

# **A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age,** **by Laura A. Millar**

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Volume 6, 2020

Special Focus on Academic Libraries and the Irrational  
Dossier thématique sur les bibliothèques universitaires et  
l'irrationnel

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069806ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.33480>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians / Association  
Canadienne des Bibliothécaires en Enseignement Supérieur

ISSN

2369-937X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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Cite this review

Troupos, C. (2020). Review of [A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age, by Laura A. Millar]. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship / Revue canadienne de bibliothéconomie universitaire*, 6, 1–3.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v6.33480>

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**Laura A. Millar. *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age*. Chicago, IL: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2019, 172 pp, \$44.99.**

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It seems each day there is a headline reporting on the mismanagement of evidence: the suppression of testimony, destruction of records, or manipulation of information. From this context comes Lauren Millar's book, *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age*, which explores the relationship between evidence and truth, and challenges governments, organizations, and everyday citizens to create and preserve good, archival records to serve as evidence to future researchers.

The book is the first volume in the new *Archival Futures* series. A central premise to the series is that a true democracy relies on trustworthy evidence, and to capture evidence sufficiently, the notion of the recordkeeper needs to expand from the traditional archivist to all citizens. Millar explains that while archival recordkeeping has never been perfect nor complete, intentionally documenting and preserving information is especially critical now considering the deluge of digital information, and more importantly, in light of the assault from the Trump administration on the very concept of fact and evidence.

Millar is an experienced scholar and archivist who has navigated the shift from paper to digital records and the challenges that recordkeeping brings. What worries Millar is not that we acknowledge that *some* truth is subjective and personal—for it has always been— but rather that we are now beginning to doubt *all* facts, that *anything* can be verified, and as a result, “we seem to be losing our faith in humanity, culture, and democracy” (5), themes that she goes on to explore in the book.

Chapters one through four define key concepts and raise important questions. Through distinguishing the difference between data, or raw content; information, or contextualized data; and evidence, or a source of information that stands as proof, Millar demonstrates how evidence relates to truth. While not all truth requires evidence (e.g. personal opinion), for a truth to be verifiable, Millar explains, it *must* be based on evidence. Moreover, she continues, even a gap in evidence can also attest to certain truths. Millar also introduces some of the complex questions related to evidence: Is it complete or taken out of context? Is it manipulated? How



do we know what information will be needed as evidence? Millar does not provide answers to these difficult questions, but rather emphasizes their importance to the interpretation of evidence.

Chapters five through eight demonstrate the significance that evidence plays within a democracy. For example, Millar affirms that people have a right to evidence of their existence; a birth certificate provides a record of one's identity and allows certain rights within a country, such as healthcare or the ability to travel freely. Strip people of this basic evidence, as with refugees, and they are stripped of basic rights and opportunities. Additionally, evidence can offer multiple perspectives or assist in achieving justice for victims. Complicating matters is balancing the need for records with privacy—another basic human right. Examples from the Obama birther conspiracy to the establishment of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission in response to the Indian Residential Schools clearly illustrate Millar's claims.

Finally, chapters nine and ten challenge the readers' assumptions about record-keeping within governments—the current laws are not substantial nor is there any assurance they are followed—and challenge readers to act in response. Millar provides a passionate conclusion and a bibliography for further reading that offers texts about archival records, data in today's society, and history.

Though ALA published the book, Millar addresses her argument to the general public. Consequently, she writes in accessible prose and relies on relevant examples from the news rather than dense theory. As a result, information professionals likely will not discover new ideas; however, they may have renewed enthusiasm for their profession and its role in maintaining an orderly democracy.

While the examples are acute, they seem repetitive at times, such as the recurring mentions of Cambridge Analytica and the Mueller Report. Although there are examples from other governments and organizations, President Trump and his administration are singled out in this war against truth via evidence spanning the day of the inauguration through to the publication of the Mueller report. Undoubtedly, this critique is fair; the impeachment trial that has since occurred underscore the arguments. However, if Millar's intent is to reach the general public, then continually drawing on the Trump administration may seem heavy-handed. As the recent *Washington Post* report on Afghanistan shows (Whitlock 2019), manipulation of evidence affects all political parties, and when addressing the public and arguing that recordkeepers ought to be impartial, Millar could be more persuasive by offering at least some bipartisan examples.

While Millar creates a passionate argument that evidence is “a cornerstone of an accountable, responsible democracy,” (145) it is unclear what action readers will take as there is little direction about *how* to demand or accomplish such systematic recordkeeping. The final chapters allude to technology that can help lock down data so it can be better trusted, and furthermore calls upon an informed citizenry that will demand authorities comply with record-keeping laws. However, without clear steps—an advocacy group to join, a bill to support—it is unlikely that the audience will do anything at all beyond developing insight into the role of evidence within their world. Still—that isn’t nothing, and, ultimately, citizens of a democracy can act with their votes. While the audience may not take up the charge to march on Washington and demand better record-keeping, they may more readily think about how we create, share, and preserve the data and/or evidence from their own lives.

Overall, this is an insightful text that helps inform citizens of the importance that record-keeping plays in a healthy democracy. While the intended audience may not be information professionals, the books does arm those same professionals with some relevant discussion points regarding the significance of evidence in preserving the truth of our times, and select chapters could help undergraduates as they prepare to use archival records.

#### REFERENCES

Whitlock, Craig. 2019. “At war with the truth.” *The Washington Post*, December 10. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>