

Grey literature from invisibility to visibility: The quest for grey content in the domain of the invisible web

“I'll make him Gandalf the White so he can really kick ass”¹

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Introduction

In the second part of the trilogy Lord of the Rings: the Two Towers the wizard Gandalf the Grey becomes Gandalf the White. The change of colour is decisive for the further development of the story. Without becoming white and the help of Gandalf - having great powers - the notorious ring couldn't have been destroyed at the end.

The motto I chose refers to the process of turning “grey” literature into “white” in terms of visibility and accessibility. At this moment we are on the threshold of a new phase in the development of the web. Second-generation web research and technology allow building of digital libraries that offer more and better bibliographic control. It looks very promising in solving problems of invisibility and accessibility of literature - grey included - in general if adaptation of second-generation tools and standards will succeed. With the realisation of the development of the web towards a ‘semantic’ web² it looks as if grey literature will become more easily to “discover”, and therefore is less grey or less obscure and turns white.

I want to address two questions and try to answer.

- The first question is in what ways is the availability of grey literature influenced by the evolution of the web in the last years?
- Secondly what about the accessibility of grey literature in the near future in the virtual world? I know these are a ‘big’ questions but I will try to outline present developments.

Growth

The way we observe the evolution of the Internet nowadays has much in common with the perspective on the geography of the world at the end of the 15th century. At that time there was a lot of guessing about the geographical characteristics of our planet. Many parts of the world were still obscure and cartography was a bit casino like. The introduction and the usage of adequate navigation tools expanded the horizon for secure travelling. Explorations resulted in shifting boundaries of empirical geographical knowledge and colonization.

In contrast, we now talk about the earth as the global village. We have shrunk our planet virtually thanks to linked communication and information networks. The phrase “long distance phone call” is history. To some with a romantic vision a new virtual world was created parallel to the physical world and was hype named cyberspace. After the big shake out of dot.com companies at the end of the nineties we have come to a new phase of web space evolution. The World Wide Web - who could have ever predicted that - has become the most important function of the Internet.

It's difficult to assess the size and growth of the web in general because different research methods have been used and so studies on this subject come with different results. In either case remarkable is the rapid ‘take off’ and fast initial growth. In 1996 it was estimated that the size of the Web as a whole was about 100,000 sites. Two years later there were nearly 1.5 million sites. By 2000, the public Web had expanded to 2.9 million sites, and two years later, in 2002, to over 3 million sites. In the five years it more than doubled in size.³

¹ Wizards: Mission impossible <<http://www.jrrtolkienpics.com/wizards.html>>

² The Semantic Web is a mesh of information linked up in such a way as to be easily processable by machines, on a global scale. You can think of it as being an efficient way of representing data on the World Wide Web, or as a globally linked database. For more information look to <<http://www.w3.org/DesignIssues/Semantic>>

³ For numbers on size and growth look at <<http://wcp.oclc.org/stats/size.html>>