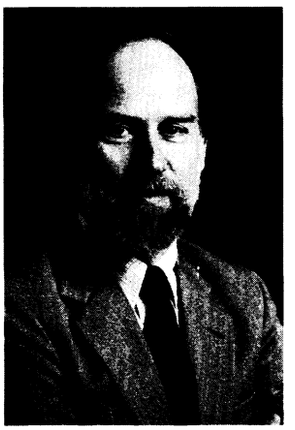
"Werner Gundersheimer's roundtable discussion" in "Rare book and manuscript libraries in the twenty-first century, Part two, Session four: Roundtable discussion (four perspectives)"

These typify the open and the closed machine in Turkle's terminology. Now to all of us, the book, the tangible book, is the openest of all learning machines. Special Collections are the seedbed from which this notion of the book must develop and grow, not the grave in which it is to be buried. We must see to it that the openness of that open machine persists and is open to more people.

Werner Gundersheimer

Coming here as I do from an institution that itself from time to time sponsors conferences and extends itself in various ways to diverse scholarly communities, I really must say that this has been an exceptionally well-organized, hospitable, and amiable series of meetings. Having said that, I must now ask our hosts to forgive me for making just a bit of fun about the great Harvard libraries by adducing what may at first appear a facetious comparison, as a way of introducing the first of the three observations I want to present.



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1. Research libraries must develop audiences as well as technologies.

Some years ago there appeared an exciting but not especially distinguished film called *Coma.* Its hero was a physician at a Boston hospital rather like Massachusetts General. This atypically brave and idealistic young resident happened to discover that the chief of surgery was deliberately using an operating room in which the oxygen lines actually delivered a chemical that put people into a deep coma. This eminent surgeon was intentionally reducing to a vegetative state patients who should easily have been operated on successfully. His purpose was to send the victims to a completely sealed, windowless building in the suburbs. There, the almost lifeless bodies were preserved in such a way that their organs could eventually be removed and sold to wealthy buyers around the world for transplantation. I am not trying to make an exact analogy with the Harvard University Library's vast and growing storage facilities at Southborough. In fact, they may come as close as current ingenuity and technology can provide to an optimal solution for the immense problems Harvard faces in storing its own particular embarrassment of riches. Actually, my thoughts turned to *Coma* when some of the previous speakers characterized research libraries and special collections in the old days as quiet, almost deserted enclaves. Aside from their financial condition (in isolated cases) the libraries with which I am in frequent contact through the Independent Research Libraries Association (IRLA) have long since abandoned that kind of passivity. Indeed, they have properly come to see themselves—both as a matter of survival and as a dimension of their evolving mission—as public resources in a much more complex and complete way than has been recognized in the course of our earlier discussions.

The nation's independent research libraries are first and foremost dedicated to serving the scholarly community. Increasingly, however, they have become institutions that reach out to influence and attempt to educate a much broader public about the resources of the rare book world. Through exhibitions and interpretive programs, they work to communicate the pleasures and delights as well as the

educational benefits their treasures may afford to visitors who are open to the experience of seeing them and learning about them.

Librarians ignore this opportunity at their peril. Hand-wringing about declining literacy has its charms, but our institutions are going to have to survive and, one hopes, even flourish in the real world. The donors of the future will learn about us—perhaps to their surprise—through the casual experience of coming through the doors, seeing exhibitions, or being affected in one way or another by the public outreach programs that institutions like the Morgan, the Newberry, the Huntington, the Folger, the Antiquarian Society and other independent and academic special collections must learn to provide. The donors of the future will not necessarily have the familiar profile of cultivated people grounded in the liberal arts who perhaps discovered the joys of collecting at the feet of some erudite pedagogue at Hotchkiss or Williams. They are more likely to be the young techno-rich who flourish in considerable numbers in and around San Jose, Seattle, and various other epicenters of futuristic change. These people may not come in on their own, but you can be absolutely sure that, at some point in their lives, some of them will respond to the excitement and power of the humanities. When that happens, there had better be some alert, entrepreneurial librarians who are open to the opportunities they represent, and who are ready to initiate them into a dimension of human experience that may not have been much of a factor in their early lives, their intellectual formation, or their worldly success, but one that could turn out to be deeply satisfying as the day wears on. As a matter of fact I have discovered—and I think some of my colleagues would concur—that a number of the younger trustees whom we've been able to attract to work with us have come from precisely that kind of setting. (Although the Folger Library is not in Seattle, I sometimes wish it were so as to test this hypothesis more rigorously).

2. *There are gangplanks for library directors.*

A recent issue of the *Economist* used the phrase "kamikaze jobs" to refer to certain high-risk positions in international diplomacy. I do not believe that being the librarian of a special collection or an independent research library is what could normally be called a kamikaze job in the sense that this term is invoked here—a job that cannot be done or that one takes on only at the greatest risk of failure or even personal immolation. In my own parochial setting, such an assignment might be the directorship of the Corcoran, still a far cry from the *Economist*'s examples (Health Minister of Uganda or President of Russia). A more recent instance from the newspapers could be Commissioner of Baseball.

In general, heads of great libraries occupy some of the most privileged and promising positions in the world of culture. Nevertheless, the problems they face in these positions are momentous and are not going to go away. They will almost certainly become far more difficult and we will need more resources and imagination to solve them. Happily, people tend to rise and respond to such challenges, and many institutions will continue to do so as well. That doesn't mean that there won't be casualties. It's quite likely that there will be some sort of Darwinian selection among the rare book libraries on the university level and in the independent world in the years to come. And that will be unfortunate. But it is an inevitable consequence in a period of scarcity and great competition for resources, and we should expect it and not be overly discouraged by the fact that this may happen at some point in the future.[1]

[1] These words, sadly, have proven prophetic even sooner than expected. On 19 February 1993, the New-York Historical Society, one of America's oldest and finest research libraries, was forced to close its doors, a casualty of the non-profit equivalent of Chapter XI. Its future remains uncertain.

3. *The new technologies hold no terrors; books will remain, on some level, irreplaceable.*

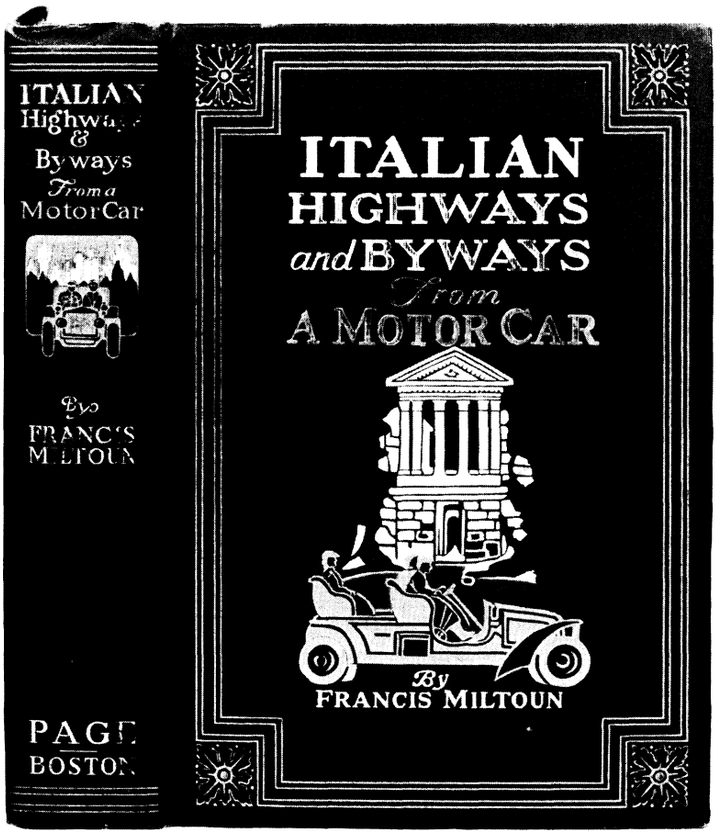
Many speakers have referred with passion, eloquence, and nostalgia to the corporeality of books, as if to suggest that they are on the verge of becoming mere artifacts, marginal to the enterprise of scholarship as it zips down the "electronic highway." That prompts the following, concluding comments on the nature of technology as a not unmixed blessing. I do consider technological change, generally speaking, to be an advantage to the world of learning, although one with significant risks and massive costs.

Many of the foregoing discussions of the implications of changes in technology for our kinds of institutions reminded me of a conversation I had with a six-year-old child of mine ages ago. We were debating whether to spend a period of the summer vacation in Vermont or on Martha's Vineyard. When I consulted this child as to which of those attractive alternatives would be preferable, he thought for a minute and said, "There are disadvantages to both." The same lesson applies to the issues we have been examining about technology, with the difference that technology is certainly here to stay, whether we like it or not. I must admit to having enjoyed not being in the vanguard of technological change at the Folger, but it makes me quite uncomfortable to be at the back of the pack. There are some risks to being at the front of the curve on these things; even if we could afford it, we probably would choose not to be there. It has become clear to all of us in IRLA and, I think, in the rare book world as a whole, however, that whether we lead or follow, the electronic highway is a trail along which we not only must, but should saunter. We will try to do so knowledgeably and with an evolving sense of control over the pace and substance of the changes we make.

There are other reasons for taking this complex issue of electronic technology seriously. For example, we do not know whether the future will hold for us the kind of unlimited mass inexpensive travel that has become our assumed privilege since the end of World War II. The supply of cheap energy is not, perhaps, as infinite as we continue to assume and pretend. The world has become totally dependent on hydrocarbons for mass intercontinental transportation. I do not believe that an appropriate substitute for jet fuel exists, or is even a theoretically plausible prospect. Therefore, someday there could be a convergence of the lines at which the costs of travelling to collections becomes so great and the ability of people to make those kinds of trips becomes so limited, that we would all welcome the possibility that a scholar sitting in Ketchican can call up on a screen some palimpsests from Cairo in order to advance a research agenda. I view this prospect with some hope and equanimity. The diminishing costs of virtual reality and the potentially escalating costs of what passes for genuine reality may at some point bring about a situation in which we'll be very glad we went through all of these wrenching changes.

To proceed a bit further on the subject of the corporeality of books, I would suggest that there are problems involved in letting every scholar handle every artifact. These problems relate both to conservation, and to the actual benefits to scholarship, when certain real texts are put to heavy use. It is possible to be perhaps a bit too sentimental about the way in which the sight and smell and feel of an ancient volume may improve or contribute to one's scholarship.

I love to handle old books, I like to sniff around a newly purchased volume when it comes in to be sure it hasn't been put through some appalling chemical bath, and



Milburg Francisco Mansfield, Italian Highways and Byways from a Motor Car *(Boston: Page, 1909). Private Collection. (Photo: Julie Ainsworth)*

all the rest of it. But I think one also has to realize that we're dealing with materials that are quite different now than when they first appeared decades or centuries ago. Cultural artifacts undergo all sorts of changes, traceable and untraceable. Books and manuscripts were perceived and experienced very differently by the people who first examined them and used them in other times and places. Here is a modest example. I was perusing a volume about travelling by motorcar in Italy, published around 1900—a nice example of the mass-produced travel books of that time. On the binding there was a beautiful little embossed picture of a convertible motorcar, in which an attractively dressed American couple and a woman companion were driving by some evocative representations of the Italian countryside. My first thought was that this was a charmingly nostalgic evocation of touring in an age of innocence. On second thought, I realized that I had gotten it exactly wrong, because the way this image would have been seen by a prospective buyer or reader in 1900, was as a tempting picture of the most avant-garde mode of transportation on earth, one that was revolutionizing the world and profoundly affecting human behavior in the process.

It takes an act of will to get past the immediate appearances of what a book presents to us and confront the social and historical context in which a reader of the time might have seen it. Even then we really can't be sure what kinds of responses it might have evoked. One may, then, be misled as well as led by the authentic artifact. On balance, however, I for one would rather take my chances with reality than with virtual reality.