Impact Summary: Cool/Scary AI Impact Denver Summit 2025

Hello,

Welcome to the Denver Cool/Scary AI Impact Summit report! As the organizing team, we are thrilled to share highlights from this inaugural event. The vision is to democratize the conversation around artificial intelligence – asking **"what if seven billion people were helping to direct where AI is going instead of five billionaires in Silicon Valley?"** The summit brought together thought leaders, educators and practitioners from across nonprofits, foundations, companies, and civil society. We aim to get into the "AHA-level" insights surrounding AI's promises and perils. We convened a wide group of speakers, each doing innovative work with AI for social good. What follows here is summary of the takeaways from the days events and speakers.

As humans and innovators in the social impact space, we cannot ignore the gnarly perils of AI. The environmental footprint of countless GPU's humming away in terms of energy, water, and community displacement is unmistakeable and must be addressed and discussed. Dystopian possibilities of AI's future (and present) and it's impact on the labor force, human relationships, etc. are also very real and must be understood to mitigate the worst of these outcomes. And, we believe as innovators for social good, we **cannot stand aside focused uniformly on these wrongs and fail to harness the potential of AI** to help solve some of our most pressing social problems. Our goal for this Summit was to embrace these contradictions. To acknowledge and challenge the fundamental issues with AI's growing influence while also seeking to harness it to achieve mission-driven aims.

In short, the summit's significance lay in forging a community intent on harnessing AI for good. It underscored that we must proactively shape AI's development to serve humanity, rather than simply react to it.

Onward,

Jen, Peter, and Ted

Cool/Scary AI Impact

Denver Summit 2025 Organizing Team

Summary

From Fear to Frontier: Embracing the AI Era

One resounding theme was the need for nonprofits to move from AI anxiety to AI action. Many organizations still feel trepidation about AI, yet as one speaker put it, the "train is here and it's not going to stop." Leaders were urged not to let fear paralyze them, but rather to get ahead of the curve with proactive experimentation and learning. Gurpreit Juneja of STACK Infrastructure shared an anecdote from a nonprofit CEO who initially admitted "she was terrified of AI" but soon realized she was "more terrified of being left behind." Six months after taking the plunge, that same leader enthusiastically reported a successful pilot in which automating a once-onerous grant reporting process cut it from 3 days down to 3 hours, a 95% time reduction achieved with zero new staff. In her eyes, AI had shifted from a threat to a "mission multiplier" – a way to amplify impact rather than undermine it. This journey from skepticism to results exemplifies the summit's key message: boldness pays off.

Start small, prove value

To cross that frontier, experts advised beginning with modest, focused AI projects that can demonstrate quick wins. One practitioner noted that even resource-strapped teams can pilot a solution for a single workflow "with no big budget commitments… just starting really small". Often, it only takes a handful of staff using a new AI tool successfully to get others on board – "when they see like 10 people are doing it, that's when [skeptical leaders] raise their eyebrow and go, 'oh, tell me what can you do?'". In a sector where everyone is over-stretched, carving out time for innovation is tough – "we want to make our lives better, but we don't have time to make our lives better." The summit sessions stressed **a mindset shift**: rather than viewing AI adoption as a distraction or luxury, nonprofits should treat it as an urgent strategic priority for advancing their missions.

Main Takeaway

AI's future is in our hands. The central insight from Denver's summit was that while AI will disrupt jobs, industries, and society, it also offers unprecedented opportunity – if we intentionally guide it. Rather than fear an AI takeover, we should focus on becoming "AI-enabled humans."

AI isn't going to steal your job, but a person who knows how to effectively use AI could steal your job,"

Sean Gannon, GTMPL.com

Contradictions:

Contradiction 1

Inclusivity vs. Tech Elitism: Even as AI is driven by big tech, this event championed a grassroots approach. How do we involve everyone in AI's direction (all 7 billion of us) when so much power is concentrated among a few? The summit itself was an attempt to resolve this tension by empowering community voices.

Contradiction 2

Innovation vs. Regulation: There was lively debate on balancing rapid AI innovation with policy oversight. For example, one founder described well-intended legislation meant to protect consumers that could actually "do a lot wrong" and hurt small tech innovators doing social good. The paradox: we need guardrails for AI's risks, yet overzealous rules might stifle helpful tools before they reach those in need.

Contradiction 3

Hype vs. Reality: Attendees noted the irony that even as AI astonishes us with human-like feats, it still has obvious flaws. (As one speaker learned, a cutting-edge image generator can create beautiful art but struggles with basics like drawing hands or letters correctly.) The group continually asked: what can AI truly do today, and where do we still rely on human judgment?

Contradiction 4

Efficiency vs. Empathy: Many nonprofit leaders are excited by AI's efficiency – automating tedious tasks, analyzing data in seconds – but equally worried about losing the human touch. The summit revealed a duality: AI can amplify human connection (e.g. tools that coach people to listen better), yet if used carelessly it might also distance or even harm the very communities we aim to help. Participants stressed that technology must complement, not replace, our empathy and ethics.

Patterns:

Pattern 1

Empowerment & Access: A recurring theme was democratizing AI knowledge. Speakers reiterated that anyone can now download AI models and experiment – power once locked in labs is available to the "everyday person". This opens the door for communities (not just corporations) to drive AI solutions. The very fact that you attended means "you have a seat at the table" in shaping AI's trajectory.

Pattern 2

Human–AI Synergy: Across talks, AI was framed as a tool to augment human capabilities, not replace them. For instance, in AI-driven outreach and sales, the best systems "route to [humans] faster" – doing the grunt work so that people can focus on what people do best. The mantra was clear: let machines handle repetitive tasks, while humans provide judgment, creativity, and empathy.

Pattern 3

Breakneck Pace, Playful Learning: Many noted the dizzying speed of AI's evolution – "new tools every day" as one presenter marveled. The pattern that emerged was the importance of lifelong learning and curiosity. Several speakers encouraged a playful, experimentative mindset to keep up. Rather than be intimidated, they dove in with creative projects (from art to chatbots) and found that hands-on play is the best teacher. This infectious enthusiasm for learning helped demystify AI for everyone.

Pattern 4

Ethics and Responsibility: Threaded through the sessions was a conscientious focus on doing AI right. Discussions ranged from data privacy and bias to AI's impacts on jobs and mental health. One speaker, a psychologist-entrepreneur, stressed that we must build AI tools that truly help people – and also know when to push back on approaches that might cause harm. The community agreed: we need to proactively consider the societal implications of AI, not as an afterthought.

Session Highlights

We heard from a lineup of insightful speakers. Here are brief highlights from a selection of them (each linking technology with social impact in unique ways):

Speaker 1

Daniel Ritchie (Founder, Brainwave Collective): Kicked off the day with "WTF is AI?" – an accessible tour of AI's history and current landscape. Daniel explained how modern AI works (lots of math and "tiny decisions" at massive scale) and gave context for the recent explosion of capabilities. Crucially, he reminded us that "we get to decide how these things are implemented". AI might be transformative, but it's not beyond our influence. His call to action was for every sector to leave its imprint on AI's future and ask the hard questions – "why is this being built, who's doing it?"
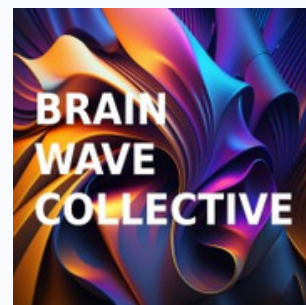
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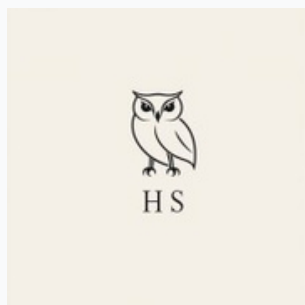
Jen Hanson (AI Product Consultant): Shared a "Playful Path to AI Literacy." Jen spoke to those who feel overwhelmed by AI, arguing that learning this tech can be fun, creative, and accessible. She recounted how she, a self-proclaimed math/astro nerd, actually "started with art" to learn AI – using image generators for playful projects. By tinkering with tools like Midjourney, she picked up AI basics through curiosity and play. **Her key takeaway**: you don't need to be an expert to begin exploring AI. In fact, approaching it with childlike curiosity (and even humor) can spark understanding for the "AI curious" in our lives who might otherwise glaze over.

Session Highlights

Speaker 3

Kelly Kinnebrew, PhD (Founder, MinervaCoach) – AI for Empathy: A clinical psychologist-turned-entrepreneur introduced Minerva, an AI "coach" that listens during Zoom meetings to help people improve soft skills like active listening. (Imagine a digital nudge telling you when to take a breath and really hear your team.) She framed this as a social good – better listeners make better leaders, which can humanize workplaces. Dr. Doe also shared a cautionary tale about policy: she had testified against a well-intentioned AI bill in Colorado, arguing that it "tries to protect… but does a lot wrong" and could unintentionally "hurt…small tech" innovators like her[

Speaker 4

Sean Gannon (Founder, GTMPL): Spoke on "Beyond Hyper-Personalization" in ed-tech and sales. Sean's big message: AI has rapidly become an everyday tool in business – in just a few years he went from "what is AI?" to using it daily with his teams. He shared how teams can use AI responsibly for tasks like outreach, lead qualification, and content creation. Importantly, Sean emphasized responsible use: training teams not just to use AI, but to use it ethically and effectively. His advice: don't fear AI taking over – learn it and leverage it, so you and your organization stay ahead in the new era.

Session Highlights

Peter Genuardi (CEO, See The Stars): Introduced the concept of an "Intelligence Safety Net." Peter leads See The Stars, a team building tech to "make the world more compassionate" for nonprofits and communities. He painted a vivid (and urgent) picture of the problem: due to policy changes, millions of Americans will lose food stamp (SNAP) benefits and Medicaid coverage soon. This is a tsunami of need that traditional systems aren't prepared for. Peter's project uses AI and direct-response outreach tactics to find at-risk families and connect them with support services quickly. He spoke of "meeting the moment" by using every AI tool available (from targeted ads to automation) to coordinate aid in ways government alone cannot.

Maya (Founder, Battleground AI): Explored how AI can help us navigate the wild world of public policy and politics. "2025 was a huge year for legislation," she noted – over 135,000 bills were introduced across the U.S., including 1,000+ related to AI. Maya, who has a background in political campaigns and marketing, showcased how her startup Battleground AI crunches through troves of legislative text and advertising data. By doing so, it can flag important policy changes and compliance issues in real-time. For organizations and advocates, this is a game-changer: AI can track the fast-moving landscape (bills popping up "every four minutes" on average!), so that nonprofits and social enterprises can stay informed and respond. Maya's key insight was marrying AI with human context – using AI's speed to inform strategy, while people still decide how to act on that intel.
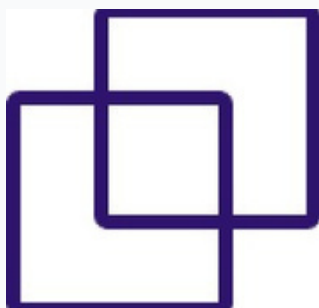
Denver Community Takeaways

Implications & Action Steps for Denver's Nonprofit Sector

Invest in Capacity and Culture: Nonprofit boards and funders should recognize that AI readiness is now a critical capacity issue, not a luxury. This means providing resources for training staff in AI literacy and encouraging a culture of continuous learning. The summit showed that when teams approach AI with a playful, open mindset, they learn faster and innovate more. Denver's organizations can follow this lead by running low-stakes AI workshops, hackathons or "sandbox" projects that let employees experiment with tools relevant to their jobs. Leadership must set the tone that ethical experimentation is encouraged. Remember, early adopters in your team can become internal champions who bring others along.

Leverage the Local AI for Good Ecosystem: A major takeaway is that no nonprofit needs to tackle AI alone. The Denver region boasts a growing, collaborative tech-for-good community – for example, a local AI meetup group has over 3,000 members and numerous subgroups (including a vibrant Women in AI circle) actively exploring positive uses of AI. Nonprofits and foundations should plug into these networks, forge partnerships with tech companies and universities, and even share talent or tools. Such collaborations can provide expertise that smaller organizations lack and ensure solutions are tailored to real community needs.

Embed Ethics and Inclusion from Day One: Responsible AI was a constant refrain throughout the summit. The Denver community is rightly focused on equity, and this must carry into AI initiatives. When deploying AI, nonprofits should establish guidelines to address bias, privacy, and transparency. In practice, this means ensuring your datasets are representative of the communities you serve, being open about how AI is used in your programs, and setting up feedback channels so clients and staff can report issues or concerns. Several speakers noted that it's good tech is "coming under the microscope" – nonprofits should embrace that scrutiny and lead by example.

Engage in the Policy Dialogue: Finally, Denver's nonprofits and philanthropies should assert their voice in shaping the policy environment for AI. With AI-related legislation surging at both state and federal levels, issues like data governance, funding for digital infrastructure, and labor displacement will be on the table. Given Colorado's prolific legislative pace in tech, being proactive is essential. The summit's discussions highlighted that now is the time to push for an AI future that reflects our community values – one that is accountable, inclusive, and geared toward solving human problems.

Working Group for a Progressive AI Future initial members

Help shape the future we actually want. Join the Working Group for a Progressive AI Future.
Email ben@stratovation.digital to join!

Thank you to our community hosts!

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