GreyNet's Focus on Science and Society:
Attention to Research and Community

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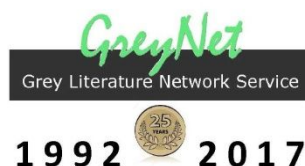
GreyNet
Grey Literature Network Service

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Introduction

During the GL19 Program Committee meeting in Pisa, the subject of GreyNet's 25th Anniversary arose. One of the committee members suggested that an article marking the occasion would be appropriate and the others appeared keen to the idea. Weeks later back at the office in Amsterdam, I recalled the Pisa meeting and the suggestion of an article. My thoughts first hit upon GreyNet's Business Report[1], which provides an up-to-date and comprehensive overview of the organization. However, skimming through its twenty odd pages, it became evident that a business report would not make for a fitting article and was certainly not what was intended. Leaving the task in my things to do folder for another handful of weeks, I found myself on the southern coast of Crete, my get away for more than three decades. I was patiently waiting for an inspirational approach to what had become an accepted assignment – an article that would capture both the attention and interest of an audience of information professionals.

Throughout the past twenty five years, the Grey Literature Network Service has witnessed sustained development due in part, if I may say, to enthusiastic and committed leadership, a strong conviction in the uses and applications of grey literature for science and society; and to a community of dedicated researchers and authors willing to share the results of scholarly work well beyond their own institution. For the next few days, the challenge to comply with what was initially taken as a straightforward proposal became a veritable task. While there was no lack of material that could be readily tapped, there was still the choice of framework and selection of relevant content appropriate for an audience of peers.

I could, for example, use GreyNet's mission statement and demonstrate how it has over the past quarter century fueled research, publication, open access, education, and public awareness to grey literature. Or, I could compile a timeline and discuss GreyNet's milestones and deliverables. I could also trace back through the years GreyNet's research projects based on its own collections and resources, or I could focus on the contributions made by GreyNet's Award Recipients[2] and demonstrate how their work has impacted GreyNet and the field of grey literature.

All four such inroads to GreyNet can in fact be extracted from the business report, which was considered less appropriate for the assignment. Caught in a moment of indecision, I realized that perhaps I should veer from any systematic review and instead address the readers as colleagues who are experienced in the field of information and who might be more interested in real situations and challenges faced by the organization in the 25 year period and the responses to them. Yes, without further hesitation the first point to convey would deal with my idea for an international grey literature network service.

The Focus

Six years prior to the founding of GreyNet, I headed a department of documentary information and a national reports center for grey literature in the social sciences. During that same time period, I also served on the technical committee for the European Association for Grey Literature Exploitation. On occasion I tried my hand at describing my work and formulating a direction that should be taken for the future of grey literature. The focus was foremost on a program of research and its vehicle would be an international conference series on grey literature[3]. In this way, the results of research could be collected and maintained in a knowledge base allowing for further use and application for science and society. The idea holds that extensive and protracted research would define an area of information science more than solely formulating a definition of grey literature. Granted definitions drive research, it is the results of research that would come to define the field of grey literature and its place among other information sciences.

Early Success

GreyNet met with early success. The First International Conference on Grey Literature booked over 200 delegates from countries worldwide. Newsletters, program books, conference proceedings, annotated bibliographies, an international guide to persons and organizations in grey literature as well as a website hosted by the Netherlands Royal Library were among its early publications. The Second GL-Conference was convened in Washington D.C. establishing the transatlantic character for the series and the Third GL-Conference was hosted by the European Commission in Luxembourg.

What appeared to be a truly successful venture came to a sudden standstill in the first quarter of 1998. Reserves were depleted and since the conference series took place only every other year, income to sustain the organization until the next stateside conference was insufficient.

Trial and Error

Often in the management of an enterprise, errors that are not identified in time are difficult to correct and threaten its very existence. Due to an increasing lack of funds, GreyNet could but sustain its existing information products and services; however, it lacked the ability to respond to opportunities that presented themselves on a rapidly changing information landscape.

To turn the tide and secure a way forward for the organization as well as the GL-Conference Series a major partner or buyer was determined the only viable option. GreyNet published via its already formidable distribution list a call for tenders, which met with two serious contenders – both publishers. After months of negotiations, GreyNet was bought by MCB University Press; however its operational management and location remained in Amsterdam until the Spring of 2000, when I tendered my resignation as Head of GreyNet owing to irreconcilable differences in the way of doing business. Within a couple of months of my resignation, MCB provided notice that they discontinued GreyNet. Owing to an acquisition agreement that the publisher upheld, I was unable to deal in grey literature until three years from the date of its signing.

Relaunch

One of my earlier published articles dealing with grey literature was titled "Rise of the Phoenix: A Review of New Forms and Exploitations of Grey Literature"[4]. This article took on an added meaning six years after its publication, when in 2003 I relaunched GreyNet and the GL-Conference Series. The original focus I had for GreyNet ten years earlier was in no way diminished. A program of research remained first and foremost and the continuation of the GL-Conference Series stayed its driving force.

Luck or serendipity should never be discounted in any venture. That which prompted the relaunch of GreyNet was the ability to recover its original domain name greynet.org[5], which now for the past fourteen years is powered by TextRelease.

Recovery of the domain name implied that all earlier content accessible via internet could be recovered. Furthermore, the GL-Conference Series and its concomitant Proceedings[6] and Program Books[7] could regain their original ISSN registrations allowing for continuity in both collections. With these key components in place, the call for papers for the Fifth International Conference on Grey Literature was published.

Among a number of changes that pursued after GreyNet's relaunch included a business plan that would engage other revenue streams besides the conference series. These came to include membership fees and the launch of a journal on grey literature[8] alongside the sale of conference proceedings and other in-house publications. The GL-Conference Series became an annual event instead of every other year; and, two workshop series: GreyForum[9] and GreyWorks[10] were introduced – signaling GreyNet's commitment to education and training in the field of grey literature.

In Step with Technological Developments

During the three year period GreyNet was inactive, much progress had taken place in the open access movement, which the organization would now have to move in step with. The development and maintenance of institutional and federated repositories was another area that challenged GreyNet. The rise of social media presented new and promising channels for public awareness not to mention the upcoming use and application of visualization techniques. These and other developments driven by technology have since GreyNet's relaunch become integrated in its workflow. Together, these provide a considerable range of sustained and enhanced information resources made possible through the expertise and investments of GreyNet's service providers, four-fold committees, their chairs and active members.

On the Horizon

Marking GreyNet's pursuits and accomplishments over the past quarter century has become for me less a walk down memory lane and more a wake-up call as to the future of the organization. Financially, GreyNet has maintained a stable track record for a number of consecutive years. The repositories housing its content are secure, its collections continue to grow, and statistics demonstrate a steady increase in use. GreyNet's associate memberships, partnerships, and agreements with abstract and indexing services as well as a licensing agent are longstanding. And, next year will mark the 20th edition of the GL-Conference Series.

Nevertheless, while the situation today cannot be compared with the crisis year almost two decades ago, there is still another significant challenge facing GreyNet – its management hand-off. Perhaps the way forward will require another call for tenders in search of a major partner/buyer. It may also be possible that one of the associate members will pursue the registration of GreyNet as an international association. In either case, current management is committed to work with that party towards a constructive transition benefiting the hundreds of authors, researchers and other information professionals and practitioners in the grey literature community.

References

[1] GreyNet's Business Report, ISSN 2542-4572 http://www.textrelease.com/images/GreyNet_Business_Report_2017.pdf

[2] GreyNet's Annual Award Recipients http://www.greynet.org/greynetmembership/annualaward.html

[3] TextRelease, GreyNet's Conference Bureau and Publisher http://www.textrelease.com/home.html

[4] Farace, D. 1997 Rise of the Phoenix : A review of new forms and exploitations of grey literature. - In: Publishing Research Quarterly, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 69-76, 1997. - ISSN 1053-8801. - Paper presented at the Second U.S. Workshop on Grey Literature - GreyWorks'96 in College Park, Maryland on November 18, 1996. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12109-997-0019-7

[5] GreyNet, Grey Literature Network Service http://www.greynet.org/

[6] GL Conference Series – Proceedings, ISSN 1386-2316 http://greyguide.isti.cnr.it/gl-proceedings-2003/

[7] GL Conference Series – Program Books, ISSN 1385-2308 http://greyguide.isti.cnr.it/gl-program-books-2003/

[8] The Grey Journal: An international journal on grey literature – ISSN 1574-1796 www.textrelease.com/publications/journal.html

[9] GreyForum Series – ISSN 2213-5735 http://www.greynet.org/greyforumseries.html

[10] GreyWorks Summer Series – ISSN 2211-1425 http://www.greynet.org/researchandeducation/workshops.html