

BOOK REVIEWS

A matter of facts: the value of evidence in an information age, by Laura Millar, ALA Neal-Schuman: American Library Association and Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2019, xix, 172 pp., US\$44.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8389-1771-8

Laura Millar will be known to many Australian readers, essentially through her contributions in *Archivaria*, her textbook *Archives: Principles and Practices* and her addresses to our annual conferences. Some follow her on Twitter (@MillarLaura). And in recent years she has contributed to local efforts to develop a national documentation strategy.

According to philosopher Lee McIntyre's foreword, *A Matter of Facts* is a 'quietly monumental' book (p. xi). Actually, its tone is anything but quiet, although the challenge it faces is certainly monumental – no less than opposing the cavalier attitude to truth and proof personified by President Trump and implied by phrases such as 'alternative facts', 'truth is not truth', 'post truth' and 'fake news'. Enabled by big tech companies, in many ways the dystopian nightmare of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* so devastatingly analysed by George Orwell over seventy years ago has become reality.

Across her ten chapters, step by step, Millar explains and illustrates the similarities, differences and connections between data, information, facts, evidence, proof and memory, when their differences matter, and when they do not. Sometimes they are qualified to make a point (*raw data*, *documented proof*, *trustworthy evidence*, *evidence-based truth*). Sometimes an example carries the argument, such as South African President Thabo Mbeki rejecting the facts about how HIV is transmitted, while repeatedly Millar acknowledges the relevance of context, social construction of ideas, the contingency of truth to changing or new evidence, and human assumptions and biases. Records and archives and recordkeeping are mentioned almost in passing, their meaning emerging from the examples while always held to the anchoring concept of evidence. Notice, not Terry Cook's 'friendly cousins' evidence and memory. And – my one concern – what I am calling storytellers' records are out; documented evidence must have been captured 'in external form' (p. 25).

Millar explicitly states her book is aimed at the public, not recordkeepers. It covers similar territory to Geoffrey Yeo's *Records, Information and Data*, but in many ways, their books could not be more dissimilar. Her examples are carefully chosen to relate to everyday personal and family situations and also drawn from recent events in Canada and the US (and once or twice in Australia too). Appropriately her writing is conversational, anecdotal, with little technical jargon, and while there are many scholarly references, the book is designed to be easily read and digested. It is a superb piece of polemic and advocacy but could readily serve too as an introduction to the key recordkeeping issues of democracies in the digital age. The narrative weaves back and forth supported also by notions like 'the facts', authenticity, reliability, trust and so on, and by stories of privacy breaches, whistleblowing, hacking, preservation scandals, the digital divide and data deluge. Repeatedly readers' objections are anticipated, allowing for instance the insights of postmodernism and the reality of personal truth.

Ultimately, the goal as Millar puts it in her Introduction, is 'to combat lies'. In response she has numerous suggestions, some as superficial (until one thinks about it) as subscribing to a newspaper and buying a history book. She also calls for changes to laws, better systems design and improved personal responsibility for one's own records because, as she notes as the book's final sentence, 'We are all archivists now'. Hundreds of times her sentences begin 'We need to ...' or 'We must ...',

and more than once ‘It is time for the public to demand . . .’. She also endorses Richard Valpy’s call for a Canadian Documentary Heritage Commission. But her key proposals are the recordkeeping equivalent of the environment and climate change campaigners’ mantra *Reduce Reuse Recycle*, namely *Remember Respect Record*. They are explained in her final chapter titled “‘An arms race against the forces of fakery”: Evidence and Accountability’.

Millar admits she is being idealistic, perhaps even naive. Indeed, she succeeds almost too well describing and analysing the current crisis and her book can readily join the expanding body of ‘teclash’ literature. As a result, I suspect some readers’ initial doubts that much can be done to counter the forces she describes will simply increase. These forces are not new. They reside deep in the human psyche. People have always lied, clung to power, undermined human rights, oppressed minorities, spread malicious rumours, forged documents and profited by invading privacy. Now there are trolls, antivaxxers, climate change deniers, microtargeting third-party entities, data monetizers and the rest. And leaders who lie and gloat.

For this reviewer, the book raised two specific issues. The first concerned core messages and advocacy methods. Laura Millar has put her heart and soul into producing a compelling case for the fundamental importance of evidence and had it published by the American Library Association with Neal-Schuman and the Society of American Archivists. What follow-up marketing ideas they have in mind remains to be seen; having it selected for compulsory study by senior secondary school students would be a start. At some point, funds are needed to educate and influence behaviour. Apparently, revenue from sales of ALA Neal-Schuman titles help fund awareness campaigns. It surely won’t come from the Koch brothers.

By contrast, how are things going in Australia? We know who our Donald Trump is; who is our Laura Millar, our *A Matter of Facts*? Culturally, do we too need to mention facts before bringing up evidence? What is the most effective way for the ASA and Australian archivists more generally to achieve ethical recordkeeping behaviour and respect for evidence wherever power is exercised and in society in general? What does GLAM Peak have to say when not preoccupied with digital access to collections? Do we need a documentary heritage commission, or leave it to the OpenAustralia Foundation and #righttoknow? Would a YouTube video like the entries which won the ICA SPA Film Festival awards in Adelaide in October 2019 be an effective answer? Perhaps the ABC tv programme *Gruen* should be asked to consider recordkeeping in its wonderful segment ‘The Pitch’, where competing advertising agencies are challenged to sell the unsellable.

A second issue, alive and well in Australia, was the use of the terms data and information for or at the expense of records and archives. Unlike Yeo, who has addressed directly and theoretically the undeniable differences, Millar deploys the idea of evidence to tease out their relationships while holding to the reality that recorded evidence is ‘information that has been fixed in space and time and can be verified as authentic, so that it serves as proof’ (p. 13). Her submission to the mid-2019 Tune Review of the National Archives of Australia was direct, but this from pp. 134–5 is pretty clear too: ‘The public should demand that public officials recognize the difference between data, information, and evidence, insisting that the government implement policies and procedures that protect evidence, whatever its form’.

A Matter of Facts stands alone as a public manifesto and raises issues at the centre of our beliefs. While not aimed at us every archivist should read it.

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