Enhancing the value of informally published research & information

An Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project 2012 – 2014

Led by Swinburne University of Technology and Victoria University of Technology in collaboration with the National Library of Australia, National and State Libraries Australasia, the Australian Council for Educational Research, Australian Policy Online and the Eidos Institute.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

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Recent advances in information and communication technologies are disrupting traditional publishing models, radically changing our capacity to reproduce, distribute, control and publish information. One key question is whether there are new opportunities and new models for scholarly publishing that might better serve researchers and more effectively communicate and disseminate research findings. John Houghton 2011

Grey literature is research produced and disseminated outside of commercial publishing channels and makes a substantial contribution to public policy, education, commercial innovation and social development.

Digital technologies have radically increased our capacity to ‘publish’ research informally however many of the social and economic benefits are then lost as much grey literature lacks bibliographic and production standards, evaluation criteria, systematic collection and preservation strategies.

This project seeks to develop best practice guidelines for producing and managing grey literature in Australia in order to transform access to public interest research for the whole community. It will identify possible changes to national information policies, collecting practices and organisational procedures, including digital content production, metadata standards, network collaboration, and information collection and preservation.

Aims

The aims of the Grey Literature Strategies project are to:

➢ Define the role and value of grey literature and establish ways in which its impact and value can be evaluated and measured.

➢ Improve the way grey literature is produced and published in Australia in order to maximise its quality, impact and use.

➢ Improve access, retrieval and preservation of grey literature by collecting institutions, universities and other organisations.

➢ Build networks of collaboration across sectors active in producing and/or managing policy-oriented grey literature in order to build capacity for shared administration and technological development.
Research methods
The project will be tackled using a range of research methods including:

- A context analysis of international trends in managing electronic resources and grey literature.
- A content analysis of information policies and other relevant documents relating to grey literature collection and preservation in Australia and internationally.
- Large sample surveys of producers, consumers and collectors of grey literature.
- Interviews with key stakeholders using semi-structured depth interviews.
- Case studies of key organisations and their role as producers and consumers of grey literature.

Outcomes
The outcomes expected as a result of the project include:

- An assessment of current policies and practices used to produce and manage informal electronic publications and recommendations for improvements.
- Evaluation of the benefits and requirements of various technological and collaborative systems operating in Australia and internationally to collect and retrieve online resources.
- A review of publishing operations, standards, protocols and technologies currently in use, and an evaluation of potential efficiencies that might be gained.
- Published survey results and interview analysis of key stakeholders from education, government, community, commercial and professional sectors.
- Best practice guidelines for producing, evaluating and managing grey literature in Australia.
- Recommendations and requirements for a framework of infrastructure and collaboration across sectors to improve access to and preservation of grey literature research.

Contribution to the research sector
The outputs will guide researchers, educators, organisations, policymakers, libraries, archives and online resource collections. Dissemination across the research and academic sectors will establish the social and educational value of informal publication, identifying optimal models for production, dissemination, collection and preservation. The research will make a major contribution to emerging scholarly fields on electronic publishing, digital education, media and communications, grey literature, open access, information policy.

BACKGROUND

Definition of grey literature
Grey literature is a relatively recent collective noun for "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 not the primary activity of the producing body", defined at the Grey Literature Conference, Luxembourg, 1997 - expanded in New York, 2004 (Farace and Frantzen 2005).

Defining grey literature is notoriously difficult and best understood by focusing on three factors: the nature of the documents concerned, the types of producers, and the means of dissemination. On this basis grey literature can be described as encompassing documents such as technical and project reports, working papers, discussion papers, technical manuals, information sheets, conference papers, theses, etc. that are produced by government departments and agencies, universities, think tanks, non-government organisations, corporations and professional bodies, and are usually lacking in systematic means of distribution or bibliographic control.

Who produces it?
Grey literature is extremely important for many disciplines including science, technology, health, engineering and social sciences, government and public policy arenas and a range of professional and commercial practices. The aim of the producing bodies is to share key information on 'what works' - technical specifications, project outcomes, changes to policy or legislation - to relevant parties quickly and easily without the delays and access restrictions of academic journals or book publishing. There is often little incentive or justification for these organisations or individuals to publish in academic...
journals, and no reason to charge for access to information that they may be mandated to share (Feather and Sturges, 2003: 210). While the production and research quality may be extremely high (with the reputation of the organisation vested in the end product), the producing body, not being a formal publisher, generally lacks the channels for systematic distribution and bibliographic control.

**Collecting grey literature**

With the increase in online content in the 1990s many saw the need to try to collect and make accessible valuable resources for their interest groups and disciplines. Existing databases went online and new ‘clearing houses’ (specialist resource and information collections either print or online), databases, digital libraries, portals, repositories, subject gateways, aggregators and archives were established. Given grey literature’s unconventional nature these have been developed by a wide range of bodies including libraries, universities, government bodies, not-for-profits and commercial companies, as well as national, international and state-based initiatives, to provide some kind of service for identifying, locating, collecting, cataloguing, disseminating or preserving online resources and publications.

The business of creating order from such a highly unorganised system has been extremely challenging, not to mention the issues of competing interests, institutional legacies, outdated legislation and other complicating factors that have prevented the kind of streamlined access to content that would benefit all society.

**Grey literature vs peer review**

In 2010 informally published research literature emerged into the public arena as a topic of news in the world media with articles reporting on the IPCC referencing of publications by the World Wildlife Fund that provided inaccurate statements about the rate of ice melting in the Himalayas. The IPCC case brought to public attention the need to be able to properly distinguish between kinds of publications and to understand their provenance. It also demonstrated the extent to which scholars, researchers, governments and others use and rely on both formal and informal research, especially where it intersects with public policy issues.

While many studies in the UK and the US have looked at changes to commercial and scholarly publishing and the impact of open access movements and scholarly communication, most of this research has been limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs and conference papers. Informal publishing has often been overlooked as it is considered outside the orbit of scholarly or commercial interests. This is despite the fact that many scholars and academic centres, along with government, NGOs and professional bodies, are increasingly publishing their findings informally (whether they are aware of it or not) and often reference informal publications.

**Improving grey literature access and collection**

Finding better ways to access, control, evaluate, collect and preserve grey literature is an important national and international issue in the 21st century, just as it was in the 20th century, the 19th and possibly even earlier.

According to the Blue Ribbon Taskforce report report (2010) “Clarification of the long-term value of emerging genres of digital scholarship, such as academic blogs and grey literature, is a high priority. Research and education institutions, professional societies, publishers, libraries, and scholars all have leading roles to play in creating sustainable preservation strategies for the materials that are valuable to them.”

A concerted effort to achieve policy changes, infrastructure investment and collaborative approaches is needed to really unlock the potential, and reap the value, of grey literature in an online world.

**References**


PROJECT TEAM

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Download this document at: http://greylitstrategies.info/sites/default/files/docs/Grey_Lit_Strategies_ProjectOverview_August2012.pdf

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PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

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