

# Review Articles

## Government Publications

*Government Publications for the Citizen* (A report of the Public Library Inquiry). By James L. McCamy. New York, Columbia University Press, 1949. 139p. \$2.50.

Government publications have gained considerable distinction through the fact that one of the studies of the all-important Public Library Inquiry is devoted entirely to them. Furthermore, the study was made by a social scientist rather than by a librarian. Mr. McCamy, now professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, will be remembered for his excellent previous study, *Government Publicity*, published in 1939. While one might disagree with some of his recommendations or suggest alternatives, the new study is a significant contribution to the literature relating to government publications.

Questions might be raised as to whether a two months' sampling of the *Monthly Catalog*, January and February 1947, and a one-month sampling of the *Monthly Checklist of State Publications*, are sufficient to draw conclusions regarding federal and state publishing. (Incidentally, Appendix B states *Monthly Catalog*, Jan.-Feb. 1948, instead of Jan.-Feb. 1947.) While the author stresses throughout the importance of the processed document, unfortunately the *Monthly Catalog* even now does not give a complete picture of this form of federal publishing. At least for one department, the Department of Agriculture, this might have been secured through its library's *Bibliography of Agriculture*. For state publishing, the study could have been augmented by analysis of the checklists of individual state publishing that now exist for about a dozen states.

Questions might also be raised as to the classification of kinds of federal publications. For example, "listings of uninterpreted data" such as directories of personnel and bibliographies are grouped as "Catalogs" (p. 5-6); and statistical statements and magazines are combined as periodicals (p. 5-6). Again, the major categories of federal publishing (p.13) might be questioned, especially when types of publishing such as "Legal actions" and "Economic analysis and reporting" are combined

with subjects such as "Aviation."

Depository libraries, including those that are college libraries, must contain at least a thousand books other than government publications, and must make the government publications available to the public. This statement applies both to "all" and to selective depositories. Mr. McCamy's statement on page 30, therefore, needs to be changed accordingly.

On page 59, Mr. McCamy states that "Government publications are not regarded as important save in the large libraries in cities of 100,000 or more and even in these material is used chiefly for reference purposes." Although Mr. McCamy's evidence probably pointed to this conclusion, I cannot refrain from challenging the statement. Possibly the small and medium-sized public libraries do not give the attention to acquiring and selecting government publications that they do to that of books, pamphlets and other materials. Furthermore, the media of selection chiefly used by these libraries only infrequently include government publications whereas every issue includes books and other materials. If this were not true, would his analysis of the government best sellers, which follows, show such a small percentage of the 26 titles in libraries? Of course, another point should be emphasized here: namely, the fact that most of these titles are so well known that the interested public may actually own personal copies and therefore not seek to use them in the public library.

Unfortunately, even though all libraries would like to have recorded in their public card catalogs every book, pamphlet, government publication, etc., such a program is gradually becoming an impossibility because of the cost and limitation of space. While the case may be different for the small or medium-sized public library, the larger library now has to coordinate its bibliographic collection with its card catalog and not duplicate in the card catalog all items found in checklists and subject bibliographies. There should be more trained personnel to assist the public in this coordination. Mr. McCamy,

here, I am sure, expressed the point of view of the public user of libraries, but from an economic standpoint such a procedure is gradually becoming impossible.

Mr. McCamy's recommendations, as found in Chapter Four, "Libraries and Government Cooperation," need careful study. First, he presents the urgent need for a tool which will attempt to classify government publications by type of interest and the need for a selective list of publications of wide general interest. While the federal *Monthly Catalog* might easily indicate types of interest, it would be impossible for it to become a selective list. Its objective should be comprehensiveness so as to include not only Government Printing Office imprints, but all processed publications and those of field agencies as well. Although we have had many commercial projects which periodically select books and pamphlets, there never has been a similar one for government publications of general interest. Would libraries finance such an undertaking if it were prepared by governmental or nongovernmental sources?

Mr. McCamy's suggestion for a coordination of distribution through the Superintendent of Document's Office, while ideal, would be difficult of attainment. This idea was proposed in the state of California at the time the new State Document Distribution Bill was being considered but it was abandoned because it was found that legislators and departments desired to reserve their rights as to free distribution of state documents. It is questionable whether congressmen and the federal agencies and departments would react any differently.

Mr. McCamy has shown the need for a clear, consistent and exact statement as to which publications are free and which are for sale. The Federal Governmental is very inconsistent in its policy with respect to free and sale distribution.

Again, in Mr. McCamy's suggestions on a rationalized depository system, we find the same stumbling block. Will congressmen or agencies surrender all their rights of distribution of free copies, and permit them

to be cleared through one central coordinated distribution unit? It is quite possible that, if all free distribution were made through one central source and were limited principally or only to libraries, all libraries might receive all government publications free of charge, irrespective of cost, and the burden would be no greater to the taxpayer than it is now under the present very wasteful free distribution program. Unless congressmen and the federal agencies are willing to give up their rights, complete free distribution of all federal publications to libraries might amount to a very substantial sum. It is a strange paradox that libraries generally expect to receive government publications free of charge, but seldom question paying for pamphlets and books which in many cases are unreasonably priced. The big question is: Where does free distribution end and sale begin? Furthermore, with the ever-increasing number of responsibilities being shifted to the Federal Government, how many additional ones can be added?

Mr. McCamy makes a strong case for the sale or ordering of government publications through the public library. Whether this is done through the public library, through some convenient means worked out with the Post Office Department, or through regional offices of the Superintendent of Documents, does not matter. For years, there has been a consistent demand for the purchase of at least federal government publications outside of Washington, D.C.

While I have expressed some points of view which differ from those of the author, they are in no way intended to devalue this important study. In this era of mass communications, Mr. McCamy has clearly shown how inadequate are the media of selection and the distribution of government publications. The book should be carefully studied by librarians and congressmen. The recommendations are challenging and whether they be adopted fully, partially, or in some modified form, they call for action.—*Jerome K. Wilcox, College of the City of New York Library.*