

Describing Grey Literature Again: A Survey of Collection Policies

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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.

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