



Defining and Understanding Grey Literature

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Defining and Understanding Grey Literature

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has dramatically altered how grey literature is defined. The importance, the availability, the access, and the types of grey literature have significantly increased since the days of keeping pamphlets and newspaper clippings in a vertical file. Deciding if a resource is commercially published or grey literature has become more complex and requires judgment. Knowledge of a field of study is helpful in knowing where to find or to gain insight about grey literature. For the author of this column and its readers, the resources cited by authors writing articles and columns for volumes 42 and 43 of *Serials Review*, published in 2016 and 2017, could be called a convenience sample. The references include data that are easily accessed and includes many resources that are developed by people, governmental agencies, and associations familiar to those working in this area of librarianship.

KEYWORDS

article references; column references; gray literature; grey literature; *Serials Review*

Introduction

In the past few decades, we have witnessed revolutionary changes in technology and scholarly communication. The Internet has provided new ways of creating and distributing scholarly materials, which has resulted in a dramatic increase in access to information from a wide range of sources in a variety of formats. Some resources are commercially published. Others are “grey” or “gray” literature. Because it is an international term, the British spelling is more commonly used.

The most widely cited definition of grey literature was adopted at the Luxembourg Grey Literature Conference in 1997 and expanded at the New York City conference in 2004. It was defined as “information produced on all levels of government, academia, business and industry in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial publishing i.e. where publishing is the not the primary activity of the producing body” (White et al., 2013). Examples of grey literature include theses and dissertations, government documents, conference papers, white papers, blog and discussion posts, and press releases. Resources can be both in print and electronic formats. GreyNet International maintains an expanded list of grey literature document types (GreyNet International, n.d.).

Unlike commercially published resources, grey literature does not typically go through a peer review process before being made available to readers. As a result, the quality can vary. The research experience and qualifications of the producers of grey literature may be unknown. They may bring biases to their writing. Others may be experienced and knowledgeable in their fields. Their writing may supplement existing knowledge or provide significant new information. Skipping the potentially time-consuming peer review process means that the results of research can appear sooner than if they had been published through traditional means. A conference paper may even provide early results of a study not yet complete, giving others in the field the opportunity to provide comments or recommendations (Cornell University Library, n.d.).

Finding grey literature can be difficult and time-consuming. It is not generally found in standard indexing sources. Web of Science, Scopus, and other commercial databases do index some grey literature (e.g., dissertations, conference proceedings); however, collecting it “is not their primary function, and they likely capture only a fraction of existing material” (Sibbald, MacGregor, Surmacz, & Wathen, 2015). The same can be said of Google Scholar, which does, however, provide access to grey literature not found in other databases, although it

Table 1. References for articles written for *Serials Review*, Volumes 42 and 43 (2016–2017).

	Journal Article References	Book References	Grey Literature References	Totals
Vol. 42 (2016) Articles	216	16	74	306
Vol. 43 (2017) Articles	171	13	75	259
Totals	387	29	149	565

Table 2. References for columns written for *Serials Review*, Volumes 42 and 43 (2016–2017).

	Journal Article References	Book References	Grey Literature References	Totals
Vol. 42 (2016) Columns	57	5	74	136
Vol. 43 (2017) Columns	36	10	33	79
Totals	93	15	107	215

is sometimes difficult to determine what is included in Google Scholar. Grey literature can be also found by searching organizations' websites.

Grey literature and *Serials Review*

Knowledge of a field of study is helpful in knowing where to find or gain insight about grey literature. For the author of this column and its readers, the resources cited by authors writing articles and columns for volumes 42 and 43 of *Serials Review*, published in 2016 and 2017, could be called a convenience sample, which is a statistical survey method that selects people or subjects because of their availability or easy access. An example would be a study conducted at a library conference to determine librarians' opinions on the best ebook packages, where the librarians can readily provide feedback. Likewise, the *Serials Review* references include data that are easily accessed and include many resources that are developed by people, governmental agencies, and associations familiar to those working in this area of librarianship.

Thirty-three articles and 35 columns were written for volumes 42 and 43 of *Serials Review*. These figures do not include the conference reports from the North Carolina Serials Conference proceedings, which are published each year in the journal, or the journal's editorials. For volumes published in 2016 and 2017, authors cited a total of 780 resources for both articles and columns. As might be expected, the journal's articles had more than double the number of references than columns had (See [Tables 1](#) and [2](#)). Articles had 565 references, whereas columns only had 215. Almost three-fourths, or 416, of the articles' references were commercially published resources. A total of 387 cited other journal articles. Only 29, or a little more than 5%, cited books. Of the article references, 149 (or 26.37%), were categorized as grey literature. One grey literature source was cited in more than one of the articles. Another was also cited in one of the columns. The references for the columns were

almost equally divided between citations from commercially published resources and grey literature. This division suggests a good balance between scholarly and practitioner research. Like the articles, most of the columns' references to commercially published resources cited other journal articles. Only 15, or a little less than 7%, cited books. Three of the grey literature sources were cited in more than one of the columns.

Overall, grey literature is more ephemeral than commercially published resources. Links for many of the grey literature references from the 2016 and 2017 volumes of *Serials Review* had changed. Twenty of the cited resources were no longer available on the Web. In five instances, the cited versions could no longer be found, but later versions were available. Two references citing prepublished articles had since been published in peer-reviewed journals and were no longer available on a blog or a discussion board. Two others that could not be found were a press release and an announcement for an upcoming webinar.

A majority of the references were for resources produced fewer than 5 years ago. Close to 60% (151) of the cited resources were created between 2014 and 2017. Sixty-four of the grey literature references did not have dates of production. All but five of these references listed a corporation, a university and its libraries, or a professional association as their authors rather than a person. Many of these resources provided information about organizations and their products and services, including LibQual+, ORCID, Clarivate Analytics, Eastern Kentucky University Libraries, and the Library of Congress' Linked Data Services. Others, like Virtuoso SPARQL Query Editor and OpenLink Structured Data Sniffer, provided links to software and documentation on their use. The content of this type of grey literature is not static and is easily changed or updated.

The more substantive grey literature cited in the 2016 and 2017 volumes is a diverse group of resources. This contained United States, Canadian, World Health Organization UNESCO, and other government-related documents. The same dissertation is

referenced in two of the journal's columns. Standards were well represented. The National Information Standards Organization (NISO), Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), and World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) recommended and best practices and the American Library Association and NASIG's core competencies for librarians were among the citations. Other examples of grey literature included white papers prepared for Sage Publications and the Legal Information Preservation Alliance and a final report for a grant received by Texas A&M from the ORCID Adoption & Integration Program.

The two volumes included references to presentations given for the American Library Association, the Charleston Conference, Electronic Resources and Libraries, NASIG, the North Carolina Serials Conference, and other conferences and events. For the purpose of this column, conference presentations were categorized as grey literature if they were posted in institutional repositories, blogs, or websites. Recordings and slides of presentations were considered grey literature even if they would later be published as part of conference proceedings in commercially published journals. For example, two columns referenced slides from presentations given at the North Carolina Serials Conference. Both presentations have since been published as articles in *Serials Review*. Presentations that had already been published as part of proceedings in commercially published journals were not treated as grey literature even though they might not have gone through the same peer review process as other content in the journal. The assumption was that the content was as easily accessed and indexed as well as the rest of the content of the journal. All but two of the 38 cited conference presentations were classified as grey literature.

Conclusion

The Internet has dramatically altered how grey literature is defined. The importance, the availability, the

access, and the types of as grey literature have significantly increased since the days of keeping pamphlets and newspaper clippings in a vertical file. Deciding if a resource is commercially published or grey literature has become more complex and requires judgment. For example, as mentioned previously, for the purposes of this column, recordings and slides of presentations from well-respected and well-known conferences were considered grey literature even if they would later be published as part of conference proceedings in commercially published journals. Other authors might decide not to classify them as grey literature. There are certainly many shades of grey literature. It spans from ephemeral resources such as press releases and discussion board posts to prepublished journal articles and conference presentations. The division between grey and commercially published literature has become somewhat blurred. Some resources do not obviously fit into one category over the other. The decision to classify a resource as commercially published or grey literature is not as binary as it once was.

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