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## **The Discussion in the Scientific Literature about Theses and Dissertations: “Are They Still Grey Documents”?**

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### **Abstract:**

*Theses and dissertations, unlike formally published scientific literature, are not included in a system of commercial publication and distribution. For this reason, until then, this documentary typology is characterized as grey literature. They are important research products that represent the original work of graduate students. It is noteworthy that the technological advances and the consequent alterations in the processes of scientific communication implied in the change of space, both of storage and of access, of the Grey Literature, as well as of the theses and dissertations. So, this paper aims to present the discussion about electronic theses and dissertations and Grey Literature. The main observations are that the phenomenon of the creation of national digital libraries of theses and dissertations worldwide, contribute to the greater dissemination, visibility and access to this documentary typology. This fact brings the reflection if they can still be considered as grey documents.*

**Keywords:** Grey Literature, Electronic Theses and Dissertations, Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD).

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## **Introduction**

The Science to be accepted by peers must be communicated. There are several spaces that enable the production, dissemination and use of scientific information, however, it is in universities where there is the highest intensity. As there is an integration between the teaching (training of new researchers) and research (production of scientific knowledge) activities developed by postgraduate programs, a specific type of scientific production gains importance: theses and dissertations.

Theses and dissertations, unlike formally published scientific literature, are not included in a system of commercial publication and distribution. For this reason, until then, this documentary typology is characterized as grey literature. It is important to differentiate grey literature from other literature: research results, published according to the traditional scientific communication model, can be commonly found in information systems, and for this reason this type of information is called white literature. Other sources of information that do not run through the traditional model, known as unconventional, are called grey literature.

When observing some definitions of grey literature identified in the scientific literature, there is in common the mention that this documentary typology is not divulged by formal or conventional channels and, therefore, there is no control of scientific editors. Thus, for a long time the theses and dissertations are traditionally grey documents, forming a type of literature with restricted and difficult access, and its function as a limited scientific communication channel. However, in today's reality, they can already be easily identified and accessed through efforts to create information systems for managing this documentary typology in universities and research institutes. They were then produced and, above all, disseminated electronically. Thus arise the electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs).

Submission of the electronic version of theses and dissertations in information systems was also initiated by Virginia Tech in 1997, at the time the project of the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) was completed. The development of this network has spurred the creation of numerous similar digital libraries around the world. Today there are more than 5,520,000 theses and dissertations disseminated and electronically accessible by NDLTD from more than 50 digital thesis and dissertation libraries in various countries around the world. Noteworthy here is the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD), created in 2002 under the philosophy of Open Archives. more than 110 Brazilian educational and research institutions.

Given the facts and figures about theses and dissertations and their transition to ETDs, it becomes a challenge to fully characterize them as grey literature.

### **The electronic theses and dissertations**

Theses and dissertations are important research products that represent the original work of graduate students. Guided by an expert of the subject being studied, they are scientific productions that accumulate a rich knowledge built during its development.

According to Yiotis (2008), the theses and dissertations of all departments of an institution become part of its library collection. Once approved, students deliver copies of the final print version to the library. However, the author pointed out that, in general, the circulation of these documents in print becomes limited to the university community.

Orera Orera (2003) presented the ambivalent function of theses and dissertations facing the debate of their availability or restriction to the public. The first function is understood as an administrative document presented to obtain an academic degree and whose defense is public, so the document is public and should be made available. On the other hand, the document is an original work of an author which must also be subject to copyright protection rules.

Although theses and dissertations are thus understood also as formal documents to perform a rite as pointed out by Orera Orera (2003), they are very demanding scientific productions in the research of other typologies. Given this, over the years, there is a common movement, especially from libraries to greater dissemination and visibility of theses and dissertations. In line with this movement, advances in information and communication technologies contribute to their greater accessibility.

The term electronic theses and dissertations are nothing more than the digital version of these same documents. Provisioning only in the press version is understood to limit circulation and, as a consequence, has a reduced impact. Not only digitized, these documents were built electronically. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2001) and Bandra (2002) have identified other elements that add to the benefits of ETDs:

- Greater access to information and research improves the quality of theses and dissertations and general knowledge;
- ETDs are avenues for sharing intellectual production because they make the results of graduate programs known;
- Access to theses and dissertations enables the understanding and visualization of the techniques used in their methodologies and that can be reused by other students; Increases student research availability and digital preservation;
- An ETD program introduces digital libraries into the university enabling other projects to flourish;
- Production ETDs make their results known nationally and internationally and ETDs can identify and connect national and international research groups;
- Extensive knowledge of good quality theses and dissertations reinforces college, postgraduate and university programs so that programs can be evaluated by the number of theses and dissertations that are accessible electronically;
- Theses and dissertations are part of the heritage and history of universities. Since they are produced on paper, why not produce them online where they require less storage space?
- In countries where thesis and dissertation writers are publicly funded, their work is expected to become public as well. ETDs are becoming the easiest way to achieve this goal.

Thus, the benefits of electronic theses and dissertations are observed compared to the versions available only in print. Although not mentioned in the points above, the use of hyperlinks, facilitated management and access through information systems, are also pointed out in the literature.

And the intersection with Grey Literature?

It is noteworthy that the technological advances and the consequent alterations in the processes of scientific communication implied in the change of space, both of storage and of access, of the Grey Literature. Years past the York Seminar in 1978, organized by the Commission of the European Communities and the British Library, which is considered a milestone in the discussions of Grey Literature in Europe, the definitions of what would characterize Grey Literature have been re-thought, since the first statements no longer match reality. As a result of these debates was created the European Association for Grey Literature Exploitation (EAGLE), which then developed in 1980 the System for Information on Grey Literature in Europe (SIGLE). SIGLE was a decentralized system that aimed to identify and gather all “grey production” generated by European Community countries in an online database, thus facilitating access to documents. According to Juznic (2010) apud Schopfel (2018), 53 percent of the resources of the former SIGLE database were dissertations produced by 20 different countries.

It has been argued that from the moment the “grey documents” were stored, organized and disseminated through information systems, criteria such as difficulty of access, location, treatment and dissemination should be disregarded. Thus, it is understood the need to redefine the concept of grey literature today. Grey Literature may be made up of documents which, by their nature, do not follow the process of commercial publication, but this does not mean that they do not have wide dissemination and access, since the internet and the automation of systems make it possible to carry out these processes.

Theses and dissertations (such as grey documents) in the current scenario can now be easily identified and accessed through university and research institute information systems. Moreira (2005, p. 60) stated that “today, traditionally grey documents such as theses and dissertations are becoming increasingly visible thanks to the efforts of creating digital libraries of theses and dissertations (...)”. Given this, are they still considered documents in the list of Grey Literature?

In search of this answer, in his work, Schopfel (2018) presents arguments that state that the theses and dissertations are still grey documents and opposes showing the arguments that characterize them as not belonging to this documentary typology. According to the author, “a discussion about grey literature is necessarily a discussion about different topics in LIS, in particular, about acquisition policy and special collections, and also about documents and document typologies, taxonomies, publications and dissemination, business models, the information market, availability, preservation and mediation”. Also, as the author points out in his conclusions, “in the specific environment of ETDs, greyness as defined above should be considered as a transitional phenomenon, as a step or stage in the transition to open science. (...) If by 2020, ETDs should be completely integrated into the emerging open science infrastructures, as open as possible (and just as closed as necessary), easily retrievable and accessible and largely reusable by content mining tools, greyness would no longer be a problem.”

We will see in the following sections the actions for the dissemination, access and visibility of electronic theses and dissertations in the world.

## The emergence of national digital libraries of theses and dissertations in the world

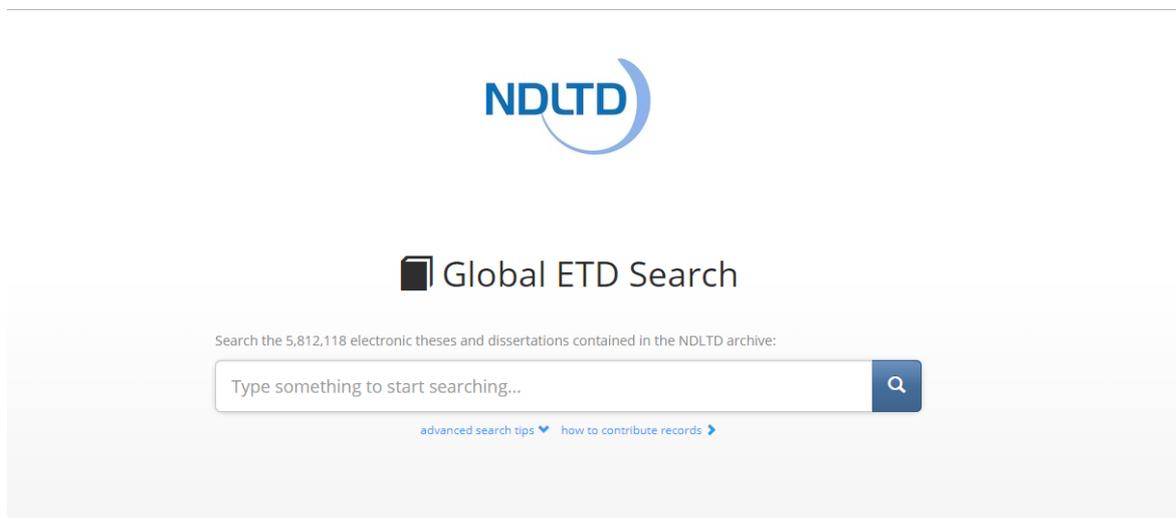
An important impetus for the submission of theses and dissertations in information systems comes from the Virginia Tech initiative in 1997 with the creation of the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD)<sup>1</sup>. Schopfel (2018), quoting McMillan (1999), points out that the network does not use the term grey literature for ETDs. The reason may be that their focus is on formats, workflows, dissemination and access, not on acquisition. Their objective is to achieve the digital transformation of theses and dissertations and to foster their findability and availability on the Web.”

NDLTD acts as an international network that brings together theses and dissertations disseminated by national digital libraries. According to its page, NDLTD aims to:

- To be the leading international organization for the promotion of worldwide ETDs.
- To provide useful and innovative resources, standards, and technology for development of ETD programs.
- To encourage institutions of higher education to use NDLTD resources and participate in NDLTD activities.

It is the largest international initiative of its kind. Through its search engine, NDLTD disseminates more than 5,812,000 electronic theses and dissertations.

Figure 1. Search interface of the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations.

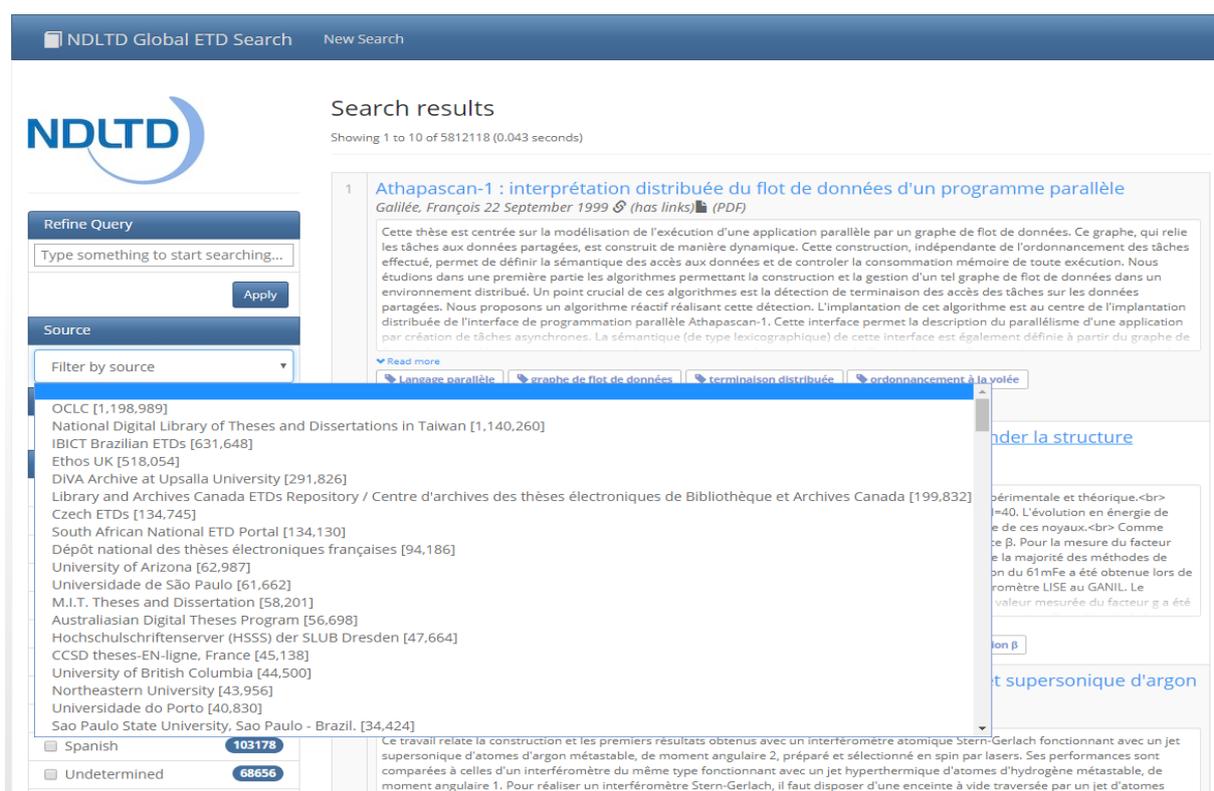


Looking at the other NDLTD issues, the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) catalog holds the largest number of theses and dissertations on the NDLTD portal, followed by Taiwan. We highlight the presence of the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD in third place in volume of disseminated documents).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ndltd.org>

Figure 2. Networks in NDLTD.



Thus, through its search system, NDLTD contributes to facilitate access and promote greater visibility of theses and dissertations worldwide.

### It's in Brazil? The Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD)<sup>2</sup>

Following the movement of creation of national digital libraries of theses and dissertations around the world driven by NDLTD, the Brazilian Institute of Information in Science and Technology (Ibict) launched, in 2002, the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD).

Based on the model presented by NDLTD and, through the use of the Open Archive Initiative Protocol - Protocol Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH), BDTD gathers the electronic theses and dissertations defended in the Brazilian educational and research institutions and by Brazilians abroad and available to society for free and access to its full texts downloadable.

Also, at the beginning of the BDTD project, when there were few systems available for the organization and dissemination of theses and dissertations interoperable with the national node, BDTD, the Theses Electronic Publishing System was developed and transferred to any teaching and research institution. and Dissertations (TEDE). Also, the Brazilian Standard for Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Description (MTD-BR) was also developed and passed on to ensure that BDTD had the minimum description of theses and dissertations (author, advisor, title, date of defense, institution, subject, abstract,...), also facilitating information retrieval.

<sup>2</sup> bddd.ibict.br

Seventeen years after its creation, BDTD counts on the participation of more than 110 Brazilian public and private teaching and research institutions, disseminating more than 530 thousand theses and dissertations and with an average of 20 thousand daily hits. It expresses one of the main systems of Ibict and Brazil regarding the management of open access scientific documents.

### **Final considerations**

Given the initial definitions of Grey Literature, it is observed that the theses and dissertations when still available only in print are characterized as belonging to this documentary typology. This by not go through the commercial flow and with ease of identification and access. However, when access and dissemination are facilitated and, in the new context, some theses and dissertations are also commercialized, the scenario becomes different. This phenomenon is called the "greyness" of literature, approaching the other non-grey typology.

The phenomenon of creating digital libraries of theses and dissertations worldwide is not a more reversible process. With each new time, one observes the importance and high impact of bringing these accessible documents to society at large.

Perhaps, as Schopfel (2018) points out, theses and dissertations can be placed on a distinct list of Grey Literature. However, in a larger context of scientific research, the features that characterize Grey Literature, such as accessibility, identification and sharing need to be debated.

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