Transcript: What is Grey Literature

Our first question is what is this thing called grey literature. Maybe the best way to answer this is to consider the opposite - what is not grey literature. For some reason this concept of dividing research literature has been arranged by colours which are white and grey. White literature is commercially published literature in two major categories.

The first category is books. Books are generally produced by publishers, sold to members of the public and produced in quantities that can be sold in print runs. In order to sell their books publishers had to develop processes to arrange them in catalogues for booksellers. This led to the international standard book number, a barcode for books and a standardised approach to describing book contents, which gives Amazon a ready made catalogue to display. The other major group that buys books is of course libraries who may also be trying to preserve them. Libraries incorporate elements of the booksellers catalogue to create standardized records for books and add subject headings which retrieve books on the same topic. A defined set of cataloguing rules standardizes the appearance of records and we classify books using the Dewey system to give every book a spot on library shelves. All of this helps with the findability of the book as a form of literature. The key property is standardisation which is required for the commercial element.

The other major category of white literature is the journal and journal article. The same pressures of standardization has led to the development of international indexes to journal articles with defined subject headings. Google Scholar and the University of Melbourne Discovery system combine multiple indexes in to one and remove the duplicated items from your results and this makes journal articles relatively easy to find.

So, over time there has been a standardisation of approach to make all the information about these sources from different publishers findable.

So what if the item you create is not commercially published. Well, that is everything else that is out there. These items exist in many different locations, often in small quantities and some times with no collection of similar items. The primary identifying factor of this grey literature is that there is no real standardisation of approach to collecting it in its entirety or for indexing it in a consistent and replicable way, although various groups are trying to replicate the white literature situation for selected materials. Therefore there is a wide variety of grey literature sources and locations to search dependent on what you are looking for.