

IJIDI: Book Review

Millar, L. A. (2019). *A matter of facts: The value of evidence in an information age*. ALA Editions. ISBN 9780838917718. 192 pp. \$44.99 US.

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At the time of writing this review, U.S. President Donald Trump's impeachment trial had just begun, capping off a tumultuous first presidential term that made popular terms such as "fake news" and "alternative facts", and set media organizations on a race to track the numbers and nature of lies and mistruths uttered by Trump since his inauguration in December 2016. Also making headlines, although smaller ones, the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) was bracing itself against criticism about the creation and display of a photograph censored by NARA staff, originally taken at the 2017 Women's March in Washington, DC. NARA's censorship of this photo included the blurring of anti-Trump slogans and references to female anatomy considered by NARA staff to be too political or vulgar for display in NARA's public exhibition space. Aside from the Trump connection, though, what do these two news items have in common? Certainly, the election of Donald Trump has focused much public attention on questions of truth and trust, abuse of power, and the dangers of unregulated and unprotected data. As an agency of the U.S. Federal Government, tasked with the responsibility to acquire, preserve, and protect the official records of the U.S., NARA created doubt about its trustworthiness as keeper of the nation's historical record with this simple act of photo manipulation.

These examples serve as reminders of how destructive the erosion of evidence and trust can be. It seems likely the era of Trump has added fuel to archivist Laura Millar's fire, whose book, *A Matter of Facts*, presents a timely, emphatic, and passionate case for the importance of creating, preserving, and understanding evidence in a period of great technological and social change. Indeed, examples pertaining to the Trump administration feature prominently throughout the book. However, Millar has a broader, more wide-ranging purpose with this book, which is, in effect, a public call to action. As she methodically details throughout its ten chapters, the rapid pace of technological change has produced quantities of data that professional recordkeepers cannot manage alone, and yet the nature of digital records necessitates early intervention and responsible stewardship to ensure the survival of data that is both authentic and accessible. This problem is at the heart of the book, and her solution is that everyone must make the protection of evidence their concern through personal action and demands for better accountability from government, industry, and business.

A Matter of Facts is the first volume in a joint endeavour by the American Library Association (ALA) and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) entitled *Archival Futures*, which seeks to examine the broader social role of archivists and archives in a changing information landscape. Millar explains her archival credentials in the book's introduction and provides a brief history of

recordkeeping professions and the value of that work through the ages. Yet despite Millar's extensive experience as an archivist and consultant, *A Matter of Facts* is a book written for the public, not for other workers in the archival profession or archival theorists. Its language is inclusive (the use of the collective 'we' features heavily throughout the book) and straightforward, and the structure of the book, with short chapters broken up by subheadings and extensive citations in chapter endnotes, mirrors Millar's belief in the importance of information exchange supported by facts and evidence. Instead of drawing on archival theory for the basis of her arguments, she instead uses news stories and examples from popular culture, both historic and recent, to tease out the far-reaching impact and value of evidence on people and societies around the world. Chapters maintain a consistent structure, with an introductory thesis statement, paragraphs with subheadings consisting of these news-based supporting examples, and a concluding paragraph. Each chapter addresses Millar's overarching thesis in a slightly different way to highlight how interrelated concepts of truth, authenticity, value, accountability, identity, and memory affect our lives as individuals, consumers, and citizens.

This populist approach and its emphasis on the "we are all in this together" concept situates this book as relevant to a potentially wide audience. It would be a particularly suitable addition to university or even high school curricula, as it contains important information about how born-digital generations, currently in their teens and twenties, can think about the large quantities of data they produce, manage, and access. It is perhaps this generation of digital creators that may benefit the most from the book's messages about the importance of creating and preserving personal digital memory objects, understanding the difference between facts and feelings or personal truth and verifiable proof, demanding accountability from government and business in the creation and protection of data and evidence, and questioning assumptions about the stability of technologies to preserve evidence. However, this book has relevance to a broader audience than just the young. As Millar points out, 'digital immigrants' such as Baby Boomers and Generation Xers also need to engage actively with these issues if they are to lead by example and have influence in their roles as parents, educators, and public officials (p.137).

A Matter of Facts is a book that foregrounds the life, work, and interests of its author. The reader can see the personal nature of Millar's writing in her numerous asides and anecdotes found throughout the text. Some of these, particularly references to Millar's husband, domestic life, and family genealogy, are unnecessary additions to the book that may serve to distance the reader from the subject matter at hand and shift focus from the collective 'we' to the subjective 'she'. Despite this, the many stories and examples used to illustrate her points throughout the book have an international focus and include accounts from South America, Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and Australia. These examples emphasize the relevance of evidence and its protection to populations around the world, even though Millar's voice is the lone and dominant force in this text. Millar also highlights the ways evidence and its absence disproportionately affects immigrants, refugees, Indigenous people, and racialized populations. Millar does this work most effectively in chapters five and six, where she recounts examples from Canada, the U.K., and Australia, with a focus on the connections between evidence, identity, personal rights, and justice.

Millar's knowledge of and passion for her subject is clear, and as a reader, this is both a bit of a curse and a blessing. The methodical way in which she has structured the book results in a certain level of redundancy from chapter to chapter, as she hammers home her points from slightly different angles. This approach is less effective than perhaps intended, and the reader may be left overwhelmed, jumping from example to example, as Millar ensures she has proven her thesis

in each chapter. Whether intentional or not, the result is that each chapter could effectively stand alone as a discrete unit of information, potentially making individual chapters useful as assigned readings for students. The tone of the book is emphatic but also didactic, and Millar does not restrain herself, telling the reader what they (we) need to do and care about to ensure the continued creation and protection of digital evidence. The reader must decide whether such exhortations are inspirational enough to prompt action or not.

Nevertheless, *A Matter of Facts* is a topical, valuable work that offers a compelling and thoroughly argued case for why we should all care about the enduring existence of authentic evidence. Millar has done her research, and her choice to target a general audience is a smart one in keeping with her belief that the challenges of curating, protecting, and preserving evidence are collective ones. The book's densely presented information is counterbalanced by the relevance of the supporting examples, which will resonate with many readers, including information professionals, students, and others. When Millar concludes, "we are all archivists now", it is hard not to feel convinced that she is right.

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