Impact Summary: Cool AI Sh*t Baltimore Summit 2025

Dear friends,

Thank you for joining us at the inaugural *Cool AI Sh*t* Summit. Whether you spoke, listened, questioned, or quietly absorbed—it mattered. Together, we carved out space to ask the big, messy, exciting questions that too often get buried beneath jargon or urgency.

What we saw in Baltimore was clear: Our community is not content to be passengers in this AI journey. We want a steering wheel. We want to shape the future, not just react to it.

But shaping the future takes more than hot takes and hashtags. It takes **collaboration**, **accountability**, and the courage to dream about what *could be* —then do the hard work of building it.

That's why we're inviting you to take the next step. We're forming a **Working Group for a Progressive AI Future**—a collective of nonprofit leaders, technologists, creatives, and organizers who want to craft an alternative vision for how AI can serve humanity. Our first goal? To respond to the AI Futures Project's challenge by submitting a new scenario—one that centers equity, community resilience, and the right to real choice, inspired by Amartya Sen's vision of *Development as Freedom*.

If you left this summit energized, curious, or even uneasy—that's your signal. Join us.

Together, we can make this moment more than a trend. We can make it a turning point.

In solidarity and imagination,
Ben, Maan, and Eric
co-founders, Stratovation Partners

STRATOVATION PARTNERS

Common Themes and Contradictions

The inaugural Cool AI Sh*t summit in Baltimore was a lively convergence of ideas, optimism, and realism surrounding artificial intelligence's transformative potential for nonprofits, creative agencies, and advocacy organizations. Attendees engaged deeply with the promise and pitfalls of AI, framing a vision that was distinctly human-centered and context-aware.

Several prevalent themes emerged

Contextual Relevance was central. Multiple speakers, notably Tareq, Bree, and Tom, emphasized the necessity of tailoring AI to the unique internal landscapes of individual organizations. Generic AI tools may be technically impressive, yet their effectiveness is severely limited without precise contextual integration. Jen Frazier's interactive peer-learning session underscored this, highlighting how attendees actively navigated their own organizational context to evaluate AI's potential. Sohini's insightful perspectives on nuanced communication further reinforced that context isn't merely beneficial but essential.

Ethical Nuance and Responsibility were frequent discussion points, particularly regarding data privacy, intellectual property rights, and the risks associated with AI-generated content. Leah's exploration of AI design tools surfaced ethical concerns around bias and ownership of generated materials, while Chris's examination of open-source AI platforms raised crucial considerations about transparency and governance. Sal provided tangible evidence that responsibly implemented AI not only maintains trust but can significantly enhance donor engagement metrics, thereby strengthening arguments for ethical AI frameworks.

Empowering Small Teams was a particularly compelling takeaway. Maan showcased practical examples of AI significantly increasing productivity through automation and predictive analytics, transforming limited resources into powerful outcomes. Eric and his co-panelists similarly described how generative AI enables rapid content creation and strategy formulation, democratizing capabilities previously limited to larger organizations.

Authenticity and Human Connection stood out as non-negotiable elements of successful AI implementation. Michael Hoffman passionately articulated why genuine human storytelling remains paramount, especially in nonprofit marketing and advocacy. Sohini further echoed this sentiment, highlighting how AI-driven efficiency must complement, not replace, the deeply human qualities of curiosity, empathy, and creativity.

Contradictions & tensions enriched the dialogue, providing balanced perspectives and acknowledging the complexities of AI adoption

Accessibility versus Expertise posed significant debate. Leah advocated strongly for the democratizing power of user-friendly AI tools, allowing even small teams to create professional-level designs. Conversely, Chris warned of potential risks when simplified platforms obscure technical complexities, potentially leading to misuse or misinterpretation. Both viewpoints underscored the need for thoughtful balance between user-friendliness and responsible oversight.

Efficiency versus Brand Integrity brought critical introspection. While attendees acknowledged AI's role in streamlining content creation, Jen's session surfaced concerns about losing distinctive organizational voices when relying on automated content generation. Sohini effectively argued for maintaining robust human oversight to ensure authenticity, suggesting that efficiency gains must never overshadow cultural and strategic identity.

Innovation versus Practical Constraints highlighted the sector's broader infrastructural challenges. Enthusiasm for innovation, as presented by Maan's automation solutions, often collided with realities of limited budgets, messy data ecosystems, and fragmented organizational practices. This tension emphasized the importance of first strengthening foundational structures before ambitious AI deployments.

Ultimately, the summit concluded without a singular consensus—an outcome embraced positively by participants. This absence of unanimity signaled a healthy ecosystem of experimentation, dialogue, and mutual learning. The vibrant diversity of perspectives and experiences shared indicated a readiness within the community to actively shape the trajectory of AI in ways that align with their mission-driven values and ethical commitments. Rather than resolving all debates, the summit set a powerful precedent for ongoing collaboration and thoughtful, inclusive innovation.

STRATOVATION PARTNERS

Session Highlights

The sessions at Cool AI Sh*t Baltimore offered a wide-ranging view into how AI is reshaping work across the nonprofit, creative, and advocacy sectors. From deeply technical insights to community-driven storytelling, each speaker illuminated a different facet of what it means to engage with AI responsibly and creatively. What follows are brief overviews of each session, spotlighting the practical tools, tensions, and takeaways that emerged. These highlights are meant to serve as a starting point for further exploration, reflection, and cross-sector collaboration.
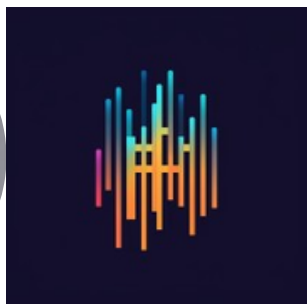
Tareq Alani, co-founder of Chorus AI, addressed the profound importance of organizational context in nonprofit AI implementations. His team's approach, focusing on securely integrating an organization's existing data and permissions, presented AI as a strategic partner, not just a tool. Emphasizing the real-world application of semantic search and retrieval-augmented generation (RAG), Tareq demonstrated that effective AI solutions must deeply understand an organization's unique operational landscape. **View Slides**

Michael Hoffman, founder & CEO of Gather Voices, gave us a session that was a passionate defense of human storytelling amid AI-driven content production. He compellingly argued for authenticity over perfection, using real-world examples to illustrate how authentic, human-centered narratives outperform synthetic content in nonprofit campaigns. His exploration of AI video tools underscored the value of augmenting, not supplanting, human-driven stories. **View Slides**
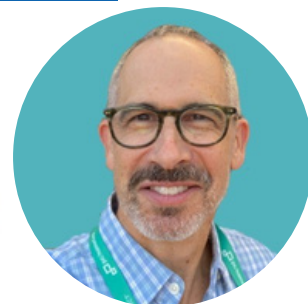
Bree Benn & Tom Spencer, co-founders of AdvocacyAI, provided a critical yet humorous examination of the current AI hype cycle, cautioning attendees against uncritical adoption of AI solutions. Their engaging session encouraged participants to become proficient "BS detectors," emphasizing context, critical questioning, and ethical vigilance as key skills for responsible AI engagement within nonprofits. **View Slides**

Leah Caldwell, CMO at engine9, introduced attendees to a curated selection of seven innovative AI design tools, ranging from beginner-friendly platforms like Canva to sophisticated generators like Midjourney and Adobe Firefly. Highlighting both their practical capabilities and ethical implications, Leah provided a balanced exploration of how these tools democratize access to professional-quality design while underscoring essential human oversight to maintain authenticity and manage biases. **View Slides**

Sohini Baliga, Head of Marketing at National Democratic Training Committee, eloquently framed AI as a valuable yet incomplete partner, incapable of fully replicating human judgment, creativity, and cultural sensitivity. Sharing insights from her own organization, she illustrated how thoughtful human oversight remains critical to successful AI deployments, reinforcing the necessity of maintaining human-centric strategies alongside technological innovation.

Chris Lundberg, CEO of engine9, delved into the democratization of AI via open-source models like Stable Diffusion and Llama, examining implications for governance, accessibility, and societal impact. His session expanded attendees' understanding of AI as not only cloud-based technology but also accessible and customizable tools that empower broader participation in AI development and application. He also surfaced the AI 2027 Report, later used by Ben in his call-to-action, to point out the possibility of a radically transformed world in a very short time period.

Maan Sacdalan, co-founder at Stratovation Partners, shared practical applications of AI and automation, demonstrating significant productivity gains in resource-constrained environments. Examples such as predictive sentiment analysis and smart email triage illustrated tangible benefits of thoughtfully implemented automation. Her relatable, real-world cases showed nonprofits that strategic AI investments could yield meaningful operational improvements without overwhelming teams. **View Slides**

Jen Frazier, Founder & CEO of Firefly Partners, transformed her session into an interactive peer-learning experience, inviting attendees to share their AI adoption journeys and challenges. This format effectively surfaced collective wisdom around balancing AI's efficiency with organizational authenticity, revealing valuable insights into practical applications and ethical considerations from diverse perspectives within the nonprofit sector. **View Slides**
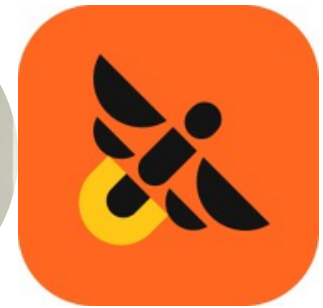
Sal Salpietro, Chief Community Officer at Fundraise Up, presented compelling benchmarking data from Fundraise Up, showcasing the substantial impact AI-driven personalization can have on donor experiences. His findings clearly demonstrated AI's potential for significant enhancements in nonprofit fundraising outcomes, especially via mobile platforms, provided ethical privacy standards and thoughtful user experience designs are rigorously upheld. **View Slides**

Jen Newmeyer, Senior Director, Digital Fundraising Strategy at PBS and **Thelma Andree**, Production & Design Director at Fresh Eyes Digital, closed the event with a panel discussion moderated by **Eric Rubin**, co-founder at Stratovation Partners, where they candidly discussed the intersection of AI, creativity, and organizational strategy, acknowledging both the transformative power and enduring human challenges of AI adoption. Their dialogue emphasized that while AI offers exciting opportunities, true effectiveness requires structural alignment, ethical transparency, and thoughtful integration into existing strategic frameworks.

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 sponsors!

Firefly Partners

engine9