



Evidence Summary

Use and Access of Grey Literature in Special Libraries may be Hindered by Lack of Visibility and Cataloguing

A review of:

Ranger, Sara L. "Grey Literature in Special Libraries: Access in Use." Publishing Research Quarterly 21.1 (Spring 2005): 53-63.

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Abstract

Objective – To examine the barriers to making grey literature (literature not controlled by commercial publishers) easier to access in special libraries.

Design – Interviews.

Setting – Variety of special libraries (government, corporate and specialized academic) in the United States.

Subjects – Sixteen librarians from fourteen organizations in Washington, Michigan and Texas were interviewed. Four of the organizations were government libraries, four were corporate libraries and five were specialized academic libraries. One of the interviews was not used because the organization did not maintain a collection of paper-based grey literature.

Methods – Librarians were selected as possible interview subjects via three methods: some were previously familiar with the author; some were referred to the author by friends, family and colleagues; two candidates volunteered in response to a presentation of the project at a professional meeting. Interviews were conducted between February 2002 and May 2003. A standard set of seven questions were used, but often followed with further questions. The interviews were conducted either in the library or the librarian's office. The interviews were tape-recorded and the answers were written down. Interviews typically lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes and asked about the current state, holdings, access and use of grey literature in the special library.

Main Results – Results from the interviews suggest a wide variance in the percentage of users that access grey literature. Grey literature was used less in the corporate libraries than the academic and government libraries. The percentage of the collection made up of grey literature also varied widely between the different libraries. Reports were found to be the most popular form of grey literature, although most of the libraries reported owning conference proceedings and newsletters in addition to reports. One interesting observation found during the interviews was that most of the users of grey literature are also producers of grey literature. The librarians surveyed reported that some of the reasons for using grey literature included use in research, to write (often more grey literature), interest in the topic, for class assignments, as records of previous practices, for localized studies, and for creating models and practices. Results found that for the libraries surveyed, much of the grey literature remains uncatalogued and what has been catalogued was done using a variety of methods. Over half of the libraries surveyed had their grey literature accessible online.

Conclusion – Two main reasons were cited as explanations for why grey literature was not used as much as it should be: lack of cataloguing and visibility. In many of the libraries surveyed, much of the grey literature had not been catalogued, making it difficult to find and use the resources. Reasons cited for not cataloguing grey literature include lack of time, funds and/or knowledge. As well, in many of the libraries surveyed, it was found that the holdings of grey literature were not readily visible to the users, so users were not even aware that it existed.

To improve the awareness and accessibility of grey literature, the author recommends regional depositories for grey literature,

international standards for cataloguing and more cooperation between special libraries.

Commentary

The study attempts to address not only the research question of how grey literature is used in special libraries, but also the reasons why grey literature is not used as much as it should be. The methodology, criteria and survey instrument are all well described.

The major concern with this study is the selection and size of the respondent group. The group should have been more randomly selected, as the author previously knew most of the respondents. With groups of only four corporate, four government and five academic libraries, the group sizes are not large enough to accurately compare the different types of special library or to draw precise conclusions.

One factor that was not considered in the study was the relationship between the subject specialization of the libraries and grey literature usage. One would expect certain subject fields such as business or science to use grey literature more than others, such as legal or medical. The subject specialization of the libraries was not indicated in the study. Similarly, the size of the special libraries selected was not indicated.

Of the thirteen libraries surveyed about their collections of grey literature, only one respondent based holding sizes on actual recent inventories. For the other twelve libraries, the librarians estimated the percentages. It is not clear how reliable the estimated percentages are. The paper does not state whether the percentage of users who use grey literature are based on estimates or actual statistics.

Explanations for low use of grey literature are examined, such as lack of cataloguing and visibility. In the case of lack of visibility,

however, the conclusions were not tied to the interview results.

The author states from the outset that electronic grey literature would not be considered for the purposes of this paper. While this may have been necessary to limit the scope of the study, it would certainly have been useful to include electronic grey literature considering the increase in blogs, wikis, 'born digital' documents and other types of literature that would be considered grey. Not only is electronic grey literature increasing in volume, but also in its availability. The rise of grey literature could also be a possible explanation for the low use of paper-based grey literature. This possibility, however, was not investigated.

Considering the importance, availability and growth of electronic grey literature in organizations today, excluding it from the study severely limits its usefulness.

Overall, this study is limited in scope and uses a sample group that is too small, non-representative and non-random to be considered valid. As such, the study only contributes some anecdotal information to our understanding of how grey literature is used in special libraries. If the study were to be reworked to include electronic grey literature usage with a more representative sample group, the results would give a clearer understanding of grey literature usage that readers would be able to apply in their own practice.