A Scholarly communication perspective of Grey literature in library and information science education

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to inform library and information science (LIS) educators of the status of grey literature among LIS students in the United States. More specifically, the article examines what students enrolled in ALA-accredited library and information science programs know about grey literature and where they learned about it. Masters-level students at three North American LIS programs answered a four-question survey. Findings revealed that knowledge about grey literature is gained across the curriculum with general reference sources being the course most likely to address grey literature. Findings also indicate that knowledge about grey literature is more intuitive and anecdotal than systematically acquired. In addition to the implications of the results, the relationship among grey literature, the library profession, and library education is discussed. The article concludes with suggestions for further analysis and research.

Suggested keywords: Grey literature, Library education, Scholarly communications
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Literature review and justification

The most-cited definition for grey literature is “that which is produced by government, academics, business, and industries, both in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishing interests and where publishing is not the primary activity of the organization” (Farace, 1997). ODLIS (Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science) provides a slightly different definition of the term: “Documentary material in print and electronic formats, such as reports, preprints, internal documents (memoranda, newsletters, market surveys, etc.), theses and dissertations, conference proceedings, technical specifications and standards, trade literature, etc., not readily available through regular market channels because it was never commercially published/listed or was not widely distributed1.” While definitions proliferate, there is agreement on the main characteristics of grey literature: they are materials that are published not for profit and, as a result, typically not marketed or distributed by commercial publishing organizations (Mackenzie Owen, 1997). In other words, grey literature is discussed in terms of its origins, its methods of dissemination, or both.
The research conducted by Sulouff et al. (2005), whose paper is most closely related to the theme of this study, points out that grey literature “takes different forms in different departmental settings” so that a working definition is often based on circumstance. The library sector carries responsibility for the management and processing of grey literature. This role is acknowledged by several researchers (Mackenzie Owen, 1997; Sulouff et al., 2005) although they have written largely about the role that librarians take with regard to grey literature, but little about how librarians learn about grey literature. The role of librarians is described as promoting dissemination and use of grey literature through cataloging, searching, archiving and preservation (Mackenzie Owen, 1997). Gelfand believes that these roles, at least with regard to grey literature, are learned on the job: “training and bibliographic familiarity… does not follow a curriculum or a set of readers of textbooks, but instead studied by doing” (Gelfand, 1998).

Research regarding grey literature in library and information studies has focused on case studies, such as that by Aina (2000), more than on grey literature in library and information science education. An environmental scan, described in more detail below (note 10), supports Gelfand’s view that training in grey literature is mostly field, and not curriculum, driven. With regard to formal instruction of grey literature in library and information science programs in the United States, the only full scale framework identified is Dominic Farace’s distance education course offered at the University of New Orleans, though one must note that the course is offered as part of a school library media program in the department of education, and not in a Master’s of Library Science program².
Library and information professionals are a vital link in the chain that makes grey literature available to researchers, students and the interested public. While on-the-job training is invaluable, certainly the purpose of graduate-level training is that professionals are hired with some baseline knowledge that they bring to the work place upon graduation. Courses that educate future librarians in areas relating to grey literature are critical training ground if awareness to grey literature is to increase.

The purpose of this paper is to identify what students currently enrolled in MLS programs know about grey literature and where they learn it. Once we have a clearer picture of the training currently available, we can open a discussion between library professionals, library educators and library students to determine how library education can best assist in meeting the needs of the current workplace and use LIS education to strengthen the relevance of current graduates to the workplace.

Methodology and data collection

Since the purpose of this study is exploratory, a survey of masters-level library and information science schools students in the form of an online questionnaire was deemed the most appropriate form of data collection. The survey was conducted in October 2007. The three master’s programs selected—Wayne State University in Michigan, Rutgers University in New Jersey and Pratt Institute in New York City—were determined by the researcher to represent a range of LIS programs in the United States. While all three are
library and information science schools, there are notable differences between them in character and emphasis.

Rutgers University, School of Library, Communication and Information Studies, is part of the iSchools caucus\(^3\) and their research and educational goal, as described on their website, is to study the digital revolution and related areas on human organizations, social organizations and institutions\(^4\). While Rutgers-SCILS educates at all levels, from undergraduate to Ph.D. and in several disciplines (in addition to library and information science, degrees are also offered in journalism and communication), only students studying for a master’s degree in library and information science were selected for this study.

Wayne State University, in Detroit, Michigan, is what may be considered a traditional library and information science program. The program does not have a Ph.D. program and serves MLS students and certificate students, with a great emphasis on skills that will make students attractive to the job market\(^5\).

Pratt Institute, in New York City, part of an institution of higher education whose focus is primarily on art and architecture, attracts many masters-level students – there is no Ph.D. program—who are interested in aspects of cultural informatics as a cross section of information, design, and globalization\(^6\).

Three separate online surveys and one hand-distributed survey were conducted using a commercial survey tool. The surveys were distributed through the listserv of each department and addressed to the students of the individual departments. The survey contained 4 brief questions (see appendix I) and took no longer than 5 minutes to complete.
While the survey questions were identical on all surveys, the question relating to courses in each department were tailored to the course names and corresponding numbers in each department. Results were then aggregated into a single file to allow comparison.

The survey ran for 10 days in early October 2007. In all, 294 students responded to the survey: 101 from Wayne State (17% of Wayne State LISP 570 students), 82 from Rutgers (24% out of Rutgers SCILS MLS 338 students) and 111 from Pratt (31% of Pratt-SILS 350 students). Data was compiled and analyzed using SPSS, a statistical analysis software package.

Limitations of surveys as a data collection method are inherent in the instrument, mostly that results are self reported and could be skewed by intentional deception, misinterpretation of the questions, and a desire to please the researcher. To avoid these limitations to the greatest degree possible, the questionnaire was tested for reliability in a pilot study conducted with a small group of students during July 2007, and the questions revised based on the group’s feedback. In addition, of the 111 surveys completed by Pratt students, 37 were distributed in class rather than online. The two groups were compared to see if statistically significant differences existed between the groups, and none were found.

Findings
The survey was answered by 294 respondents from three Masters’ of information and library science departments in the US; with Pratt students being the largest group represented, Wayne State second and Rutgers third.

Table 1: Number of respondents and their institutional affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Affiliation</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percent of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wayne State</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rutgers</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pratt</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Results revealed that the percentage of respondents who heard of grey literature, was just over a quarter of all respondents, 26.2%.

Table 2: Number of students who heard of grey literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Affiliation</th>
<th>Number of all</th>
<th>Percent of all</th>
<th>Percent within school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wayne State</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>17% of students in program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rutgers</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>24% of students in program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the 77 students who indicated that they had heard of grey literature, 63 indicated in which course or courses they learned of the term. Several students selected more than one course. Most respondents heard of grey literature in reference classes, with knowledge organization and government documents being the next two categories. It is important to keep in mind that the question that generated these results was tailored to the course offerings in each school, and that not all schools offer the same selection of courses, nor are the courses given the same titles. For example, Rutgers-SCILS does not offer a course in Introduction to LIS, while both Wayne State and Pratt do.
Students were given nine statements (see appendix) and asked to rate each one in terms of how well the statement describes the term Grey Literature. Responses were on a Likert scale with 5 meaning the statement describes Grey Literature very well and 1 meaning the statement does not describe it well.

Table 3: suitability of statements to describing Grey Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very well</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Not well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>1. <em>Grey literature</em> describes materials of unknown origin (where the author or publisher can’t be identified)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2. <em>Grey literature</em> is similar to open access journals</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3. <em>Grey literature</em> refers to materials guarded by institutional gatekeepers who deny access to them</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The results suggest that the case of grey literature in library and information science departments is haphazard and that there is no pattern to what, where, or how students know of grey literature. Nonetheless, a closer examination reveals some interesting findings.

Duration in MLS programs made no difference in perceptions of the nature of grey literature, with the exception of statement 4 (“grey literature refers to materials stored in dark archives that are intended for long term preservation”) which incoming students (Fall 2007) were significantly more likely than others to indicate as an inapt description. It thus appears that duration in the MLS program is not an indicator of having heard of grey literature or of being able to describe it accurately.
Of the 77 students who indicated hearing the term, 74 ranked the statements provided in the questionnaire, but in addition to them, 66 students who claimed not to have heard the term grey literature, also ranked the statements. A statistical comparison between the two groups found no significant difference in the way each group perceived grey literature. This finding alone may indicate that the scope and depth of knowledge acquired throughout the MLS experience, allows students to make informed judgments regarding the accuracy of the statements provided in the questionnaire.

Statistically significant results regarding the nature of grey literature were found in the rating of five of the nine descriptions. Students perceive in descending order that grey literature are materials not indexed by commercial indexers, that grey literature describes materials published by non-commercial publishers and that grey literature describes materials not available in online public access catalogs (OPACs). On the other end of the spectrum, students do not identify grey literature as materials stored on dark archives, nor as materials whose author or publishers are unknown.

The question is, of course, did students get it right? Students’ perception of grey literature as not indexed and published by non-commercial publishers is within the scope Farace’s narrow definition of grey literature. With regard to the third significant finding, that grey literature describes materials not found in OPACs, there is no definition that supports this perception. On the other end of the spectrum, students feel that the statements that least accurately describe grey literature are those that refer to it as materials stored in dark archives and materials whose author or publisher are unknown. While definitions do not
for the most part describe something in terms of what it is not, the two statements students identified as describing grey literature least well are closely linked to other forms of materials that have weak bibliographic control, namely, government documents and orphan works.

When attempting to learn the courses in which students learned about grey literature, general reference courses received the highest scores both overall and within each school. While this finding lacks ambiguity, it is worthwhile to note that previously gathered evidence seems to indicate that the library professional most likely to deal with grey literature in libraries are serials librarians, collection developers or technical services librarians, and only then reference librarians⁹.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

Grey literature and emerging publishing models are changing the role of librarians. Traditional library roles which were for the most part departmentalized, are converging, and grey literature is a good example of the new playing field of libraries. While grey literature has a following among academic librarians, this study finds that Gelfand’s assertion that it has gained a new visibility may be a bit optimistic (Gelfand, 1998), as it seems that today, nearly a decade later, only a quarter of students currently enrolled on library and information science program even heard of the term.
Findings indicate that grey literature is covered - or more accurately, mentioned - in many different courses in MLS programs. This treatment of grey literature across the curriculum is appropriate to demonstrate the various aspects, treatments and handling of grey literature in libraries. Curriculum developers would do wisely to continue and expand this approach.

To get a fuller picture of the status of grey literature in LIS education, a more comprehensive examination of course syllabi should be conducted.

Appendix

Survey on Grey Literature

Dear student,

Please take a few minutes to answer this short survey on Grey Literature. Results will be used as part of a study on library education, presented in a scholarly conference, and made available to students. No personal data is collected and respondents remain anonymous.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at drabina@pratt.edu.

Thank you for your cooperation.

D. Rabina
1. In the course of your studies, have you come across the term Grey Literature?

☐ Yes

☐ No

2. To the best of your recollection, in which course or courses have you heard the term (check all that apply) [note: list of courses was tailored to each school’s offerings]

☐ Knowledge organization

☐ Reference

☐ Other

_____________________________

_____________________________

_____________________________

3. When did you begin your MLS studies?

☐ Fall 2007

☐ Spring 2007

☐ Fall 2006

☐ Spring 2006

☐ Fall 2005

☐ Spring 2005
4. Which of the following statements best describes the term Grey Literature?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grey Literature describes materials of unknown origin (where the author or publisher can’t be identified)</th>
<th>Very well</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>Not well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grey literature is similar to open access journals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grey literature is government information that</td>
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</table>
is not available in the *Catalog of Government Publications*

*Grey literature* describes materials published by non-commercial publishers

*Grey literature* describes materials not available in OPACs

*Grey literature* describes materials not picked by my commercial search engines (such as Google and Yahoo)

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**Bibliography**


References

7 Thus, the high participation rate of Pratt students may be attributed to the fact that the researcher is a faculty member of that department.
8 All percentage points in this paper are rounded to the closest hundredth of a percent.
9 For more details see Association of Research Libraries, Scholarly Communication Education Initiatives, August 2007. http://www.arl.org/bm-doc/spec299web.pdf (access Nov. 24, 2007). E-mail posting from Serials Listserv (SERIALIST) seems to support the view that serials librarians and collection developers have responsibilities for non traditional sources such as grey literature.
10 An examination of LIS syllabi was attempted in order to identify courses that covered grey literature. Because many universities do not make their syllabi available on the free Web, a comprehensive examination was not possible. However, the syllabi that were examined represent a wide range of LIS course offerings. As mentioned in the Literature Review, only one course was found that is dedicated to grey literature (New Orleans http://www.greynet.org/images/Syllabus_Grey_Literature.pdf access Nov. 24, 2007). Other include general reference (Louisiana http://slis.lsu.edu/syllabi/7002.pdf accessed Nov. 24,