COMMENT

FBI and the Scientific Community

BY AMITAI ETZIONI

Under the Freedom of Information Act, the numerous scientists on whom the FBI keeps files can review the files the FBI has on them. These include faculty and researchers dealing with matters of national security, persons who have been considered for federal posts (even if only to serve on HEW review panels for a few days), those in touch with scientists from the socialist republics and quite a few others. Scientists may well be advised to review their files. Several reports suggest that the files tend to include erroneous information, and that synopses of them, which are freely transferred to other agencies, are surprisingly sloppy.

At issue here is not the existence of these files. While in the best of all worlds there would be no central, semi-secret investigative force, in a world of nuclear weapons and superpower confrontations an FBI has a place. Nor are the often criticized methods the FBI allegedly uses at issue, such as getting local police forces to search offices and homes without a court warrant. If the FBI's tasks require great latitude, let the law be changed to extend its license and reach; illegal conduct cannot be condoned.

At issue is the method used in gathering and processing information, a subject not exactly alien to the scientific community. Persons who examine their own files may find that the FBI is using a vacuum cleaner approach; it makes any and all input part of a person's file, without any evaluation. However outlandish an informant's tale, no matter how prejudicial the information's source, in it goes. Thus, John Seigenthaler, publisher of The Nashville Tennessean and a former high official of the Department of Justice, branded as absolutely untrue the lines in his file stating "allegations of Seigenthaler having illicit relations with young girls, which information source obtained from an unnamed source."

Radical attorney William Kuntsler found in his FBI file the text of a letter allegedly written to the Columbia University student newspaper, in which he urged students to rise violently. The file neglects to indicate that the letter was a spoof concocted by the paper's staff, part of an April Fool's Day issue. My own file's errors range from misspelling my wife's name and misidentifying the subject of my Ph.D. thesis, to confusing my opposition to specific items of U.S. foreign policy, especially the war in Vietnam, with a "negative" view of the United States. The theses of my books are summarized by citing the jackets' "blurbs," prepared by the publisher's market department. Also in my file is the text of a postcard (evidently mailed by some right-wing organization) which branded as "communist" everyone who signed a New York Times ad for a nuclear test ban. Citations from the Daily Worker are served straight up. The synopsis's bias can be gleaned from characterizing my position as that of a "pacifist" (the documents refer to my peace position); citing my articles in liberal-left publications but not in others, say the Wall Street Journal; and using the label "activist," which I earned in the sociological community, to imply that I was an agitator of sorts.

Perhaps worst, when requested by other agencies, the biased summary of the FBI files travels without the content of the files. In my case, this caused my exclusion from several HEW review panels, none of which dealt with security matters to begin with — and my file itself indicates that I was found not to be a security risk.

There is no mechanism that allows one to point out to the FBI its mistaken information and assessment and lead it to correct the file. One can file one's own assessments, next to the other unevaluated ones. Such corrections, however, will not travel to other agencies that usually get synopses, rather than copies of the files.

It could be argued that a person subject to these abuses should be able to correct the file, if he or she could show the facts and/or interpretations are erroneous. Until such a procedure is available, the outcry of those who see themselves in these files' crooked mirrors will have to serve — to urge that information collected be verified before it is used and disseminated, that sources be evaluated, that information generated by informants who turn out to be unreliable be removed from the files and that synopses be subject to a quality control mechanism — to gain an elementary level of accuracy and fairness. Aside from the elementary fairness to the individual affected, this might vastly improve the information used and passed on by the FBI. □

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