

HUMAN RELATIONS AREA FILES

The Human Relations Area Files of New Haven, Connecticut has been a subject of discussion and controversy among Government agencies for several years. At one time several agencies gave modest financial support to the Files. For a time the support was suspended. Now one agency has pledged substantial support to the enterprise. The rest of the Government research community feel bound either to use this resource to the maximum extent possible or to recommend suspension of the project if the views of our more pessimistic colleagues can be substantiated. Since there is a wide divergence of opinion on the potential usefulness of the Files, the views of qualified persons outside the Government will be most welcome.

What is HRAF?

The Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) originated at Yale University in 1937 as the Cross Cultural Survey. It was expanded during World War II through Government and private foundation support, and took its present form in 1949. Fifteen major universities contribute to its support. The Files at present contain basic information in the form of books, articles and other references, literally cut up, arranged by subject matter, and filed and cross filed on about 105 peoples of the world, mostly primitive societies.

How the Files are Organized

An area is selected for attention in accordance with the wishes of contributors. The interests of the universities tend to run to primitive peoples, while Government departments have specified particular interests in Iran, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and Czechoslovakia. HRAF has identified some 3000 "cultures" in the world which it would like to tackle one by one, but it has been persuaded to study single countries or areas by country.

A select bibliography of, say, 100 titles is prepared by experts for an area to be studied. The purpose is to cover with the most authoritative literature available a comprehensive but weighted view of all aspects of human behavior in the area. Selection is weighted to take account of especially important features (such as the rubber industry in Malaya), but comprehensive in that the materials even on such weighted topics are held down so as not to crowd out consideration of other aspects of the area. Titles selected are almost without exception secondary scholarly or reportorial treatments, not primary data of the kind supplied by handbooks, statistical compilations, newspapers, or telephone books. Occasionally, reports from recent travelers are included.

Foreign language materials used in the selected bibliography are translated.

All pages of selected materials, whether printed book or typewritten translation, are reproduced in their entirety on multilith mats blown up or reduced to 5" x 8" by a process called Xerox, which produces a good facsimile and includes half-tone illustrations.

The page mats are next annotated for filing. An analyst reads the text and marks in the margin beside each paragraph numbers indicating every category of the file to which the material is pertinent. An elaborate outline sets forth the categories and numbers, covering the gamut of human behavior in family, social, economic, cultural, political and nearly all other aspects of life. Date of material and author references are included on every page.

One copy of each page is printed for each file number of that page for each set of full files desired. At present 25 complete sets are run off. The separate pages are then filed under their marked numbers and the file is thereby produced. Author cards are also prepared setting forth the qualifications of the author and scope of his work.

A full copy of each book or article is reconstituted by a device which insures that a copy of each page is filed authorwise. Each area file thus includes a library of the selected materials, useful for reference from any separated item in the file if the user wishes content.

Items of the file can be and have been reduced to micro-photograph size -- about 1 1/2" x 2" -- and in this form are conveniently transportable. Machines to facilitate reading these miniatures have been designed.

Features of HRAF:

The file is selective. Although it aims to cover all aspects of behavior plus the geographical and physical setting of societies, it covers no aspect in depth.

The file is almost entirely a secondary, not a primary source. It presents, for example, not a series of trade statistics but derived generalizations on trends, with only such basic data as an author may adduce in support of his generalizations.

The file aims at complete exploitation of any book or article or chapter selected. Every paragraph or page is filed somewhere, often in many places. HRAF claims that if 100 sources are in the bibliography and if the user finds ten of these sources excerpted under some category of the file, he may be sure that that is all these sources have on the subject and that the other sources have nothing on the subject.

The file is a substantive file and not an index. Emphasis is placed on the fact that the user finds actual reading matter and not merely references to reading matter under each category. Moreover, if the user wishes to see the whole content of any excerpt, the full consecutive text is in the author file.

The file is flexible. Any contractor can adjust the basic selection of materials according to his needs. The file could

reach to any desired depth of material on any topic. An indefinite number of items can be added to the file under any or all categories. Although languages are translated, they need not be.

The file is compact. Printed on paper, the sheets run 325 to 1 inch of file drawer space measuring 5'x 8."

Questions and Criticisms:

Here are some of the questions asked about and criticisms leveled against HRAF:

1. The idea of the file originated in the desire to cross-reference anthropological materials on primitive societies. The major practical use to which the files have been put was the Navy's use of them during World War II to obtain information about certain Pacific islands and their inhabitants of great but momentary importance to the conduct of the war. Great doubt exists as to whether the file would be equally serviceable for complex, modern, dynamic industrial societies. The Director of HRAF states simply that we cannot know whether the files will work for an industrial society until we have tried them.

2. HRAF is costly. It is estimated that it would cost \$3,000,000 a year for 4 years to cover the globe. A fair average cost for processing one country of medium complexity could run between \$250,000 and \$300,000 for initial processing.

3. HRAF can never replace human expertise. The value of HRAF to the expert would probably be negligible. The value of the files increases with the inexperience of the user.

4. Moreover, it has been suggested that a sizeable corps of persons would be required to work with the files in order to keep them up to date.

5. The initial processing takes time. It is estimated that five years are required to cover areas such as Iran or Czechoslovakia.

6. It is said that in the end the file represents a level of information and presentation less integrated and less up to date than certain existing materials.