



## LEADERSHIP BRIEF:

# The Role of Libraries as Public Spaces in Countering Misinformation, Disinformation, and Social Isolation in the Age of Generative AI

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing reliance on digital platforms for information sharing and social interaction brings both advantages and challenges to our daily lives, local communities and global culture. Benefits include faster access to information and more opportunities for exchanging ideas. However, challenges include difficulties in verifying information, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and potential negative effects on real-life social connections.

This leadership brief highlights the importance of digital literacy and the physical public spaces of libraries as essential tools in countering misinformation and disinformation, as well as in fostering social connectedness. This brief argues for the imperative need to provide digital literacy tools that enhance a person's ability to screen for misinformation and disinformation. Additionally, the brief emphasizes the significance of physical spaces in fostering social connectedness, civic health, and the crucial role that public spaces like libraries play in humanizing interactions by providing avenues for social contact and meaningful connections.

### How the American Psychological Association Defines Misinformation and Disinformation

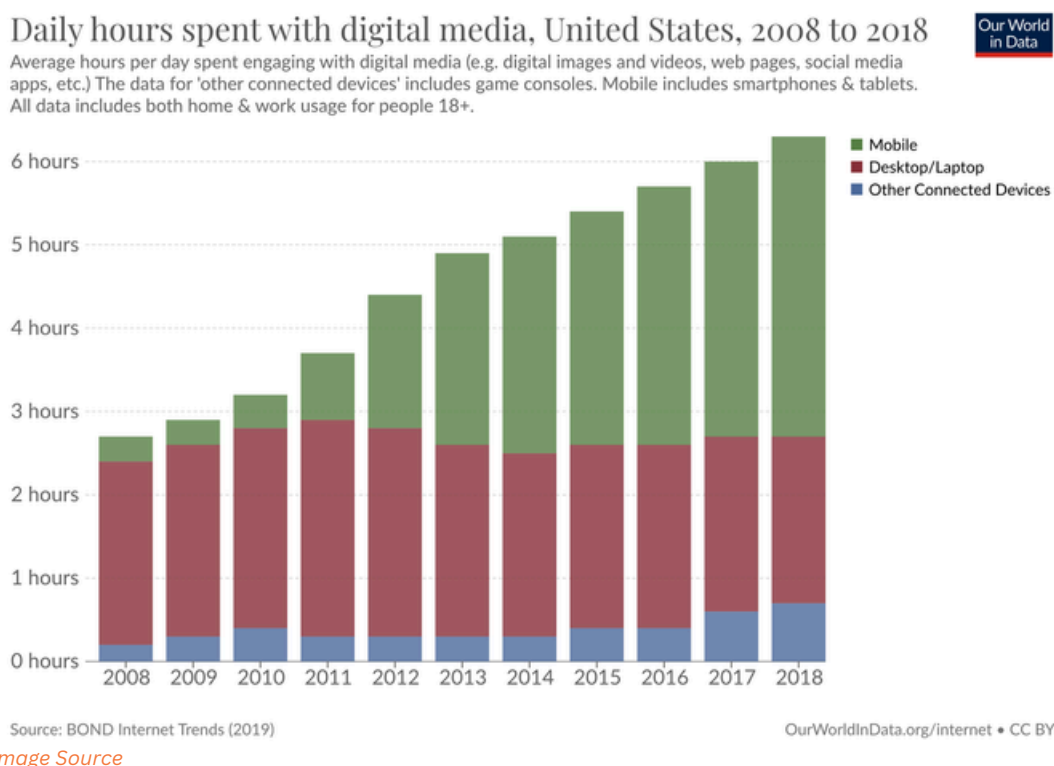
- **Misinformation** is false or inaccurate information—getting the facts wrong.
- **Disinformation** is false information that is deliberately intended to mislead—intentionally misstating the facts.

## THE ISSUE: Misinformation, Disinformation and Social Connectedness

Since the advent of the internet, many aspects of social transactions that were once entirely physical have, over the years, become partially or fully digital. From entertainment to shopping, community gatherings to medical consultations, the internet provides digital alternatives to social interactions that often expand access and participation, while also increasing convenience and efficiency.

While these benefits have indeed led to a more connected world, there are still essential aspects of human interaction that digital environments have been unable to effectively replace. One of these is social connectedness, which the [U.S. Surgeon General defines](#) as “the interactions, relationships, roles, and sense of connection individuals, communities, or society may experience.”<sup>1</sup>

A major factor that makes social connectedness in the digital environment particularly complex is the anonymity inherent in such settings. This anonymity, as [described by William J. Mitchell, former Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT](#), often leads to situations where people’s digital personas differ from their real-life behaviors, making it incredibly difficult to develop genuine community ties or social connectedness in fully digital spaces.<sup>2</sup>



Moreover, the anonymous nature of digital environments, when not intersected with physical spaces, can reinforce stereotypes, amplify divisions, and foster the creation of silos instead of community—all of which create a fertile ground for misinformation and disinformation to thrive. This reality underscores the importance of physical community elements, such as libraries and other public spaces, in providing opportunities for face-to-face interaction.

1 Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community [Internet]. Washington (DC): US Department of Health and Human Services; 2023-. PMID: 37792968.

2 William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 12. Mitchell talks about the construction of virtual identities and writes, "I can very easily conceal, leave carefully ambiguous, or falsely signal gender, race, age, body shape, and economic status. My representation on the Net is not an inevitability of biology, birth, and social circumstance, but a highly manipulable, completely disembodied intellectual fabrication."

Various studies indicate that misinformation and disinformation are more likely to thrive in societies that are either severely polarized or in communities with low levels of social connectedness.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the [World Economic Forum, in its 2024 Global Risks Report](#), ranked societal and/or political polarization just behind AI-generated misinformation and disinformation as one of the “top five risks most likely to present a material crisis on a global scale in 2024.”

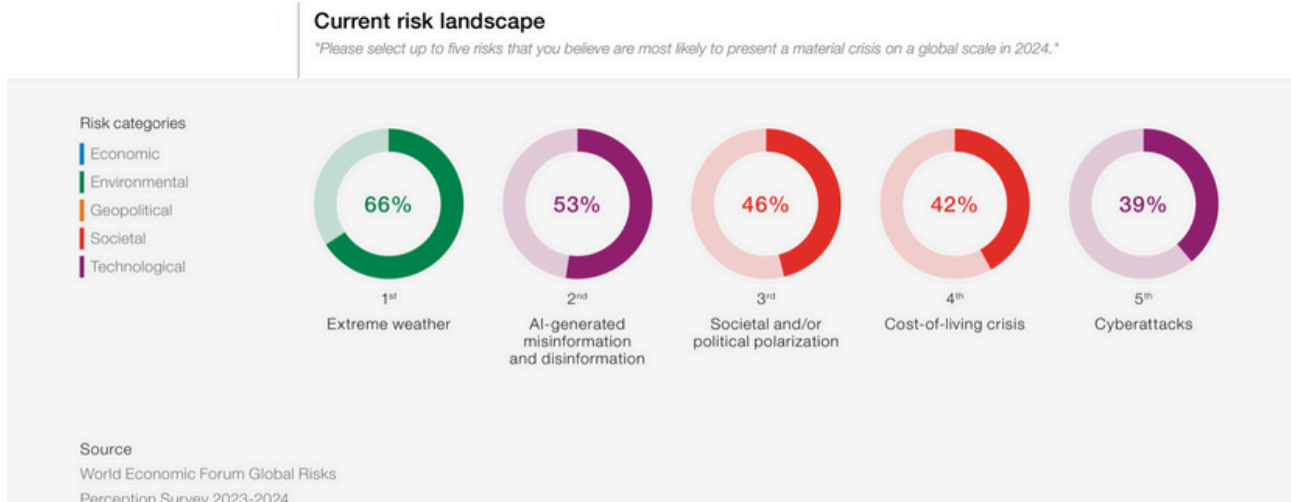


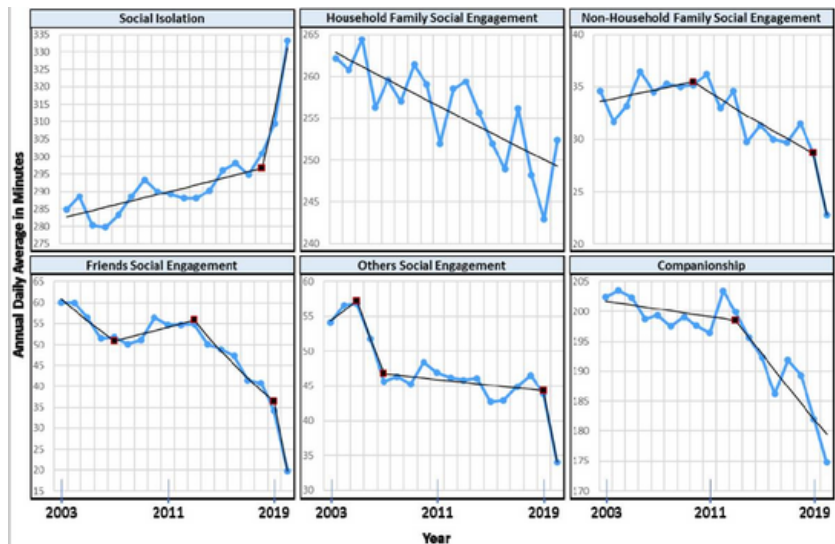
Image Source

In the United States, there has been a gradual decline in social connectedness for decades, but this trend accelerated even more between 2003 and 2020. According to the [U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community](#), time spent alone by Americans increased significantly from 2003 to 2020, while time spent on in-person social engagements decreased. These findings, based on [analysis by researchers at the University of Rochester](#) of the American Time Use Survey, also revealed that the average time spent alone by individuals in the U.S. increased by 146 hours in 2019 compared to 2003.<sup>4</sup>

**U.S. Social Connectedness Trends, 2003–2020.**

Annual Daily Average in Minutes are in blue trendlines. Joint point lines are black with red-bordered square points indicating years at which the slope of the trend line changes significantly.

Image Source



3 World Economic Forum - The Global Risks Report 2024, pg.20: [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_The\\_Global\\_Risks\\_Report\\_2024.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_Global_Risks_Report_2024.pdf)

4 Kannan VD, Veazie PJ. US trends in social isolation, social engagement, and companionship – nationally and by age, sex, race/ethnicity, family income, and work hours, 2003-2020. SSM Popul Health. 2022 Dec 25;21:101331. doi: 10.1016/j.ssmph.2022.101331. PMID: 36618547; PMCID: PMC9811250.

## THE CHALLENGE: Misinformation, Disinformation and Artificial Intelligence

Technology has always played a role in spreading misinformation and disinformation, but the advancement of artificial intelligence, **particularly generative AI**, has ushered in an era of unprecedented expansion in the volume, sophistication, and believability of falsified information. According to **News Guard**, a company that manages a comprehensive and accountable dataset on news sources, websites with AI-generated false articles have increased by more than 1,000 percent—from 49 sites to over 600—since May 2023.<sup>5</sup> NewsGuard also reported that some of these sites actively combine real information with disinformation to make false stories appear more believable to website readers and social media users.

These developments have drawn the attention of lawmakers in the U.S. Congress and policy experts. In **testimony submitted to the Senate Artificial Intelligence Insight Forum** on November 8, 2023, Jessica Brandt, a Policy Director at the Brookings Institution, highlighted the current risk of bad actors using generative AI to shape public opinion to influence election outcomes.<sup>6</sup> This testimony underscored the significant threat posed by low-cost and easily accessible AI technologies, such as deepfakes that generate replica audio of another person’s voice, which can then be disseminated through social media or as robocalls.

Moreover, there are already examples from around the world where generative AI has been used to influence public opinion, cause divisions, and sow doubt. A **recent report from Freedom House**, a global nonprofit dedicated to strengthening democracy and protecting human rights, documented at least 16 elections in different countries in 2023 where AI was employed in attempts to influence the outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

This explosion in varieties of falsified information is likely to make it increasingly difficult to distinguish accurate information from falsehoods. For instance, even before the rise of generative AI, a 2020 Gallup poll (and **reported by the Knight Foundation**) showed that the inability of Americans to navigate news media bias and arrive at facts had steadily increased since 1985—from 34% in 1985 to 45% in 2019-2020.<sup>8</sup>

To further underscore the urgency of the situation, the World Economic Forum, in its **2024 Global Risks Report**, ranked misinformation and disinformation as the most severe short-term risk currently facing North America. Additionally, the United States ranked sixth among the global pool of respondents who identified misinformation and disinformation as the biggest national risk in the context of upcoming elections.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tracking AI-enabled Misinformation: <https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-reports/ai-tracking-center/>

<sup>6</sup> Propaganda, foreign interference, and generative AI: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/propaganda-foreign-interference-and-generative-ai/>

<sup>7</sup> How generative AI is boosting the spread of disinformation and propaganda: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2023/repressive-power-artificial-intelligence>

<sup>8</sup> American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy: <https://knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/American-Views-2020-Trust-Media-and-Democracy.pdf>

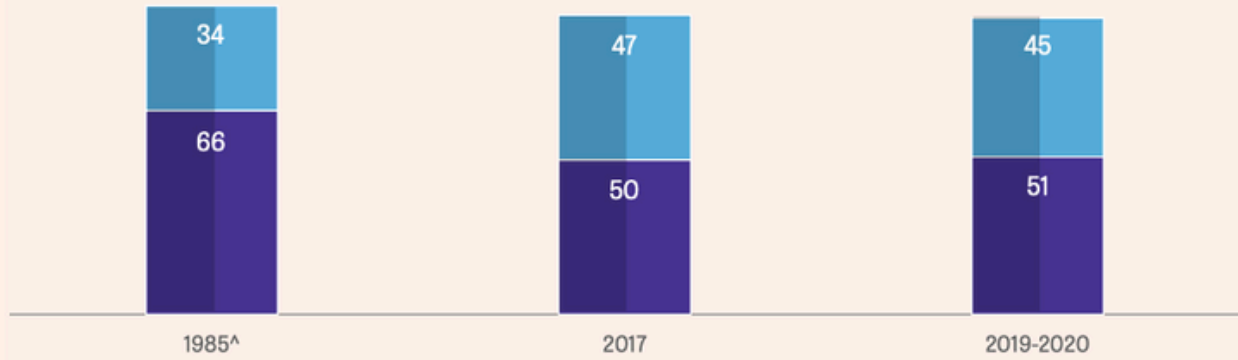
<sup>9</sup> World Economic Forum - The Global Risks Report 2024: [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_The\\_Global\\_Risks\\_Report\\_2024.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_Global_Risks_Report_2024.pdf)

## Americans' Ability to Navigate News Media Bias to Arrive at Facts

Please indicate which of these statements comes closer to how you personally feel:

■ % Although there is some bias in the news media, there are enough sources of news to be able to sort out the facts

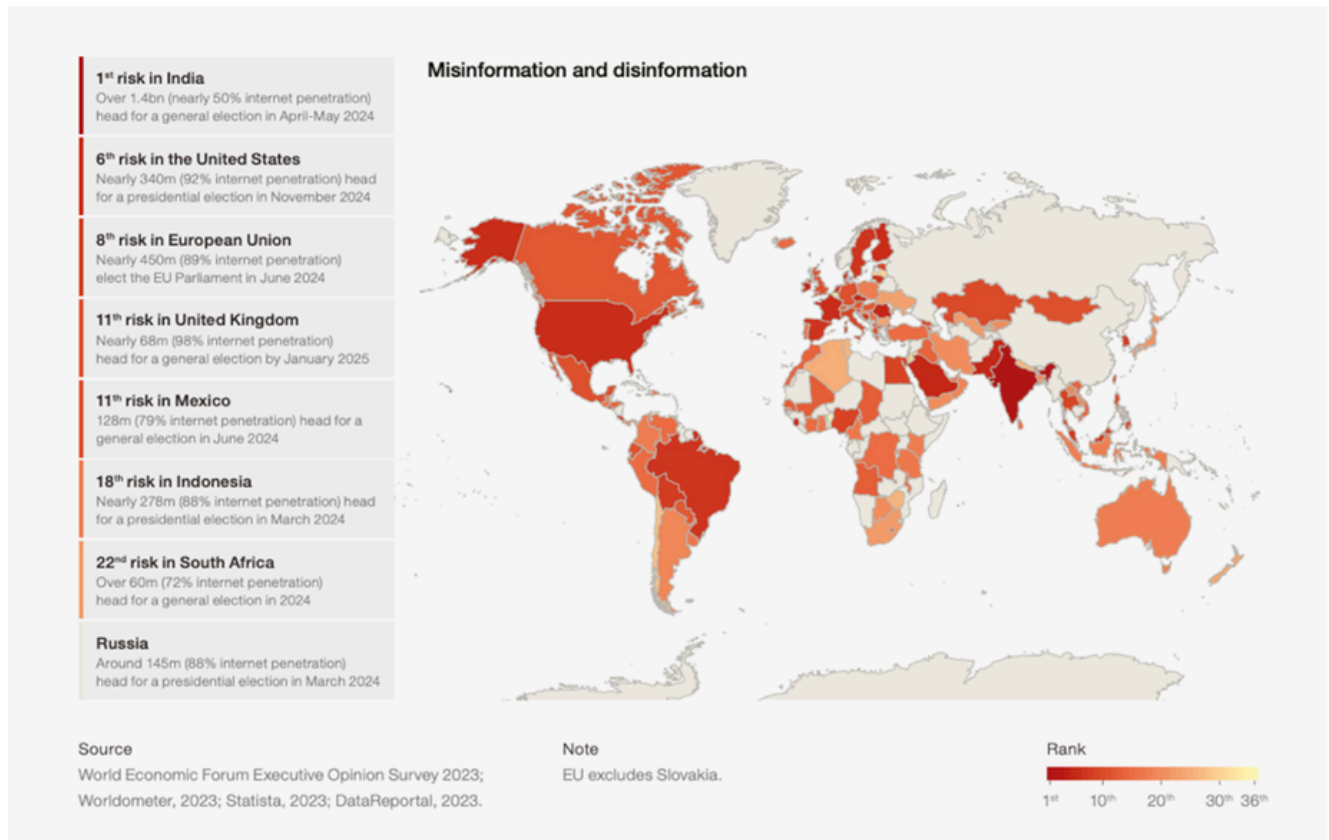
■ % There is so much bias in the news media that it's often difficult to sort out the facts



Note: "No answer" percentages not shown.

<sup>^</sup> American Society of Newspaper Editors News Credibility mail survey, conducted by MORI Research

[Image Source](#)



[Image Source](#)

## THE SOLUTION: The Importance of Social Infrastructure in Countering Misinformation, Disinformation and Social Isolation

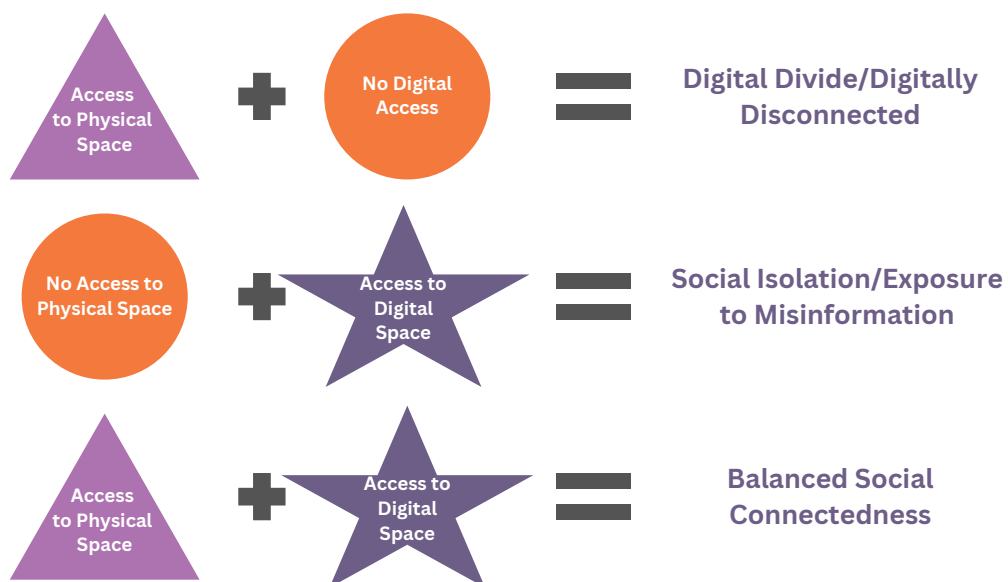
As communities grapple with the challenges of social isolation and the spread of misinformation, the role of social infrastructure becomes crucial. This notion is strongly supported by both current research and historical perspectives, emphasizing the need to design and maintain public spaces that cultivate social connectedness and civic engagement.

A 2023 advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General highlights “Strengthening Social Infrastructure in Local Communities” as one of six key pillars essential to advancing social connectedness within a community. The advisory defines social infrastructure as programs that build social capital by bringing people together to engage with physical elements of the community, such as libraries, parks, green spaces, and playgrounds.

Similarly, Jane Jacobs, in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, discussed how public spaces, when functioning properly and designed well, create ample opportunities for social contact that reinforce civility, empathy, and humanity.<sup>10</sup> In other words, people need physical spaces that contextualize and humanize anonymous or digital interactions to actively participate in and connect with their community.

Among other societal benefits, the ability of public spaces like libraries to facilitate social contact significantly enhances the development of tangible connections while reducing the likelihood of social isolation. Additionally, libraries, as indoor public spaces, not only provide avenues for increased social contact but also encourage community members to engage in a culture of self-driven fact-finding, fact-checking, and information verification. In this way, libraries actively contribute to countering misinformation and disinformation.

### Balancing Physical and Digital Connectedness



<sup>10</sup> Jacobs, Jane. 1993. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

As digital platforms increasingly shape how we share information and engage with others, public libraries stand at the forefront of addressing both the opportunities and challenges that arise in this evolving landscape. While the benefits of rapid information access and idea exchange are undeniable, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, along with the erosion of real-life social connections, pose significant threats to individuals and communities alike.

Here are four things public libraries can do to advance this work.

### 1. Review and update digital literacy curriculum to capture the current challenges of generative AI.

While misinformation and disinformation are not new challenges, the impact of generative AI on its nature and scale presents an unprecedented challenge that requires an intentional and coordinated response. Although public libraries already offer extensive digital literacy programs, there is a current need to include modules that clearly outline the emerging uses of generative AI for propaganda and disinformation, as well as best practices for identifying AI-generated misinformation and disinformation.



*The [Boston Public Library](#) recently hosted a workshop focusing on countering misinformation, developing digital citizenship skills, and learning tools to identify accurate online information. In this workshop attendees were presented a “Be MediaWise: A Misinformation Resilience Toolkit,” which they used to explore various digital literacy skills while addressing questions around sorting facts from opinions, how to find accurate information, and identifying AI-generated content.*

### 2. Utilize public spaces in the library to build social capital and social connectedness.

The library offers opportunities for self-expression, social interaction, and community engagement, effectively humanizing social transactions. The benefits of physical interactions should be emphasized as the essential goal of digital or anonymous interactions, with a focus on converting digital interactions into face-to-face connections within the library’s public spaces. Programs should aim to create new pathways, connecting the community to other library services and resources that help cultivate patterns of information validation and assist in countering misinformation and disinformation.



*In summer 2024, the [Dallas Public Library](#) hosted a traveling Smithsonian exhibit called “The Bias Inside Us” and planned connective programs for patrons of all ages. One event, the Escape Your Bias Puzzle Room, allowed people to participate in a puzzle room exercise at the central library, where their problem-solving skills were tested while gaining an understanding of how bias impacts their thinking.*

Additionally, [Living Room Conversations](#) is a U.S. nonprofit project that offers a free online tool to help people better listen to and learn from those with differing beliefs and opinions. Living Room Conversations has [an AI conversation guide](#) that offers prompts to help lead discussions about technology and its impact on our daily lives.

### **3. Create and/or curate resources and tools community members can easily use to detect misinformation and disinformation.**

Libraries should consider developing public information campaigns centered around themes such as “Trust but Verify,” where instructional guidance is paired with a toolkit that patrons and community members can easily access and quickly use to identify misinformation and disinformation. This could be a document available on the library website and at library locations. Such resources should include specific steps for identifying misinformation and disinformation, as well as details of a designated library staff member or resource person to help navigate the information verification process.

In an era where misinformation and disinformation are rampant, various initiatives have emerged to help individuals navigate the complex information landscape. Several organizations also offer resources that libraries can apply to their own work in this arena. The [2024 Trustworthy Information Guide by Citizen Connect](#) is a repository of helpful links on finding balanced news sources, credible information, and resources for obtaining reliable data, facts, research, and analyses to foster critical thinking. Additionally, tools from the [News Literacy Project](#) such as [RumorGuard](#), [quizzes](#), and the [Misinformation Dashboard: Election 2024](#), are available to help public library users counter misinformation and disinformation.



*The [Toronto Public Library](#) has a comprehensive “Fake News and Information Literacy Toolkit.” This toolkit is designed to help users distinguish between credible information and misinformation. It includes guidelines on how to evaluate sources, identify biases, and verify facts. The toolkit is accessible through TPL’s website and is used in workshops and educational programs across the library’s branches.*



#### 4. Design programs and events around awareness of new forms of misinformation and disinformation and connection to civic duty.

Libraries should consider programming and information sessions designed to educate the public on navigating misinformation and disinformation in the era of generative AI. These programs can be developed in collaboration with civil society and nonprofit groups focused on digital literacy, as well as countering misinformation and disinformation. Organizations like the [League of Women Voters](#) have a strong track record of working closely with libraries on programs to help communities become more aware and civically minded. Additionally, partnering with subject matter experts, such as local journalists or college faculty, can also aid in creating effective programs to educate the community.



*In March 2024, the [Brooklyn Public Library](#) collaborated with the nonprofit [Women in AI Ethics™](#) to host an event with Rep. Yvette D. Clarke (D-NY). The discussion covered Rep. Clarke’s new bill advocating for content provenance on AI-generated media, the critical need to protect women from image abuse, ways to enable victims to seek recourse, and the significance of AI literacy programs to ensure community safety in the AI era.*

## CONCLUSION

This leadership brief underscores the vital role that libraries play in promoting digital literacy and fostering social connectedness. By equipping the public with the tools to critically assess information, especially in the era of generative AI, libraries can help combat the pervasive influence of misinformation and disinformation. Furthermore, the physical spaces within libraries serve as essential venues for nurturing social capital, providing opportunities for meaningful, face-to-face interactions that humanize and strengthen community ties.

The strategies outlined in this brief—updating digital literacy curricula, utilizing public spaces to build social connections, curating resources for detecting misinformation, and designing awareness programs—offer a comprehensive approach for libraries to address these challenges. By implementing these strategies, libraries not only enhance their role as information hubs but also affirm their position as vital civic spaces that contribute to the overall well-being of the communities they serve.

In an age where digital interactions often overshadow physical ones, libraries have the unique opportunity to bridge this gap, fostering both informed citizens and connected communities. Through continued innovation and collaboration, libraries can ensure they remain central to the fight against misinformation and the cultivation of social connectedness in the digital age.

## Acknowledgments

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