

ONE BOOK



ONE PROFESSION

SOCIETY OF AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS

The Publications Board of the Society of American Archivists has selected for its 2020/2021 One Book, One Profession reading initiative [*A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age*](#), by Laura A. Millar (SAA & American Library Association, 2019). In this book, written to raise public awareness of the importance of documentary evidence, Millar makes the case that records, archives, data, and other sources of documentary proof are crucial in supporting and fostering a society that is respectful, democratic, and self-aware.

This book, and the study questions presented here, can be useful tools for archival professionals to engage the public in the effort to preserve and make available records and archives. Readers are encouraged to approach the study questions in two ways. The first is to focus on the issue itself, such as the nature, form, and value of evidence; its role in supporting memory, identity, justice, and human rights; or the risks associated with the manipulation, neglect, or abuse of evidence. What are the ideas that come to mind as you consider these questions from a professional perspective?

The second approach is to consider how you, as an archival professional, might use the ideas in the book to engage researchers, donors, and the wider public more actively in the work of records and archives care. In discussion groups, for example, you may want to exchange stories and case studies in relation to the different questions, to help build a repository of examples to support awareness raising.

1. *A Matter of Facts* distinguishes between truth, facts, and evidence. How do the definitions in the book enhance, support, or challenge your own perceptions of those concepts? How might you use the distinctions between truth, facts, and evidence to explain the role, purpose, and value of records and archives to the public?
2. Why are the concepts of provenance, context, and chain of custody so important to understanding and protecting the authenticity of evidence? How might you use the discussion in *A Matter of Facts* to help explain these concepts to users, donors, and the public?

3. Millar argues that ways in which records are created and kept depend significantly on the technologies available at a particular time and place. How has the archival role changed as record-making and recordkeeping technologies have changed? How do you think that role will change in future?
4. Millar uses the term “documentary evidence” in preference to traditional definitions of records and archives. Do you agree with this broader focus on evidence? How does this idea challenge current perceptions of the role and nature of records and archives?
5. Millar argues that records, archives, and other forms of evidence are valuable for creating a sense of individual and community identity and connection, for supporting justice and human rights, and for enhancing personal and collective memory. Is it the archivist’s role to identify or highlight these different values in a body of archives? What are the risks of privileging one value over another?
6. Millar argues that all archives come with silences, gaps, and biases but also that even the smallest “sliver of a sliver” of archives can help tell a story that might not otherwise be told. Do you see these ideas as complementary or conflicting?
7. As discussed throughout *A Matter of Facts*, there is a common public perception that digitizing archival materials is easy, fast, and inevitable. But archival professionals know that digitization can be complex and time-consuming, and sometimes it is unnecessary or even inappropriate. How might you use the discussion in *A Matter of Facts* to help raise awareness of the challenges associated with digitization?
8. As Millar outlines, one challenge with preserving born-digital evidence is that it is highly mutable: capturing data at one time does not remove the responsibility to capture a new iteration of that data later. What is the role of the archival professional in managing born-digital evidence? Custodian? Policy maker? Advisor? Other?
9. Millar does not agree with the suggestion that archival institutions should “keep everything.” But there is a growing argument that institutions *can* retain all born-digital sources of evidence, and that doing so would not only support “big data” analysis but also remove the subjectivity of human-driven appraisal. Do you think it is possible or logical to retain the totality of an institution’s born-digital records?
10. In Chapter 10, Millar presents several concrete steps that the public can take to support the protection of evidence, including working to change evidence-related laws to adopting ethical approach to the use of information technologies to increasing personal responsibility for creating and managing records. What steps do you think the public could take to improve the care of evidence? How can archival professionals support these changes?

- 11.** At the end of Chapter 10, Millar argues that “We cannot allow people in positions of power to destroy evidence because it does not suit their political ambitions, business interests, or personal preferences.” If archival professionals believe that sources of evidence are not being protected adequately, what action should those professionals take? What principles should guide their decision making: laws and regulations; professional codes of ethics; personal beliefs; other?
- 12.** In the Conclusion, Millar writes that “The recordkeeper’s job is to support truth. Not personal truths, or partial truths, or relative truths, but evidence-based truths.” To perform that job, she argues, archival professionals must strive to be as impartial as possible. How realistic is it to ask for impartiality, especially in today’s challenging sociopolitical environment? Can archivists balance impartiality with activism? How?
- 13.** Has reading *A Matter of Facts* influenced your view of your role as an archival professional or your sense of the future for records and archives management? Which topics in the book have reinforced or challenged your perspective on your chosen career?