people working for those publishers have no idea where those servers are housed. Who is responsible for insuring their integrity and their long-term preservation?

The organizations on the November guest list of the Chicago Collaborative meeting worry about this. The technical solutions developed by CLOCKSS, Portico, and the National Library of Medicine represent very different ways of thinking about how preservation efforts should be funded, managed, and carried out. I came away from the meeting feeling that, although we have tremendous opportunities to preserve more content than ever before, the risks of losing more than history can bear are just as great. The consensus among the participants was that this is a critical time and we have not arrived at clear technical or organizational solutions. The more experimentation, the better.

What does this mean, then, for the role of librarians? Surely, the importance of maintaining a stake in the cultural memory of society remains one of our professional values. But it is also clear that, as with so many things in the digital world, this is not an area that we can effectively deal with on our own. The publishing community has a greater stake and default responsibility than ever before. The rise of institutional repositories provides opportunities for preserving kinds of content that, if preserved at all in the past, tended to be relatively inaccessible.

In The Book in the Renaissance, Andrew Pettegree points out that our view of the early days of printing is skewed by our focus on what got preserved in libraries, and that tended to be materials that were expensive and relatively little used.1 Publishers didn’t make money printing those big beautiful bibles — they made money printing indulgences, broadsides, playing cards, inexpensive teaching materials, and, of course, pornography. Little of this kind of material is still extant. Nicholson Baker may blame the politics behind the de-acidification and microfilming projects, but the real culprit is, and has always been, the devil of selection. We have never been able to preserve everything, and the choices that we make of what to preserve and how well to preserve determine the lens through which we view history.

There’s the opportunity — with digital storage being cheap, can we preserve everything? Baker’s inclusionist predilections could be served. Practically speaking, though, we are not. We are still at the very beginnings of sorting out the what and the who and the how. On my optimistic days, I believe that we will figure this out and that we’ll develop robust and successful preservation programs that rely on the collaborative efforts of librarians, publishers, scholars, and a variety of institutions, some still to be invented. But, because we haven’t yet figured out how to effectively deal with preservation in the digital age, a significant portion of the kinds of documentation that historians rely on has already been lost, and the historians of the 22nd century will have a difficult time getting a clear picture of the beginnings of the 21st.

I hope my bartender maintains his enthusiasm and begins to write letters to his son. I hope that one day the letters end up in a library or archive. If he uses good paper and a decent fountain pen, the letters will be in fine shape. They won’t tell the full story of his relationship with his son, of course. We’d need the text messages for that as well, and those will probably be gone.

It’s become a truism that nothing ever really disappears from the Internet. So we’re supposed to be careful with our angry emails and our less than discrete Facebook postings and tweets. But will they really last? Will they be findable and useful? Who’s to say? 🐼