

Media quiteracy and the role of AI refusal in information literacy programs

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Abstract:

This paper uses the idea of *media quiteracy* to carve out a role for AI refusal in information literacy programs. As proposed by Good and Ciccone (2025), media quiteracy posits that media literacy can and should include opportunities to resist and reshape specific technologies. Libraries host media, tech, and information literacy programs, often through teaching our users how to use tools like databases or LLM tools. But what opens up when we also teach about how to *not* to use those tools? While we are currently deep in a hype cycle promoting broad and numerous uses of generative AI, serious reservations include issues of accuracy, data privacy, copyright, labor exploitation, bias, and environmental harms. AI literacy that focuses exclusively on teaching the use of AI tools forecloses discussion of those serious issues. Media quiteracy suggests that taking tech refusal seriously empowers learners: by centering user autonomy, learners become active participants in shaping the future of technologies. I use emergent examples of library programming in public and academic libraries in the United States to show how AI quiteracy fits into AI literacy and information literacy programs, and will offer practical responses to potential backlash.

Keywords: AI refusal, media quiteracy, teaching

Introduction

In 2025, *Time* magazine declared “the architects of AI” as their person of the year, with a cover featuring tech giants including Jensen Huang, Elon Musk, Sam Altman, and Mark Zuckerberg. The magazine noted, “Person of the Year is a

powerful way to focus the world's attention on the people that shape our lives. And this year, no one had a greater impact than the individuals who imagined, designed, and built AI. Humanity will determine AI's path forward, and each of us can play a role in determining AI's structure and future. Our work has trained it and sustained it, and now we find ourselves moving through a world increasingly defined by it" (Jacobs 2025).

Yet 2025 was also the year of "slop" according to the American Dialect Society, with other words and phrases considered including "vibe-coding," "that's AI," and "the algorithm" (Zimmer and Wright 2026). As these designations hint, while AI—particularly generative AI—seems to be everywhere, its reception is not uniformly positive. Pew Internet research from 2025 shows that in the United States, fully half of adults are "more concerned than excited" about the uptake of AI in day-to-day activity. Pew's international survey from the same year found that, "in many countries surveyed, a larger share of people are equally excited and concerned about the growing use of AI" (Poushter et al. 2025). Just this spring, several prominent commencement speakers at US college graduations seemed shocked when their positive comments about AI received jeers and boos (Hollingsworth and Gecker 2026).

Library workers find ourselves navigating competing interests (and varying interest) in this rapidly evolving technology. In this talk, I suggest that many of the stated approaches to AI literacy fall short of the moment. Instead, I propose that media quiteracy (Good and Ciccone 2025) offers a useful path forward. While AI is here, at least for now, we need to be able to help library users navigate it and make their own choices about if, when, and how they want to use AI, if at all.

AI Literacy, media quiteracy and where they fit in information literacy

AI literacy, much like information literacy or media literacy, aims to equip learners to deal with AI. But what does that mean? There are numerous definitions of AI literacy, and it is beyond my scope to explore them broadly, so I will offer just a few:

From the Digital Promise, a technology education non-profit:

AI literacy includes the knowledge and skills that enable humans to critically understand, evaluate, and use AI systems and tools to safely and ethically participate in an increasingly digital world (Lindauer 2024).

From the University of Pennsylvania Libraries:

AI literacy emphasizes a reflective use of AI tools and the ability to evaluate the quality and accuracy of those tools and the outputs they produce. To be AI literate, you do not need to be an expert at the mechanics of how AI works from a technical perspective, though some understanding of basic concepts about AI development and design helps with AI literacy. Instead, AI literacy means being able to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of AI, the differences between various types of AI, ethical concerns about AI, and be able to critically consider the application of AI tools in teaching, research, learning, and every day life. Moreover, AI is rapidly evolving, tools change quickly, and part of AI literacy means monitoring and adapting to changes in the field. Being AI literate is essential to effectively, efficiently, and ethically making the best use of these tools (Wolfson, n.d.).

And from the US Department of Labor:

a foundational set of competencies that enable individuals to use and evaluate AI technologies responsibly, with a primary focus on generative AI, which is increasingly central to the modern workplace (US Department of Labor 2026, 1).

While each of these examples reflects a particular context and responds to specific concerns, it is notable that each of these includes preparing learners to use AI. This reflects what Good and Ciccone refer to as the “digital participation model” where tech literacy implies tech use (Good and Ciccone 2025). Kay Slater calls this AI competency, focused on how to use the tools, in contrast to a true literacy focused on comprehension and interpretation (Slater 2025). Even work like Chiu et al’s (2024), which synthesizes many different definitions and practices into a thorough and open framework ends up weaving AI use throughout. The message from all of these is clear: AI literacy means preparing learners to use AI, if hopefully in a thoughtful or even ethical way. While all of these definitions allude to responsible or ethical use, the point of clarifying your values is so that you can (better) use AI. Reflecting on her own experience growing up exposed to social media in school, Allie Lopez writes, “Constant engagement with technology at school meant that I was more likely to use it outside of the classroom. Because the adults I trusted quickly accepted and adopted new technologies in educational spaces, I figured those technologies were always acceptable” (Lopez 2024). This experience of forced inevitability makes her, now herself an educator, question whether there is any responsible way to teach AI.

The digital participation model of literacy is so normalized that it may feel self-evident or even naïve to point out. But we might consider other approaches to

teaching and learning. What if AI literacy were treated more like sexuality or drug education, which often hinge on teaching about behaviors in order to discourage or shift their practice? We could also consider something like general gun safety, where a technology is introduced but not necessarily promoted. Rather, there's the expectation that if you choose to use the technology, clear safety measures are needed. In all of these cases, the content itself is something with potentially serious consequences, both individually and societally.

Media quiteracy offers a pathway for these types of imaginative and expansive ways to teach and learn about AI. Good and Ciccone define media quiteracy as "an active, generative approach to learning about and intervening in a heavily mediatized, commercialized, and digitized information environment through intentional acts of refusal, abstention, and disconnection" (2025, 151). This may not be absolute and lasting refusal, but could be a temporary break, such as a digital fast.

This framework centers learner autonomy. I am reminded of the principles offered by the Consentful Tech project, from Planned Parenthood: consent, whether in technology or in sexuality, should be freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific (Lee and Tolliver 2017). No one should be forced to use technology they do not want to use, either by being pressured to or by stealth. An authentic interest in consent also helps us walk away from absolutism. While AI abolition is a legitimate political project, it is not necessitated by media quiteracy, where we focus on what refusal helps us learn. As Consentful Tech invites us to: "Think of a technology you use on a day to day basis. Can it have unjust or inequitable impacts on anyone? Who owns the technology, and who participates in the making of it?" (Lee and Tolliver 2017, 10). The pedagogical goal is not to block any usage, but rather to facilitate learners' exploration *including* non-use. It is worth noting that some AI literacy frameworks do take this perspective, such as from the Responsible Innovation Centre, which prioritizes learner agency "to make informed, independent choices about how, when, and *whether* to use AI" (Belshaw et al. 2025, 8).

Good and Ciccone present three common barriers to the implementation of media quiteracy. In addition to the assumption that use is implied in literacy (the digital participation model described above), they note that practicing tech refusal interferes with narratives that equate emerging technology with progress; and note that anyone seeking to limit technology use may be dismissed as part of a moral panic. I have already spoken to the assumption of use implied in AI literacy framings, but the other two barriers are also evident. The examples I shared above incorporate the assumption that technology

inevitably leads to progress: the Digital Promise speaks to our “increasingly digital world,” and the US Department of Labor refers to generative AI as “increasingly central to the modern workplace.” The *Time* magazine person of the year write-up declares that we “find ourselves moving through a world increasingly defined by [AI]”. The seeming inevitability creates a sense of helplessness about how to shape these technologies or the future.

The third barrier is Good and Ciccone’s least developed. A moral panic refers to exaggerated or fabricated fears of the societal effects of a person, group or activity—or in this case, technologies, whether television, video games, or generative AI. Labeling an argument as a moral panic neutralizes the concerns presented. Borkowska and Jackson’s 2026 article, “From moral panic to pragmatic governance: reframing AI’s societal impacts in employment, education, and ethics,” offers insight into how this term is applied. While their overall call to focus on addressable specific problems with AI, rather than vaguely stated and unverified concerns is quite reasonable, many of their concrete examples fall back into the pattern of tech inevitability. For example, they contrast concerns about algorithmic bias with the practical advice to develop fairness-aware machine learning that can recognize and address it (Borkowska and Jackson 2026). But how can educators, students, or families ensure that happens? Why is this a better solution than not using these tools at all? While the authors’ data-driven agenda for AI in education is laudable, it both accepts that AI will ultimately be used in education, and ignores the struggle in implementing these improved outcomes. In the United States, the history of education is littered with examples of data-driven practices tossed aside due to political or other considerations. In May 2026, the California State University system renewed a \$13 million contract with OpenAI, despite objections from many students and faculty, and during a time of financial austerity (Rix 2026).

Ultimately, the barriers to media literacy themselves reiterate the need for it. Let’s step back to the definitions I offered and revise them, to see what opens up:

Digital Promise, revised:

*AI literacy includes the knowledge and skills that enable humans to critically understand, evaluate, and use **or not use** AI systems and tools to safely and ethically participate in an increasingly digital world.*

Penn Libraries, revised:

AI literacy emphasizes a reflective use of AI tools and the ability to evaluate the quality and accuracy of those tools and the outputs they produce. [...] Being AI literate

*is essential to effectively, efficiently, and ethically making the best use **or disuse** of these tools.*

US Department of Labor, revised:

*a foundational set of competencies that enable individuals to use **or not use** and evaluate AI technologies responsibly, with a primary focus on generative AI, which is increasingly central to the modern workplace.*

It is in the spirit of these revised definitions that we will explore some real world examples of AI quiteracy in libraries.

Emergent examples

I see AI quiteracy being implemented organically in libraries across the United States, as library workers creatively grapple with the needs in their communities. In this section, I draw on my own experience as a librarian at a large public university, and on the Library Freedom Project, a community of practice for library workers focused on privacy, technology, and information democracy. The following examples point to the sort of radical autonomy and choice that media quiteracy invites.

At my own institution, my colleague Laurie Bridges, co-director of the AI Literacy Center, has regularly brought speakers who address many perspectives on AI, from concerns about data centers to the effects of agentic AI on libraries. The Center's faculty fellows explore topics ranging from critique of AI's use to "talk" to whales to hosting a community of practice for faculty to consider if/when/whether to use AI in their teaching.

At Laurie's request, I have developed several one-hour workshops presenting critiques and alternatives to AI. In *AI and Privacy: What You Should Know*, we explore potential privacy concerns and actions that users can take. I draw on both theoretical frameworks and real-life examples from the news. More recently, I began offering *Opting Out of AI*, where we explore reasons why people may want to opt out, as well as concrete steps for doing so in popular systems. These workshops have been attended by university staff, faculty, and students, as well as community members. Our library also offers other skill-based and general interest workshops about AI taught by other librarians. That is, users can choose which programs they want to attend, based on their interests. As Good and Ciccone put it, "a digital literacy of engagement and a media quiteracy of non-use go hand in hand" (Good and Ciccone 2025, 160).

Laurie and I have also held an ongoing reading group focused on AI, where we read books on various facets of AI. Some regular participants are heavy AI users, others largely abstain, and all appreciate this space to discuss across differences. Even largely AI-positive readings often include some opportunities for refusal, and questions of use/non-use come up in every discussion.

Other libraries are also trying out creative forms of AI quiteracy. Hannah Cyrus at Bangor Public Library has held a series of workshops focused on “breaking up” with Big Tech, and recently added a workshop on *Avoiding AI*, with 70 participants at the initial offering, who clapped enthusiastically at the end (Cyrus 2026). In addition, she encourages librarians to consider how refusal can be brought into all of our public service work, such as when a user asks for help setting up an email account. As she writes, “Yes, our traditional jobs have been to teach patrons how to use technology. But, we can also provide information on how to circumvent, resist, disable, and refuse technologies” (Cyrus 2026, 2). Other examples from libraries in the United States include an *Avoiding AI* workshop at the Philadelphia Public Library, an AI Refusal/Resistance LibGuide from Olympic College, and a digital collection of books on AI Refusal from Markham Public Library (Free Libr. Phila., n.d.; Newcomer, n.d.; Markham Public Libr., n.d.).

In all of these examples, libraries are making space for refusal of the generative, meaningful types that Good and Ciccone encourage. All of these libraries also offer other information, programs, or materials about AI. It’s also quite likely that other programs do include some elements of quiteracy. Any introduction to AI can incorporate the concept of refusal. If you introduce why learners may want to use it, ask them why they may *not* want to. Incorporating information about the environmental, labor, and other harms into standard programs about AI ensures that those points do not get ignored in the rush to learn skills. Newark Public Library will be hosting an event called Build Different: AI, Community, and the Future, partnering with local organizations and focusing specifically on “who technology is built for, who it leaves behind, and what it looks like to build differently” (Eventbrite, n.d.).

I want to end this talk with some suggestions for dealing with backlash. Given the fractiousness that AI can inspire, you may face criticism or questions if you implement AI quiteracy. While you can find many clear arguments for AI abolition, such as “A Librarian Against AI or I think AI Should Leave” (Fox 2024), I think the strongest response is rooted in media quiteracy itself. Why does refusal/abstention threaten AI? If AI is indeed the inevitable future, what is the

problem if people take breaks from it? Some research suggests that people with more knowledge about AI are less receptive to its use (Tully et al. 2025).

Conclusion

This is one small contribution to a growing area of critical AI literacy, which follows lineages of critical pedagogy back to Paulo Freire and others. Critical pedagogies ground learning in the real world context of power and oppression, bringing theory into practice, equipping learners with the tools of analysis they need to build a more just world. Critical AI literacy thus brings an element of critique and transformation to discussions of how to teach this technology (Veldhuis et al. 2025). And yet, even in critical AI literacy, “AI is often assumed to be inevitable” (Li and Mroziak 2026). Rather than accept that framing, media literacy offers a structure for exploring other possibilities, and has a place in any critical approach to this technology.

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