

## **Describing Grey Literature Again: A Survey of Collection Policies**

Heather Lehman

MLS Student, Information School, University of Washington

Janet Webster

Head Librarian, Guin Library, Oregon State University

### **Abstract:**

At Oregon State University, we are exploring the differences between collections formed by digitizing existing materials on our shelves and those created by identifying and acquiring digital objects beyond our library. One example is the proposed Tsunami Digital Library (TDL) that would support a growing research program with users needing access to diverse information, much of it grey. The TDL is conceptualized as an information portal designed to coordinate the access and distribution of Internet based tsunami related information. The distributed collection is maintained by contributing partner sites within a digital library system. Yet, defining this digital collection presents challenges that differ from our traditional approach to collection development as the audience goes well beyond OSU, materials are created and housed elsewhere, and the formats are not consistent.

Building on our needs assessment of potential users of the TDL, we surveyed librarians active in the field of digital collections on their practical and theoretical approaches to collecting digital grey literature. Their insights and a careful review of the literature of digital grey collections provide a context for creating a specific collection development policy. Our experience is transferable to any librarian collecting digital grey literature.

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### **Planning for a Digital Collection of Grey Literature**

Digital collections of Internet resources place important information close at hand. They facilitate the dissemination of new research faster, and create access for wider audiences. Rather than searching the entire Internet, a collection limits resources to those pertinent to a subject. A collection also suggests that material has been identified as useful by a qualified librarian or subject expert.

The emergence of digital collections and the increasing amount of digital grey literature challenges the library's ability to consistently collect information using our traditional tests and tools. Some of the standard criteria of authority and relevance to the institution's mission remain critical. Other standards, such as longevity and access, are more problematic to apply. One challenge is the lack of consensus among librarians on a definition

of grey literature. Another is the failure of collection policies to adequately address grey literature, especially in light of the digital environment. Addressing both challenges is essential to move forward with collecting digital grey literature in a coherent fashion within the university.

At the Oregon State University (OSU) Libraries, this is apparent as we develop digital collections that venture beyond digitizing our special collections and archives. The Tsunami Digital Library (TDL) is one example. It is conceptualized as an information portal designed to coordinate the access and distribution of Internet based tsunami related information. The OSU Librarians in collaboration with colleagues from the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science are testing the utility as well as the feasibility of a distributed digital collection maintained by contributing partner sites with OSU acting as the facilitator. The OSU Libraries also will provide the collection content by evaluating existing digital material, potentially converting useful print material into digital format, and negotiating access with partner sites.

The TDL challenges our expertise with collection development as the intended audience is not local, the potential content is not discipline or program specific, and the formats are not consistent. The audience of tsunami researchers and hazard managers is distributed throughout the Pacific Rim in a variety of settings from labs to local emergency services units. The information is interdisciplinary, real-time and historic, data as well as narrative. Much of it is digital, although not all is accessible to the broad tsunami community given format, language, licensing, and poor web interfaces.

To tackle the challenge, we conducted a needs assessment of potential users to assist us in describing the information they wanted and created (Lehman and Webster, 2004). We surveyed and interviewed forty identified experts within the diverse tsunami community. The

survey revealed that this community is a sophisticated user of Internet search engines and tools, and is very familiar with existing information. Not surprisingly, a significant portion of the materials required and desired by the interdisciplinary tsunami community is grey, and these are not adequately housed, maintained, or organized by existing partner sites.

The needs assessment helped us identify the core audience, the digital data, and desirable information resources for the basic collection of the TDL. From the results, this community is looking for a centralized means to find and retrieve real-time as well as historical data, geographic resources, outreach materials, and modelling information. Researchers would benefit from a collection of resources instead of continuing to resort to searching across multiple disciplines and the entire Internet for information. Given the high volume of grey materials, the breadth of subject areas, the multiple languages, and variety of formats, a collection policy statement could help us and our potential partners better develop the TDL content.

### **Collection Development Policies and Digital Grey Literature**

Opinions vary about the utility of collection development policies with some contending that they quickly become inflexible and outdated (Snow, 1996). Most see collection policies as devices that help libraries target resources perceived to be useful to our audiences and our institutions (Intner, 1996; Lee, 2003; Mack, 2003; Spohrer, 2003). To the inexperienced librarian or one taking over a new subject area, collection development policies can be lifelines while gaining familiarity with a discipline and its local audience. Collection policies traditionally address grey literature tangentially. They describe sources (e.g. societies, government), and formats (e.g. reports, proceedings). They may give geographic scope and language limitations that direct a selector away from some sources and

towards others. In general, collection policy statement literature focuses on acquisition decisions involving expenditures, neglecting the plethora of free, digital grey literature.

While working on the TDL statement, we looked to see how others addressed the interaction between collection development policies and digital grey literature. Peters (2001) and Edwards (2004), among others, underscore how collection development is shifting under the pressure of electronic resources. Discussion of consortial agreements, shifts from print to digital, and access versus ownership dominates the digital collection policy conversation (White and Crawford, 1997; Kyrillidou, 2000; Digital Library Federation. [2004]). The policy discussion avoids explicitly addressing grey literature, and the digital collection conversation focuses on tools and technological solutions. Many have discussed the difficulty of defining what is grey, especially in a digital context (Di Cesare and Sala, 1998; Gokhale, 1998; Gelfand, 2000). This difficulty appears to have inhibited the development of coherent policies and practices for treating digital grey materials.

There are exceptions to this dearth. These tend to either address organizing digital grey literature with subject guides that link to digital resources selected according to policy criteria (Latham, 2002), or making grey literature in current collections available (Russell, 2004; Drake, 2004). Additionally, there is some collection policy work in the digital library environment. In this realm, statements generally emphasize format, pricing, and collecting all literature necessary to support research in the particular field (ARL, 2004; Digital Library Federation, [2004]). Many academic libraries have only recently started to develop digital policies to reflect access and ownership issues, technological changes, and the development of interdisciplinary subject areas.

Rather than being discouraged by the lack of models for a digital grey literature collection, we were convinced that the process of developing a collection development policy

was useful. The process helped us clarify the scope and content of the TDL, and made us discuss the tests of authority, access, timeliness, relevance, and longevity. However, we were stymied by certain issues:

- Accessing the breadth of digital information when the lowest common denominator is that it is digital;
- Describing the responsibilities of ownership;
- Maintaining quality and authority when conferred by users, producers and librarians;
- Selecting the relevant given the volume of digital grey literature.

So, we turned to our colleagues and surveyed 20 librarians we felt would have insight on these issues as well as the challenges of incorporating digital grey literature into collections.

### **Survey on Grey Literature and Collection Policies**

Through the literature and current policy work, we identified 20 librarians actively involved in some form of digital collection development. These 20 librarians were given a 12 question survey crafted to elicit longer responses (Appendix 1). Selected ones received follow-up correspondence to further clarify their practical and theoretical approaches to collecting digital grey literature. Additionally, the digital collection policies for their respective institutions and subject areas were reviewed for treatment of grey materials. While our survey is small and limited to librarians in North America, it does present some new insight about how digital collection policies handle grey literature.

Analyzing the survey results in a systematic way was problematic given the nature of the questions; they did not, for the most part, generate simple yes or no answers. Rather, we looked for patterns in the beliefs and attitudes that librarians have towards their collection policies and grey literature. We also were interested in working definitions of grey literature in the electronic collection policy setting. We anticipated some validation of the importance

of digital grey literature, and the need for collaborative efforts to improve access to these materials. The following presents the results in clusters of survey questions that address the following:

- Subject areas
- Definition issues
- Selection issues
- Cooperation issues
- Access issues

### **Subject Areas – Questions 1 & 6**

The sciences are considered to be the primary source for grey literature. Most of the participants are responsible for science collections so, the awareness of grey literature is high. Seventeen respondents considered their subject areas the highest producers of grey literature. Many respondents note that new technologies are promoting the development of grey literature in fields beyond the sciences.

### **Definition Issues – Questions 2, 3, 4 & 5**

In defining grey literature, every librarian mentions the themes of “visibility / accessibility,” “authority / peer reviewed” and “not traditionally published,” though not all use the same terms. The most precise definitions of grey literature are articulated by the three respondents whose digital collection policies incorporated the treatment of grey materials. More general definitions come from the 16 librarians working with policies that avoid explicit treatment of grey materials, digital or otherwise. One librarian quotes the definition adopted at the Third International Conference of Grey Literature (Farace, 1998); however, this respondent’s policies make no mention of grey literature.

The respondents do not consider foreign language materials grey simply by virtue of being non-English, except when their policies dictate such treatment. Most consider much

digital material as grey, but difference in shades of grey emerge. For example, one respondent indicates that the transitory and invisible materials on the Web are obviously grey while another perceives that because the Internet provides greater access to materials, it makes them less grey. Questionable lifespan, accessibility, and on-line publishing are mentioned as why digital materials are often grey.

Respondents divide into three groups when discussing the affect of the Internet on the volume of grey literature. These conflicting responses are again tied to definitions of greyness. Librarians who use a definition focused on access perceive a decrease in volume as the Internet improves access. If defined by publishing methods, the volume of grey literature increases because publication through the Internet is non-traditional. The volume is perceived as steady for those using a definition that combines access and publishing method. Though much digital material is grey, participants note that the Internet is not the only vehicle for grey digital materials; obsolete formats such as tape drives and even CDs render information grey as well.

### **Selection Issues – Questions 7, 8, 10 & 11**

Though the answers do not provide any conclusive process for selecting grey materials, they help address the collection of digital materials in general. In only one instance did the policy of respondents specifically address grey materials. The majority of respondents acknowledge that their collection policies do not specifically address grey materials, and that they do not systematically collect grey items. Those librarians that contradict this trend do so because they serve an audience that mandates that grey collections (i.e. agency technical reports collections) or because they are not academic research librarians (i.e. documents staff). Respondents note that they do not deliberately exclude grey materials, and that they collect it if requested by faculty or if the materials are published by their institution. A few

respondents note that they monitor on-line sources for pertinent materials, or have developed a means of reviewing the materials retrieved by faculty visiting conferences and meetings.

The majority respond that grey materials are selected according to the same criteria as any other item: relevance to the subject area and demand by the collection audience. Outside of relevance as a criterion, knowing that an item could be catalogued is the second highest factor affecting selection. Knowing whether an item is indexed or not does not affect selection uniformly because some define greyness by whether the item is indexed or not.

Given the rise of grey materials stemming from increasing interdisciplinary research communities (Wilson and Edelman, 1996; Herring, 2002) and the capabilities of the networked research environment, it is surprising that the majority of responses show a limited number of policies in place to address multi-disciplinary areas. From the responses, strategies for selecting interdisciplinary materials seem to be far more prevalent than collection policies.

### **Collaboration Issues – Question 11**

The concept of using the library catalogue to describe materials housed outside the library appears to be of interest, but not widely applied. Several participants mentioned branch library collections or union catalogues as a means of broadening coverage. Two specifically mention non-library collections that are included in the local catalogue. Collaboration seems to be among libraries or within the institution in terms of integrating access to collections.

### **Access Issues – Question 12**

Eighteen respondents feel that people do not have adequate access to relevant grey literature. Even with ready access through the Internet, grey materials are by their nature difficult to find. As one participant writes, “A researcher, with a good grasp of their



discipline, will know more about the grey literature than the librarian. A student will not. An uninformed citizen will not.” Access depends on knowing how and where to search. This requires searchable metadata, some subject knowledge, and coordinated information management.

Twelve respondents identify available resources for grey materials that meet the above requirements. These include Agricola, Virtual Technical Report Center, Scientific Network and Information Network (STINET), CiteSeer, and Cogprints. A few suggested that libraries need to consider specialized web portals and harvesting services to facilitate access to materials that are not necessarily catalogued or collected.

### **Observations on the Survey Results**

It was surprising that stronger patterns and more cohesive answers did not emerge given the similarity in background of most of the respondents as well as their experience with electronic or digital collections. The most prevalent approach to selecting grey materials focuses on relevance to a subject area within the confines of an informal definition of what constitutes greyness. As the definition varies, selection and collection practices shift. With the increasing availability of digital grey materials the reliance on an un-stated definition seems inadequate to capture the full array of relevant grey materials in any subject area, let alone overlapping disciplines. It also seems insufficient to assume that relevant grey literature will be collected utilizing existing strategies rather than a specific collection policy.

We originally hoped that the survey and review of policies would yield a strong working definition of grey and practical selection guidelines that would validate the relevance of grey materials for inclusion in a collection. What we found is that grey items are not dismissed but are usually given a low priority by selectors. This is due to the difficulty of

dealing with them in a concerted fashion as well as budget restraints that direct resources towards mainstream resources. Digital grey literature reminds us that grey literature in general is messy, and takes time and expertise to collect. The low prioritization of grey literature, digital and print, reflects that many libraries still “fear to introduce how information with no price tag on it can have incredibly high value placed upon it” (Gelfand, 2000).

Currently, the most familiar approach to improving access to digital grey materials is linking and not conscious collection development. These linkages and the development of portals indicate awareness that collaboration among institutions provides greater access to more grey information. However, other than acquiring items at faculty request or selecting on an “I know it when I see it” basis, academic research libraries are still primarily relying on other entities to collect grey materials. This reliance on others to collect so that linking works as a basic strategy is dependent on high maintenance and constant review.

The issue of collaborative collecting underscores the importance and utility of a collection policy. In a collaborative project that extends beyond the borders of a single library, the collection policy can define the responsibilities of ownership and not just the means of access to digital grey materials. The collection policy can be developed to address the responsibility of each institution, including how or when ownership and of collected digital materials should be transferred to or shared with another institution. This is especially important to preserve access to still relevant but endangered digital materials and resources. Approaching collection policy development in this manner can benefit institutional repositories as well as any other digital collections. It also remedies the unsatisfactory approach of providing links to relevant resources with poor interfaces by collecting those pages that are the most important.

The audience for digital collections, particularly those used by interdisciplinary researchers, can be much larger than that of traditional print collections. This expanded audience presents the opportunity to utilize their expertise to identify pertinent materials, thus building upon the traditional method in collection development of utilizing faculty requests as a selection aid. For digital grey materials, deliberate collaboration with the audience may stretch the comfort zones of many librarians. Rather than viewing the collaboration as removing the authority and responsibility of the librarian, it should be seen as a mechanism for identifying and capturing relevant materials from the vast and growing amount of items available.

This new approach to evaluating and conferring authority assures the relevance of materials in the collection by utilizing the expertise of both the librarians and the user community. It would aid in capturing a wider array of digital formats than would normally be included for evaluation. It would deliberately include the expertise of interdisciplinary researchers extending the expertise of the selecting librarian. Since there has been an increase in publication and dissemination of materials directly from the producers of grey literature and other materials, establishing the means to work directly with users rather than relying on the traditional means of evaluating and collecting becomes necessary.

### **Final Thoughts on Collection Policies and Grey Literature**

A heightened awareness of the changes stemming from technological innovations is apparent from the literature and the survey responses. This awareness includes the increased availability of digital grey information. However, the transition from awareness to acknowledgment of the validity of collecting grey literature is less obvious. Instead, there is still an emphasis on providing access to grey materials collected by others and a reluctance to

expend time and resources on including grey resources in existing collections. It is not that librarians disregard grey literature. The difficulty and missed opportunities lie in the reliance on strategies that treat grey literature inconsistently.

Collecting digital grey literature means a commitment not only to acknowledging the importance of this literature, but to changing existing collecting strategies into policies that advocate its integration into collections. Once a decision to collect has been made, the research on collaboration and varieties of consortial agreements can help guide the mechanics of collecting of all formats of digital materials. What is needed is more focused discussion on collaboration specifically in regards to grey materials. This discussion needs to include how collaborative agreements can be structured with users and producers of grey literature so that issues of quality and authority are addressed as well as issues of access and ownership.

One way to begin that discussion is to turn to the familiar practice of creating a collection development policy. As a tool, the policy is a solid way to discuss and refine the direction and strategies of creating any collection. It can provide a strong framework for acknowledging that grey materials are a vital part of our digital collections, and outline the mechanisms for integrating them.

## Appendix I

### Gray Literature Survey

1. What subject areas are you responsible for in the library's collection?
2. How do you define grey literature?
3. Do you consider foreign language materials as grey literature?
4. Do you consider a lot of digital material as grey literature?
5. How has the advent of technologies such as the Internet affected the volume of grey literature – has it increased or decreased?
6. Do some subject areas or disciplines generate more grey literature than others?
  - a. If so, which fields do you consider as having more grey literature?
  - b. Where do your subjects fit into this continuum?
7. Does your subject area collection policy address grey literature?
  - a. If yes, why?
    - i. Do you actively collect it?
    - ii. How do you find grey literature relevant to your collections and how do you evaluate that material?
  - b. If no, why not?
8. Do your collection policies cover digital material that might be considered grey literature?
9. How does your institution handle collection development in overlapping disciplines or interdisciplinary fields?
10. When making decisions about whether to collect a grey publication, what factors make a difference to you?
  - a. Knowing that other departments/ areas within your institution have (print) copies
  - b. Knowing that you can get it catalogued
  - c. Knowing that it is indexed
11. Does your catalog describe materials housed in other areas / departments?
12. Do you feel that people have adequate access to the grey literature that they would find relevant to their work/needs?

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