

Old Wine in New Bottles? Developments in electronic information and communication: structural change & and functional inertia

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Abstract:

To understand the meaning of grey literature in the internet age, it could be helpful to have a look at the whole system of scientific information and communication and its changes at the time being, not only at its informal ('grey') sector.

Part 1 of this paper presents empirical data on electronic journals ('e-journals') in the Social Sciences in Germany and the differences between commercial and non-commercial publishers. Further information concern different types of electronic publications - 'grey' and 'white' - and innovative developments in electronic information and communication *via* the internet. A network of R&D projects in Germany under the general name *vascoda* exemplifies this. The project's vision is an integration of searching information on literature in distributed sources and receiving the full texts immediately, preferably by download.

The Social Sciences are represented by the *infoconnex* project, which includes grey literature; *infoconnex* is part of the *vascoda*-network.

Part 2 draws some (theoretical) consequences for our understanding of grey literature and its future. As to the *technical facilities*, things have widely changed (although printed grey literature is not completely out of fashion), but with regard to the *economic structures* and *social functions* of grey literature we can confirm that only little has changed - if anything at all.

Introduction

It was in late 1994, that my institute offered its first page in the internet and proudly presented a so-called *gopher* which was the most advanced technical device of information technology at that time. A *gopher* is a kind of squirrel, i. e. a small red haired animal with a bushy tail climbing up and down the trees, and that is why it gave its name to a structure of internet files arranged like branches of a tree.

This advanced technology, however, was at the same time the reason for failure since hardly any of our customers - which means: of *social scientists in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland* - had an internet connection at his disposal at that time. Most of them did not even know what the internet was and what it was good for. It still took years until the social scientific community discovered the internet which meanwhile had switched over to the *world wide web* structure (WWW) as organizing principle or *hypertext transfer protocol (http)*. The situation in the Social Sciences was not much better when we made a relaunch of our internet pages, now in the *world wide web* in late 1996.

Now, only seven years later, the internet is a self-evident tool for information and communication even in the Social Sciences.

The internet provides all possibilities we have always been dreaming of. All we need is a computer, internet access and a homepage with a URL - the *unified resource locator*, which is the internet address of a site. Then, we can be all in one: the *author*, the *board of referees* deciding whether an article of ours is accepted for publication or refused, the *printer*, the *publisher* and the *book seller*. And it does not cost a penny more to distribute our articles worldwide.