

Faculty Perceptions of Grey Literature: A Qualitative Analysis of Faculty Interviews

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Abstract

To examine the use, field perception, citation practices, creation, methods for finding, and dissemination of grey literature, this study used interviews of faculty at a large RI university. Further, interviewees were asked specifically about one type of grey literature - preprints - as well as about ways in which libraries could support their overall grey literature goals. The study findings included concerns about the challenges of finding known items and the unstable nature of web pages. Some less expected findings included the use of grey literature in undergraduate instruction as well as faculty creation of grey literature for lay audiences. In terms of implications for practice, librarians could use these findings to inform long term preservation practices as well as access to institutional repositories.

Introduction and Literature Review

Grey literature (GL) in its various forms is produced and utilized by researchers across the disciplines in the sciences, social sciences, and arts and humanities. In this study, which is a follow-up to an earlier survey that we conducted, we interviewed researchers as a way to gain a greater understanding of the attitudes toward the use and creation of GL in various fields of study (Cooper et al. 2019).

While GL is not an uncommon topic in the literature, studies about its use seldom take a broad look across many academic disciplines. Instead the focus is often on one field of study or one type of GL, or a combination of the two. For example, across the sciences, researchers have looked at how often papers from a particular conference result in a subsequent journal article (Fosb(l)l et al. 2012; McRoberts et al. 2014). Hanneke and Link interviewed public health researchers and found that many of them disseminate their findings in GL formats such as policy briefs and reports as well as through peer reviewed journal articles (Hanneke and Link 2019). They also discuss discoverability and preservation of GL, broad themes that other authors address in the library literature (Adams et al. 2016; Aloia and Naughton 2017; Mahood, Van Eerd, and Irvin 2014).

Works that consider GL across multiple disciplines are less common. In their studies of scholarly communication practices, Harley and co-authors include GL in their discussions when describing both the literature of various fields from physics to political science and how it is shared (Harley et al. 2007, 2010). GL is also covered in Nederhof's discussions of non-journal publications in political science, economics, and psychology (Nederhof, van Leeuwen, and van Raan 2010). Sulouff et al. interviewed liaison librarians in order to discover their knowledge and exposure to GL and also to gauge the requests for GL that they received (Sulouff et al. 2005). They used their findings to recommend actions about the acquisition of GL and how it might be included in their institutional repository (IR).

In a sister study to the one reported here, 172 faculty from 9 colleges at the University of Minnesota responded to a survey about their creation, use, and citation habits in regard to GL (Cooper et al. 2019). Overall, 78% responded that they created GL and 84% said that they used it. The types that they used varied a great deal, as did the methods that they employed to find GL.

Interest in GL has increased in recent years due in part to the growth of systematic reviews and other forms of evidence synthesis. In their guidelines, both the Cochrane Collaboration and the Campbell Collaboration mention the importance of GL in a comprehensive search (Campbell Collaboration 2019; Higgins and Green 2018). The rationale for including GL is that it may lessen the likelihood of publication bias.

Related to the topic of systematic reviews, discoverability and citations of GL are topics that have been addressed by both disciplinary researchers and librarians. Hartling et al. looked at a subset of Cochrane reviews covering topics related to the health of children and found that most tried to cover non-English papers and unpublished reports but searching for dissertations and theses (D&T) was less consistent (Hartling et al. 2017) (Hartling et al 2017). Enticott and colleagues report on a technique to locate GL for systematic reviews on refugees and asylum seekers and Berrang-Ford et al. addressed locating GL in their paper on techniques for systematic reviews on climate change adaptation (Berrang-Ford, Pearce, and Ford 2015; Enticott, Buck, and Shawyer 2018). Among librarians, Hunt and Bakker as well as Hanneke and Link discuss findability of GL in public health (Hanneke and Link 2019; Hunt and Bakker 2018). Saleh and colleagues conducted a survey to find out how much time systematic review authors spent searching for GL and what sources they utilized (Saleh, Ratajeski, and Bertolet 2014). They found that the amount of time spent was related to whether the project was grant funded and that the number of sources searched varied by the type of institution where the authors worked and whether or not they had received training in conducting systematic reviews.

Methods

This is a qualitative analysis of interviews examining faculty experiences with finding, using, citing, and creating GL, as well as potential disciplinary differences in interactions with GL. For the purposes of this study, GL is defined as works not published by commercial publishers such as conference papers and posters, working papers, technical reports, early versions of articles submitted for publication, theses and dissertations, and government documents. This was done as part of a mixed method study that also included quantitative survey results which can be found in a previous publication (Cooper et al. 2019).

Participants

The participant pool for the study was selected based on faculty status as tenure or tenure track at a large RI institution and was the only selection criteria used. Those who were interviewed had taken part in a survey about GL and indicated they were willing to be contacted in the future to participate in interviews. We contacted everyone in this group, except for one emeritus professor and two researchers who were located off-campus. The original survey pool was developed by the institution's Survey Advisory Team and included 1008 tenured faculty and 292 tenure track faculty. The survey was distributed via email and was conducted from April to May 2018.

After the survey was closed participants who had indicated they were willing to take part in interviews were contacted to set up a time. Participants who agreed to be interviewed included three Health Sciences faculty, five Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences faculty, two Liberal Arts faculty, and one faculty member each from Biological Sciences, Human Development, Policy & Development, and Design.

Research instruments

The interview instrument consisted of an in-depth semi-structured interview guide. Interview questions and communications were developed by the research team and were not based on or modified from previous studies (see Appendix A). Interviews were conducted between August and October of 2018 and took place in faculty members' offices, or another location of their choice. Interviews were conducted by two members of the research team, with one acting as primary interviewer and the other as note-taker. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis by audiotranscription.org.

Data analysis

For analysis two authors (WM and AS) used line-by-line open coding based on each interview transcript. Using pre-established question codes to begin analysis, the authors further identified themes while dissecting the transcripts to establish more comprehensive codes. This led to the development of a codebook (see Appendix B) which was later used to analyze transcripts in Atlas.ti v. 8. Question codes and theme codes were used to examine both occurrence and co-occurrence of themes and were used to layout the framework of this paper. Use of investigator triangulation, or analysis by multiple individuals, allowed for a richer and deeper interpretation due to a broader range of experience, increasing the strength of our result (Patton 2002).

Findings

Use

When asked about how they use GL, participants indicated that they used it in many different ways. Multiple participants used GL in their instruction, particularly with undergraduate students. Government documents were discussed as an example of this. Reasons included that GL is often written for a general audience, is more often open to the public than scholarly work, and is therefore more accessible. One person noted:

I would say a second thing that I'm using grey literature for is actually in teaching because most books and journal articles, at least in my field, aren't written with undergraduates in mind. But sometimes these non-governmental organizations {NGO} reports, which are written for a broader audience, cover the same material but at a much more accessible level

Keeping up with trends in their disciplines was another reason that participants used GL as it can often contain information not included in published scholarly literature. As one participant noted:

A lot of times just because I get some feedback or some information from someone in the field and I want to know more about it. For example, the other day, we had a meeting with swine producers and they said, "Oh our main issue now is anal prolapse." And I was like, "I've never heard of anal prolapse in a swine." And then you go and search the formal literature and there are not a lot of reports. But you go and search the grey literature and then you get it.

Closely tied to keeping up with trends in the field, publication delay was another reason for using GL. The time delay found in many scholarly publishing venues can mean that the most current work in a particular field is not found in journal articles. Biogs were one example of grey alternatives used in this manner.

Why do I choose them? Because the publication lags in economics are really dramatic sometimes, and so that's how you access the most recent work, usually. Meaning, anything that's actually been done in, at least, the last two years.

Dissertations and theses are useful when participants are looking to discover more detailed methodology of previous research as they often include more detail than a journal article. Instances of the academic literature not providing the information participants need to do their work, while GL does, was another motivation for using GL. Systematic reviews and other evidence synthesis methodologies were mentioned by interviewees in the context of needing to use GL in their reviews to address comprehensiveness. Finally, NGO reports and government documents such as technical reports, population surveys, and government research lab reports were mentioned by multiple participants.

Field perception

The authors were interested in learning if researchers had similar feelings about GL according to their field of study or discipline or if it varied from person to person. Those who thought they were like their colleagues, commented positively about both creating GL and citing it. Along the same lines, a researcher felt that it was their college's duty to produce GL because of the university's land grant mission:

I feel it's really important to have grey literature production [in my college]. It is part of our mission; my personal view. I don't think it is but, I think it should be.

Another researcher initially had difficulty getting on board with citing GL as they had transitioned from a discipline that was far more critical of GL than their current discipline.

The first time that it was really obvious to me was when we were writing our first paper in collaboration and I found some references in there that I was like, "You cannot cite this." And he was, "Of course, you can." And I was like, "No, you cannot." And it took me a while, going back and forth with the other faculty author to figure out whether it was yes or no. And then I learned, "Oh it's not a problem." That's how I learned about it. It's just a completely different

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Multiple reasons arose for why researchers thought they may be outliers regarding creating and citing GL, but the most common reason was due to the rigor of the tenure process. Spending time to create GL while working towards tenure was not considered a good use of time:

Don't get me wrong. I mean this is what I do. This is the stuff I do. But I wouldn't recommend junior faculty members doing this.

One researcher noted that the only kind of GL that would be viewed positively in their discipline and would count toward tenure would be publishing datasets.

If you're publishing lots of grey literature, it doesn't count unless it's making a dataset available as a resource. That is something that would count. But in terms of tenure discussions, that would be viewed positively but is not as a substitute for peer-reviewed publication.

Citation guidelines

When researchers were asked if they were aware of citation guidelines regarding GL in journals in their disciplines, responses varied. Some researchers said that yes, there are guidelines and they know what they are supposed to do. A couple of researchers stated how they just use guidance provided by American Psychological Association (APA). Other researchers discussed how although there may not be discrete guidelines, they just cite to the best of their ability and have never experienced pushback. Another person talked about the rigorous and transparent guidelines they encountered when working on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report.

The IPCC, which is seen as probably the most credible UN-sanctioned report on climate, have very extensive guidelines about grey literature. It actually became super interesting because basically, it became politicized in the sense that there was a strong sense by a lot of participants from developing countries that their research was only in grey literature and it became this political issue where one of the developing country authors really wanted more grey literature [included] so that their country's work could be represented.

Still others described how there are informal guidelines about not being able to cite it. One researcher lamented the informal standards.

I wish they were public. I wish there was debate about them. I think if there was debate and discussion, we might be able to come to some new understanding and agreement on how to use different kinds of literature.

Many people talked about how it varies in their discipline; some journals have guidelines, others do not. One interviewee referred to their field as "the Wild West" when it comes to citing GL. However, other journals explicitly do not allow GL, such as PLOS One or the American Physiological Society journals.

Despite guidelines or the lack thereof, several researchers talked about how they always prefer to use peer-reviewed sources, or sources that were published in a traditional manner, as opposed to GL.

Citation practices

When researchers were asked if they were citing GL, most interviewees stated that they were citing. However, when expanding the conversation around their citation practices, they mostly talked about disciplinary expectations (why they are or are not citing GL, and how to properly cite) and issues they encounter with citing GL. Some researchers discussed how their field negatively perceives certain kinds of GL or believes there is an issue with credibility. Another person talked about how they go to the GL to read and learn about a topic, but then search for peer-reviewed articles to cite instead. Others did not see a problem with credibility of GL, discussing how it is important to be comprehensive, especially in relation to a "systematic review or meta-analysis".

If it's relevant, it can and should be cited. It's not as if it's grey literature, it's not "as good". I think most researchers in my area, which is a fairly applied one, don't necessarily look down upon literature if it's not peer-reviewed, particularly if it's from a noteworthy or respected

Of those who cite GL, several mentioned the issues with web stability and availability. Because of lags in the publication process, URLs may change or disappear.

By the time we were in the copy editing stage, we had ten citations that we had cited, and two years later, they were gone.

Methods for finding

The interviewees mentioned a wide variety of methods for locating GL. The most common practices, each mentioned by more than half of the researchers, were searching Google Scholar, receiving recommendations from colleagues or professional networks, and searching a resource supplied or recommended by the library. Other avenues for locating GL that were mentioned by multiple people were checking the works cited in publications and monitoring listservs and particular websites. Regarding backward citation tracking, one respondent stated:

Usually the best way to track down grey literature is by hand searching and searching reference sections, etc. That usually gives us a better picture of some of the grey literature that's out there in terms of conference abstracts, reports, etc.

Researchers also noted tracking blogs and social media including Twitter and Facebook. Everyone that was interviewed mentioned using more than one method to find GL.

Some methods involve the researcher taking action such as initiating a Google Scholar search or visiting a Web site while others deliver the information to the person without requiring any action such as receiving an e-mail message from a listserv or a colleague. Several people noted that part of what drove their particular methods for locating GL was an interest in finding reliable information.

Although we did not directly ask why they used GL, during the discussions about how to find it several people volunteered that they did it to keep up with the latest trends.

[There] are actually good [grey literature sources that cover] trends or new phenomena that are happening... the main areas that I'm looking at are emerging practices, future practices, future business practices.

As for finding GL for the purposes of evidence synthesis, interviewees mentioned searching indexes to which their library subscribed and using backward citation tracking.

The question we asked was about finding out about the existence of GL items and not locating the full text but a few interviewees talked about the problems about actually obtaining the items. Comments noted broken URLs, documents that had disappeared from Web sites, and papers that were behind paywalls. They also mentioned that while interlibrary loan was a valuable service, sometimes they were not able to obtain GL items using that method.

Types created

Nearly all researchers reported creating at least one type of GL that fit a typical definition such as conference papers, working papers, and reports. In addition, they mentioned other outlets for their work including blogs and social media sites, teaching materials, and Web-based resources, some of which were interactive.

I write a couple times a year for a blog. That's a great tool... it's basically a collection of case studies that people are doing on the ground. They're not replicated studies. And there's some data in there.

Another notable topic that surfaced more than once was the number of reports that are generated by researchers and the fate of those reports. These reports may be created based on collaborations with industry partners or as part of a requirement from a grant or through work with a local or federal government agency.

A lot of the work I've been doing lately has been funded by state agencies and these require reports... And then typically, what happens is they get buried. They might get put on a website.

Across the disciplines a number of interviewees talked about the amount of GL that they produce for non-academic audiences. The products included policy briefs, fact sheets, Extension documents, and magazine articles. They may emanate from their academic department, college or the University as well as their professional associations or a government agency with which they are collaborating.

Sharing preprints

Interviewees were asked about their experience (if any) with disseminating preprints, and the majority answered in one of two ways: Yes, they are actively disseminating preprints; or No, they are not active in disseminating preprints. One interviewee described how whether or not they disseminated preprints depends on the situation, while another had some misconceptions about the definition of preprints.

The majority of interviewees stated that they share preprints and were doing so in order to solicit feedback. Interviewees either deposited manuscripts in a repository or directly with colleagues. The action of sharing preprints was driven by responding to peer review publication delays and ensuring an open access version was available. One person discussed how they believed it was important to get their work out quickly but that others in their discipline disagreed:

We have a public mission and should be getting information out as quick as possible. But some of my colleagues are very anti that, even in this department.../ think that this is terrible and don't understand why anyone would do this. I think it's terrible to withhold [your work] until a peer-review publication.

Of those who stated that they did not share preprints, there were some fears by individuals about scooping.

The PI where I was doing my post-doc would never allow us to preprint. She would not even allow you to do electronic posters or things like that because she was competing with two other labs. So she would give the information in the abstract but didn't want to show her whole hand.

One interviewee expressed faith in the peer review system and therefore was reluctant to share research that had not been vetted via peer review.

I think reviewers just add so much because they really see what you don't see. So it improves the science to have a review process. I really value it a lot.

Distribution/dissemination

When asked about dissemination of GL the participants discussed many different methods both in their personal practice and that they had observed others practicing. The most popular method was through personal or lab/center websites. One participant noted:

We just redid our website for my research group. So that becomes more of a platform that we can use.

Industry or society websites were mentioned as well, but not as often as personal websites. One participant commented on the amount of broken links that have occurred through one industry site they have used in contrast to their personal site.

[redacted] redesigns their website all the time and so the link just constantly is broken and moved. And then I'll say, "You know people are telling me it's broken. They're asking me." So I'll set it up again and I'll try to link it again. They've done about Jive reports with me now and I just link on my website.

Other methods were discussed by multiple participants. Research networks such as Researchgate.net and Academia.edu were mentioned, with one individual commenting on their usefulness in disseminating conference materials. Other methods included biogs, social media such as twitter, and repositories both institutional and subject specific. Additional dissemination methods discussed by some participants included submitting to preprint servers, and other digital platforms.

infographics, listservs, discussion boards, providing their work to individuals upon request, and producing government documents.

When asked who the intended primary audience was, the most common response was to those in industry.

Primarily it's the people in the field. So it's the architects, contractors, owners, subcontractors that are trying to adopt these new practices or these new technologies and they don't know how to do it.

Colleagues were another group that participants frequently shared GL with, especially those who had expressed interest in the participant's work. The final audience type mentioned by several participants was that of landowners.

Library support

Many participants mentioned how they used library resources to find GL. Some elaborated on how the library supported or could support finding GL, use, access, citation, and creation. Others participants discussed how access to IRs provided a venue for hosting and finding content.

One researcher mentioned that their lab recently began depositing datasets into an IR to help with citing standalone data, following grant obligations, and disseminating their work for others to access.

Another interviewee who had not previously deposited work in our IR, but was considering it mentioned,

That has been something in the back of my mind. And we may be doing that ... as a team in the next year or two.

Three participants mentioned the Libraries provided Interlibrary Loan (ILL) services when they were unable to find locally owned resources. Some expressed a positive experience with library provided ILL. One respondent sought conference proceedings and had more ease obtaining documents produced in the U.S. as opposed to internationally born documents.

There have been some examples of conference proceedings where something looks really interesting so I'll go to interlibrary loan and try to get it and it's just impossible to find. But that, as I said, is the exception for the most part.... [T]he library is pretty good at finding some way to get documents especially if it's from the U.S.

For a respondent who conducted a comprehensive literature search for the purposes of a meta-analysis, there were challenges obtaining the full text of older documents:

Older governmental reports can be harder to track down. For a recent meta-analysis, we had multiple reports that were published in the late '70s/early '80s that we're including. Many of them are on microfiche. Sometimes, they're difficult to identify via interlibrary loan. So those can be challenging. And they're usually so old, 30-40 years old. You can't really contact the authors for them either.

Only a few interviewees offered discrete ways in which the libraries could support them with their GL needs. Because the world wide web is somewhat unstable, a couple interviewees expressed the potential ability for the libraries to actively archive and perform data rescue. Due to confusion with how to cite GL, one interviewee recommended that the libraries provide guidance/instruction/education (e.g., tutorials) specific to how to cite GL.

Discussion

In studying the comments made by interviewees, some were fairly predictable, given our knowledge as information professionals. At a basic level, people had varying definitions of what constituted GL and given that different disciplines make use of different types this was not surprising. Searching for GL is not a straightforward task and the wide variety of discovery methods that were reported seemed to reflect that. Although the respondents themselves did not articulate this, their methods often appeared to be time consuming, less than comprehensive, and in some cases rather haphazard. This is an area where guidance from library staff could help make the

sites with poor or nonexistent indexing. Another aspect of GL that is familiar to librarians is its potential lack of permanence and that was also noted by a number of researchers across the disciplines. They mentioned finding broken links in the reference lists of papers and also being unable to find publications that they themselves had noted earlier.

Also not surprising is the confusion among some of the interviewees about whether various types of GL were allowed to be cited, particularly in the more prestigious journals in their fields. Some researchers assumed that it was not acceptable but few had checked. It seemed that they avoided citing GL just to be safe although they may have actually consulted it as they wrote their papers. This situation could be improved if journal publishers and editors included straightforward instructions in their author guidelines.

Currently the acceptance and prevalence of pre-prints varies among different disciplines and this was reflected in the responses we received, from little recognition of the concept to opinions both pro and con. There was much more convergence across subject areas on the idea of using GL to keep up to date and find out about new trends, partly because GL usually has a much shorter publication turn-around time than journal articles or books.

A few comments touched on areas not often considered by academic librarians and could potentially lead to improved service to users. One involved the large amount of GL that was produced with a lay audience in mind. A number of interviewees from disparate disciplines mentioned creating GL for lay audiences with related comments about how they got little credit for it in their current position or that it did not seem to be widely distributed or archived anywhere for later use. Several people noted that often these documents were part of either a cooperative project with industry partners or an outreach effort to practitioners in their field.

With GL produced for a lay audience there are obvious roles for libraries such as seeking out more of this material and including it in IRs. Another idea about using GL to create affordable content (as an alternative to expensive textbooks) arose from an interviewee's comment. They reported that they had initially created a report for an industry group and then later used it in one of their undergraduate classes because it provided a good introduction to a topic in understandable language. Other types of GL could be similarly repurposed for the use of delivering content in classes.

The comments about library support for GL indicate that there is room for improvement in library services in this area. Some ideas are mentioned above and others fall into the areas of outreach, collection development, and preservation. For outreach, a focus could be on assisting users in efficiently locating relevant materials. The importance of interlibrary loan services and the skills of their staff can also be promoted.

In the realm of collections, library staff can promote the IR as a place to both deposit and find GL as much of the GL lacks a stable home. Where appropriate librarians can include GL in their collection development policies. Comments about the need for GL produced by local governments such as planning documents reminded the authors that public libraries often have these materials in their collections while academic libraries do not. Developing a greater knowledge of community partner collections could be a benefit to library users.

The results of this study suggest several avenues for potential future research. One potential area of research would be to have further discussions with scholars of the disciplines that reported having fewer issues finding GL and the potential reasons. Is there a particular location that is collecting it? Are there particular terms that they are using in their searching that consistently returns relevant results? The answers to these questions could potentially help librarians deepen their own knowledge of disciplinary GL practices and discover resources to include in catalogs or libguides. Another logical next step to this study would be to survey producers of GL such as NGOs and industry producers of GL that scholars are using to determine if there would be benefits to developing stronger relationships between libraries and those producers. Librarians might be able to provide aid in increasing the findability of this GL, while the producers could expand librarians' awareness of the creation and location of information valuable to the research they support.

This study had a few limitations. As the majority of participants were full professors, the results do

the majority of respondents were those who do use or create GL in some way, so this study is unable to explore in any detail the motivations of those who do not use GL. Due to the sample size and study design, it is difficult to generalize by discipline. Finally, while this study took place at a large research institution, the fact that it reflects the views of scholars at a single institution means it would be difficult to generalize the results to larger populations.

Conclusions

While there were aspects of this study that were not surprising to the authors (varying definitions of GL in different disciplines, issues with locating it, and permanence once it had been found) there were surprises as well. These surprises included the amount of GL that is created with lay audiences in mind, which was greater than anticipated. Additionally the way that this material is utilized in undergraduate teaching was not expected. Librarians are well situated to partner with faculty in all these areas. They possess the expertise to help with locating existing GL for both research and instruction purposes. Another avenue for this partnership is in the long term preservation and access of GL created by their faculty and researchers through IRs. Future research by librarians into GL producers such as non-affiliated institutions and NGOs would shed light on potential partnerships to increase knowledge of and access to important GL. As shown by this study GL is a significant resource for the teaching and research of disciplines across the institution and is therefore an important resource for libraries and librarians to embrace.

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