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Review of A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age

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Laura A. Millar. *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age*. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2019.

The information age, with its rapid growth of information and technologies, gives the perception that facts and information are more accessible than ever and that connections between people and communities have been strengthened over the past thirty years. Yet the opposite is occurring, with the increasing rejection of truth and manipulation of evidence by many forces in society today. The challenge against truth is being used as a mechanism for asserting political dominance and eroding the sociopolitical landscape. Laura A. Millar's *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age* sets out to convince the general public of the value of evidence and why it matters by presenting several stories about evidence through the lens of recordkeeping. Millar frames the book around the issue of how we trust information, especially in this "post-truth" world, and examines it through three main questions: what is evidence, why is it important, and ultimately what do we do next?

Millar is an independent consultant in archives and records management. Her career spans across government, university, nonprofit, and professional association settings. Her expansive professional experience translates well into articulating the importance of recordkeeping in a clear way to the general public. Millar's writing is the first volume in a series called "Archival Futures," a collaboration between the Society of American Archivists and the American Library Association. The series highlights discourse surrounding the importance of archival records and the future.

The first section of Millar's book is about understanding what is evidence. Chapters 1 and 2 explain that the first step in countering the onslaught of misinformation and "truthiness" is recognizing the difference among truth, facts, and evidence. In a time when society seems to correlate feeling to truth, choosing emotion and personality over facts, Millar clarifies that truth is relative and not an inherent fact. Moreover, facts are an accumulation of evidence; ipso facto, evidence validates facts. Millar describes how the analysis of an accumulation of facts builds a truth like links in a chain. Evidence in itself is defined as any source of verifiable proof. The type of evidence she primarily considers is recorded evidence, information that can be fixed in time and space. What Millar is describing is not reconceptualizing definitions but encouraging readers to recognize that "evidence matters more" because evidence guides facts and truths (8).

In chapters 3 and 4, Millar further unpacks the concept of evidence by outlining what makes evidence trustworthy. She argues that evidence must be unchanged, authentic, and complete, noting that these markers are becoming increasingly difficult to verify with the composition of electronic records. Such concepts are not unfamiliar to information professionals, as they are guiding principles in records management. In chapter 4, Millar expands the scope of trustworthiness by detailing how evidence, in itself, is a social construct. Social constructs are what create evidence, and the embodiment of evidence can take any form, such as quipu, photographs, oral histories, clay tablets, or data. But evidence is not valuable or useful without context. Millar emphasizes that the representation of evidence relies on the ability to "understand how evidence came to be, what it says, what it means, why it was created, and how it was created, and how it was used" (48). She notes how a (raw) data point is not evidence itself without any context to

describe the data point's meaning, and it is with meaning that value is created. Examining these concepts highlights how using and protecting evidence is a multifaceted endeavor.

Only briefly does Millar acknowledge as a caveat the continuous challenge of silences and biases in recordkeeping and how they can affect the existence of evidence. It is a missed opportunity to dig deeper and enlighten readers about the nuances of subjectivity in recordkeeping and how silences and biases are not created in a vacuum. Even though the intended audience is the general public, and Millar explains that this lack of scholarly sources and theories is an intentional omission, it would have been a chance for readers to understand more about how social, political, and cultural shifts shape our valuing of evidence and preservation practices.

In the second section, the crux of the book, Millar focuses on three main reasons for the importance of evidence. First, evidence is needed for identity and connection. Chapter 5 examines how records are intrinsically linked to our sense of identity. This is clear in birth certificates, passports, and other identification sources that help distinguish who we are and where we are from, which reinforces not only legal status but personal identity. Millar poignantly points out how critical evidence is for identity when it goes missing. With over 25 million refugees around the world, how do refugees provide proof of their identity and rights when record evidence is lost (61)? How does one navigate the world without evidence that proves information about one's self? It is that evidence which continuously grounds and links us to others; therefore, Millar argues, when people have a sense of identity and community, people may feel that they have a greater stake in what happens in society.

Second, evidence is a tool for promoting justice and rights since it acts "as a witness to wrongs" (68). Evidence can demand accountability, as Millar points out in chapter 6. For example, Millar presents how in the 2007–8 financial crisis in Iceland, the government commission investigating key government agencies and banks found evidence to help in prosecutions. Furthermore, the value of this information led the commission to promote a policy change that creates and protects such evidence in Icelandic oversight moving forward. Another important example Millar highlights is a situation where indigenous communities came into conflict over land rights in Canada. These communities consider oral history as a valued form of evidence that dictates their rights to land, but the oral histories were largely ignored until 1997, when a legal declaration acknowledged them as a form of evidence. The decision came from the evaluation that evidence is not defined by its form but by its value to society.

Millar's third reason for evidence's importance is to help craft personal and collective memories. Chapter 7 explores how "evidence links personal memories with official stories, enriching our personal lives, helping us define ourselves, and enhancing our understanding of others" (82). Millar includes a beautiful story about how a lost canister of film from World War II was discovered and brought back to its intended destination and a screening was conducted for the community. Among the attendees was Ann Alsop who, for the first time, heard her father's voice—a man who died in combat before they had a chance to meet. Alsop's story is one where evidence interweaves a complex personal and collective narrative of life, family, and war. By linking information, knowledge, identity, and personal and social memory, Millar presents the issue of a post-truth era as less macro and more personal, subtly reiterating how each person has a connection to what is at stake when these elements are eroded.

Millar transitions in chapter 8 to the notion that while evidence is valuable, it is equally vulnerable, describing the dangers of manipulation and abuse of evidence to us as individuals and as communities. As a case in point, the chapter examines Andrew Wakefield’s erroneous research linking autism to MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccines, a manipulation of evidence that sparked a wildfire of mistrust in the scientific community and gave rise to the antivaccination movement and resulting measles outbreaks. Similarly, Millar documents how President Donald Trump’s administration steadfastly stuck to their “truth” that his inauguration was the largest ever attended by doctoring digital photographs of the crowd size. This reiterates how electronic records are specifically vulnerable. Millar also notes another layer of vulnerability to digital information—the danger to privacy as leaks, neglect, and hacking continually affect the integrity of evidence and expose personal information, something that will exponentially increase as technologies evolve.

With a post-truth landscape, can democracy survive in the information age? Democracy is built on the crucial foundation that citizens will have unfettered access to evidence and can use that evidence to formulate beliefs to participate in political and social decision-making. But when society’s form of evidence is vulnerable, and vitriolic political rhetoric reigns supreme, how can one challenge the erosion of truth? Millar seems optimistic in the final section of the book, which proposes what to do next. She demands a call to action to protect evidence. One of the critical pieces to protecting evidence, according to Millar in chapter 9, is to first shed some of our misplaced assumptions about the nature of evidence. She elaborates that society needs to stop assuming that current laws are adequate, that access and privacy to information is legally defined or wholly guaranteed, that evidence will exist, and that the digital future is stable and secure. Millar adeptly uses Terry Cook’s dichotomy of “electronic records, paper minds” as our society rests on the assumption that our formerly analog world meets the demands and challenges of our information age (121).¹ A new system of safeguards is needed as laws and ethical business practices have not caught up with defining the parameters of safeguarding data, which, for example, allowed Cambridge Analytica to infiltrate Facebook accounts’ data and use it to influence the 2016 election without much criminal consequence.

Millar transitions to strategies for what to do to confront post-truth misinformation in chapter 10 by asking readers to take personal ownership of changes to protect evidence. Taking a cue from environmental initiatives by creating a recordkeeping initiative equivalent to “reduce, recycle, reuse,” Millar advocates for the concept of “remember, respect, record.” As Millar outlines, we need to “remember” with honesty and integrity, which is achieved through “respect” in the value of trustworthy evidence, and to do both, “we need to ‘record’ our actions and decisions so we have evidence to defend rights, support accountability, create identities, and preserve memories” (128). The three points emphasize how crucial it is for members of society to be vigilant and cognizant record-keepers in order to counter misinformation. Millar provides strategies for how to protect evidence and its integrity by lobbying for strengthening laws, improving technologies, taking personal responsibility, raising awareness, and embracing change. And finally, she calls on the public to engage with archives, libraries, and museums to support and utilize the evidence they hold, creating a cyclical relationship that will promote evidence-based recordkeeping practices.

¹ 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): 300–328.

A challenge with a book such as this is that traversing many powerful stories about misinformation and abuse of evidence eroding our democracy keeps the question of how society got to this point in the forefront of the reader's mind without fully delivering a comprehensive answer. How did the rejection of evidence infiltrate sociopolitical and scientific institutions, former authorities of trust, and become so normalized in our lives? While Millar does an incredible job outlining evidence-based truth, her perspective is from records and archives, which only encompasses part of the entire picture. A more contextualized scope comes in the form of a supplementary reading list at the end of the book.

It seems the old adage "a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes" is in hyperdrive these days, and Millar is able to illustrate one of the reasons for this acceleration by showing that as our evidence or information has grown, so has its vulnerabilities. At the heart of Millar's work is the theme of interconnectivity between records and our sense of self and inclusion within our communities, which underscores the importance of recognizing how critical evidence is to our daily lives and how it needs watchful protection. It is an important message because archivists, librarians, and information professionals cannot do this alone, and in a post-truth world, society needs to come together to support evidence-based truth and challenge false facts and manipulation of evidence.