

**SLIDE 1:**



Thank you for inviting me to give this talk. It is an honour to be with you here in Winnipeg and to share some thoughts about the current state of our profession, and the world of information and evidence. My special thanks to Greg Bak for your help and support, to the Association for Manitoba Archives and the University of Manitoba for your efforts to coordinate this hybrid event.

I've titled my talk Truth, Lies, and Evidence: The Role of the Archivist in an Information Age. I might have called it, Truth, Lies, Elton, Marilyn, and the Bunny Rabbit. Bear with me and we will get there.

**NOTE TO READER:** This version of the author's presentation has been edited to remove any third-party images, to protect third-party IP or other rights. The author makes this text available for research or personal use only. Thank you.

SLIDE 2:

The slide is divided into two main sections. On the left, a teal vertical bar contains the word 'QUESTIONS' in white, uppercase letters. To the right, a dark grey/black background contains two questions in white text, separated by thin horizontal lines. The first question is 'What is the role of the archivist today?' and the second is 'What can we – the profession, institutions, individuals – do to fulfil that role?'.

Since this talk is largely intended to support the University of Manitoba’s archival studies students, I have put on my teaching hat and crafted some framing questions to consider as I offer my remarks. During our discussion, which I hope will be lively, I’d like to hear your thoughts about the answers to these questions. But let me warn you, they could be trick questions. Don’t hesitate to think outside the box.

## LAURA MILLAR AMA U of M SPEAKING NOTES

### SLIDE 3:

[IMAGE REMOVED]

So to begin. Last Friday night. I went to see Elton John's Farewell concert in Vancouver before flying to Winnipeg. I will admit I am a fan of Elton John's music, especially the older albums, but my reasons for going to this particular concert were more complex. When Elton John came to Vancouver in 1975, I asked my father if I could go. It would have been my first rock concert. No, my father declared. Nice young ladies – "good girls" – don't go to rock concerts. I was forbidden.

I was certainly a good girl back then. So, I accepted my fate. I didn't go. (As time went on, I did go to my fair share of rock concerts, starting with a performance of ZZ Top, and of course I indulged in all the associated debauchery that goes with them. But that's another story.)

So last Friday night, 47 years later, I went. It was a great show, and I am filled with admiration that a 75-year-old survivor of prostate cancer, Covid-19, and a hip replacement can perform for 2 ½ hours without a break.

But my point in talking about Elton today is archival, not musical or medical.

## LAURA MILLAR AMA U of M SPEAKING NOTES

### Slide 4:

[IMAGE REMOVED]

During the performance, the screens above the stage were filled with images, videos, and light effects. It was, basically, a 2 ½ hour music video. When Elton sang *Candle in the Wind*, images of Marilyn Monroe came up. When he sang *Rocket Man*, images of Elton in costume came up.

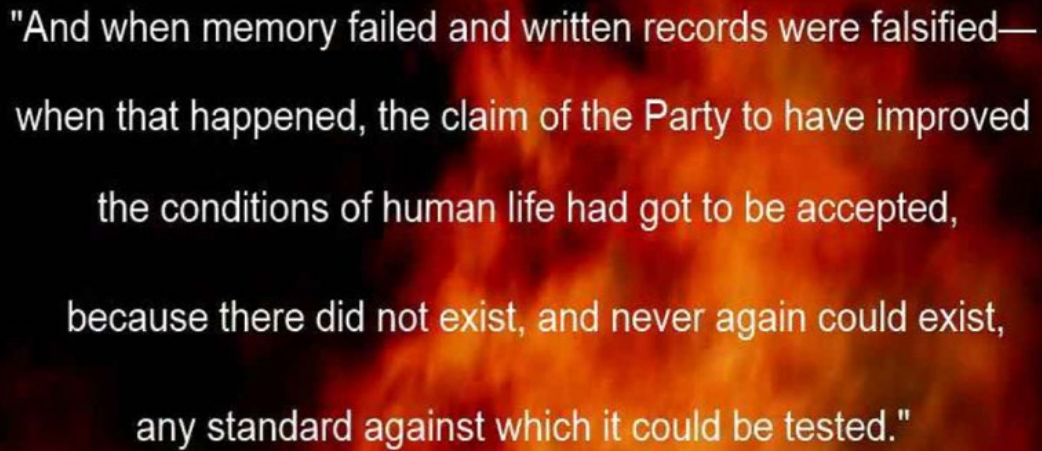
But not all the pictures of Marilyn WERE Marilyn. Some were the actor Ana de Armas, who plays Marilyn in the new movie *Blonde*. Some were of the actor Taron Egerton, who played Elton in the film *Rocketman*.

What is true? What is a lie? Does it matter? I know. Once an archivist, always an archivist. Watching the mix of fact and fiction, I inevitably thought about the omnipresent question of lies, truth, and evidence. Was it inauthentic that a rock concert used fictional images as well as real? Or was it just art? How could people know which is true and which is false? Does it matter?

I don't have a problem with artistic license in a rock concert. That's what art is. And to be fair, as the show ended, a massive list of credits rolled up the screens, just like in a movie. Source information was provided. Well done, I say.

But there are tip of the iceberg questions here, as we consider truth, lies, and evidence. When we see videos of bombings in Ukraine, how do we know the images are true? When we listen to audio recordings of politicians, how do we know the words haven't been manipulated? Surely art is art. But truth is truth. And facts are facts. And therein lies the problem.

Slide 5:



"And when memory failed and written records were falsified—  
when that happened, the claim of the Party to have improved  
the conditions of human life had got to be accepted,  
because there did not exist, and never again could exist,  
any standard against which it could be tested."

We all know how dangerous lies and deceit are. We are steeped in a world of mis- and dis-information. George Orwell's 1984 has become such a reference point these days that it is verging on cliché. But in the vein of "truth is stranger than fiction," his words still resonate. As he wrote,

And when memory failed and written records were falsified – when that happened, the claim of the Party to have improved the conditions of human life had got to be accepted, because there did not exist, and never again could exist, any standard against which it could be tested.

Writing in 1948, Orwell was reflecting on the dangers of totalitarianism in Stalinist Russia. Talk about déjà vu all over again. We are now witnessing totalitarianism in Putinist Russia, and it isn't pretty.

Closer to home, the United States is no longer officially defined as a full democracy. It is now considered a "flawed democracy." Around the world, hundreds of thousands of people have died of Covid-19, many of whom might have lived if they hadn't become victims of fake news around vaccines or bleach remedies or conspiracy theories about microchips. And don't get me started on truth, lies, Brexit, and the revolving door of UK politics. We can only do so much to stop those whose intentions are wicked. But we can do something about failed memory and falsified records. We can do something to support and uphold the standards needed to measure, and maintain, the conditions of human life.

In my book *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age*, I argue that that the best standard against which to measure truth – external, verifiable truth, not personal or spiritual truth – is authentic, reliable evidence. But in a post-truth world, access to, and trust in, evidence is a challenge. Recordkeepers cannot resolve this challenge ourselves. But we can work with others to raise awareness of evidence – of written records and other sources of documentary memory – as the standard against which to test the claims of those in power.

SLIDE 6:

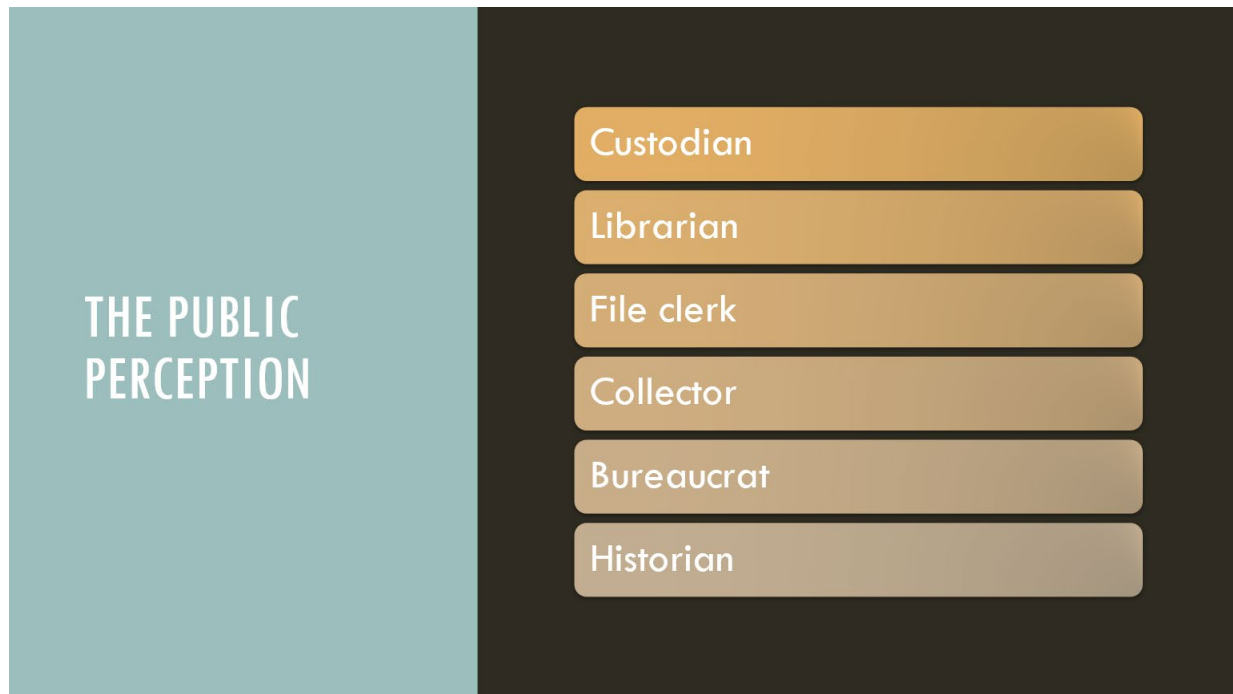
THE  
TRADITIONAL  
ARCHIVAL ROLE

- Identify, manage, and preserve official records with long-term value
- Assess, collect, organize, preserve, and provide access to records
- Acquire, preserve, and make available documentary sources with permanent value
- Manage, care for, hold, preserve, and provide access to records

But we *cannot* do that critically important work in a digital age. Not if we continue to follow custodial, traditional, status quo models.

The phrases on the screen are taken from the mission and mandate statements of a range of professional archival associations, international, national, and local. They all share a common thread: The archivist's job, as KEEPER, is to seek out and collect, preserve, and make available the records that exist, that are left behind, so that those sources can be used by anyone, for any reason.

SLIDE 7:



This is how the public sees us. As KEEPERS. Whose work is custodial and historical. We look after the old stuff and make sure it is available for historical or research use. We ensure the public can locate and use sources of evidence, which they overwhelmingly perceive as “old.” How we do it, they do not question.

We think they do not understand what we do and therefore they do not support us. But that’s not really true. They DO not understand us. But they do trust that we are doing our job. They assume we are doing what we are tasked to do, as curators, bureaucrats, and historians.

But what the public does not understand, and what we do not explain well enough, is that if the stuff that we want to keep isn’t MADE well, it isn’t possible to KEEP it well. Since archivists are too often sidelined in discussions about how to MAKE records, it is very hard for us to ensure good records exist when it comes time to KEEP them.

As a records and archives consultant, I try to start every new project by saying “let’s not just manage what documentary evidence you have. Let’s figure out what evidence you *need* in the first place, then we will develop strategies for how to *make* it well and then how to *keep* it well.” It is not an easy conversation, and often I am shut down before I begin. Many clients perceive of data and information as entirely separate from records and archives. But in a digital age, if you don’t have good data you can’t have good information. Then you can’t have good evidence, and you can’t have good archives.

One of the reasons I wrote my book, I confess, was that I am tired of having those conversations.

## LAURA MILLAR AMA U of M SPEAKING NOTES

### SLIDE 8:

[IMAGE REMOVED]

So at heart, the problem is that the public assumes we are doing a job that needs to be done and that we will just keep doing it. We are nice people. We are good and gentle folk, who don't go to rock concerts. Who wouldn't say boo to a fly. We are magicians. We are invisible magicians.

We don't need the public to understand that archival work as traditionally defined is valuable. We need the public to understand that archival work has changed. That records and archives professionals cannot do the job of **keeping** good evidence if records creators don't help with the job of **making** good evidence.

We are *not* magicians. **We cannot pull a rabbit out of a hat if someone hasn't put the rabbit in the hat in the first place.**



## LAURA MILLAR AMA U of M SPEAKING NOTES

**SLIDE 9:**

**[IMAGE REMOVED]**

Let me illustrate my point with an exceptionally pertinent example.

I am sure you have heard that the National Archives and Records Administration in the United States has been trying to retrieve official records created during the presidency of Donald J. Trump, boxes and boxes of which were transported to his Mar-a-Lago home after he lost the 2020 election. In violation of the Presidential Records Act.

When I wrote my book in 2019, I discussed how Trump had been tearing official records up and throwing them in the garbage. He dismissed NARA staff because they were retrieving the records and trying to tape them back together again. In my book, I said if the President of the United States can get away with tearing up official records, what else can he get away with?

I don't like to think of myself as Cassandra, but, as my husband will attest, I do enjoy the rare moments when I can say I told you so. This is one. It was later reported that Trump was flushing records down the toilet. And hiding records. And "declassifying" files just by thinking about it. And refusing to return official records to NARA despite multiple requests, followed by interventions from the Attorney General of the United States.

This week it was announced that among the records in question are highly sensitive documents related to Iran and China. Trump's violation of US law is flagrant, and the likelihood that he will get criminally charged keeps getting stronger and stronger.

## LAURA MILLAR AMA U of M SPEAKING NOTES

### SLIDE 10:

[IMAGE REMOVED]

The Trump NARA story is important, not just to the United States. Internationally, democracy is imperilled by these actions, and the world is watching.

In a video session tomorrow, Jason Baron, former head of litigation at NARA, and Nancy Kegan Smith, an archivist at NARA from 1973 to 2012, will discuss this case. I hope you can join in. I also hope that in their talk they will address head on some of the myths about the role of the archivist.

One of the reasons, I believe, that Trump has been able to get away with violating the Presidential Records Act is that the legislation has limited power – there are no meaningful enforcement mechanisms, which mean the law is, for all intents and purposes, powerless. Another reason Trump has been able to break the law is that he – and no one around him – really sees archivists as a threat. After all, we are kind and good and gentle. We are invisible custodians who magically pull documentary rabbits out of hats.

## LAURA MILLAR AMA U of M SPEAKING NOTES

### SLIDE 11:

[IMAGE REMOVED]

Speaking of rabbits, on August 29 this year, Rachel Maddow, MSNBC's lead political commentator, spoke about NARA on her national television program. Maddow noted that Donald Trump and his extreme right-wing followers were now sending threats to National Archives' staff in light of NARA's attempts to retrieve official government records. How can anyone go after the National Archives, she asked? She went on to say this:

I mean the National Archives is where we keep our country's documents. It's the filing cabinet. It's the library. How can you be mad at the library?... I mean, if the federal government were a zoo, the National Archives would be like the lop-eared bunnies exhibit, you know, the baby otters, the cute little vegetarian monkeys that are so small they can sit in a teaspoon. I mean, it's just not possible to object violently to the National Archives on any rational basis.

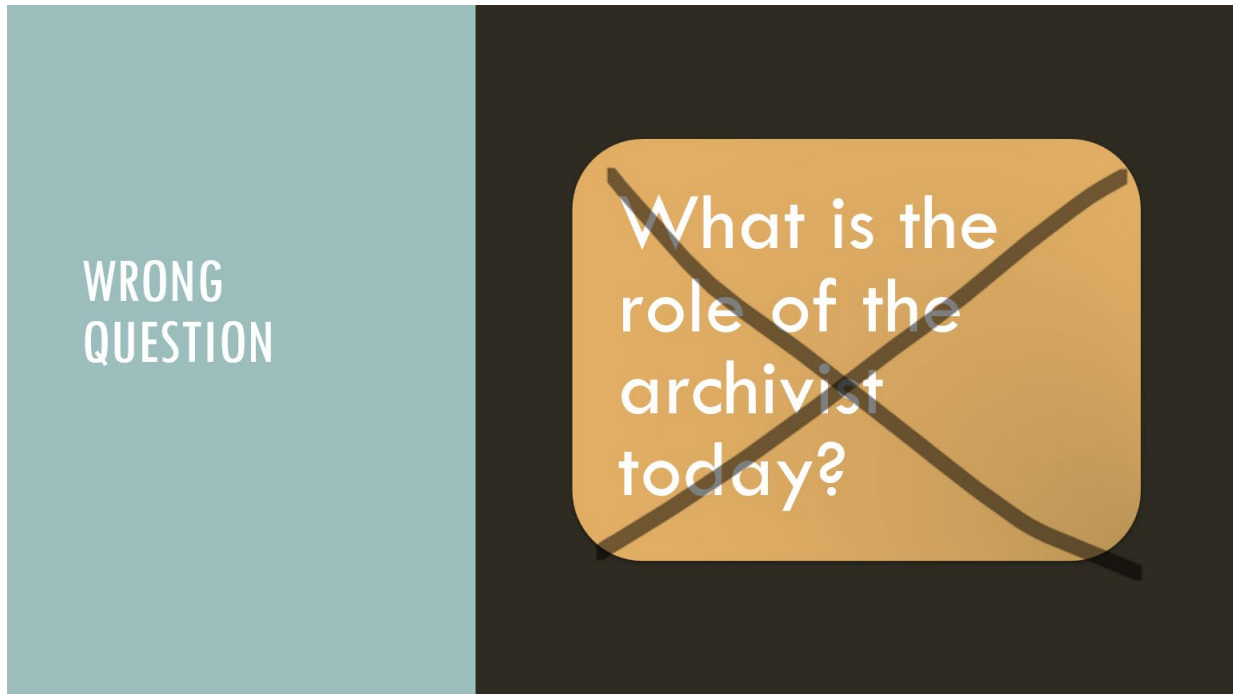
**SLIDE 12:**

**[IMAGE REMOVED]**

Is that who we are? The lop-eared bunnies? The baby otters? Cute beyond cute, but harmless, small, insignificant? Sweet and kind? People who go to see Fred Penner, not Elton John?

That, my friends, is the problem. We cannot succeed in our role as protectors of evidence if people do not recognize that our role must change. We may be trusted to do our work as traditionally defined. But that work cannot be done in a digital age. Not unless we – and society as a whole – strengthen the connections between acts and facts, data and evidence.

SLIDE 13:



So, when I ask, “what is the role of the archivist,” I am asking the wrong question. If we are going to take a strategic approach to change, in order to help society protect authentic and reliable sources of evidence, then we have to take a step back. We must look not at our role in isolation, but at our wider vision for a society that values facts and truth and evidence over lies and disinformation. Taking a strategic approach is essential.

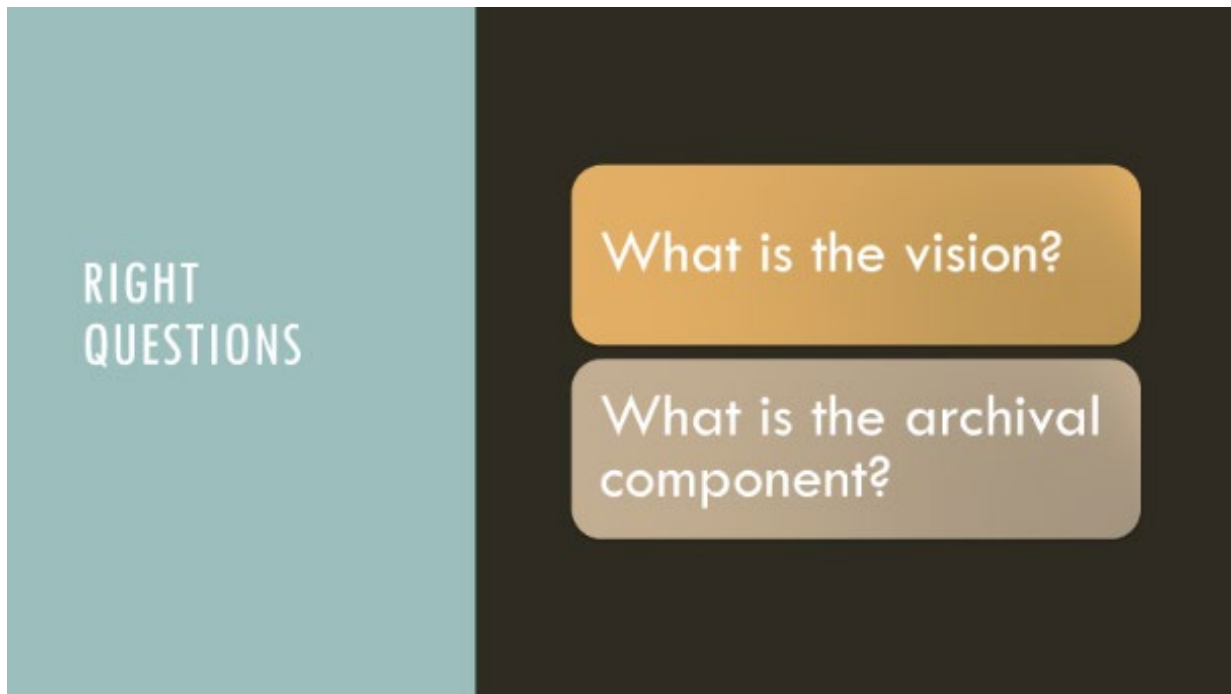
SLIDE 14:



As an archival professional, I spend my days doing strategic planning, to help organizations, governments, and societies manage evidence. My strategic approach always starts with vision, mission, and goals. Once the vision, mission, and goals are clarified, we can then look at the objectives – the actions we need to take to achieve the goals – and then at the strategies and tactics needed.

Then and only then can we define roles and responsibilities. You can't decide **what** someone should do until you clarify **why** they even have a role. And you can't articulate what one group should do without considering how they will work in partnership with others. My job is to help organizations figure out **who** does **what** with **what** in order to achieve success, as defined in the vision and mission.

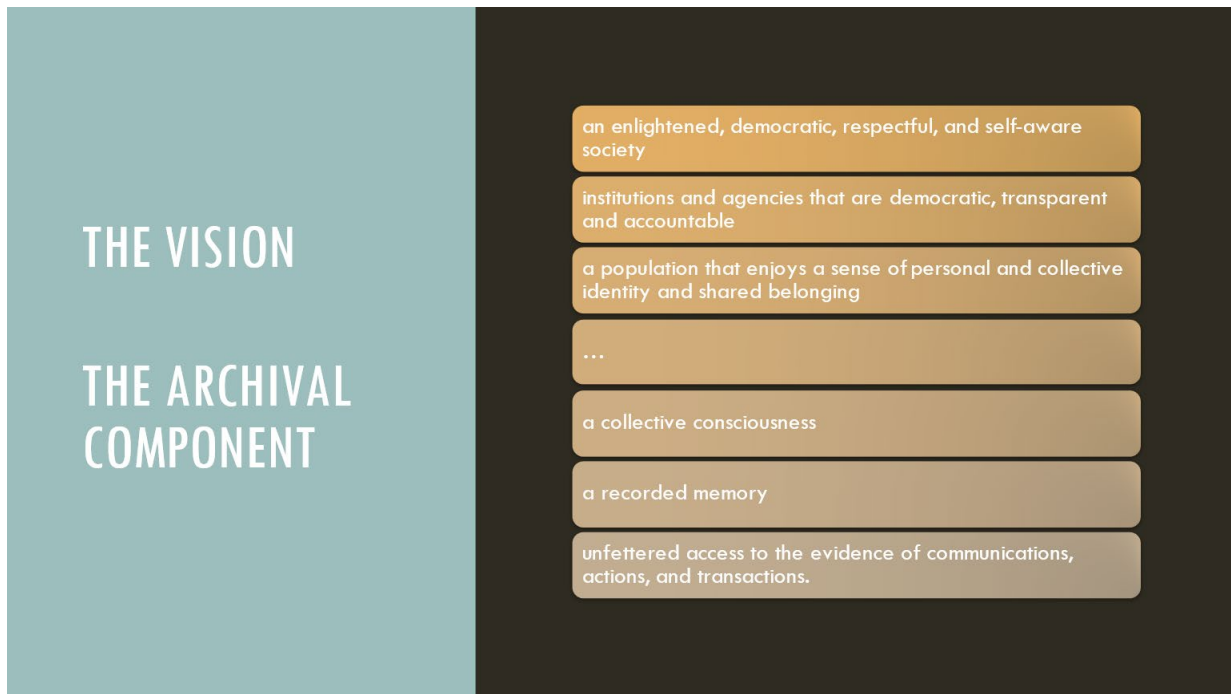
SLIDE 15:



So, I think the right questions to start with are these. What is our vision for society? And what is the archival component in that vision? What is our place in achieving the society we want?

I have been giving several presentations lately calling on our profession to ask these questions of ourselves and come up with strategic answers. For now, I can only speak for myself. But as you will see, I strongly recommend that the Canadian records and archives profession, and our colleagues around the world, conduct this critical strategic planning process.

SLIDE 16:



So, here's my vision. I want to live in a society that is enlightened, democratic, respectful, and self aware. Which means institutions and agencies – public and private – will be democratic, transparent, and accountable. I want to know that the people in that society enjoy a sense of personal and collective identity and shared belonging. That they are willing and happy to work for the common good while respecting each other's autonomy and agency.

I've been told my vision is naïve. But I've also been told I am a good girl. And we know that's not true.

To achieve my vision, I believe society needs a collective consciousness, which comes with a shared understanding of "truth" and of facts and evidence. This doesn't mean one and only one truth, but it does require a recognition of the value of different perspectives on truth. Fact-based truth depends on unfettered access to sources of evidence, including but not only documentary materials such as data, records, and archives.

I also believe in the value of artifacts and stories, art and music, and other types of tangible and intangible heritage. But my specialty is documentary evidence, and I don't pretend to those other areas of knowledge.



SLIDE 17:

**TAKING ACTION**

- Re-examining and redefining professional and institutional goals, objectives, roles, and responsibilities
- Identifying gaps and deficiencies that inhibit the achievement of these goals and objectives?
- Clarifying archival roles in relation to partners and stakeholders – looking for distinctions AND convergence
- Developing strategies to fill gaps and work in partnership
- Presenting a shared vision to the public for their input and support

To move forward with my vision, what would I do next? Here is what I recommend. These actions are not listed in priority order – this is and ought to be a highly iterative process, with some actions involving multiple engagements. But let me work through the list.

To be clear, when I say “we” I am referring, variously, to our professional associations, our custodial institutions, our governments, and us as individuals working in the records and archives field.

## LAURA MILLAR AMA U of M SPEAKING NOTES

1. First, we need to re-examine and redefine our professional and institutional goals, objectives, roles, and responsibilities. To do this, we need to review our bylaws and foundational documents, codes of ethics, framing language, mandate statements, and strategic plans. We don't need BlueSky statements and fuzzy thinking. We need concrete, line-by-line reviews of the words we use so we can validate their meaning and import or update them to suit current realities.

For example, do our professional codes of ethics actually reflect the work we do, or ought to do, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Does the legislation governing archives or access to information or privacy still hold meaning in a digital age? Imagine reviewing the Presidential Records Act with my vision in mind: I would hope that piece of legislation would end up with firm and vigorous enforcement mechanisms.

2. Second, we need to identify the gaps and deficiencies that inhibit the achievement of our goals and objectives. What systems, methodologies, tools, or techniques still work, and which are no longer suitable? We should not be afraid to abandon stalled or static initiatives. Why continue using a piece of legislation that does not include enforcement mechanisms? Revise it or replace it.
3. Third, we need to clarify archival roles in relation to partners and stakeholders. We need to look for both distinctions and commonalities in our work. For example, archivists are not computer programmers. We can't and shouldn't do the job of IT experts. But computer experts are not archivists. We shouldn't expect them to do our job. If we come together and hash out the details, we can say, look, it doesn't work to build computer tool that promises to "archive" a record but does not include a mechanism for locking down that record as authentic and migrating it forward with its content, context, and structure protected. And they can say, look, artificial intelligence really can help to appraise and select records, if we design it with the right criteria in mind. If both parties come to the table willing to learn from each other, how can we lose?
4. Fourth, we need to develop strategies to fill the gaps and work in partnership. By working with IT experts, for example, archivists can insert the evidentiary perspective into software development, while adapting archival practices to incorporate machine learning and artificial intelligence. We will not succeed in protecting evidence in a digital age if we do NOT work in partnership.
5. Finally, but not really finally, we need to present our vision to the public and then ask for their input and support. But we need their input, so we need to build a consultative strategy that is agile and flexible. We need to learn from the public while educating them about our work, and we need to build a path forward that is collaborative and consultative.

**SLIDE 18:**

**[IMAGE REMOVED]**

If these are my strategic actions, what is the first step? How do we kickstart a process of strategic change? I have a very specific suggestion. I have recommended that the International Council on Archives host an international summit on archives and evidence in a digital age. I would love to see a UNESCO role here to raise profile and reach the widest possible audience. I would also love to see Canada host a similar summit. Maybe we should hold one first and create a model for international engagement?

The goal of any such summit would be to bring together key players in the data-information-evidence sphere to share our different disciplinary perspectives and develop strategies for working more effectively together. From those discussions, we might then consider specific actions for better collaboration, improved public awareness, greater consistency, and more robust governance.

Participants might include archivists and recordkeeping professionals, data scientists, computer programmers, privacy experts, lawyers, historians, librarians, and access to information advocates. Other participants might include statisticians, intellectual property experts, health data managers, and those involved with sustainable development, environmental management, and human rights. We are increasingly aware of the role of records and archives for human rights; we need to highlight that important issue. And we also underestimate the environmental impact of digital technologies, including digital preservation. Keeping it all is no longer a viable option.

The last major archival summit in Canada was held in Toronto in 2014, coordinated with leadership from the former Librarian and Archivist of Canada Ian Wilson. I was one of the “agent provocateur” speakers at that event, and I suspect some of the people listening to me today were in attendance, physically or remotely.

Valuable as that summit was, it did not include enough stakeholders from outside our professional milieu. I imagine something very different: an event that is not *archives* driven but focused on the data-information-evidence ecosystem in the very widest sense. As the protectors of evidence, ours will be an important voice in that discussion. But we will not be the only voice. We need to listen as much as talk. There is much we can teach, and much we can learn.

So let’s go back to my trick question. What is the archival role? Can we answer that question? I can answer it because my answer is based on my strategic vision. You may have a different answer, but I urge you to develop your strategic vision first.

SLIDE 19:

The slide features a teal vertical bar on the left containing the text "THE ARCHIVAL ROLE...?". To the right, a dark grey background contains two white text blocks, each separated by a thin horizontal line. The top block reads: "As appropriate to the circumstances, we support, facilitate, guide, and oversee the act of creating, managing, preserving, and providing enduring access to authentic sources of documentary evidence." The bottom block reads: "In this work, we uphold and apply professional and ethical standards, to ensure the highest degree of impartiality and trustworthiness possible."

Here is my answer to the question.

- As appropriate to the circumstances, records and archives professionals support, facilitate, guide, and oversee the act of creating, managing, preserving, and providing enduring access to authentic sources of documentary evidence.
- In this work, we uphold and apply professional and ethical standards, to ensure the highest degree of impartiality and trustworthiness possible.

There is no one way to protect evidence. Some of us will still be custodians. But not all of us, and not always. Some of us may be facilitators, teachers, or guides. Some of us may be more activist than archivist. I still see us as evidence specialists, managing sources of documentary proof in different ways in different contexts.

Paper records will still exist. After all, clay tablets and parchments still exist. But digital data also exist. We need to be flexible and nimble, as ready to tackle digital databases as we are to tackle bound registers. Some of us will still work in storerooms. Others will focus less on what is in front of us and more on how we liaise with our partners in the wider ecosystem. As strategic planners, trainers, advisors.

**SLIDE 20:**

**[IMAGE REMOVED]**

Strategic change is not easy. It's terribly hard. But it is only when we step out of the box that we can achieve real change. As the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca said, "It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that they are difficult." (And I note that, fond as I am of this quotation, the fact that Liz Truss used it when announcing her resignation as UK Prime Minister doesn't fill me with confidence. In Truss, not Seneca. He's okay.)

## LAURA MILLAR AMA U of M SPEAKING NOTES

**SLIDE 21:**

**[IMAGE REMOVED]**

Let me end with thanks. I look forward to the chance to discuss of these issues with the students here in the room with me and with the wider audience on Zoom.

Let me also end by saying this. I try very hard in my work and my life to be polite and diplomatic and gracious. But with apologies to my father, I am *nobody's* "good girl." I am *nobody's* lop-eared bunny.

Please join me in the effort to break these assumptions and make archival work, and our vision as evidence professionals, more visible.

Thank you.  
Laura Millar  
25 October 2022