

Ethical Considerations for Librarians Using GenAI

Generative AI tools raise ethical questions around intellectual freedom, patron privacy, equitable access, and responsible stewardship. The following areas warrant careful deliberation.

BIAS & DISCRIMINATION

GenAI systems reflect and amplify biases present in their training data. These biases are often invisible to end users, making critical evaluation difficult.

Key concerns:

- Over-representation of dominant cultures and languages
- Harmful stereotypes about race, gender, disability, and class
- Algorithmic bias affecting library tools and recommendations
- Increased marginalization of communities already underserved by libraries

PRIVACY & SURVEILLANCE

GenAI tools collect, store, and process user inputs, including prompts, uploaded documents, and interaction patterns. This can conflict with a library's commitment to patron confidentiality.

Key concerns:

- Patron queries may be logged, stored, or used for further training
- Terms of service may grant broad data-use rights with limited transparency
- Sensitive research topics (e.g. health, legal, immigration) may become visible to third parties
- Children's data protections (COPPA) may be inadequately addressed
- Institutional pressure to adopt tools may override privacy-first principles

LABOR & ECONOMIC IMPACT

GenAI development depends on large-scale human labor, often underpaid and invisible, while its deployment threatens creative, educational, and information professions.

Key concerns:

- Training data is often sourced without consent or compensation
- Companies rely on underpaid and undersupported developing country workers for content moderation and data labeling
- Automation narratives may be used to justify library staff reductions
- Economic benefits concentrate among a small number of technology corporations
- Potential devaluing of librarian expertise in curation, reference, and instruction

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The computational resources required to train and operate large AI models carry substantial environmental costs that are rarely disclosed to end users.

Key concerns:

- Training a single large model can emit hundreds of tons of CO2
- Data centers consume significant water and electricity
- Each query adds to the cumulative energy demand
- Environmental costs are disproportionately borne by vulnerable communities
- Library sustainability goals may conflict with heavy AI tool usage

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE ADOPTING ANY AI TOOL

- Who built this tool? Who profits from its use?
- What data was it trained on? Was consent obtained?
- Where do patron inputs go? Who can access them?
- What are the documented environmental costs?
- What alternatives exist that better align with library values?
- Who in our community benefits? Who may be harmed?