

# Impact Summary: Cool/Scary AI Sh!t DC Summit 2025

Hello,

Welcome to the impact report from Cool/Scary AI Sh!t DC, held on October 29, 2025 at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in partnership with DC Public Libraries. On a Wednesday afternoon in the nation's capital, we brought together nonprofit professionals, technologists, advocates, and community members for four hours of honest conversation about what AI means for the social impact sector—and for the people it serves.

This was our first DC event and our largest speaker lineup to date: thirteen voices spanning civic tech, digital inclusion, accessibility, advocacy, organizational readiness, grant funding, media literacy, and the case for a publicly owned AI. The range was intentional. AI's impact does not stay inside neat categories, and neither should the conversation about it.

What made this event distinct was its setting. Libraries are one of the last true third spaces—free, open, and designed for belonging. Chelsea Kirkland, DCPL's Digital Inclusion Coordinator, opened with a powerful frame: placemaking as a driver of digital inclusion. The library was not just a venue; it was a statement about who gets to be in the room when AI's future is discussed.

Across the day, attendees heard practical tools they could implement immediately—from AI-powered accessibility audits to continuous improvement feedback loops—alongside deeper questions about ownership, agency, and who benefits from the current AI trajectory. The informal breakout sessions between speaker blocks gave people time to process, push back, and connect with one another.

What follows is a summary of each session, the cross-cutting themes that emerged, and what attendees told us in their own words. We publish these reports because we believe the voices in rooms like this one deserve to be part of the broader record. AI's rules are being written right now. We intend to make sure they're not written without us.

Onward,

**Ben Childers and Chelsea Kirkland**  
Cool/Scary AI Sh!t × DC Public Libraries

## Session Highlights

The sessions at Cool/Scary AI Sh!t DC offered a wide-ranging view into how AI is reshaping work across the nonprofit, civic, and advocacy sectors. From the case for public ownership of AI infrastructure to hands-on accessibility tools, each speaker illuminated a different facet of what it means to engage with AI responsibly and practically. What follows are brief overviews of each session, spotlighting the key insights and takeaways that emerged.

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### Digitally Invisible

*Ben Childers, Head of Experience Design, Cool/Scary AI Sh!t*

Ben opened the event by introducing Dr. Nicole Turner Lee’s concept of digital invisibility—a shift from the inputs-based framework of the “digital divide” toward an outcomes-based understanding of who is actually seen, valued, and served in the digital world. Through the story of a day laborer who cannot work after the 20th of the month because his prepaid phone minutes have run out, Ben grounded the day’s conversation in the lived realities of people who are already being left behind. The framing set the tone: as we move into the age of AI, the question is not just who has access to technology, but whose lives are made visible—or invisible—by it.

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### A Pitch for Civic Tech

*Cameron Peltz, DC Civic Tech*

Cameron introduced DC Civic Tech, a volunteer-driven nonprofit that brings together technologists, project managers, and community members to build tools for social good. Meeting twice monthly in downtown DC, the organization runs projects ranging from an algorithm that scrapes eviction notices and texts legal aid resources to affected residents, to data visualization tools for voter suppression cases. Cameron emphasized the organization’s user-centered philosophy: start with the problem to be solved, build collaboratively, and design tools that are reusable across organizations. The pitch was clear: civic engagement and technical skill can meet in the same room.

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### On Placemaking as a Driver of Digital Inclusion

*Chelsea Kirkland, Digital Inclusion Coordinator, DC Public Libraries*

Chelsea made the case that digital inclusion is not just about broadband access or device distribution—it’s about the spaces where people gather, learn, and build a sense of belonging. Drawing on transformative learning theory, situated learning, and Mitchell Resnick’s creative learning spiral, she argued that community spaces like libraries are where technology learning

becomes human. Chelsea highlighted DCPL's AI Upskilling Cohort, in which 50 recently laid-off knowledge workers spent 12 weeks building AI-powered projects in small groups at the library—culminating in demos at DC Startup and Tech Week. Her bottom line: if digital invisibility is the new divide, then placemaking is the bridge.

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## **In Need of a Public Foundation Model**

*Tom Spencer, Co-Founder, Advocacy AI*

Tom delivered a provocative and entertaining argument for why the foundations of large language models should be publicly owned, created by, and accessible to everyone. He opened by polling the room on trust in tech leaders—not a single hand went up for Elon Musk—and used AI-generated images throughout his slides as a deliberate demonstration of how current models reflect a narrow, homogeneous view of the world. His core argument: every post, caption, and review we have ever written has been scraped to build these models, yet their ownership is concentrated among a handful of billionaires. For roughly \$100 million—a fraction of what the U.S. government has invested in private tech companies—we could build a public language model that speaks in the diverse voices of the people whose data created it.

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## **Beyond Alt Text: How AI Can Automate Accessibility Requirements**

*Ira Horowitz, Founder & Principal, Corner Shop Creative*

Ira provided a practical, actionable session on using AI to make websites more accessible. He walked through the four WCAG principles—perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust—and identified the four areas where nonprofits most commonly fall short: HTML markup, PDFs, captions and transcripts, and alt text. He demonstrated tools like accessibility audit plugins, AI-powered PDF remediation, auto-captioning services, and Corner Shop's own bulk alt text generator. Critically, he warned against overlay widgets that claim to make sites accessible automatically, noting that they often interfere with assistive technology and have faced lawsuits. The message: accessibility is not a one-time fix but an ongoing commitment, and AI can help maintain it at scale.

## Developing an AI Use Policy (That Folks Will Actually Use)

*Cat Proulx, Senior Manager of Marketing & Culture, Beekeeper Group*

Cat brought the energy of a camp counselor to a topic that could have been dry: building an internal AI use policy. Dressed in a vintage Boy Scout shirt, she had attendees map their current AI use on a compass grid—then compare it to where their colleagues and their organizations think they are. The misalignment was visible across the room. She walked through the essentials: defining the why (purpose), the how (scope), the who (users and overseers), the where (devices and accounts), and how much (open, limited, or restricted use). She emphasized ethical use considerations including algorithmic bias, data security, transparency, sustainability, and job displacement—and argued that responsible internal policy is a prerequisite for credible advocacy on AI legislation.

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## AI-Fueled Continuous Improvement

*Jeff Livingston*

Jeff pushed back against the AI conversation's tendency toward either hype or doom, instead making a case for a pragmatic, iterative approach. Drawing on examples from Charity Water's quarterly beneficiary outreach and Khan Academy's monthly feedback loops, he argued that nonprofits of any size can use AI to move from annual review cycles to continuous improvement—using tools they already have. His recipe: existing LLMs, transcription tools like Otter AI, email marketing platforms with automation, and a CRM. The key insight was not technological but cultural: organizations need to commit to hearing feedback regularly, testing new approaches, and being willing to let go of what does not work. He also offered a practical tip: ask your AI for a veracity score on any analysis it produces.

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## Vibe Check: Your Next Engineer Is a Prompt

*Chris Lundberg, CEO, Engine 9 / Fracture*

Chris dove into the technical landscape of AI in 2025, walking attendees through four key concepts: vibe coding, RAG (Retrieval-Augmented Generation), MCP (Model Context Protocol), and AGI. He demonstrated how a non-technical staff member built a functional donor lookup app in 20 minutes using Replit, and made the case that AI-generated websites and forms are rendering traditional tools like WordPress and PHP increasingly obsolete. His discussion of MCP—Anthropic's protocol for connecting LLMs to external data systems—painted a picture of a near future where a conversational AI interface could replace the traditional CRM entirely, pulling live data and composing donor communications on demand. He closed with a frank acknowledgment that AI will take jobs and will not give them back, but argued that the technology itself is neutral—what matters is who holds it.

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## How AI Is Changing Advocacy — and Why It Matters

*Laura Rodriguez, Global Wave Digital*

Laura shared the work of AI Access for All, a project of Global Wave Digital that provides AI training to civil society organizations across the globe—from Kenya to the Philippines to Colombia. A survey of partner organizations found that 78% reported little to no familiarity with AI tools, while 100% said they believed AI was valuable and wanted training. She highlighted a partner in Kenya whose communications person also serves as the organization’s legal advisor—a common reality for under-resourced groups—and how AI tools for social media, graphics, and messaging have become force multipliers. Laura emphasized that access must be equitable, culturally sensitive, and grounded in the communities being served.

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## A Case Study in AI Adoption from Localist

*Craig Johnson, Principal, Unfiltered Media*

Craig presented one of the day’s most striking case studies: Localist, a four-person nonprofit in rural Wisconsin working to get clean energy projects permitted, discovered that LLMs are among the most effective deprogramming tools available. Building on research from MIT and the UK government showing that people are more persuadable by AI than by other humans—because the interaction does not trigger the psychological filters that shut down political persuasion—Localist introduced an AI chatbot named Mark that engages opponents of renewable energy with cited sources and patient, non-judgmental dialogue. The result: 30% conversion rates in rural communities on clean energy. Craig’s broader argument was that nonprofits cannot afford to sit out the AI era; every second spent debating whether to use it is a second not spent deploying it against actors who already are.

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## Closing the Gap Between AI Ambitions and Organizational Readiness

*Patty Debow, President & COO, PTKO, and George Danilovics*

Patty and George addressed the gap between wanting to “do AI” and actually being ready for it. They presented three scenarios that will feel familiar to many nonprofits: the rebel in the ranks (a staff member already using AI tools independently), the rogue board member (who came back from a weekend excited about AI and told the IT team to make it happen), and the C-suite champion (with budget and ambition but no roadmap). For each, they offered practical responses: form an AI champions team with guardrails, present realistic budgets and capacity assessments to leadership, and channel energy through existing IT governance processes. Their core message: AI adoption is a change management project, and it deserves the same rigor as any other major organizational initiative.

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## **Million Dollar Mistakes: What Happens When AI Meets Grant Funding, Analytics, & Reporting?**

*Dr. Tatiana Warren (Dr. Tati)*

Dr. Tati, a social behavioral scientist and grant reviewer, brought a sharp warning about AI in grant writing. She highlighted how grant management systems are now using AI detection tools to reject proposals that exceed 60% AI-generated content, and how human reviewers are catching hallucinated citations—fabricated authors, invented publications, nonexistent data. She cited the case of Deloitte in Australia, where a \$500,000 impact report was found to contain AI-hallucinated citations attributed to real researchers who had never written the cited works. Her advice: use AI as a learning and drafting tool, but do your due diligence, stay true to your mission, and never chase funding at the expense of your organization’s authentic voice.

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## **AI Literacy in Action**

*Cameron Peltz, DC Civic Tech*

Cameron returned to close the programming with a media literacy crash course focused on AI-generated content. He walked through how generative models work—their sycophantic tendency to produce relevant rather than truthful outputs—and showed examples of AI-generated political propaganda, deepfake videos, and manipulated media. He offered practical detection strategies: look for visual artifacts, analyze account histories, corroborate claims across sources, and practice responsible sharing. His closing point was simple and urgent: everyone in the room has the power to either amplify or guard against the spread of false information.

# Themes & Patterns

Across thirteen sessions, two breakout discussions, and a post-event happy hour, several cross-cutting themes emerged. These are not consensus positions—they are the tensions and throughlines that defined the day.

## 1. Ownership and agency are the defining questions

The day's most persistent thread was not about what AI can do, but about who controls it and who benefits. Tom Spencer's call for a publicly owned foundation model, Chelsea Kirkland's framing of placemaking as a path to digital agency, and Craig Johnson's case study of Localist all circled the same core question: in a world where AI is trained on our collective data, who gets to decide what it does with that data? The room's answer was consistent: not the people currently in charge.

## 2. Start with what you have, not what you wish you had

Jeff Livingston's continuous improvement framework, Patty and George's organizational readiness scenarios, and Cat Proulx's AI policy checklist all converged on the same practical wisdom: you do not need a massive budget or a dedicated AI team to begin. Use the LLM you already have, the CRM you already pay for, and the governance processes your organization already follows. The barrier to entry is cultural, not technological.

## 3. Accessibility is a practice, not a checkbox

Ira Horowitz's session on accessibility made this explicit: overlay widgets that claim to solve accessibility in one click often make things worse. But the principle extended beyond web design. Chelsea's emphasis on building spaces where people feel safe to learn, Laura's work ensuring AI training is culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate, and the event's own design—free, in a public library, with informal breakouts—all reflected a commitment to accessibility as an ongoing practice embedded in how work gets done.

## 4. Human oversight is non-negotiable—but insufficient on its own

Nearly every speaker touched on the importance of keeping humans in the loop: Cat's exclamation-pointed emphasis on human oversight, Dr. Tati's warnings about hallucinated citations, Jeff's reminder that AI is a calculator trying to give you the answer you want to hear. But several speakers—particularly Chris Lundberg and Craig Johnson—pushed further: human oversight alone is not enough if the humans doing the overseeing do not understand the technology. Skill-building and critical literacy are preconditions for meaningful oversight.

## **5. The cool and the scary are not separate categories**

The event's name proved to be its most accurate description. Craig Johnson's presentation was the clearest example: the same LLM technology that is flooding the internet with misinformation is also the most effective deprogramming tool nonprofits have. Chris Lundberg's vibe coding demo showed a non-technical person building a functional app in 20 minutes—exciting and destabilizing in equal measure. Tom Spencer used AI-generated images to illustrate AI's biases while arguing for public ownership. The day's implicit conclusion was that cool and scary are not a spectrum; they are the same thing viewed from different angles.

## What Attendees Said

Nine attendees completed the post-event survey. While a small sample, their responses reinforce the themes above and point toward what this community wants next.

### Likelihood to Attend Again: 4.67 / 5

67% of respondents gave the highest possible rating (5 out of 5), and no respondent rated below a 4. The most frequently cited value of the event was the diversity and range of perspectives represented.

### In Their Own Words

*“Diversity of voices. There are a lot of events in fundraising and technology, and a lot of the same people flock to said events. This event had a different feel.”*

*“The content was very good with AI related topics that I found fresh. I enjoyed learning about the engine behind AI and the advocacy examples. The community spin on the Digitally Invisible was enlightening.”*

*“Closing the gap between ambitions and readiness. Too many orgs and companies just want to ‘do AI’ but they provided a strong approach to making progress.”*

### Sessions That Resonated

Respondents named nearly every session as their standout, with no single talk dominating. The most frequently mentioned were: Developing an AI Use Policy, Beyond Alt Text, Vibe Check, In Need of a Public Foundation Model, Closing the Gap Between AI Ambitions and Readiness, AI-Fueled Continuous Improvement, and the Localist case study. The spread confirms that the breadth of the programming was a feature, not a bug.

### What They Want Next

Future topic requests clustered around three areas: deeper technical dives into AI tools and infrastructure; real-world case studies and practical applications; and the environmental impact and sustainability costs of AI. Several respondents asked for more on ethics and panel-style discussions. One respondent specifically requested content on autonomous fundraising.

## **Working Group Interest**

Two respondents said yes to joining a working group for a progressive AI future, and five said “maybe — send me more info.” That is 78% of respondents expressing some level of interest in continued engagement beyond the event itself

## **Thank You to Our Sponsors**

Cool/Scary AI Sh!t DC was made possible by the generous support of three sponsors who share our commitment to accessible, mission-driven AI education. These events do not happen without organizations willing to put resources behind community conversation.

### **Corner Shop Creative**

A digital marketing agency supporting nonprofits and small businesses with website design, development, hosting, and digital marketing. Ira Horowitz, founder and principal, also delivered a session on AI-powered accessibility.

### **Beekeeper Group**

A digital public affairs firm in Washington, DC specializing in strategic communications and advocacy. Cat Proulx from the Beekeeper team presented on developing an organizational AI use policy and provided copies of their “Navigating the AI Wilderness” report to all attendees.

### **Advocacy AI**

Co-founded by Tom Spencer and Bree Benn, Advocacy AI works with nonprofits, trade associations, and community groups to strengthen their advocacy efforts using AI. Tom also delivered a session on the need for a public foundation model.

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## **Venue Partner**

DC Public Libraries and the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library served as both venue and co-host for this event. Special thanks to Chelsea Kirkland, Digital Inclusion Coordinator, whose vision for the library as a space for community-driven AI learning made this partnership possible.

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## What's Next

Cool/Scary AI Sh!t is expanding. In the weeks following this DC event, community-hosted events launched in Denver and San Francisco. In 2026, the series is evolving into a decentralized, community-run model—with local hosts putting on events under a shared brand and shared principles. Every event is free. Every event centers local voices. And every event produces a report like this one, because we believe these conversations deserve to be documented and shared.

If you attended this event and want to stay connected, get involved as a host, or join the working group for a progressive AI future, reach out to [ben@stratovation.digital](mailto:ben@stratovation.digital).

[coolscaryai.com](https://coolscaryai.com)