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Resourcefully: Grey Matters

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ABSTRACT

It won't do to ignore it, though it's hard to collect it. In this instalment of *Resourcefully*, a discussion of the rapidly expanding and increasingly important world of grey literature. Exploring the potential for library-led investment and preservation, and the social justice opportunity to acknowledge a constellation of creators providing a wide variety of valuable, unconventional content, we take inspiration from the past to plot a course forward. Grey literature allows us to ask a big question: How can we learn from past library failures in supporting and preserving independent open access publishing moving forward?

KEYWORDS

Grey literature; digital preservation; collective collections

Introduction

In our increasingly fluid research communities, we can no longer ignore grey literature. Consider – the distinction between “scholarly” and “grey” resources was convenient for traditional collection development, a handy bias deployed to deem what was sufficiently valuable to belong in academic collections. In our current era, we can move to challenge marketplace dictates as the arbiter of scholarly publishing. The ease of commercial authority is accompanied with unsustainable expense.¹ It's time to embrace a decisive role for library workers as curators in determining what matters in the Grey and collecting and keeping it as a result, for library budgets to adapt accordingly.

The difference between a journal and a blog was always perception, which is to say razor-thin and subjective. As Moriana Garcia, STEM and Scholarly Communication Librarian at the University of Rochester, once noted to me in a meeting, “A journal is just a playlist, with editors as DJs.” As increasingly egalitarian digital publishing can be considered a triumph of ingenuity and access, any collections approach to Grey Literature should learn from it, embrace its variety. What does it mean to embrace “non-conventional, fugitive, and sometimes ephemeral publications²?” Perhaps, the way to the collection of the future is to invest in the frames that support these modes of publishing and creators themselves, rather than in a vendor-owned publishing infrastructure.

Acknowledging that not all Grey is great, it will also benefit us to consider that curation of such resources will be more labor-intensive, more manual. We have automated and outsourced collection decisions with methodologies and systems that will not work here in the murky and Grey. Regardless, to imagine a future for library collections without a plan for grey literature is a blind spot for any long-term collection strategy. But what should that plan be?

It should be a plan for investment and preservation – ambitious, distributed, and library-led. A plan that defines a new role of the library in investing and preserving Grey Lit as an opportunity to challenge the hegemony of commercial publishing and its whiteness.

Lessons learned

A recent study³ explored 176 open access journals that vanished from the web from 2000–2019. They spanned all research disciplines and regions of the world. Like many, I have meditated on this finding, and wondered at the ongoing failure of libraries seeking to adapt to the digital publishing environment. The preservation mission of research libraries is to ensure the integrity of the scholarly record – and we’re not succeeding.

It can be challenging to account for the real cost of labor of publishing an article in a peer reviewed publication. Likewise, in nontraditional and open access publishing, we are hard-pressed to quantify the cost of editing and publishing a journal. It demands a reckoning and reconciliation, which we have not undertaken. By failing to account for the true cost of that work and calling Open Access journals “free” libraries have obfuscated a central responsibility to their preservation mission. We have also, unfortunately, continued to invest in commercial publishing infrastructures to the detriment of alternate investments. It is the very definition of technical debt⁴ – we have continued to spend where we do not own.

It might make sense to interject here, I am not a preservation wonk – I never have been. I don’t think all information should live forever. However, it is important to consider the ways in which library collection budgets move us towards more equitable scholarly dialogue or fail to. When we failed to preserve those 176 titles – among them are potentially scholars whose voices are now lost entirely. When we continued to invest in commercial infrastructure rather than our own, we reinforced the homogeneity of the scholarly dialogue present rather than in voices that had previously been ignored.

Moving forward

I titled this instalment of Resourcefully “Grey Matters” because I wanted to evoke the thinking, memory, and most pointedly, decision-making. Those regions of the brain are found in its grey matter.⁵ When we think of Grey Literature, it may feel natural to long for the simplicity of a scholarly communication system where resources are simply scholarly or not. But that simplicity fails to acknowledge nuance, Grey Literature requires nuance and our attention. I wrote this column to ask that we collectively, and you specifically to apply your grey matter to grey literature, to think about the future as we can envision it, remembering our past failures, and decide to plot a course forward.

Grey Literature deserves investment and preservation commitment – and the way we can best ensure we avoid these losses moving forward is to invest in grey literature as an investment in Green open access, particularly in repositories supporting preprint access. In a world where research and knowledge are expanding at rates that exceed the limits of traditional publishing, the most sensible investment is non-traditional publishing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Notes

- 1 Lisa Peet, “Budgeting for the New Normal: Libraries Respond to COVID-19 Funding Constraints,” *Library Journal*, <https://www.libraryjournal.com?detailStory=budgeting-for-the-new-normal-libraries-respond-to-covid-19-funding-constraints> (accessed October 19, 2020).
- 2 V Alberani, PDC Pietrangeli, AMR Mazza, “The Use of Grey Literature in Health Sciences: A Preliminary Survey,” *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 78, no. 4 (1990): 358363.

- 3 Mikael Laakso, Lisa Matthias, and Najko Jahn, "Open is Not Forever: A Study of Vanished Open Access Journals," (2020): arXiv:2008.11933.
- 4 Carolyn Seaman, Robert L. Nord, Philippe Kruchten, and Ipek Ozkaya, "Technical Debt: Beyond Definition to Understanding Report on the Sixth International Workshop on Managing Technical Debt," *Software Engineering Notes* 40, no. 2 (2015): 32–34.
- 5 T. Root, "Show Me Science Advanced-Neuroscience: The Brain Understood," *The Video Librarian* 34, no. 1 (2019): 1–1.