

Law Libraries as Publishers

Counting Things, with Citations and Downloads

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When it comes to legal scholarship, professors and librarians seem to enjoy counting things: downloads, citations, views, mentions, tweets, references, and the like. Perhaps “enjoy” is not quite the right word; rather, we need a phrase encompassing “anxiously counting any indicia of importance, influence, recognition or merit with the hope of not comparing unfavorably to one’s actual or aspirational peer group.”

Publishers and information services vendors have developed a number of ways to count and compare how different scholarly works have been accessed, read and used. When law libraries act as publishers, they should pay attention to scholarly impact metrics and consider the tools that calculate and display such

metrics. Libraries should also educate authors and readers about what these numbers mean and discourage overreliance on them.

Keeping the limits of each impact metric in mind is important. Evaluating the value of an article based on downloads, citations and social media mentions is a bit

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like deciding the worth of a person based on his or her weight, LSAT score and salary. Each number means something, but it is ridiculously easy to give them too much weight or to use them in situations for which that number is

continued on page 3

continued from page 2

Law Libraries as Publishers—Counting

not very relevant. Kept in proper perspective, though, impact metrics have their uses. This column will discuss counting citations and downloads, and the next column will consider mentions in social media.

Citations

In the legal academe, citations are the gold coin of the realm. (I do not want to stretch the currency analogy too far, but downloads strike me as silver, and social media mentions as copper.) Every major legal research service collects and counts citations between cases, statutes, and secondary materials. For most law review articles, almost all citations listed in these databases (such as Westlaw, Lexis, Bloomberg Law or HeinOnline) come from other law review articles. A cite from a judicial opinion merits throwing confetti around the author's office.

Citation counts indicate some level of readership and influence—"My article has been cited 25 times." There are two major limits to what this number means: database coverage and type of citation. There is no

universal citation list. Westlaw's KeyCite, Lexis's Shepard's, Hein's ScholarCheck, Bloomberg Law's BCite and Google Scholar all have different scopes. Academic publishers in many other fields use cited-by linking, a service provided by

a bare number
does not indicate
whether an
article was
acclaimed or
reviled

CrossRef, to track citations. Most law reviews have not entered this system, so most citation counts for law professors probably miss citations outside the legal literature. Also, we do not yet seem to collect citations to and from books as effectively as we do for journal articles. Until some Citator to Rule Them All is created, libraries displaying citation counts should check multiple citation lists across databases and academic fields, and note each citation list's scope.

Some case law citators categorize citations by treatment. I have not seen anything similar for legal scholarship. An article that cites another paper's analytical framework and then bases its entire analysis on that framework is surely more valuable than

inclusion in a string cite. As shown by discredited cases with high citation counts, a bare number does not indicate whether an article was acclaimed or reviled. A low count may indicate mediocrity, or may suggest the paper's value has not yet been recognized. Just as a red citator signal does not mean one can skip reading a case, citation counts do not substitute for substantive evaluation of scholarly work.

Downloads

I always enjoy getting emails from SSRN or bepress's Digital Commons telling me how many downloads my articles have received (setting aside how many of those downloads are me checking what I wrote because it is easier to search Google Scholar than my Dropbox). While my ego relishes the image of people all over the world eagerly reading my work, one look at my "maybe read this sometime" folder reminds me that I download many more articles than I eventually read or find relevant to my research questions. Academics do not write to be downloaded but to be read, and while downloading is often necessary, it is not sufficient for reading.

Libraries publishing scholarly works should track and display download rates because SSRN and bepress have set that expectation. Libraries should ensure their usage statistics tools meet the international COUNTER (Counting Online Usage of NeTworked Electronic Resources) standard so that these numbers can be compared across different repositories. Libraries should also educate authors and researchers with a short explanation of what download counts measure, linked right next to the usage statistics for each work.

I download
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To Be Continued

The latest metric for scholarly impact is so-called altmetrics—mentions in tweets, blogs, and other less formal venues. Counting those things opens up a bunch of questions that I'll focus on in my next column. Until then, if you have any examples, comments, or questions relating to measuring scholarly influence or law libraries as publishers, please contact me at bkeele@indiana.edu. 📧