

Could we ever get rid of usage statistics?

UKSG is pleased to be able to publish the winning entry in the Usus Travel Award competition, sponsored by COUNTER. The award is made to a librarian who contributes the best opinion piece, and it can be used towards travel to the Charleston Conference, UKSG Conference, Electronic Resources & Libraries Conference or NASIG Conference. The winning entries were judged by the Usus supervisory board, and the Co-Editors of *Insights* would like to add their congratulations to the 2015 winner, Nancy Bennett, whose essay is reproduced below.

For several decades we have experienced an explosion of electronic information accessible via the internet. Previously, we were tied to our desks if we wanted to view this information, but with the advent of the Kindle, the iPhone, the iPad and the different incarnations of these mobile devices, we can now access all this knowledge wherever – and whenever – we want. People always seem shocked when I remind them that libraries were at the forefront in embracing this technological advancement.¹ People forget that our mission – whether academic, public, special, or school library – is to provide access to information, no matter what the format.

E-journals have long been in existence in libraries and now come the e-books, and all the problems associated with them. Just as we experienced growing pains trying to figure out how to administer and track e-journals, we find we are fighting the same battles all over again. With ever-decreasing budgets and ever-increasing costs, libraries continue to have to fight and prove the importance of providing access to information.

When physical items were the only things found in libraries, check-out counts were used to justify whether an item was 'good enough' to stay in the collection. Now, instead of 'check-outs' we have page views, downloads and record clicks. Shelf-space is limited but cloud storage is infinite (at least for this discussion). Without having to worry about physical space limitations, do we care how many times an e-book is viewed? Does it matter if our e-journals ever get downloaded? The current integrated library systems (ILS) make it easy to track check-outs of our physical items but none of them can track electronic usage as part of the core ILS functionality. Can we justify the time spent gathering electronic usage statistics?

COUNTER reports have come a long way in standardizing data across vendors so we can compare apples to apples, but that does not mean the problems have gone away. Some vendors do not offer COUNTER reports; other vendors have search policies in place that affect the interpretation of these numbers. And ALL vendors have to be accessed individually to gather any reports. SUSHI is still problematic at best and therefore we are left with a laborious manual process to gather, store and analyze any usage statistics we do happen to gather. Does anyone care about usage?

Yes; librarians care. And patrons care. And budget managers care. Whether tax dollars or tuition dollars, librarians are tasked with providing the most relevant content for the cheapest price. Usage statistics may not be the only tool used in the decision-making process but, when budgets are cut, they become one of the most valuable. Except for the lucky few who may experience unlimited budgets or new buildings, weeding is a part of



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84 collection development. Faculty or patrons may disagree with our choices, but when faced with the cold reality of having to do more with less, hard numbers concerning usage will pull more weight than whether or not a book 'might' be useful to someone 'some day'.

Therefore, it is always surprising to me when I evaluate new electronic resources and vendors respond, 'Why no, we don't offer usage statistics.' Or it comes time for renewal and the vendor can't provide detailed usage on specific journal titles when this product is in direct competition with another vendor that can provide me with the information I need. Why are they surprised, then, when we cancel their subscription? Yes, they told me that the journals were viewed 200 times in a month, but there are over 4,000 titles in their product. Which titles were used? Is it the same title 200 times (potentially because of a specific class assignment) or 200 unique titles covering a broad spectrum of subjects that can't be found elsewhere? If I can't answer those questions then I can't justify sometimes exorbitant subscription costs.

Some periodical titles are seminal and will always be a part of a collection as long as we have a program that focuses on that area. Does that mean we should blindly pay the subscription fee and not care if it is used? No. Usage statistics are utilized for more than just renew/cancel decisions; they can also guide us to titles that are being *underutilized*. When titles *should* be used by students but *aren't*, we then turn our attention to 'why'. Why isn't this seminal title being used? Maybe the students don't know about it. Is the professor creating assignments that require them to read it? Is it cataloged properly so the students are able to easily find it? Should we promote the title in multiple locations, such as a Library Guide, to help bring awareness to its importance?

Gathering usage statistics is very time-consuming and analyzing the numbers takes some effort, but I don't think it is possible to fully utilize our resources and guide our students in their research without them. No, usage statistics should never be the only factor when making decisions about additions or subtractions to a collection, but they are a vital tool and it is irresponsible to ignore them. Gathering usage statistics may be the least glamorous part of my job, but being able to provide the data when answering why something was – or was not – canceled does make me the hero sometimes.

'usage statistics should never be the only factor when making decisions'

Reference

1. LITA Is at the Forefront of IT all, *American Libraries*, 2004, 35(8), 8-8.

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