). Useful qualitative measures include user feedback, liaison librarian feedback, reviews, and assessment checklists (Linda Hulbert , Dani Roach , Gail Julian 2011). Usage statistics are a good tool for evaluation, but their limitations must be recognized (Bucknell 2012; Fleming-May and Grogg 2010).

Increasingly flexible discovery environments make it more difficult to measure the effectiveness of a resource, as users work with content outside the “measurable environment” (Kyrillidou, Plum, Thompson 2010, Krueger, Perricci, 2010). This is especially the case for non-text electronic resources, where many of the usage tools exist outside the data-collection environment (Krueger, Perricci, 2010).

COUNTER’s Release 4 created standards for multimedia reports (COUNTER, 2015), but there is limited literature about usage reporting for non-text resources. This is likely in part because the standard is relatively new and partly because of the challenges of multimedia reporting. In the realm of non-text electronic resources, “countable units” is different than for text electronic resources (Krueger, Perricci, 2010).

Case Study 1

Jennifer Bazeley, Interim Head of Technical Services, Miami University Libraries in Ohio

Statistics are used when resources need to be cut; usage numbers help decide which resources are used the least. While no one looked at statistics when the budget was healthier, statistics are now available continuously and especially at subscription renewal times.

The measure of a resource’s value varies depending on the discipline. STEM librarians look at cost-per-use and download statistics; Humanities librarians like usage-over-time, especially for departments that are smaller or new. Cost-per-use is more meaningful for some of the larger e-journal packages, than other resources. Patrons evaluate resources on ease of use and brand recognition.

COUNTER reports are used whenever they are available at Miami University-Ohio; they make it very easy to compare reports across vendors. COUNTER has also been very helpful for introducing reporting standards for multimedia resources- previously untracked.

By contrast, drawbacks of COUNTER include:

- Not every vendor is counter-compliant
- Changes in technology necessitate time-consuming changes in reports
- Reports don’t fully document what a user is doing; it only demonstrates access.
- Qualitative feedback from faculty and students is important along with statistics for understanding what resources are most valued; liaison librarians are an excellent source.
- Users interact with different types of resources in different of ways, so usage reports mean something different for each type. It’s not useful to compare text and non-text usage statistics; additionally, third-party platforms can’t compare the different reports for these different formats. Comparison between different multimedia platforms is very useful for learning if users have a preference for a specific platform and its features.

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Case Study 2

Katherine Borkowski, Digital Resources & Instructional Services Librarian, Thomas J. Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Usage statistics are consulted for decisions about subscription renewals; to prepare annual reports for funders; and to identify access or usability issues that users may not have mentioned.

Different vendors provide different information regarding usage, and it is difficult to understand what these statistics mean: a high number of searches may indicate that users can’t find what they’re looking for. Qualitative feedback, though time-consuming to gather, is useful, especially when statistics show major usage changes.

Statistics are a reflection not only on the user community’s desire to access the resource, but also on the resource’s user interface and the library’s internal promotion of resources.

COUNTER reports are very useful, largely because they are audited and easy to compare. However, not all vendors offer them, so real comparisons are difficult to compile. Changes in COUNTER standards sometimes result in strange/incorrect report results while vendors work out the kinks of new reporting mechanisms.

Text and non-text electronic resources are compared by default, because the Watson Library compiles all usage statistics in the same spreadsheet with cost-per-search as the main data point for evaluation. However, this process doesn’t account for the different ways that people find different types of content; browse data is also crucial. As discovery increasingly happens through methods other than searching, it’s unclear how much of that behavior is being captured.

Case Study 3

Sue Reynolds, Electronic Resources Librarian at Johnson & Wales University

The Johnson & Wales University Library uses statistics to justify expenditure, to verify that users are making use of resources, and to track whether large bundle subscriptions are providing the best value for money.

For Sue, the value or usefulness of an online resource is linked directly to numbers as a form of measurement. The most useful data points are searches and downloads. If the number of downloads is higher in proportion to searches, this indicates high usage: Users are performing fewer searches, but selecting multiple items from a search results list because they are finding content which meets their needs. It’s getting more difficult to use this metric, however, because vendors and libraries provide more and more curated content: Users have the option to browse and point & click to content in topical lists, subjects areas, and indexes instead of entering keyword search terms.

COUNTER has become difficult to work with for a number of reasons: There are too many types of reports and too much data; COUNTER standards/ versions are updated more rapidly than vendors can keep up with; COUNTER includes specific breakdowns that may not be useful; and not all vendors are able to provide all types of COUNTER reports, which makes comparison of data difficult. A vendor’s own reports may actually be more useful than the COUNTER reports they also offer.

It’s important to consider what users are doing with the content they find, and it is difficult to determine this by numbers alone. Qualitative information is useful, if for example, liaison librarians can provide anecdotal information on usage.

Making one-to-one comparisons for usage statistics across mixed-media formats isn’t feasible; vendors break down usage differently for different formats (article, book section, page view, video segment), and this makes it difficult to find the correct numbers to put into the usage formula of downloads in proportion to searches.

Conclusions

Much of the literature on COUNTER and multimedia (Krueger, Perricci, 2010; Sugarman, Kelley, Krueger, 2009) exists from before the latest COUNTER release (2012). By contrast, some of the most thorough studies of issues in usage statistics evaluation (Bucknell 2012; Baker and Read 2008) do not go far enough in examining the differences between text and non-text electronic resources.

Many libraries define value of electronic-resources as cost-per-use, but use is difficult to define and can change with time. To define use, it is critical to understand how patrons are using electronic-resources and accessing content.

Qualitative data on electronic-resource usage is important and there is a need for recommendations for acquiring, evaluating, and integrating this data into a library’s decision-making process in an efficient way.

Because many libraries use usage statistics to make decisions about which resources to keep and which to let go, usage statistics of electronic-resources are often compared with each other, but multimedia and textual resources can not be equally compared.

While COUNTER can provide a more accurate and efficient way of comparing electronic-resource usage, it requires stakeholders (libraries and vendors) to keep up with evolving standards. At the current pace of updates, it is unrealistic for many libraries and vendors to keep up.