

*Satellite Meeting: Grey Literature: Scholarly Communication in a Digital World*

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## **Expanding the Universe: Social Media as Grey Literature**

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### **Abstract:**

*This exploratory paper looks at different aspects of social media as grey literature. The sections are organized by the questions that drive the exploration:*

- 1. Is social media a type of grey literature?*
- 2. Why should libraries focus on unique collections of social media as grey literature?*
- 3. What are the challenges around collecting social media as part of grey literature collections?*
- 4. What does it mean for librarians for the grey literature universe to include social media?*

*To illustrate the questions, this paper uses examples primarily from Twitter in relation to current events in Venezuela.*

**Keywords:** social media, digital media, Twitter, Venezuela

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This exploratory paper looks at different aspects of social media as grey literature. The sections are organized by the questions that drive this exploration using examples primarily from Twitter in relation to current events in Venezuela.

### **IS SOCIAL MEDIA A TYPE OF GREY LITERATURE?**

The first question of whether or not social media can be categorized as grey literature depends mainly on the author of the content. The Twelfth International Conference on Grey Literature in Prague in 2010 arrived at the following definition:

*Grey literature stands for manifold document types produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats that are protected by intellectual property rights, of sufficient quality to be collected and preserved by libraries and institutional repositories, but not controlled by commercial publishers; i.e. where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body.*

The examples of social media considered in this paper were all produced by governmental entities where publishing is not the primary activity. Gelfand and Lin's 2013 article was titled "Grey literature: format agnostic" and they stress that greyness is not dependent upon format.<sup>1</sup> In light of this, if government agencies or ministries, elected officials, or other inter-governmental organizations publish social media content, then it can be considered grey literature according to the above definitions. Screen shots of tweets relating to current events in Venezuela illustrate the concepts discussed below.

### **1.1 Is it important to differentiate between social media that disseminate grey literature published elsewhere and that which is itself unique grey literature?**

A corollary to the first question is whether it is useful to distinguish between different types of social media published by a governmental entity. For example, a governmental entity can use social media to publicize reports that points users to a URL that allows them to read or download content. Is the social media posting about such a report grey literature or is it a tool to in service of grey literature?

There are some social media postings by governmental entities that may include an announcement that has no equivalent in the traditional media of television, radio, or newspaper. Such unique social media resources have been appearing in Venezuela.

Some background on key events in Venezuela over the past few years is necessary to illuminate the following examples of social media. The government of Nicolás Maduro declared him the winner of the May 2018 presidential elections although the Venezuelan opposition along with many countries around the world considered them to be undemocratic and therefore illegitimate.<sup>2</sup> In January 2019, Maduro's began his contested second presidential term while the National Assembly elected Juan Guaidó as its president.<sup>3</sup> The National Assembly is the Venezuelan legislature that is often described as the last remaining democratic institution in the country and a critical component of the movement opposing Maduro.<sup>4</sup> To date, over 50 nations recognize Guaidó as the legitimate interim President of Venezuela until democratic elections can be held.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Gelfand and Anthony Lin, "Grey literature: format agnostic yet gaining recognition in library collections," *Library Management*, Vol. 34, Issue 6/7, 2013, pp. 538-550, DOI:10.1108/LM-03-2013-0022.

<sup>2</sup> See Al-Jazeera, "Venezuela elections 2018: A look at the key points," May 20, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/venezuela-elections-2018-key-points-180518100733025.html>. See also Tom Phillips, "Venezuela elections: Maduro wins second term," *The Guardian*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/21/venezuela-elections-nicolas-maduro-wins-second-term>.

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, "Venezuelans 'under Maduro dictatorship' - Juan Guaidó," January 29, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-47040902>.

<sup>4</sup> Deutsche Welle, "Venezuela congress names new leader, calls Nicolas Maduro illegitimate," June 1, 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3B54P>.

<sup>5</sup> Megan Specia, "What Is Happening in Venezuela and Why It Matters," *The New York Times*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/30/world/americas/venezuela-crisis.html>.

On April 29, 2019, a new Twitter handle was created to be the “National Communication Center” of the Venezuelan presidency. The Twitter handle @Presidencia\_VE was created by the opposition led by Juan Guaidó. The image below shows what a user would see upon visiting this Twitter page:



*A Twitter account titled the “National Communication Center” in Spanish established by the Venezuelan opposition, led by Juan Guaidó, who is considered by many countries to the legitimate interim president.*

Upon creation, the first tweet of April 29, 2019 included an announcement of the account’s creation in order to “guarantee access to information that is true, free, and opportune for citizens and the international community” (all translations are by the author from the original Spanish). The document named a journalist as the coordinator of the “National Communication Center.” The announcement ends with “follow us on Twitter and Instagram” followed by the entity associated with the handle: “Official account of the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.” The image of the document of the initial tweet can be seen below:



*Juan Guaidó’s first tweet establishes the Twitter handle @Presidencia\_VE as the official institution of information from Venezuela’s legitimate government, also known as the opposition to President Nicolás Maduro.*

Leaving aside the political debate of who is the head of the Venezuelan nation, this tweet is different from most others. This tweet does not reproduce media found elsewhere although later tweets may. If grey literature is format agnostic, then it is the content that matters most for classification. Thus, a unique social media posting like this one is standard grey literature in a new format. If such social media is indeed grey literature, should libraries be collecting it in order to document governmental activity the way other types of grey literature are collected?

## **2 WHY SHOULD LIBRARIES FOCUS ON UNIQUE COLLECTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS GREY LITERATURE?**

Gelfand and Lin wrote, “In this day and age of budget reductions, the importance of grey literature is becoming more critical as academic and research institutions are depending on a wider source of alternative, yet authoritative literature and information resources.”<sup>6</sup> This comes

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<sup>6</sup> Gelfand and Lin, p. 547.

from the section on science and data but it could easily apply to many other fields of study. Does this mean that libraries collecting grey literature should follow suit in documenting social media as “alternative yet authoritative literature and information sources”?

According to an interview with Michael Camilleri, director of the Inter-American Dialogue, “The Venezuelan government going back years now has essentially co-opted or silenced any independent media in the country. So the Internet has become an essential source of information for anybody who doesn't want to take government propaganda as truth.” If there is a democratic revolution in Venezuela, Camilleri maintains that it will be one that “was very much organized and inspired by these” social media networks.<sup>7</sup> Are libraries especially bound to provide access to information that citizens may otherwise be denied? Juan Guaidó’s tweet below reminds librarians that social media is part of the greater universe of information, which is one of the pillars of a democratic society: “..we also defend democracy through social media...we disseminate information through this new official channel, this window to freedom.”



*Juan Guaidó’s tweet from April 29, 2019 states that “we also defend democracy through social media.”*

<sup>7</sup> Drew Harwell and Mariana Zuñiga, “Social media remains key to Venezuela’s opposition, despite attempts to block it,” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2019, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/04/30/social-media-remains-key-venezuelas-opposition-despite-efforts-block-it/?utm\\_term=.0be2f0991702](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/04/30/social-media-remains-key-venezuelas-opposition-despite-efforts-block-it/?utm_term=.0be2f0991702).

Threats to democracy add urgency to collecting social media which may be one the unique “alternative yet authoritative” information sources that documents Venezuela’s historical struggle for posterity. An additional pressure is that no one can say how long platforms like Twitter will endure.

Concerns about the continuity of social media published by governmental entities is not limited to Venezuela. Gelfand and Lin wrote that “one example of the reincarnation of grey literature...is the strident move of government publications to the internet...It is alarming that a huge part of government information could be unusable due to a software update.”<sup>8</sup> This describes governments around the world using social media as well as other online platforms. There are certain kinds of information which governments are obligated to publish and retain on behalf of their citizens. Do libraries share in this responsibility to provide citizens with access to unique grey literature created by their governments?

Any grey literature collection that includes social media will necessarily be global in scope as all governments broker relationships with other nations. For example, on April 30, 2019, Guaidó translated a tweet from President Donald Trump of the United States voicing his support for the Venezuelan opposition:



*Juan Guaidó retweeted and translated a tweet regarding Venezuela from the President of the United States’ Twitter account.*

If one president’s sentiments are considered grey content, then the retweet by Venezuelan “National Communication Center” is doubly so. A second example comes from the Organization of American States: “It is urgent that the government of the President in Charge @jguaido provide solutions for members of the military who are loyal to the legitimate government who find themselves outside of Venezuela.”

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<sup>8</sup> Gelfand and Lin, p. 545.



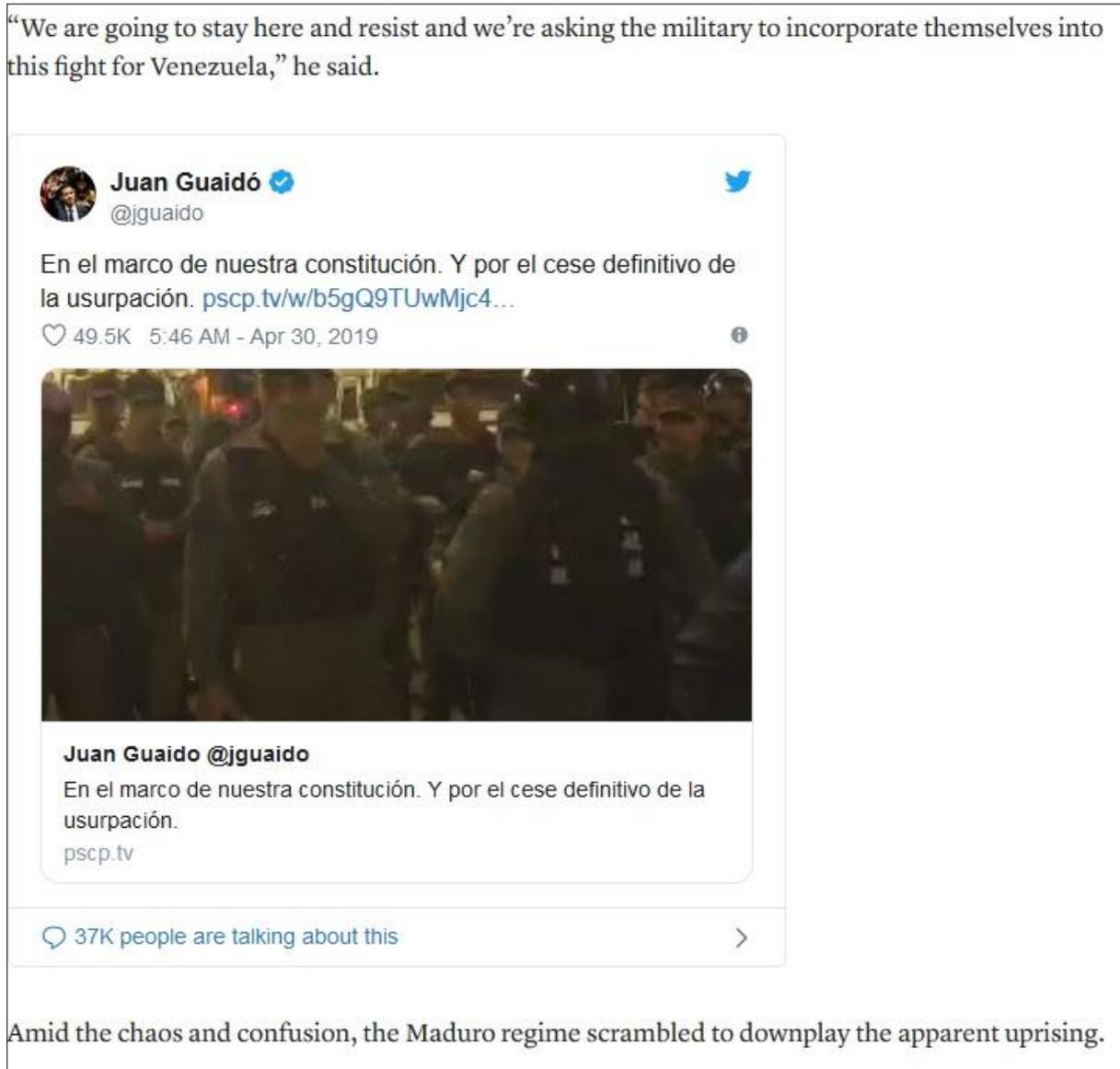
*The Secretary General of the Organization of American States tweeted about his desires for Venezuelan military members who have fled the country.*

The Organization of American States is an inter-governmental entity and, thus, it is a creator of grey literature in the form of social media. Does the globally connected character of social media make it unique in the grey literature universe and therefore especially worthy of collecting?

Another reason to focus on collecting social media for grey literature collections might be that it documents important historical trends. In their research on parliamentary use of social media, Giraldo-Luque, Vallegas-Simón, and Carniel Bugs identify several studies that show social media as an important part of contemporary political activist movements, citing authors such as Anduiza, 2014; Bennett y Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2012; Fuchs, 2014, Lindgren y Lundstrom, 2011.<sup>9</sup> Can libraries afford to have gaps in their collections that document historical and political movements of the twenty-first century world?

<sup>9</sup> Santiago Giraldo-Luque, Isabel Vallegas-Simón, and Ricardo Carniel Bugs, ¿Cómo usan los parlamentos las redes sociales? Un estudio comparado y longitudinal aplicado a países de América Latina y Europa (2010, 2015 y 2017), *Revista Latina De Comunicación Social*, 72, 2017, p. 1,281.

Below is an example from a newspaper article April 30, 2019, which references a tweet from Juan Guaidó:



*Screenshot of a Miami Herald article that includes the Twitter video posted by Juan Guaidó*

This screenshot is not directly from the Twitter page but from the newspaper that references the video tweet in the body of the article.<sup>10</sup> Readers could click on the link and watch the video of Guaidó asking the people to rise up from La Carlota military base. Therefore, the tweet was a political statement that was subsequently discussed in other media but was first announced via Twitter. Can library historical collections include grey literature about political protests without also collecting the original social media that sparked the protest?

<sup>10</sup> Jim Wyss, “Venezuelan violence escalates as Maduro regime fights for political survival,” *Miami Herald*, April 30 2019, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article229837409.html>.

### **3 WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AROUND COLLECTING SOCIAL MEDIA AS PART OF GREY LITERATURE COLLECTIONS?**

Gelfand and Lin summarized the most formidable challenge for libraries collecting grey literature: “to organize this new type of medium into a coherent and easily findable format for future researchers to retrieve the events when they happened. Much of the video footage, tweets, Facebook entries, and blog postings are scattered all over the internet and it is hard to corral everything into a coherent format to benefit future academic researchers and also into a system that can make retrieval of these events in an organized fashion” (Grey literature: format agnostic, 2013, 547). What can libraries do to organize such a scattered universe of grey literature?

The first step is to understand the nature of the challenge to collecting grey social media. Several factors can limit a library’s ability to collect comprehensive grey social media. Giraldo-Luque, Vallegas-Simón, and Carniel Bugs note the algorithms that can limit the discovery of resources, the diversity of accessible resources, and navigation of the web.<sup>11</sup> In places like Venezuela, these concerns are more extreme, for example, “internet-monitoring groups said CANTV, the state-run Internet provider through which most people access the Web, appeared to block or restrict access to a range of websites, including Twitter and Instagram.”<sup>12</sup> It is unlikely that libraries in Venezuela can collect critical social media of current events so does this responsibility fall to concerned libraries in democracies that retain fuller internet access? Can any library really say that it has completely unrestricted access to online resources? How will such internet restrictions affect grey social collections in the future?

Gelfand and Lin wrote “the challenge within the scientific community is determining a central location for grey literature publications as much of the literature is be scattered about throughout cyberspace and also hidden in internal networks, personal computers and individual web sites that are not always discoverable by indexing agents or webcrawlers.”<sup>13</sup> Again, this challenge affects many fields beyond science. How can libraries strategically collect grey literature that does not depend entirely on web crawlers?

The universe of social media is enormous and ever-expanding but there are strategies to limit where to look for valuable grey literature. Research by Giraldo-Luque, Vallegas-Simón, and Carniel Bugs showed that from 2010-2017, Twitter was the most-used platform by legislatures in nine countries: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Sweden, Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>14</sup> Not all social media platforms are of equal value for grey literature sources but more studies are needed. How can libraries use academic studies like the one above to strategically focus their precious resources on identifying unique and relevant grey social media for their collections?

### **4 WHAT DOES EXPANDING THE GREY LITERATURE UNIVERSE TO INCLUDE SOCIAL MEDIA MEAN FOR LIBRARIANS?**

If certain kinds of social media are to be included in grey literature collections, librarians will necessarily be impacted. Appleton and Tattersall remind librarians to include social media as part of larger searches for grey literature resources. They writes, “most formal research requires

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<sup>11</sup> Giraldo-Luque, Vallegas-Simón, and Carniel Bugs, p. 1,280.

<sup>12</sup> Harwell and Zuñiga.

<sup>13</sup> Gelfand and Lin, p. 548

<sup>14</sup> Giraldo-Luque, Vallegas-Simón, and Carniel Bugs, p. 1,292.

a constructed approach to sourcing and managing supporting research, but tools such as Twitter gives real-time access to ‘grey web literature’ that may also add to the research findings.”<sup>15</sup> Experience searching for “grey” social media is important to move past unidirectional publishing. Aloia and Naughton conducted a study and found “that many researchers disseminate their findings through social media, but rarely do they look for resources using social media.”<sup>16</sup> This means that people are disseminating potentially valuable resources on social media but then leaving social media out of their searches. Librarians are reminded that publishing on social media on behalf of their grey literature collections only partially leverages the power of social media; can librarians also identify ways to find, search, and collect social media in order to better serve their collections and institutions?

Including social media in grey literature collections can potentially support larger movements around open access. Gelfand and Lin found that “Libraries over the last few years have also been cataloging and processing content which is ‘free’ where no purchase is associated with acquiring or subscribing to it. This trend reinforces the ‘Open Access’ movement.”<sup>17</sup> If open access is an important value for libraries, can collecting grey social media also support broader practices of open publishing in a virtuous cycle.

Taking on social media may require more training for librarians. Appleton and Tattersall wrote that “being expected to make full use of social media technologies available in order to deliver basic and advanced services requires a level of technical expertise on the part of the library and the information professional...advanced functionality such as research support and analytical work clearly demand a high level of expertise from those library and information staff involved.”<sup>18</sup> Becoming proficient in the use of social media platforms which are varied and ever-evolving will require librarians to learn new skill sets. As Gelfand and Lin wrote in 2013, “education has also evolved into lifelong learning” and this trend appears to continue.<sup>19</sup> Can these valuable skills of savvy social media use and lifelong learning be passed on to patrons? How can these skills be used in service of those who have less access to technology and limited opportunities to learn in a safe environment?

While lifelong learning sounds like a lovely ideal, in reality it requires patience, persistence, and the willingness to occasionally look foolish. Can librarians learn to be equally comfortable with the role of student and teacher, beginner and expert, creator, consumer, and curator of grey social media? Pursuing new skills has its rewards. Gelfand and Lin found that “the experiences of those that have welcomed grey literature can demonstrate the great potential of making less used documents more visible through emerging technologies.”<sup>20</sup> Social media may be one way to give visibility to grey literature documents through a readily accessible platform and therefore, more useful. The social media skills that librarian develop can also be used in service of the library, his or her lifelong career learning, and all patrons. In light of these potential rewards, is it worth expanding the grey literature universe to include social media with all of its challenges?

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<sup>15</sup> Leo Appleton and Andy Tattersall, “How librarians can harness the power of social media for the benefit of their users,” *Multimedia Information & Technology*, November 2015, Vol. 41, Issue 4, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Danielle Aloia and Robin Naughton, “Share #GreyLit: Using Social Media to Communicate Grey Literature,” *The Grey Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue 2, summer 2016, p.97.

<sup>17</sup> Gelfand and Lin, p. 540.

<sup>18</sup> Appleton and Tattersall, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Gelfand and Lin, p. 541.

<sup>20</sup> Gelfand and Lin, abstract.

## 5 CONCLUSION

To summarize the questions in this exploratory paper:

- Can social media published by governmental entities be categorized as grey literature?
  - Is it important to distinguish between social media that disseminates grey literature and social media that is uniquely grey?
- Why should libraries focus on unique collections of grey social media?
  - Do libraries follow other fields of study that depend on “alternative yet authoritative sources” such as social media?
  - Are libraries especially bound to document grey social media when democratic freedoms are restricted in parts of the world?
  - Are libraries especially bound to document grey social media when it is unclear how long the publishing platforms will endure?
  - Does the global character of grey social media make it especially worthy of collecting?
  - Can libraries afford historical gaps in their 21<sup>st</sup> century political collections, in particular if social media is the original or primary medium for announcements?
- What are the challenges around collecting grey social media?
  - What can libraries do to organize a scattered universe of grey literature?
  - Does collecting responsibility fall to libraries in democracies that retain less restricted internet access? If all internet access includes some restrictions, what does this mean for the future of grey social media collections?
  - How can libraries build grey literature collections without depending on web crawlers?
  - How can libraries use academic studies to strategically build grey social media collections?
- What does expanding the grey literature universe to include social media mean for librarians?
  - Can librarians also identify ways to find, search, and collect social media to better serve their collections and institutions?
  - Can collecting grey social media support the broader open access movement?
  - Can librarians become lifelong learners and pass these skills onto their patrons?
  - Is it worth expanding the grey literature universe to include social media with all of its challenges and demands for new skills?

While the answers to these questions continue to evolve, it is clear that librarians have a role to play in every part of the grey literature universe.

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