Unlocking grey literature in the social sciences

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Introduction

I was recently asked to speak about grey literature at an Association of Librarians and Information Professionals in the Social Sciences (ALISS) Masterclass event at Aston University. This included outlining some sources for finding different types of grey literature ie. semi or informally unpublished information, not published by commercial publishers and with particular reference to social sciences and including some free sources. A library guide providing an overview of these resources has been created at: https://libguides.city.ac.uk/grey.

Social sciences covers a wide range of subjects such as Politics, Psychology, Education and Library and Information Science. It has many sources of grey literature which can provide both challenges and opportunities to researchers. The world of grey literature has been transformed by the availability of online access to information reducing the need to contact authors or organisations directly in search of elusive reports and documents.

It can be beneficial to use grey literature sources in research because they may be free at the point of use, be produced quickly and provide extra insight or a different approach to a topic.   However, there are also challenges sometimes in retrieving the materials due to a lack of standardisation and bibliographic control and differences in search functionality and interfaces. As they might not have undergone peer review, checking or revision, materials should be evaluated for accuracy and quality.

Terminology

The concept of grey literature can be traced back to the early 1900s in the library and information field but became quite accepted in the 1970s (Auger, 1998). One issue with grey literature is the terminology itself, it does not necessarily have a clear definition and also there are debates as to what it includes. It is popular in the systematic review approach to research, often used in health and social sciences. It may be timely and sometimes might produce balanced research as it may include some negative or neutral studies (Paez, 2017). Although searching may take some time and effort and require changes in the choice of keywords and strategies, it is considered good practice to augment a systematic review.

> "In systematic reviews and library guidelines, grey literature is often defined as unpublished, that is, not available via traditional publishing, unconventional, with little distribution and not peer-reviewed" (Schöpfel and Rasuli, 2017, p.209).

Not only has the usage of the term been regarded as unclear, in some disciplines the sources it refers to are regarded as very important rather than secondary. It is in itself a 'grey' area and really depends on the context and discipline(s) in which research is being undertaken. For example, for a doctoral researcher, it would be very useful to read previous theses in the field to inform their own research.

> "The term grey literature by no means meets with universal acceptance, and in the area of theses, translations and meetings papers […] the description sits particularly uneasily" (Auger, 1998, p.65).

The status of materials can of course change and it is therefore not totally helpful to label all of these materials simply as 'grey'. For example, conference proceedings might be commercially

published, a preprint of an article can subsequently be published in a journal, a doctoral thesis might be published as a book or a book chapter. This would mean that some materials may become commercially produced but have essentially the same content.

Examples of sources

- For the purpose of the workshop, we found that the BASE (Bielefeld Academic Search Engine) https://www.base-search.net provided by Bielefeld University Library was one of the most useful search engines. BASE contains over 120 million documents from more than 6,000 sources; approximately 60% of documents are available on open access. BASE also links to Google Scholar and repository content and it can be searched from ORCID to allow researchers to find and link their publications to their ORCID profile.

- Some subscription databases such as Web of Science, Scopus and EBSCOhost contain grey literature content such as conference proceedings, technical reports and letters. This is usually found either by searching the appropriate index or by adding suitable search terms for example (conference proceedings) or by refining a search by material type.

- Google and Google Scholar are useful for finding free reports and documents for example from government departments or universities.

- The UK government website www.gov.uk contains sources such as governmental publications, policy documents, consultations and announcements.

- Aggregators such as CORE https://core.ac.uk/ are useful for surfacing UK and international content via repositories and open access journals. Institutional repositories such as City Research Online http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ are very useful for finding research and working papers and doctoral theses etc.

- The British Library EThOS service https://ethos.bl.uk includes records of 500,000 UK doctoral theses, some of which can be downloaded immediately. The availability and visibility of doctoral theses has very much increased due to digitisation projects and the provision of electronic copies on institutional repositories.

- Open data repositories such as Figshare https://figshare.com contain content such as research outputs, datasets, lecture notes and slides.

Types of materials

As mentioned, these may be wide ranging and dependant on the discipline, see our library guide https://libguides.city.ac.uk/grey for some examples. According to Farace and Schöpfel (2010) the

term traditionally covers three categories of documents, conference proceedings, reports and doctoral theses; however it could include a multitude of different sources.

Other examples may include: research papers, working papers, dissertations, government consultation documents, lecture notes, laboratory notebooks.

Benefits

Information seeking behaviours have changed due to the vast increase in the availability of electronic materials.   Because electronic access is more prevalent, this makes it much easier to obtain some materials and they may be open access, or freely available on the Internet.   As it can sometimes be made available quickly, grey literature can be a useful source of information and could provide access to raw data which otherwise would not be made available.

Grey literature can explain ideas and concepts and make them available to a wider audience. It can bring access into the public domain and allow research to be more easily conducted by those without access to subscription databases. There is often a long process to publishing a journal article commercially which means that there may be a gap of at least several months before research outputs can be published in this way.

> "Grey literature often represents research at its initial development and may be a tool both to uncover innovative information and to shorten the time between research and practice (Pappas, 2011, p. 228).

Challenges

While the use of these sources can add another dimension to research, it can also pose challenges. One of these is the lack of consistent metadata to describe grey literature as it comes in varied formats and from different sources. Another issue is concern around quality assurance and the validity of the content and it is advisable to evaluate it and make sure this is accurate.

Some sources might have quite a basic interface, search capability and functionality and others do not seem to be maintained or have current content. The search techniques often used on subscription databases might not work in the same way, for example the order of the search terms might affect the search results in some cases. They are also copyright, legal and licensing implications which are not necessarily clear for example with some self-archiving of materials onto websites.

Conclusion

It is extremely likely that grey literature will continue to be an area for future expansion. This is partly due to the availability of open access resources including for example electronic theses. It certainly looks as though research funders will continue to mandate for research outputs to be made available on open access and that this area will continue to expand. It can be seen that the popularity of such resources is growing as they are often quoted in research. It is not easy to measure how much they are cited as they may not be indexed by subscription databases and is also not possible to estimate the ever increasing number of items. It would be difficult to have one search engine to search the various formats available although these have been developed in some areas such as searching across repository contents.   It seems unlikely that there will be standardisation and bibliographic control of such items so the user experience and time taken in searching for and retrieving them is likely to continue to vary.

References

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