

Deborah Lee

Technology Redux

A Librarian's AI Journey

The year was 1992. I had the opportunity to serve as a trainer at the liberal arts college where I worked as it first joined the Internet. A strange new world of “FTP” and “Telnet” was introduced, but even in the earliest days, it was obvious that this was going to touch every aspect of our work in the library. The response of one of my colleagues has always stayed with me. At a staff meeting I excitedly shared what this may mean, and in all seriousness, she turned to me and said, “Deborah, if we ignore it, maybe it will go away.” The Internet did not go away.

Now, decades later, I find myself in a strangely familiar place. In 2024, I assumed the role of director of research impact and artificial intelligence (AI) strategy for my university library. The names and tools are different, but the questions sound similar. What will happen to academic integrity? How can we trust what's online? Will this technology make us obsolete? And once again, I feel that same blend of excitement and responsibility that came with those early Internet years.

When the Internet was introduced on our campuses, libraries were among the first to make sense of it. We built web pages, digitized collections, subscribed to online databases, and taught users to evaluate what they found. The library became a bridge between technology and the academic community, where we offered not just access but also support for digital literacy.

Looking back, what strikes me is how central librarian values were to that transition. We focused on teaching users to think critically, preserving equitable access, and protecting privacy even as information went global. And that history matters. Because now, as generative AI begins to reshape higher education, I see the same need for thoughtful mediation. Once again, we're navigating a frontier filled with both promises and challenges, and once again, our communities are looking for guidance they can trust.

When ChatGPT became publicly available in November 2022, the campus conversation was immediate and intense. Faculty members asked if they could ban it. Students experimented (sometimes wisely, sometimes not). Administrators debated what, if any, policies would be needed. Libraries have historically sat at the crossroads of research, teaching, and technology. We already teach students to evaluate sources and think critically about the information they use. AI literacy is a natural extension of this traditional focus on information literacy.

Important conversations about AI are happening on college campuses across the globe. It is important that librarians have a seat at the table where those conversations

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are taking place. But we can't engage in these conversations if we are not conversant about this technology. That's why standards such as the recently released ACRL AI Competencies for Academic Library Workers is so important.¹ These standards can help frame the discussion of AI-related skills and services within academic libraries.

In 2024, the opportunity arose to propose a new position for our library. Although there were a lot of questions across campus about AI, there were few answers and even fewer resources available to help guide those questions. This opportunity came with risks. The job description was deliberately vague, as were the benchmarks for success. Having a supportive dean, one comfortable with experimentation and not afraid of failure, was vital.

There was, bluntly, an opportunity on our campus to become part of the AI story as it unfolded. Many on campus were intrigued by AI's potential but unsure how to begin. Others were worried about ethics and academic integrity. Librarians are uniquely equipped to bridge these concerns. We understand pedagogy, research workflows, and the complex relationship between people and information in a way that few other organizations or groups are equipped to provide.

Taking on this role has allowed me to draw on both the core values of librarianship and my prior experience with technological change. The introduction of an AI ethics workshop filled a vital role that was missing across campus. Building a key partnership with the campus Office of Research Compliance and Security helped expand the audience and incorporate this option into the Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) activities on campus. This key partnership has helped ensure that we routinely have sixty or more faculty and students enroll in the online workshop each semester. It served as the springboard for more opportunities to discuss AI usage and ethics as part of a broader library instruction program. And it opened the door for the development of other instructional programming and resources. Recent instruction sessions included a session for an upper-level undergraduate engineering class on the use of AI in the writing of lab reports, as well as instruction sessions for several graduate seminars on the use of AI in scholarly publishing.

There have been other opportunities: a campus project aimed at building an AI "portal" with information for undergraduate students; a regional event that provided support for education faculty and a discussion of the role of AI in secondary education; and lectures for campus and community groups on the opportunities and challenges of AI. These and other opportunities became available because the library became a partner with campus efforts to support the ethical development and inclusion of AI within the Mississippi State University community.

AI may be the latest frontier, but for libraries, it's another chapter in a much longer story. A story that is built on curiosity and founded on an ethos of service. When I look back on my early Internet workshops and my current AI work, I see continuity, not disruption. Each era brings new tools, new fears, and new opportunities to reaffirm what librarianship stands for.

The goal isn't to become an "AI expert." Rather it is to remain what we've always been as information professionals: trusted guides in a changing information landscape. The challenge of this moment is not just to understand artificial intelligence but also to ensure that intelligence in all its human, ethical, and creative forms remains at the heart of our work.

That's why I took on this role. I get to help write the next chapter of how knowledge is discovered and shared. And I can't think of a better place for that work to take place than the library. //

Note

1. "AI Competencies for Academic Library Workers," American Library Association, October 6, 2025 (accessed October 20, 2025), <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ai>.