

*A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age.* By Laura A. Millar. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman and SAA, 2019. 192 pp. Index. Softcover. \$44.99. \$40.00 for SAA members.

To refer to Laura Millar's *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age* as timely is both an understatement and inaccurate. It is an understatement because, as of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as not only the most disruptive event across the globe in generations, but has also been subject to the worst excesses of the epistemic crisis that Millar details throughout the book. Perhaps now more than ever, facts, evidence, and the truths they support are urgently needed—they are a matter of life and death—but yet they are constantly subjugated to selective incredulity, confirmation bias, and political expediency. The reference to *A Matter of Facts* as timely is also inaccurate, not through the fault of the author's straightforward approach or concise handling of the subject matter, but because any single work cannot possibly account for the depth of the problem of misinformation or anticipate the rate at which it has evolved and embedded itself into our social fabric in such short order. Certainly, Millar is aware of the intractable yet fluid nature of the current situation, and the developments in just the year or so since the book was published could very well provide a tremendous amount of cautionary fodder for an expanded edition at a later date. Nevertheless, she has produced an exceptional volume that centers records and information as providing the evidentiary basis for individual rights, institutional accountability, personal and communal memory, and the possibility of democratic sovereignty. As records and information become increasingly voluminous and ephemeral in this politically polarized and socially fractured digital era, Millar offers a wake-up call to activists, technologists, and policy makers that we can no longer assume the stability of this foundation and that quick action is needed to protect it.

Although *A Matter of Facts* is part of the ALA/SAA Archival Futures series, it is not—nor should it be—*only* for archivists. Ideally, professional archivists are already familiar with the underlying concepts and issues at play when it comes to archives and records as evidence. This book is not a practical how-to guide, even if it does offer some concrete suggestions on ways that archivists, librarians, and others in the information and cultural heritage professions might positively shape future outcomes. Rather, it admirably aims to include a wider audience by providing a cogent assessment of the current landscape, with loads of recent examples that illustrate the threats and potential consequences of inaction for everyday groups and individuals. Of course, we archivists know (or should know) that the records and information created today become the archives of tomorrow, and this entire process leaves an evidentiary trail that spans time and space. Yet, we have not been effective public advocates for the short- or long-term social value of our work, nor have we done a good job of articulating to uninitiated audiences the potential negative consequences of when this process goes awry. *A Matter of Facts* is structured and presented in a way that laypersons will find helpful, informative, and hopefully troubling, while giving archivists another tool for advocacy and raising awareness.

The first two chapters identify some disturbing trends and establish the potential stakes in a society “slipping into a dangerous post-truth sinkhole, where truth and trust are drowning in the flood of conflicting data and opinions” (p. 5). Out of the small percentage of records and information produced by society that are kept indefinitely, those that can be verified as authentic, ostensibly carry the most weight in defending human rights, fostering identity, securing justice, and upholding the rule of law. As Millar notes, facts and truth matter, but only to the degree that they are supported by evidence, and increasingly “we are seeing a loss of evidence, by accident and by design, as people manipulate sources of proof in their effort to blur the lines between reality and fantasy” (p. 8). Millar defines evidence-based truth as “a conclusion or perspective reached as a result of the analysis of an accumulation of facts” and firmly ties evidence to recorded, documentary proof (p. 13). This does not discount the notion of personal truths or the possibility of multiple truths originating from subjective experience, but a baseline of agreement around provable facts and verifiable evidence existing in a shared objective reality is required to stave off a complete epistemological meltdown in an age dominated by emotions-based decision-making.

Chapters three and four look at the composition and characteristics of evidence, which in the digital environment often serve to buttress popular skepticism toward sources of information and records traditionally considered authoritative. Millar discusses the problems of “velocity, volume, and veracity” around digital records in particular, which, for the average person or organization going about their regular business, do not always lend themselves to easy interpretation or discernment of what is important, authentic, and complete—not to mention for the recordkeepers charged with managing the digital information deluge over time (pp. 27–28). The reality that “people will decide what they will document, how they will document it, and why they will document it, according to their own needs, technologies, politics, cultures, and customs” basically guarantees gaps, bias, confusion, and inconsistency that compounds in digital environments like social media platforms or complex organizational networks (p. 39). The record-centric examples presented by Millar—President Barack Obama’s birth certificate, Cambridge Analytica, and the Mueller investigation, among many others—illustrate the struggle to produce, capture, and preserve reliable evidence that can withstand the scrutiny of the wildly divergent worldviews of people with historically unprecedented access to information but less capacity or willingness to engage with and make sense of it.

Chapters five through eight cover some of the major implications of the current crisis around evidence, specifically what the lack of documentary evidence might mean to individuals, groups, and communities in the construction of identity and the assertion of rights. Millar includes numerous examples of how the evidence found in records and archives facilitates restorative justice and reconciliation, provides official accountability and transparency, and makes us more empathetic toward the experiences of others. Verifiable evidence is crucial to personal and collective memory and thus how we might understand the full range of society’s competing and complementary narratives that comprise current and historical storytelling. Indeed, evidence is a touchstone that gives us a “tangible link between our memories, which can be remarkably fragile, and

provable facts, which are immutable” (p. 82). Evidence is used and sometimes misused in the service of memory making, and central to Millar’s argument throughout the book is the question of how we ensure that evidence remains a valuable social tool without being weaponized.

Chapters nine and ten offer criticism of some of the major assumptions about information and records safety, stability, and integrity that too many take for granted in the digital age, calling for approaches that extend beyond policy and technology to emphasize personal and professional responsibility. To this end, Millar proposes a model mentality that borrows from the environmental sustainability concept and alliterative schematic of Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle:

We need to *Remember* with honesty, integrity, and clarity. Being able to remember our actions, decisions, and opinions—those we made this morning and those we made a decade ago—is essential to charting an evidence-based course of action. To remember well, we need to *Respect* the value of trustworthy evidence. We need to distinguish between information with only short-term value and evidence with long-term value. To remember and respect, we need to *Record* our actions, decisions, and opinions so that we have the authentic evidence we need to defend rights, support accountability, create identities, and preserve memories (p. 128).

*A Matter of Facts* is an important work of archives and records advocacy that hits all the right notes with its relevant examples and reasoned approach. The authoritative analysis behind Millar’s writing is what one would expect from someone with her extensive background as a scholar and practitioner in the archives and records discipline. The book would be an excellent primer for anyone unfamiliar with the issues surrounding records as evidence, or for archivists wishing to gain a firmer grasp on the current situation. As an archives and library professional, I mostly appreciate that Millar takes a clear stand about where a great deal of the responsibility lies with the current epistemic and evidentiary crisis—the embrace of reactionary populism and mistrust in social institutions—and does so by emulating the facts and evidence-based approach championed throughout the book. The only weakness is that the reliance on very recent examples may not resonate with future audiences, which is more a problem with the shelf life of this information in a fast-moving media and information environment. As noted earlier, this is not a problem of execution, it simply reflects the perils of taking on a topic of this size, scope, and fluidity.

Additionally, I would have liked Millar to expand on the role of archivists, records managers, librarians, and other information professionals in contributing to the epistemic crisis in society at large. Quoting Lee McIntyre (who provided the foreword to the book), Millar writes: “It’s all fun and games to attack truth in the academy, but what happens when one’s tactics leak out into the hands of science deniers and conspiracy theorists, or thin-skinned politicians who insist that their instincts are better than any evidence” (p. 90)? This moment has arrived, and sooner or later the broad coalition of information and cultural heritage professionals must come to terms with the fact that

postmodern identity politics and internal broadsides have helped produce this mass incredulousness, which has serious consequences for our institutions and archivists' credibility as stewards of essential recorded evidence.

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