

Chicago University Graduate Library Conference

# A FORUM ON THE *Public Library Inquiry*

*The Conference at the University of Chicago  
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### Final Comments, by Robert D. Leigh, Director, The Public Library Inquiry

I think it is fair to say that trade publishers in the United States have as little information about the needs and the wants of their customers as any other national industry. Most of the reliable information they now have comes to them from the so-called subsidiary distributors—mainly the major book clubs and the reprinters of paper-bound books. This is partly because the publishers generally cannot afford extensive market research projects, while the great distributors can. One of the consequences of this is that the needs of the distributors play a disproportionately large and steadily growing role in publishers' list making. These distributors are getting to know more and more about the kinds of books they can sell in huge quantities with a minimum of risk; that is how they define their needs, and those are the needs they effectively communicate to the publishers. I urge you to realize that in so far as the book needs of the public libraries differ from those of the book clubs and the cheap reprinters the libraries can make their needs known to the publishers with a reasonable expectation that these needs will be better filled than they are now.

#### CONCLUSION

It is my belief that the communication of the libraries' book needs to the publishers of books is a responsibility of the libraries, not of the publishers; it is my belief, moreover, that the libraries are in a far better position to find out and to disclose their needs than the publishers are of finding out the libraries' needs for themselves. The publishers have not the facilities or the incentive, for example, for discovering which of the books they sold to large wholesalers have been resold to libraries. The libraries, on the other hand, know which books they have bought, which they desired, but could not buy, which circulated best, and which were in the greatest demand. They certainly should have the facilities and the incentive to mobilize that knowledge and to communicate it to the source of their supply.

## *Government Publications for the Citizen, by James I. McCamy*

DISCUSSION BY JEROME K. WILCOX, LIBRARIAN, CITY COLLEGE LIBRARY, NEW YORK CITY

McCamy's *Government Publications for the Citizen* is a comprehensive study with many challenging recommendations. Much emphasis upon many of the acute problems of indexing and distribution of government publications, which many of us have been struggling with for years, will be found therein. Unfortunately, the study is centered "on the publications themselves, their purposes, their content, and their actual function, as a means of communication between the Government and its citizen." In a sense, therefore, the study is one-sided in that government methods and procedures are forcibly challenged, but little or no comment is found concerning the public libraries' methods and procedures in dealing with government documents. The assumption might follow that only the Government is at fault, although I believe it might be better to assume that the one-sided picture is the result of limitations on the study itself.

THE LIBRARY ASPECT OF THE PROBLEM      Public library methods and procedures should have been critically examined, and suggestions for possible improvement or change should have been made—or has there been complete endorsement as it is? For instance, can one assume that the public libraries are adequate in every respect to receive, to house, to give public service in the field of government publications? Would the

reasonable to expect libraries, including depository libraries, to pay printing and paper costs of checklists and indexes if the Government pays the cost of compilation? In the case of the discontinued *Biennial Document Catalog*, the Government invested \$200 in each copy, but sold each at \$8. There are those who think that the Government should pay the entire bill, both compilation and printing costs. If subscribers, principally libraries, including depository libraries, were not paying the full subscription rate, the Library of Congress could not publish the *Cumulative Catalog of Library of Congress Printed Cards*. When the *Monthly Catalog* finally becomes a complete checklist with the comprehensive inclusion of field agencies' publications, it should be well worth many times its present subscription rate to libraries. Its greatly expanded subject index as well will make it no longer necessary for libraries to flood their public card catalogues with thousands of analytics for government publications.

With regard to distribution, if agencies and Congressmen should surrender all rights to free distribution (including that to constituents) to some central clearing agency, such as the Superintendent of Documents Office, for free distribution to libraries only, it is possible that insofar as single copies per title are concerned, every public library might receive all Federal publications free. Unfortunately, McCamy's study is without any cost studies of this free-while-the-supply-lasts distribution versus probable actual costs for free distribution of Government publications to libraries through a central clearing agency. Will agencies or Congressmen surrender their rights to free distribution? Can the taxpayer finance one more drain on the public treasury if they do not? At least one thing is certain. The present depository library system needs complete overhauling, and the responsibilities of a depository library must be clearly defined. Probably a limited regional system of complete, or "all" depository libraries is called for. Probably,

also, certain areas of government publications should be definitely designated as free to all libraries on request.

Libraries are certainly among the best means the Government might use to inform the public of its activities and projects. This does not necessarily mean that all government publications, including checklists and indexes, should be supplied to all libraries without charge. In any free distribution of items, however, libraries should always be given preference. Libraries, large and small, have been paying the H. W. Wilson Company a service basis charge for periodical indexes for years. Therefore, as long as libraries which are not designated depository libraries are able to purchase government publications at a pro rata printing cost per copy, they are still receiving a larger return for each dollar spent than from any other type of material purchased by them.

DISCUSSION BY ROY B. EASTIN, SUPERINTENDENT OF DOCUMENTS, UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

Any survey of government publications inevitably becomes a study of problems—problems encountered by the various publishing levels of government, problems of potential users, and problems of librarians, who are the middlemen between the publishers and the potential users.

James L. McCamy's report, *Government Publications for the Citizen*, is certainly no exception. He has done an excellent job of concisely presenting the essentials in the field and of pointing up the principal areas where improvement is necessary.

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE REPORT I should like to spend most of the time available to me developing answers to four questions which naturally arise from reading Mr. McCamy's book.

orders. No promotional campaign was undertaken, and no "follow-up" was made.

To retest the potential interest of librarians in promoting sales, the Superintendent of Documents prepared a poster advertising ten best-selling publications. Early in July, 1949, each public library was offered a copy of the poster for display in the library. To date 1,554 libraries have agreed to display the poster. In addition to listing ten publications, with the prices of each, the poster offers a free price list of publications on hobbies.

The discount policy has also been liberalized for libraries which desire to stock publications for resale. The discount is now allowed on all orders for publications to be sold to the public.

**CONCLUSION** Mr. McCamy has pointed out many ways in which librarians can contribute to a better understanding and a greater utilization of government documents by potential readers. He has also pointed out improvements and reforms which the various levels of Government should make to perfect their publishing programs. Probably the greatest improvements will come in those areas where librarians and government officials work together and establish a basic understanding of each other's problems and limitations. In the Division of Public Documents of the Government Printing Office the very helpful co-operation extended by the library associations and by individual librarians has made possible accomplishments which would have been considered impossible a decade ago. With librarians and interested government agencies united in a common effort, many of the broad and long range proposals found in the McCamy report may be realized in the near future.

REPLY TO THE DISCUSSANTS, BY JAMES L. MCCAMY, PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

This battery of papers reminds me of the Fred Allen radio show in which he occasionally had an author meet his critics. The participants talked about different things and rode their own hobbies, just as we are talking about different things.

**THE PURPOSE OF THE REPORT** Before going any further, I should explain how I happen to be represented here at all. It may answer some of the comments made by the critics. The Public Library Inquiry was designed, as I understand it, to look at the public library as an institution in American affairs, to see how it had used its talents in the process of communication among free men, to discover ways in which the library as an institution could serve the nation better.

The Inquiry was not expected to deal with the specialized techniques of librarianship. If it had been much concerned with the inner workings of libraries, it would have employed trained librarians to write its reports. On the contrary, to make the kind of social investigation it was expected to make, it hired people from other fields to look at the library in relation to those fields, such as music, public opinion, government, and government publications.

We approached our work, in other words, from the standpoint of observers who looked at the library as a public service, but we are not experts in library techniques. I happen to be a journeyman political scientist, with about equal experience as a teacher and as a Federal official. As a Federal official however, I never had any intimate responsibility for publications or libraries; no closer dealing, in fact, than seeing that we had an information staff to do technical work of librarianship or in one happy instance seeing installed as librarian of the



Department of Agriculture, Mr. Ralph Shaw, who was in this audience in 1938 when I gave one of the lectures in the Conference. My work in the Government was principally in the administration of international economic programs, starting with agricultural concerns in 1939, going through lend-lease during the war, and ending with efforts to adjust to postwar world trade.

As far as knowing about libraries goes, as a graduate student in this university I long ago learned to stay out of the stacks and leave such matters to my betters, the trained librarians who can navigate those caverns without unwinding a ball of cord behind them to guide their return. Even today, with the privileges of full professorship and the indulgence of young ladies behind the desk for a gray-haired faculty member, I still stay out of the stacks. The young ladies can tell me what's back there—or more likely what is not back there—much quicker than I could learn it for myself.

The point is this. My report on government publications and their distribution through public libraries should be read, not as a study in library techniques, but as a study of the role libraries play and could play in making available to citizens the publications of government. It is intended to present an accurate statement of the present role libraries play, though not a statement that is so thorough and detailed as Mr. Wilcox seems to have expected. It is also intended to propose some ways to make libraries more active as channels of communication between government and citizen.

I think it is accurate and sensible for what it is—no more and no less. It is a transient piece, designed to tell the Public Library Inquiry the general picture with some recommendations for change. Like hundreds of other reports prepared for one inquiry or another, it may not make the least difference in practice, or, on the other hand, it may give some reader an idea that will take shape in action.

I said earlier that we are all talking about different things. In the main, it seems to me, Mr. Wilcox is talking about the book he would have written and the book he is infinitely better qualified to write. I hope he will write it. If the library's methods and procedures in handling government publications are to be criticized, he is the man to do it. That was not my assignment.

POPULAR USE OF GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS One other general comment is relevant to Mr. Wilcox's criticism. He appears to be thinking of this whole subject primarily in terms of the specialized use of government publications instead of the common, popular use of government publications in public libraries that owe a duty to ordinary readers. This emphasis on the special nature of government output is typical of the literature on the subject. It reflects a preoccupation of the librarians who specialize in handling government publications, even to the point of distinguishing them as "documents." When Mr. Wilcox complains that we have not reported the number of librarians who are skilled in the special handling of government documents, I can only reply that for our purpose in the Inquiry we should challenge any system that requires the presence of specialized librarians.

Certainly it is not my intention to disparage specialists in the reference use of government documents in their proper place. As a faculty member, I use the documents room of the Wisconsin State Historical Library more than any other section. It is the greatest professional pleasure to know that the very competent staff there can pull out official information on practically any subject. I am sure it is equally welcome to lawyers, engineers, and hopeful inventors who dig in the patent mines on the second floor of the documents room. But professors, graduate students, and patent searchers are not typical of the mass reading public. The reference service that is

provided for them is only remotely connected with the service of government publications that should be provided to the general reading public by the public library.

By definition in the title and the assignment, my concern was with the use of popular items through public libraries. To illustrate, does the present system get surely and easily to the high school student, the club woman, and other literate citizens such publications as *To Secure These Rights*,<sup>1</sup> the report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights,<sup>2</sup> which won the American Political Science Association award for the most significant book in the field of government and social welfare in 1947, or *Anzio Beachhead*<sup>3</sup> and the other excellent battle histories, or *International Control of Atomic Energy*<sup>4</sup> and the excellent statements of United States foreign policy?

As Mr. Eastin says, why can't librarians treat government publications as they would privately printed works? Particularly, why do they not consider them for acquisition with attention equal to that given the run-of-the-mill products of commercial publishers? In another context, why should a commercial publisher recently write the *New York Times* book magazine that if the government wants its publications read, it should give them to commercial publishing houses? His firm, McGraw-Hill, had just brought out an edited version of the Hoover Commission reports. Last year I criticized the college editor of a leading firm for including in a \$4 book an Act of Congress that must have added 75 cents to the retail cost of the book. The Act could be purchased from Mr. Eastin

<sup>1</sup>United States, President's Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights*, Washington, D.C., United States Government Printing Office, 1947.

<sup>2</sup>United States Department of the Army, Historical Division, *Anzio Beachhead*, Washington, D.C., [1948], American Forces in Action series.

<sup>3</sup>United States, Department of State, *The International Control of Atomic Energy, Growth of a Policy; an Informal Summary*, Washington, D.C., Department of State, [1946], Pub. 2702.

for 15 cents. The editor's answer was that if anyone was to read the act, it had to be published where it would be read.

LIBRARY EMPHASIS ON PROCEDURES I think one reason for this strange distortion is the very preoccupation that Mr. Wilcox reflects. It is a preoccupation with indexes and catalogues and training people to handle the indexes and catalogues. The result is an emphasis on the procedure of acquiring and filing government documents rather than upon the content of the documents and how to get them read. Naturally, many public libraries, particularly those with small staffs, cannot keep up with this circular introspection. University libraries, state libraries, and public libraries in the larger cities have a personnel that has become specialized in this emphasis on procedure. All government publications are treated as if they were alike, and all are treated, as Mr. Eastin has asserted, as if as a group they differed from other books and pamphlets.

Hence the problem facing a nonlibrarian concerns the extremes between a prolific source of readable information and a distribution system that does not reach those for whom part of it is intended.

AVAILABILITY OF GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS When I considered the present system of announcing publications, it was only for the purpose of seeing how it affected the ability of a typical librarian, not especially skilled in handling the intricate procedures of government documents, to find out what should be ordered for literate citizens. As a result, I suggested a review of content and the development of some system of categorizing publications so that librarians could choose those they want. This is accepted practice in the choice of books privately published. For government publications, however, there is no *Saturday Review*, no *Publishers' Weekly*, no *Times* or *Herald Tribune*, no American Library Association *Booklist*.

When I looked at the present depository system, with respect to its relevance to the reading public, I found that it includes only 2 percent of the public library systems (not counting the branch libraries separately) in the nation. This means that practically all the libraries that cater to readers who come to the library after school or who drop in for casual reading or who must prepare a report for their next club meeting are denied the official patronage of the depository system. The great majority of depositories are college, university, state government, or institutional libraries. I suggested that all non-commercial libraries be made depositories, but only to receive those publications which they specifically request. Admittedly, there would be great waste, as there is now, in supplying publications not requested.

When I looked at the possible outlet for sales of government publications, I found the public library to be the most available outlet. Book stores do not exist in most localities, and in any case they do not like to handle government publications. The Post Office has refused to be a sales outlet. It is regrettable that librarians are reluctant to assume any responsibility for selling. We can only hope that Mr. Eastin's latest effort to promote the sale of publications through libraries will get more favorable response. I can think of no other available outlet that offers so much as does the public library as a channel for making it easy for citizens to purchase government output.

Similarly, the library is the most available outlet for the efficient and economical distribution of free publications. There are many government publications that should be given to as many citizens as will read them. Yet this free distribution for the sake of economy should be supervised by some responsible agency. For distribution to farmers, the extension services have long ago solved this problem by using the county agents and home demonstration agents and the various clubs

as concentrated outlets. For urban citizens, the public library might be developed in time to be the center where citizens could expect to receive whatever free publications they want—or to buy whatever is for sale.

It is unreasonable, of course, to contemplate that libraries would carry large stocks of publications. Some may carry small stocks, but it seems to me that most of them would serve only as agents to take orders.

**CONCLUSION** Finally, I suggested that no piecemeal changes would cure the present confusion. All changes should be made at once in one great drastic revision of policy and practice in both the government and the libraries. If such a comprehensive change were made, I think Mr. Wilcox's concern over the cost to the taxpayer would be removed. He thinks that my proposal to give any library the items it requests would be another raid on the treasury. I do not think either of us can prove without question what the results would be, but I would gamble on a saving in the total cost to the taxpayer if this move were accompanied by the other proposed changes, that is, to achieve consistency in what is to be sold and what is to be given away, to cut out duplicate distribution, to stop free distribution of items listed for sale, and to pay closer attention to the publications programs within government. In terms of money costs, it would be hard to devise a more wasteful system than the present one, in which the sale of publications compensates for only about 15 percent of the cost of producing the publications.

In any case, the purpose of the Government is not to save money, except insofar as the functions expected by citizens should be performed with the greatest efficiency at the lowest cost. The purpose of governmental functions, such as publishing and maintaining free libraries for the distribution of publications, is to serve the citizens with what they need and want.



This brings us to the essential question that motivated this particular study and, indeed, the whole Public Library Inquiry. What are the responsibilities of the government agencies involved in this part of social communication? It seems to me that the governments which publish material have the obligation to make it easily available to ordinary citizens whenever it is relevant to their interests. And the public libraries, as agencies of government, have the obligation to serve as the channel of distribution for government publications to a much greater extent than they do now.

## *The Information Film* by Gloria Waldron

DISCUSSION BY MRS. PATRICIA BLAIR, LIBRARY FILM ADVISOR,  
AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

IN THE SUMMER OF 1947 there were fourteen public libraries in the United States circulating 16mm films—one year later the number had risen to the twenty-eight mentioned in this book. Today, in the summer of 1949, there are known to be sixty-three public libraries in this country that acquire, select, purchase, and circulate informational films. That is an increase of 100 percent in 1947-48 and another 125 percent in 1948-49. When one considers these sixty-three libraries in relation to the 300 possible units of library service having incomes which might adequately support film service, one can conclude that about one-fifth of the potential of *individual* library film service has been achieved. This rapid expansion makes it evident that if ever a definitive book were needed, it is in the public library and information film field.

*The Information Film* by Gloria Waldron has, therefore, been awaited by the librarian with much interest and with considerable hope. Those of us who work with films were delighted when we learned that the Public Library Inquiry was to include this relatively new aspect of library work in its study and that Miss Waldron, of the Education Department of the Twentieth Century Fund, had been commissioned to do this part of the survey.