



COUNTER METRICS

The R5.1 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 available for free on the Education pages of our website, countermetrics.org.

This version of the Guide was updated in March 2026.

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.

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Why use COUNTER for OA?

COUNTER is a community collaboration between libraries, consortia, publishers, aggregators and technology providers who want a shared standard for usage. The Code means we can all measure usage of online scholarly content in a consistent, credible, comparable way. Our metrics are the same, no matter how content has been licensed (e.g. copyright or Creative Commons), who funded the research, or who paid for publication. One of the claims about OA is that it drives increased usage. Without using the same metrics, measured in the same way, it's very difficult to justify that claim. That's why we built R5.1: if you are using normalised COUNTER metrics to measure both OA and subscription usage, you can be sure you're comparing like with like.

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, or cost per use. We know that an increasingly large volume of scholarly output is OA (just check out the [OASPA data](#) from Jan 2026!). Because of that increase, libraries and funders want to know the equivalent cost per use calculation for OA content.

The typical cost per use calculation for a subscription journal is...



Figure 1. Subscription cost per download.



Figure 2. OA cost per download.

There is a caveat for the OA calculation! If you look only at the first year of usage, you aren't going to be able to see the long-term value of investments in OA.

The key difference between the subscription and OA calculations is whether the Unique Item Request metrics are for a particular institution or for the whole world. Subscription cost per use looks only at the usage within a particular organisation. Paying for content to be OA is an investment in perpetual openness, so OA cost per use looks at global usage. The next section, [Reporting to The World](#), explains the 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.

While we think usage, citations and altmetrics are useful, 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 tell us 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'. By adding together all of the institution-linked (attributed) usage with The World usage, publishers can create a global COUNTER report.

Linking usage to institutions

Users' activity (usage) is linked to institutions 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.

Users who can be authenticated as belonging to an institution are easy: we tell publishers to attribute and report all of their usage to that institution. Users who can't be authenticated as belonging to an institution may still be able to read content, particularly where it's OA. The publisher needs to track that usage, but it belongs to 'The World'.

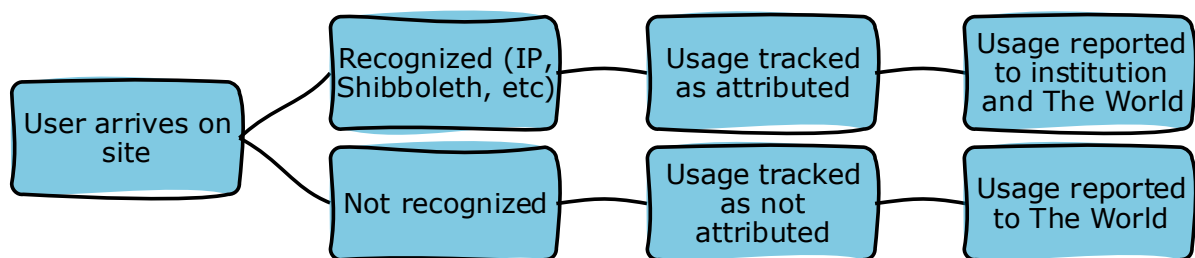


Figure 3. Attribution as a driver of reporting to institutions and the world, or just the world.

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 they need to produce a global report.

Global reports can be broken down while maintaining user privacy and protecting commercial confidentiality using Reserved Elements. We recommend breaking global reports down geographically by country or country subdivision (e.g. state), and of course by 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 reporting

We think global reporting is essential for understanding OA, so we allow all four COUNTER Reports (the Platform, Database, Title and Item Reports) to be offered as global reports. We think the Global Title Report could be really useful for OA-only journals, particularly ones using cooperative models like Subscribe to Open.

Transactional OA models, like article processing charges, have made it important to understand usage more granularly. Libraries who have paid for a specific journal article or book chapter to be made OA want to know the global usage of that specific piece of content. In R5.1 we recommend that all report providers, but particularly journal and book publishers with OA offerings, should provide Global Item Reports. That is, we're asking for an Item Report (IR) to The World. As you'll know if you've read the Friendly Guide to COUNTER Reports, IR is very granular and shows 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).

Find out more

There is a lot more information in the full Code of Practice (<https://cop5.countermetrics.org/en/5.1>) and of course on our website at countermetrics.org.

If you have questions that haven't been answered elsewhere, please don't hesitate to email our Executive Director: tasha@countermetrics.org



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