A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age. Laura A. Millar. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman / Society of American Archivists, 2019. xix, 172 pp. ISBN 978-0-8389-1771-8

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Evidence is fundamental to the formation of truth; it helps determine facts, and analyzing those facts can help separate truths from lies. In *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age*, Laura Millar sets out to defend evidence, and ultimately truth, from the onslaught of "fake news" and "alternative facts." For Millar, this onslaught has contributed to a descent into the "toxicity of a post-truth, post-fact world" (p. xix), and the only remedy is to fight for truth and combat lies by protecting and respecting evidence – more specifically, *recorded evidence*.[1]

But how did we get to this point? Millar argues that the vulnerability of digital information technologies and the rise of the "post-truth" age[2] – where even traditionally trustworthy sources of evidence such as government documents, scientific data, and media reports can be questioned on the grounds of bias –

1 Millar defines recorded evidence as "information that has been fixed in space and time" (p. 13).

2 It is important to note that Millar's text follows American philosopher Lee McIntyre's 2018 book *Post-Truth*, which asks a similar set of questions and offers conclusions about our arrival in this "post-truth" age and its consequences on evidence. While they share similar concerns – McIntyre, in fact, wrote the foreword to Millar's book – Millar is less interested in philosophical reflection and more concerned with the defence of trustworthy recorded evidence, which can be mobilized to battle the lies, half-truths, and "fake news" items that have become so pervasive in modern society.

have threatened our ability to determine evidence-based truths. Millar argues that the duty to protect evidence, and the skills required to determine the value of evidence, can no longer be left to archivists. While Millar, a long-time consultant and educator in archives, records, and information management, is no stranger to writing for information professionals, this book is aimed at a wider public audience. For Millar, the responsibility for defending evidence now falls on all of us: "We *all* need to come together to preserve the documentary evidence that holds to account those in power, that nurtures our sense of identity and community, and that helps us capture and share our individual and collective memories. We need to come together to change course, before it is too late. We are all archivists now" (p. 149).

Millar is writing for a largely Western audience, as demonstrated through her emphasis on the importance of recorded evidence and through the geopolitical context of her examples. For instance, Millar introduces readers to the concept of archival appraisal by comparing the fleeting need for the kind of evidence found within a text message consisting of a grocery list to the enduring value of Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller's report on Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, and uses Donald Trump's declaration that *his* inauguration was the largest ever to introduce readers to the importance of trustworthy evidence. Millar uses personal stories to build trust with her readers and to emphasize the importance of recorded evidence. In her discussion on memory and proof, for example, Millar "remembers" when President Kennedy was assassinated but acknowledges that, without recorded evidence such as a photograph of her reaction to the frightening news, she is unsure if her childhood memory is definitive proof or simply her own personal truth.

As a text aimed at a broad audience, *A Matter of Facts* is free of archival jargon, save for some key concepts such as *record*, *data*, *information*, and *evidence*. The lack of direct engagement with archival theory is no reason for archivists, records managers, and other information professionals to dismiss her book. While her focus is on writing for the public, Millar references an impressive number of archival scholars and institutional resources, including Verne Harris, Geoffrey Yeo, Terry Cook, the National Archives and Records Administration, Library and Archives Canada, and the Archives of New Zealand. But alongside these references are countless footnotes that direct readers to news articles, government reports, and blog posts, which help to underscore Millar's assessment of the power and criticality of evidence.

Millar's book is structured into 10 chapters, each neatly divided into sections and concluding with a summary of main themes. In chapter 1, Millar discusses the nature of digital information and describes how our ability to easily produce massive amounts of it, coupled with our inability to properly authenticate it, has compromised our ability to differentiate between truths and lies. Our arrival in the "post-truth" age, which she argues is a result of overzealous applications of postmodernist ideas, has resulted in a world where everything, including the existence of objective truths, can be questioned (p. 4). Chapter 2 dissects the relationship between truth and evidence: the analysis of evidence leads to facts, and an accumulation of facts helps to determine our truths. It is here where Millar underscores her primary interest in recorded evidence, which is "information that has been fixed in space and time and can be verified as authentic, so that it serves as proof" (p. 13). This chapter is a critical point for readers of the text, as Millar compares recorded evidence with undocumented personal observations (for example, her memory of Kennedy's assassination), which she claims can be inconsistent and disputable. Observations, according to Millar, are therefore unable to serve as definitive proof (p. 14). Millar's discussion of evidence advances in chapters 3 and 4 with lessons on assessing evidence, using examples of ancient recordkeeping techniques such as the *quipu*[3] to illustrate the importance of understanding the context, quality, and form of records in order to interpret and determine the value of evidence – not unlike the analysis of content, context, and structure as part of determining value in records.

Chapter 5 is a convincing segment on why *everyone* should care about evidence. Millar uses events such as the *Windrush* scandal, where Caribbean migrants were wrongfully detained or deported due to missing documentation, to explain how recorded evidence is vital to personal identities, connections, and freedom. Here, and again in chapter 6, Millar touches on the concept of evidence as power. Millar acknowledges the role of dominant members of society in constructing the belief that only *recorded* evidence can lead us to the truth. Millar asks, "What happens when I am satisfied with a handshake and you demand a written agreement? Who gets justice, and whose voice remains silent? Protecting rights for all means broadening our perception of evidence"

3 Millar describes the quipu, or "talking knots," as a set of fibre cords used by people in the Andean region of South America, which were tied into varying numbers of knots and consisted of different colours. Their use, according to Millar, is debated, though it has been suggested that the knots may have represented numbers (p. 40).

(p. 72). Millar observes that Indigenous concepts of evidence place much more value in oral testimonies, songs, and symbols – values which have been, until recently, largely rejected by dominant Western and Eurocentric systems. This has had devastating results for Indigenous communities through the loss of land, resources, and cultural rights and through abuse at the hands of the Indian residential school system. While Millar acknowledges that certain steps have been taken to broaden conceptions of acceptable forms of evidence, she resumes her appeal for the protection of recorded evidence in chapter 7, describing its importance in creating verifiable historical accounts.

Millar's final three chapters get to the heart of her call to arms. In chapter 8, through examples of evidence being misused, leaked, and manipulated, Millar explains how digital information technologies can make evidence vulnerable to loss and open to misinterpretation. Millar advocates a re-thinking of our assumptions about evidence in chapter 9. Citing Terry Cook's 1994 manuscript *Electronic Records, Paper Minds*,[4] and using examples such as the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal and the Internal Revenue Service's major 2018 server crash as warnings, Millar cautions readers not to assume that either our current laws (including access and privacy legislation) or our technological infrastructures go far enough in safeguarding, capturing, and protecting evidence. But as Millar's final chapter asserts, perhaps the most effective change we can pursue is to more richly value the creation (or recording) of evidence. We – all of us – can find ways to raise awareness, to take responsibility for engaging with and managing evidence properly, and to underscore and value the role of evidence in determining truths.

Considering its intended audience, *A Matter of Facts* effectively describes the main problems facing traditional concepts of evidence, and Millar successfully educates her audience on the ongoing value of trustworthy, verifiable recorded evidence in order to ensure that our society is "free, democratic, respectful, and self-aware" (p. 149). Millar is convincing in her assertion that certain powers – namely the modern media, certain politicians, and ultimately many members of the public – have become less willing to determine the difference between good and bad evidence. Millar is also methodical in her approach, using countless examples of President Trump and his White House staff to show that it has

4 Terry Cook, "Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modernist Era," *Archives and Manuscripts* 22, no. 2 (1994): 300–28.

become far too easy for those who disagree with, or feel threatened by, evidence-based truths to discredit facts as "fake news." Despite the weightiness of Millar's message, her writing is informal, relaxed, digestible, and deeply personal, making reference to her husband, her parents, and even her Great Uncle Frank – a style that likely makes the book relatable to many readers.

Some readers may believe her calls for change are broad and unrealistic, as she appeals for sweeping changes to legislation and the implementation of large-scale business and governmental "evidence assessments" in order to create transparency in evidence creation and storage (p. 130). While Millar acknowledges that some of these asks may be idealistic, she also offers a series of practical tasks to help support recorded evidence – for example, taking responsibility for safeguarding the evidence we each create and subscribing to journals and media programming that verify evidence on our behalf.

While Millar clearly states that her book is for everyone, readers looking for a more critical discussion of the ways in which *unrecorded* evidence can be considered trustworthy and valuable to the truth-making process will need to look elsewhere.[5] Still, anyone interested in the relationship between evidence, facts, and truth (including archivists and records and information professionals) would do well to read Millar's book, to study it closely, and to take inspiration from her defence of evidence. *A Matter of Facts* reminds archivists that we must continue to advocate a better approach to preserving all kinds of evidence, not only so that we can tell truths from lies, but also in order to support varied methods of identifying, understanding, and fostering diverse approaches to memory making.

5 Millar does provide references to further reading on Indigenous forms of memory and evidence, pointing to her article "'Subject or Object?' Shaping and Reshaping the Intersections between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Records," *Archival Science* 6, no. 3–4 (2006): 329–50, as well as to J.J. Ghaddar's "The Spectre in the Archive: Truth, Reconciliation, and Indigenous Archival Memory," *Archivaria* 82 (Fall 2016): 3–26. Readers may also find Geoffrey Yeo's article, "Concepts of Record (1): Evidence, Information, and Persistent Representation," *American Archivist* 70, no 2 (2007): 315–43, useful in discussing concepts of evidence.