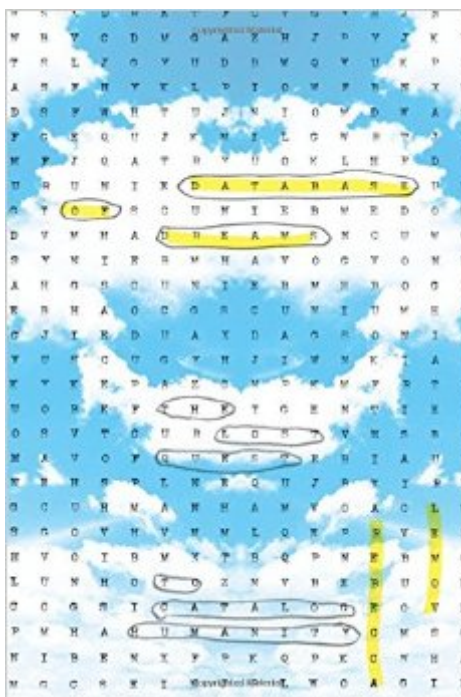


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Database Of Dreams: The Lost Quest To Catalog Humanity



Synopsis

An acclaimed science historian uncovers the fascinating story of a project to unlock humanity's common denominator that prefigured the emergence of Big Data. Just a few years before the dawn of the digital age, Harvard psychologist Bert Kaplan set out to build the largest database of sociological information ever assembled. It was the mid-1950s, and social scientists were entranced by the human insights promised by Rorschach tests and other innovative scientific protocols. Kaplan, along with anthropologist A. I. Hallowell and a team of researchers, sought out a varied range of non-European subjects among remote and largely non-literate peoples around the globe. Recording their dreams, stories, and innermost thoughts in a vast database, Kaplan envisioned future researchers accessing the data through the cutting-edge Readex machine. Almost immediately, however, technological developments and the obsolescence of the theoretical framework rendered the project irrelevant, and eventually it was forgotten.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rebecca Lemov has written a significant and surprisingly lively book about the extensive, but little known, efforts of 20th century scientists to collect, analyze, and store data on the human mind and behavior. She covers the leading technologies developed and adopted since the 1930s, including the Rorschach (inkblot) and TAT projective tests designed to unlock the secrets of human personality, and the microcard data storage system designed to enable patterns to be found in the dreams of people around the world, based on data collected by hundreds of field researchers. Such efforts were undertaken by leading universities and governmental organizations (such as the

National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences) to advance human knowledge. Many scientists played a role, but the leading figure in the quest to build the database of dreams was Bert Kaplan, a Harvard-trained psychologist/social scientist. Lemov also discusses the practical uses that were made of the projective technologies. I did not realize that the tests were given to the Nazi leadership during the Nuremberg trials to determine whether something unusual about the minds might explain how the horrors of WWII came to be. Even more surprising is her finding that the Rorschach test also gained wide acceptance in the postwar US in child custody cases and in human resources departments, leading people to wonder if they lost custody of their children, or failed to get a job, merely because they saw a butterfly or a bat in the inkblot. The microcard technology provided a very successful way of storing the details of dreams, enabling copies of the data to be distributed to researchers as needed.

Important Questions About What It Means to be Human in a Data-Based World
Database of Dreams by Rebecca Lemov
This unique book elevates history of science research into beautiful prose and sparkling ideas. In the 1950s, a large committee of psychologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists, under the leadership of Harvard psychologist, Burt Kaplan, created a database of information about the human experience. This massive clearing house contained the results of interviews, psychological tests like the Rorschach, the retelling of people's dreams, and many other bits of information into a collection that was supposed to become the definitive encyclopedia of what it means to be human. Scores of social scientists from many schools and disciplines, spent years of their lives on this expensive and purportedly definitive research. But all of this data was eventually neglected and forgotten, until it was rediscovered by Dr. Rebecca Lemov. This book is partly the history of the database of dreams and human experiences, but it is also a springboard for important questions that arose in Lemov's mind as she exhumed these files that were scattered through various libraries. What did the researchers of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, consider data? How was data defined? Why was it considered to be important? How could it be stored for perpetual use? According to Dr. Lemov, the data base of dreams was a pioneering exercise in the forever storage of intimate details. Today there are many more such databases, powered by machines that are far more powerful... The fate of what this earlier effort stored is a parable for our time... raising important questions about what it means to be human in an increasingly data-based world.

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