



Impact Summary

Cool/Scary AI × DC Public Library

Mt. Pleasant Neighborhood Library · February 24, 2026

To our neighbors,

Thank you for joining us at Mt. Pleasant Neighborhood Library for an evening of honest, grounded conversation about how AI is showing up in everyday life across Washington, DC. Whether you came with burning questions or quiet curiosity — your presence shaped the room.

This event was a departure from how most AI conversations happen. There were no product demos. No breathless predictions. Instead, we heard from neighbors — a technologist thinking about aging in place, a writer navigating AI’s usefulness in a professional setting while destroying creative work, and a librarian asking what we even mean when we say “AI.” And, we got to talk to each other.

What emerged was striking in its consistency: across every table, participants pushed back on hype and demanded clarity. They wanted to understand what these tools actually do, who they serve, and who gets left out. They insisted that humans remain in the driver’s seat — and that learning about AI is an ongoing, iterative process, not a one-time briefing.

This is what community-centered AI literacy looks like. Not a lecture. A conversation.

With gratitude,

Chelsea Kirkland and Yonah Gaber, DC Public Library

Ben Childers, Cool/Scary AI

Event at a Glance

Date: February 24, 2026, 6:00–8:00 PM · **Location:** Mt. Pleasant Neighborhood Library, Washington, DC

Partners: Cool/Scary AI × DC Public Library · **Format:** AI intro + 3 community “takes” + small-group table conversations

Community Speakers: Eddy Perez (AI & aging in place) · ACB (AI & creative work) · Yonah Gaber, DCPL (classifying AI)

Participation: All tables opted in to sharing takeaways



What the Room Said

Themes from small-group conversations

After each community “take,” attendees broke into small-group discussions. Each table had the option to capture a key takeaway to share anonymously. Three tables opted in. Below are the themes that emerged — along with selected reflections in participants’ own words.

1. Humans First, AI Second

The strongest consensus across all tables: AI works best as an assistant, with the human firmly as decision-maker. Participants were interested in AI’s potential to help people maintain independence — especially for aging in place — but equally clear that AI should enhance agency, not replace judgment. Multiple tables emphasized that AI is most useful as a starting point, and potentially dangerous when treated as a final answer.

“AI can work well as an assistant with the human still as a decision-maker.”

— Table 1 takeaway

2. “AI” Doesn’t Mean What You Think It Means

Every table flagged this: the term “AI” has become so broad it’s almost meaningless. It collapses very different technologies — machine learning, generative AI, predictive analytics — into a single buzzword that obscures more than it reveals. Several participants noted that “AI” functions primarily as a marketing term, making it harder for people to evaluate what products actually do or whether they can be trusted.

“AI could mean so many things, only useful for marketing.”

— Table 2 takeaway

3. Creativity Is Human Territory

The conversation about AI and creative work surfaced real tension. Participants recognized AI’s value for analytical tasks and productivity but drew a firm line around creative expression. Art, they argued, is fundamentally human. The use of creators’ work to train AI models without consent was a recurring concern — the room distinguished between AI as an analyst’s tool and a genuine threat to the creative practitioner.

“AI for gen doesn’t come with consent from creators.”

— Table 2 takeaway

4. Skepticism Is a Feature, Not a Bug

Rather than accepting AI tools at face value, participants brought healthy skepticism about sources, accuracy, and reliability. AI-generated information was seen as useful for research but dangerous for decisions. This wasn’t technophobia — it was the kind of critical engagement that leads to better adoption and exactly the posture that AI literacy efforts should cultivate.

“AI can improve accessibility, but we were skeptical about sources it uses — best as starting point, dangerous potential as result.”

— Table 2 takeaway



How the Format Worked

This event tested a format designed for accessibility and genuine exchange: a short introductory talk grounding attendees in AI basics (using Poynter’s Alt+Ignite vocabulary framework), followed by three brief community “takes” from DC residents — each paired with small-group table discussions. Hands-on AI experiments were available at laptops as attendees arrived.

Participant feedback was positive. One table noted the introduction was “informative and concise” and appreciated learning about AI activity happening “right here in DC.” Multiple tables found the aging-in-place examples “specific and relevant.” The structure succeeded in moving quickly from information to conversation — which is where the real learning happened.

Format Design Choices That Worked

- **Local voices, not outside experts:** Speakers were DC community members sharing firsthand experience
- **Consent-based participation:** Table takeaways were voluntary and anonymous — every table chose to opt in
- **Library as civic infrastructure:** DCPL provided trusted, accessible, neighborhood-level space
- **Hands-on entry point:** AI experiments at laptops gave attendees concrete experience before discussion
- **Free and open:** No cost, no registration barriers

What’s Next

This event is part of a growing series of Cool/Scary AI community conversations happening across the country — from Baltimore to Denver to Brooklyn to Detroit. Each event is shaped by its local context, speakers, and community questions.

In DC, we’re exploring how to continue this partnership with DCPL to bring grounded, accessible AI conversations to more neighborhoods. The table takeaways from this event will be anonymized and shared at future gatherings — so DC residents can see how their neighbors are thinking about this technology, building a living picture of community perspectives over time.

Our next two events are scheduled:

- [March 25th from 5:00-7:00 at Woodridge Neighborhood Library.](#)
- [April 29 from 5:00-7:00 at Anacostia Neighborhood Library.](#)

If you’d like to contribute a community “take” at a future event, share your perspective as a DC resident seeing AI in your work or neighborhood, or explore partnership opportunities, reach out to chelsea.kirkland@dc.gov.

Partners

Cool/Scary AI — A national series of community-centered conversations about AI’s real impact, produced by Stratovation Partners.

DC Public Library — Serving as civic infrastructure for accessible, neighborhood-level programming that meets residents where they are.