

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

Access to Medical Knowledge: Libraries, Digitization, and the Public good. By Frances K. Groen. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2007. 270 pages (soft cover). ISBN-13 978-0810852723. US\$55.00.

When selecting a nonfiction book to read, regardless of topic, we do so in the hope of learning something new, filling in gaps in our current knowledge of the book's subject, or acquiring new perspectives on what we already know. The good news is that it is possible to accomplish all three of those goals by reading Frances K. Groen's *Access to Medical Knowledge: Libraries, Digitization, and the Public Good*. The bad news is that because so much of her material is irrelevant and haphazardly organized, and the book as a whole is so poorly edited, if edited at all, it requires a great deal of perseverance and determination on the part of the reader to stay interested in what Groen has to say.

The book starts off promisingly enough. In the first chapter, Groen asserts her thesis that information should be viewed "as 'public goods' in the way that public education and public highways are public goods." To that end, she introduces her intention to demonstrate how medical librarians—through adherence to what she identifies as the three core values of librarianship: "providing access to information to all who need to use it... the promotion of literacy and the preservation of the accumulated wisdom of the past"—attempt to serve the public good in the digital age. Her topic is timely and merits serious discussion, but rather than sustaining her audience's interest by taking advantage of the momentum she establishes in her opening chapter, Groen frustrates her own purpose and the reader's patience by veering off into a tedious, 138-page exploration of the history of medical librarianship, the Medical Library Association (MLA), and the development of the electronic age. Although some background information is helpful in framing her argument, most of the details she provides in parts I through III of the book are highly tangential, if not downright irrelevant, to the topic of providing access to information as it relates to the public good.

One wonders, for instance, why she felt it necessary to include what is, with the exception of a few sentences and two paragraphs, an almost verbatim reprint of her twice published, nine-page article on William Osler, George Milbry Gould, and Margaret Ridley Charlton, the three credited founders of the organization that eventually evolved into the MLA.¹ Gratuitously inserted as it is, this biographical digression fascinates only to the extent that it arouses curiosity as to why Groen treats the memory of the two male founders with nearly obsequious reverence but takes multiple opportunities to zero in on unflattering facets of Charlton's personality as reported by her contemporaries. What any of this reprinted material (which is freely available on PubMed

Central) has to do with the digitization of health information and the public good the author never makes clear.

More destructive to her purpose than the frequent inclusion of irrelevant information is Groen's failure throughout much of the book to logically organize her material. Zig-zagging from one topic to another within her paragraphs, she exhausts and confuses the reader with her inability to stay focused. Also confusing is her poor handling of the chronology of events. Nowhere is this more evident than in chapter 6, "Digitization and the Internet: a revolutionary context for libraries." Her habit of jumping backward and forward in time throughout her discussion, sometimes without providing dates, makes it difficult to keep track of what happened when and how one event may have influenced another. An illustrated timeline as an adjunct to the text would help tremendously where words fail.

Groen's all-too-frequent inappropriate placement of material further diminishes her ability to educate and influence her audience. She distracts by inserting into her discussion parenthetical information that should be relegated to end-of-chapter notes. On the other hand, she tends to use the notes to house information that would serve both her discussion and the reader's understanding better had it been incorporated into her main text. Having to turn to the notes for information that provides the necessary context hinders one's ability to make sense of her text and contributes significantly to the overall difficulty of reading this book.

Another drawback to her writing, which diligent editing would have caught and corrected, is the author's tendency to introduce the names of people within a discussion without explaining who they are and what their contributions were. For instance, on page 81 she refers to the "remarkable talents" of Eugene Garfield, but she neglects to further elaborate on those talents or how they relate to her discussion of a "new method of producing the *Index Medicus*." Nor is her reference on page 128 to the "writings of Scott Adams" ever explained. It's anyone's guess whether Groen assumes that her reading audience is already familiar with the works of such authors or whether she simply never got around to writing a subsequent draft in which all would be made clear.

Because of the pace of developments in the universe of electronic resources, it comes as no surprise that by the time a book is published some references to specific resources become outdated. However, given that Grateful Med has been unavailable since 2001, and the Brandon-Hill list ceased publication in mid-2004, Groen's references to them as currently available resources (pages 153 and 168–169, respectively) can only be understood as her failure to carefully review for currency the material that she chose to include from old notes or prior publications. Regardless of their origins, these two references constitute inexcusable editorial oversights in a book with a 2007 publication date.

¹Frances K. Groen. Three who made an association: I. Sir William Osler, 1849–1919 II. George Milbry Gould, 1848–1922 III. Margaret Ridley Charlton, 1858–1931 and the founding of the Medical Library Association, Philadelphia, 1898. *Bull Med Libr Assoc*. 1996 Jul;84(3):311–9; and *Bull Med Libr Assoc*. 1998 Apr;86(2):183–91.

The book is not totally without merit, improving noticeably in the part IV chapters on the economics of publishing, open access, and copyright. The chapter on copyright is by far the best written. Here the author finally succeeds in presenting her material in an organized manner.

Moreover, she provides valuable insights into the reasons librarians face frustrating dilemmas in trying to adhere to their core values to serve the public good while simultaneously attempting to remain in compliance with confusing and fuzzy laws and highly restrictive electronic-resources licensing agreements. However, the last few chapters are not so meritorious that they justify the book's purchase or the effort needed to appreciate what it has to offer.

Although it is obvious that Groen spent a great deal of time gathering her facts, it is equally obvious that she spent little or no time reworking her material for relevancy, effect, or readability. As a result, *Access to medical knowledge* is a disappointing endeavor by a person who has deservedly

been honored for her many contributions to the librarian profession. Far better writing than is found in this book is expected from the co-winner of the 2001 American Library Association (ALA) Blackwell Scholarship Award for authoring that year's outstanding publication on collection development and from the 2004 recipient of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) Award for Distinguished Service to Research Librarianship. It comes as both a surprise and a letdown, therefore, that Groen's latest publication cannot be counted among the noteworthy accomplishments of her career.

Marybeth Gaudette

*Prince Albert Parkland Health Region (PAPHR) Library
Victoria Hospital
1200 - 24th Street West
Prince Albert, SK S6V 5T4, Canada
E-mail: mgaudette@paphr.sk.ca*