

Quality of grey literature in the open access era: Privilege and Responsibility

Paola De Castro, Sandra Salinetti
Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Rome (Italy)

Abstract

The privilege recently gained in the dissemination of Grey Literature (GL) through the widespread use of the Internet implies a new level of responsibility for GL authors and issuing organizations. In the past, in fact, only a limited number of copies were produced, generally in-house printed, and the target readers were very well focused and known beforehand. Now in the open access era, greater care should be assured not only to the scientific content of GL, but also to the respect of editorial standards to allow easy readability, understanding and retrieval of the document in the Internet. The differences in the editorial processing of GL documents *versus* articles published in open literature stress the uncertain borders existing between the two channels of publication. In particular, the different levels of technical editing, applied also to non-officially refereed documents, can be compared to the editorial process followed in conventional literature. The long experience in the production of GL by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (the Italian National Institute of Health) allows reflecting on these issues related to GL production, circulation and use. Besides the authors' primary responsibilities, it is important to focus on the educational role of the editorial staff (inside the research institute producing also open literature), actively contributing to guarantee a better quality to all documents issued by the organization.

For correspondence: paola.decastro@iss.it

The grey nuances: from past to present

The concept of Grey Literature (GL) has suffered many changes since the Seminar of York (1978) which set the basis for the discussion on this kind of material in Europe.¹

At present, the awareness of the specific role of GL, within the information transfer process, is no longer questioned. Its importance and usefulness is now widely recognised, whereas in York it was even difficult to find a proper definition for GL. A simple search, through Google, for the term "grey literature" (that once was known only to a small group of specialists and was called with different terms such as report or fugitive literature) gives more than 600,000 scores.

Moreover, today the Internet revolution has affected also GL, while in the First International Conference on GL, held in Amsterdam in 1993, network publishing represented just one of the many issues at stake.²

Yet, some of the characteristics historically associated to this literature are still valid, in particular:

- *Issuing organizations*
They continue to play a fundamental role in the production and dissemination of GL, mainly in the scientific field.
- *Document types*

¹ Alberani V, De Castro P. Grey literature from the York Seminar (UK) of 1978 to the year 2000. *Inspes/* 2001;35(4):236-47.

² First International Conference on Grey Literature. Rai Congress Centre. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. December 13-15, 1993. Conference Proceedings. Amsterdam: *Transatlantic*, 1994.