Grey Literature

Grey Literature is a genre that indicates an article or report that has the appearance of a scholarly research report or study but that is published by an interest group, think tank, for-profit research organization, government commission, or one of several other influential and ideologically driven organizations. Grey literature also includes articles written by scholars that have not yet been published in academic journals.

Author, Audience, Purpose

Authors vary considerably. Many are, in fact, experts and scholars who may or may not be paid for their contributions. Other authors may include paid consultants, government officials/appointees, lobbyists, or organization representatives. The intended audiences for these reports vary but often include policy makers, government contractors, and scholars or experts. The advancement of knowledge about a topic is usually one of several considerations but in some cases may be subordinated to ideological, political, or institutional objectives.

Reliability

Some grey literature sources go through a peer review process, but the quality of this process is sometimes diminished when those reviewing articles have homogeneous interests. There is sometimes an editorial board and/or official process of approval for such publications, but in these cases findings which go against the interests of the funding/publishing organization may be suppressed. Articles are often well documented with a literature review and extensive context. These sources can be very useful but require vigilant background research and critical attention.

Examples

- Reports and studies published by the Brookings Institute, Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, RAND Corporation, Council on Foreign Relations, Cato Institute, ACLU, etc.
- Government reports on original research and reviews of scholarly literature
- Pre-print manuscripts of ongoing scholarly research
- Reports published by intergovernmental bodies like the UN, WTO, World Bank, IMF or IPCC
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Uses in the Research Process

Some government reports and studies published by think tanks, NGOs, and government commissions are of a very high quality, but they require a vigilant, critical eye, since they often represent a single perspective that is narrowly circumscribed by an institutional context or by an ideological orientation. Any evidence drawn from such sources will need to be put into context by discussing the stake that the funding/publishing organization has in the findings. Pre-print manuscripts may be very similar to articles from scholarly journals, but it is important to keep in mind that these articles have not yet been peer-reviewed.

Tips for Identifying Grey Literature

First Page

- Many grey literature sources include a cover page that identifies the organization sponsoring the report or the entity to whom the report was submitted.

Genre

- Many grey literature sources will follow the genre conventions of scholarly literature.

Language

- These sources are often written in language specific to scholars and/or professionals in the field.

Editorial Oversight

- You can usually determine from indicators in the report itself, on the issuing agency’s or organization’s website, or from Google searches what kind of review, editorial oversight, or report approval process may (or may not) have occurred. This information is needed to contextualize the information in the report.
How do I Find Grey Literature?

These frequently appear in Google and Google Scholar searches. They are also usually easily searchable on the websites of sponsoring organizations or government agencies. You might find them mentioned in popular press articles on your topic. Particularly high-profile reports of this nature will be cited in some scholarly literature.