Breakstone, E. (2005, September 30).Librarians can look forward to an exhilarating future. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Libraries p.20.

I expect my fellow librarians to be excited by changes that make information more accessible. But when I read articles about the future of the library, I often sense fear and anxiety rather than anticipation and enthusiasm.

I'm disturbed by that dismal view of a future that I'll occupy. I earned my master of science in information from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 2004 and became an academic reference librarian, eager to help people find their way through the information morass. For new librarians like me, technology is second nature. We use instant messaging, record our lives and discuss our work in blogs, and include Google as one of the many tools in our arsenal. We're early adopters and explorers. At the same time, many of us are positioned squarely between generations that grew up with print resources and the generation growing up immersed in technology. We understand the utility of the traditional and the potency of the new.

The panic that permeates public discussions about the future of libraries is absent when I speak with my friends from graduate school and my colleagues. Unfortunately, few people outside the field hear our perspective. Too often it's the stereotype-fulfilling librarians who get the press. I see optimistic conversations in library-related blogs and publications, but when I read articles that reach the general public, I groan.

Take Michael Gorman, now president of the American Library Association, commenting in The Chronicle earlier this year about Google's plan to put library books online: "They say they're digitizing books, but they're really not, they're atomizing them. In other words, they're reducing books to a collection of paragraphs and sentences which, taken out of context, have virtually no meaning."

Those outside the field often put librarians in an even worse light. Technology Review's recent article on Google's digitization project features an illustration of a young suit ascending the heights of information greatness as he sticks a piece of paper into a digitizing machine and zooms past a bespectacled librarian at a reference desk, her hair in a bun, plummeting into obscurity. Alternately, we are depicted as technology-crazed, in books like Nicholson Baker's Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper (Random House, 2001) or in a recent New York Times article stridently chastising the University of Texas for its decision to "set aside books" for the sake of an information commons.

I beg to differ. Librarians don't blindly buy into every new technological toy without thinking about the implications, but neither are we all afraid or disdainful of the changes we're facing. Traditionally a structured collection of books, the library now extends far beyond physical walls as we work to enhance information retrieval, dissemination, and literacy.

Most of us know that Google's digitization project, the open-access movement, the proliferation of blogs, and other recent developments increase both the availability of

information and the challenge of finding what's relevant. The more sources that are available, the more important it is to be able to interpret and evaluate them. In understanding and exploring technological changes, librarians not only participate in the information revolution but help direct its course.

Librarians rooted in tradition, like the ALA's Michael Gorman, raise important points about the value of traditional scholarly communication and library tools. But in deriding new models, he fails to recognize the value of new forms of learning and communicating. Changes in the way we read aren't inherently bad. True, you may lose one type of comprehension when you read only sections of a book, but what you gain from reading in new ways may be as good, if not better.

For example, online encyclopedias allow you to move quickly and smoothly among entries, expanding your knowledge of a topic. And wikis -- communal Web sites that can be edited by anyone who visits them -- when done right, allow for constant enhancement and fact-checking. Compare those new reference sources to a print resource like the much-anticipated revision of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford University Press, 2004): What should have been an instant reference classic turned out to be riddled with errors.

Although I don't fear technology and its impact on the library's future, I do have some concerns. I worry about the economics of scholarly communication -- the combination of plummeting library budgets and skyrocketing journal and database prices. I fear that leasing digital collections of material, rather than owning them, will leave librarians dependent on the long-term benevolence of corporations. I worry that the so-called graying of the profession isn't actually opening up new jobs but is creating empty positions in libraries with tight budgets looking for ways to cut back. I suspect the jobs that do exist will continue to pay poorly, forcing some librarians to enter the corporate world in search of a better living.

And I'm concerned that many of our patrons don't recognize our value because they think of libraries as merely collections of books and journals. Some faculty members haven't stayed up to date with research tools, relying on the sources they used in graduate school and even teaching their students to use the same outdated tools.

Many students at my university don't know that the library has a reference desk, let alone hundreds of databases they can use to lead them to articles, encyclopedias, book chapters, statistics, images, and so on. Other students know that we're available but don't think of us first. I can't count the times a student has approached the reference desk with the plaint "I've just spent two hours on Google looking for -- " and walked away 15 minutes later, with her information need satisfied.

We have to make professors and students more aware of what the library has to offer. The library is one component in an evolving landscape, and we need to make use of and think creatively about new technologies. Failing to stay current would make us obsolete.

True, some trends, like CD-ROM's, may be fleeting, but that is all the more reason for us to be open to them: We should participate in determining how useful they really are. And we must move beyond merely digitizing print tools. Our online catalogs, indexes, and research guides should be better than just electronic versions of their print predecessors. Some libraries are enhancing their catalogs with blogs and RSS feeds, to give patrons information about new material and other news. And with online reference, we're experimenting with technologies like instant messaging, which may be more effective than clunky software programs that mimic the in-person reference interview.

When I think about the library that I'll be working in 30 years from now (right before I retire, if all goes according to plan), I have no idea what my work environment will look like. But when I speak with friends who are also new in the field, I sense excitement and empowerment rather than anxiety. Like me, they find it exhilarating to work in a profession with such an open future -- an open future, mind you, that will be shaped by us.