

## Towards a Continuum of Scholarship: The Eventual Collapse of the Distinction Between Grey and non-Grey Literature?

Marcus A. Banks

New York University School of Medicine, NYU, USA

### Introduction

The open access publishing movement has begun to enhance the availability of research published in peer-reviewed journals. Valuable grey literature also deserves extensive exposure, but in too many cases it languishes unnoticed. A common means of increasing access to grey literature is the development of discipline-specific portals to this literature, most of which remain fairly obscure. A more comprehensive solution would be to integrate access to grey literature within the databases that scholars regularly consult.

These databases already identify peer-reviewed articles. The open access movement is a political endeavor to enhance retrieval of those materials that are easy to identify but not to obtain. With a focus on the grey literature of public health, this paper will suggest political steps that could enhance access to materials that would often be easy to obtain if they could be identified.

Shifting from a political to technological analysis, I will propose that institutional repositories represent an exciting possibility for both the preservation and retrieval of grey literature. The development and curation of robust institutional repositories should obviate the political struggle necessary to challenge the current hierarchy between non-grey and grey literature.

### I. The Waning Primacy of Peer Review

Publishing a peer reviewed article in a prestigious journal remains the highest validation for a work of scholarship. Peer review has served scholars well for centuries. The concept of reporting and validating research findings began in 1665, with the founding of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* [1]. Peer review has enhanced the rigor and relevance of many scientific breakthroughs.

In spite of its many benefits, peer review is flawed. Scholars tend to publish only statistically significant findings rather than all of their findings, which inflates the perceived importance of reported results [2]. More nefariously, business and political interests have become adept at using “research” teams to lend a patina of scientific rigor to their product development plans or policy goals [3]. These practices pervert the principle of objective scrutiny, which should be a foundation of scholarly research.

Personal computers did not exist in 1665, and for more than 300 years afterwards. The only way to disseminate research results was to print them, and this acted as a natural constraint on what scholars could produce. Within the confines of this system, the peer-reviewed article emerged as the vector of choice for scholarship.

Personal computers are ubiquitous at academic institutions in the developed world today, and this has begun to alter conceptions of what constitutes scholarship. Digital media has substantially displaced print media, particularly in the scientific, technical, and medical (STM) domains [4]. There is no longer a pragmatic reason that the peer-reviewed journal article must stand atop the hierarchy of evidence. It is now possible to envision a seamless continuum of evidence, which is housed in well-organized and maintained repositories [5]. This continuum would still contain formal articles, which would ratify rather than validate scholarly work. Content at other points along the continuum of evidence could come to be as highly regarded as journal articles. Much of this content—such as technical reports and public policy overviews—would be what we now consider grey literature.

In this long-term vision, grey literature will become indistinguishable from non-grey literature. For the foreseeable future, this distinction will remain. Raising awareness of the value of grey literature is a political endeavor, and should be understood as such.

The open access movement, which primarily seeks to increase access to peer-reviewed articles, is explicitly political. In less than a decade, open access has blossomed from a fringe idea into a perspective that merits serious consideration [6]. Although the future of open access is unclear, it seems inevitable that the scholarly communication landscape will contain some version of open access. Advocates for grey literature can learn valuable lessons from the political history of the open access movement.