News Access *and* Media Literacy *in* Public Libraries

SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES IN A CHANGING INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

A research initiative by the Public Library Association, sponsored by PressReader

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 Introduction

4 Methodology / Survey Context

5 Understanding Patron Media Engagement

7 Finding 1: News and Media Literacy is Already Part of the Library Mission

8 Finding 2: Staffing, Training, and Capacity Are the Central Constraints

9 Finding 3: New Information Challenges Require New Skills

10 Finding 4: The Participation Paradox: Who Library Programming Reaches (and Who it Doesn't)

12 Implications and Future Investment

14 Conclusion

15 Recommendations

About the Public Library Association
The Public Library Association (PLA) is the largest association dedicated to supporting the unique and evolving needs of public library professionals. Founded in 1944, PLA serves nearly 9,000 members in public libraries large and small in communities across the United States and Canada, with a growing presence around the world. PLA offers professional development and networking, transformative public library initiatives, and a conference that brings public library staff together in meaningful partnership. In collaboration with its parent organization, the American Library Association, PLA works to strengthen public libraries by serving as an indispensable ally for public library leaders.

About PressReader
PressReader helps public libraries connect their communities to trusted journalism and diverse perspectives through an easy-to-use digital platform. With access to more than 8,000 quality newspapers and magazines from 120 countries, alongside a growing collection of books and daily puzzles, libraries can offer an all-you-can-read experience that supports literacy, curiosity and lifelong learning.

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Media literacy and news literacy have become increasingly important as misinformation grows online. Communities have long looked to library workers to guide them on their literacy needs. From early literacy to digital literacy and health literacy, librarians are a trusted source for knowledge and guidance.

While the questions arriving at service desks have changed, the need and trust have not. Patrons want help evaluating sources, recognizing misinformation, understanding AI-generated content, and navigating an increasingly complex information environment. They are turning to libraries for help making sense of information that can be difficult to evaluate and trust.

Librarians have always been in the business of connecting people to reliable information. What's changed is the complexity of that task. Digital news and media channels have multiplied, social media has become a major pathway for discovering information, local news landscapes have changed, and AI-generated content has emerged as a new challenge. Libraries are not exempt from that reality.

This report examines where public libraries stand on news and media literacy and engagement today, drawing on survey responses from 913 librarians and library staff across the U.S. and Canada. It explores what libraries are observing about patron media habits, how they are supporting media literacy, and the challenges they face in doing so.

The findings point to a profession that is already engaged, already stretched, and already clear about what it would take to do more. Libraries are supporting news and media literacy every day, often informally and without adequate support. The question is whether that work will be recognized and resourced before the gap between what libraries are being asked to do and what they are equipped to do grows any wider.

This report is based on an online survey conducted in May 2026 by the Public Library Association and sponsored by PressReader. It was distributed through emails and social media channels to respondents in the U.S. and Canada. All respondents were screened to confirm active employment at a public library; the final sample included 913 completed responses.

Survey questions were drafted by PLA and approved by PressReader.

Most respondents were based in the U.S. (95.3%), with 4.7% from Canada. Respondents represented public libraries across the U.S. and Canada, with participation from every U.S. region. The survey included both closed-ended questions and open-ended prompts. The final question, which asked respondents to name the biggest gaps and unmet needs in their library's media literacy programming, drew responses from all 913 participants and anchors much of the qualitative analysis in this report.

Note on interpretation: these findings reflect the perspectives of library staff, not patrons. The data is a record of what the people doing this work every day believe is and isn't working. **Supplemental engagement data provided by PressReader is presented separately and clearly identified throughout this report.**

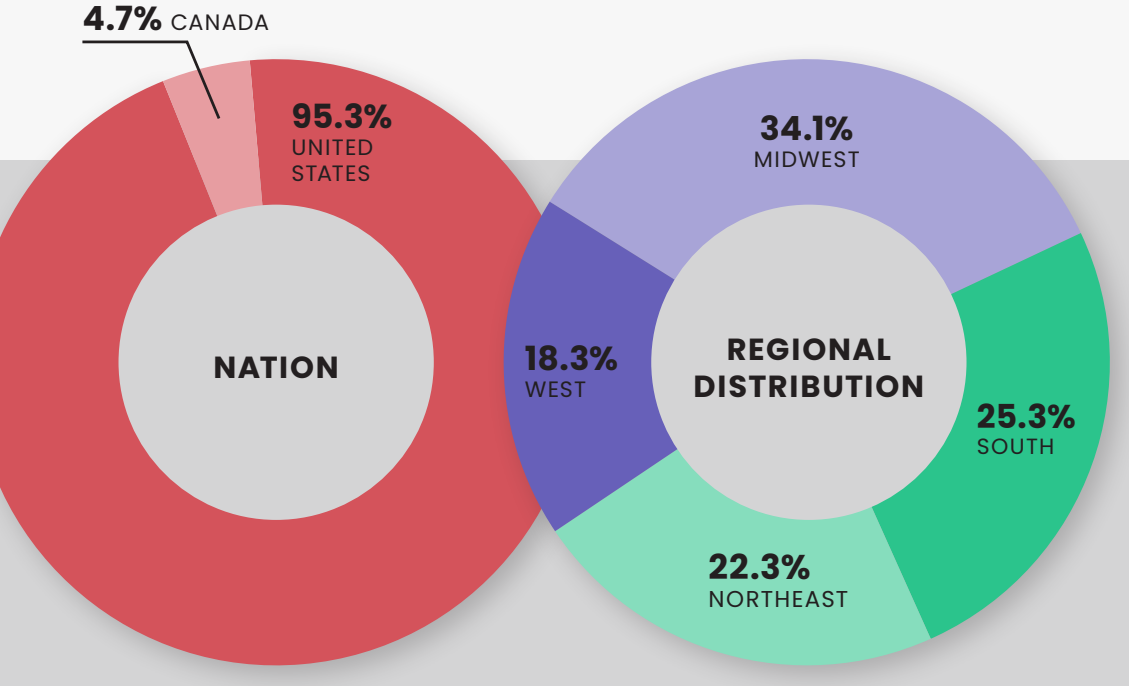

FIGURE 1

Survey Respondent Snapshot

from 913 Responses

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When and What Patrons are Reading

11.3%
Food & Cooking

8.5%
Politics

7.3%
General News

Peak Reading Hours

Engagement peaks rapidly in the morning between 7 AM and 9 AM local time, **with the 8 AM hour drawing over 9% of all daily reads.**

Peak Reading Days

Weekend reading dominates, led by **15.93% on Sundays and 14.68% on Saturdays.**

Engagement Shifts (2025 Q1 vs. 2026 Q1)

Data reveals a distinct shift toward mainstream entertainment and sports engagement. **Sports reading grew by +3.1 pp and Entertainment grew by +2.5 pp,** while Science & Technology engagement fell by -4.3 pp.

Note: These baseline engagement patterns align closely with wider global reading trends highlighted in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025.

Source: PressReader public library engagement data, 2025-2026.

Respondents reported that patrons seek information on a wide range of topics, consume news and information across both print and digital formats, and discover content through multiple channels. Libraries also serve increasingly multilingual communities, reflecting the diverse information needs of the populations they support.

The most commonly reported areas of patron interest were food and cooking (45.5%), politics and civic affairs (42.5%), business and finance (31.8%), and health and wellness (29.5%). The range of topics reported by respondents highlights the breadth of information needs librarians help patrons navigate.

The findings also suggest that patron media consumption is not neatly divided between traditional and digital formats. Respondents reported that 84% of patrons consume print newspapers and magazines, while 72% consume digital text formats. Rather than representing a shift from one format to another, these results point to a hybrid information environment in which patrons engage with news and media across multiple channels. This requires libraries to provide access to information in multiple formats while helping patrons navigate an increasingly complex media landscape.

The ways patrons access news and information help explain many of the challenges libraries now face. 52.7% of respondents reported that patrons access digital news through social media. Only 42.3% of patrons use library-provided platforms.

FIGURE 2

Where Patrons Access News and Information

52.7%
SOCIAL MEDIA

42.3%
LIBRARY-PROVIDED PLATFORMS

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Digital Engagement Through Public Libraries

What Patrons are Reading

58.7 million
article reads

10.7 million
unique articles

266,000
reading hours

Most-accessed publications

- The New York Times
- The Economist
- The Boston Globe
- The Philadelphia Inquirer
- The Guardian

Source: PressReader public library engagement data, 2025-2026.

This explains why professionally produced journalism registers as so important to library staff. 79.8% of respondents said access to professionally produced, edited journalism is very or extremely important for helping patrons navigate today's information environment.

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of respondents said access to professionally produced journalism is very or extremely important.

For many respondents, journalism is more than a resource to offer patrons. It serves as a model of sourced, edited, and accountable information against which other content can be evaluated.

Local news is where patrons' interests and the broader information crisis converge most visibly. Local news and local magazines ranked as the most important news category by library staff respondents, with 71.7% of respondents rating it very or extremely important. That figure is well above national news (54.2%) and far above international (21.7%). Yet local journalism is also the sector of the press most hollowed out by the economic pressures of the past two decades. Many communities have lost their local outlets entirely. For patrons in those communities, the library is often one of the few remaining places to find reliable local information, which places librarians in a role they weren't necessarily designed for and may not have the resources to fully fill.

Ask a librarian or library worker whether news and media literacy belongs in their work, and the answer is nearly unanimous. 87.9% of respondents rated it as very or extremely important as a public library responsibility; 51.3% chose "extremely important," 36.6% chose "very important." Only 0.7% said it was not so or not at all important.

FIGURE 3

Is News & Media Literacy a Library Responsibility?

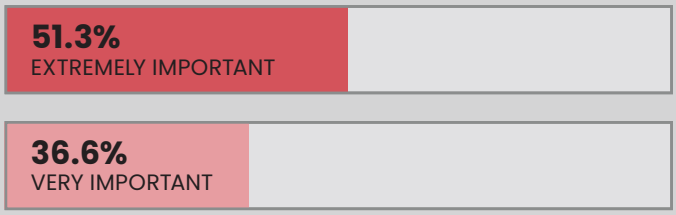
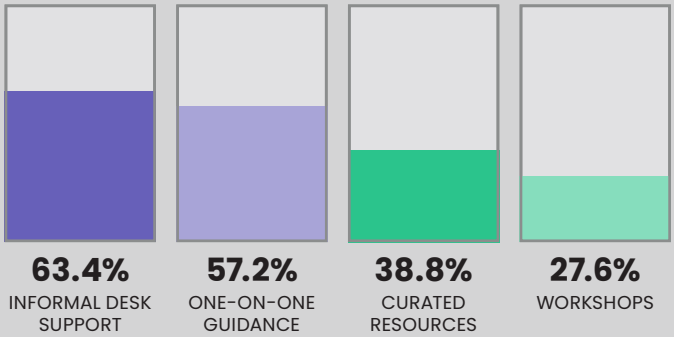


FIGURE 4

How Libraries Currently Support Media Literacy



The same conviction extends to how librarians and library workers think about news access. Over 92% of respondents said access to perspectives from quality news sources is very or extremely important for helping patrons develop media literacy skills. Nearly 80% said the same about access to professionally produced journalism. As professionals who teach critical thinking, librarians see curated, credible news access as part of the work.

When asked how their library currently supports media literacy, the most common responses were informal support at service desks (63.4%), one-to-one staff guidance (57.2%), and curated access to trusted news resources (38.8%). Formal workshops ranked fourth, at 27.6%. News and media literacy in libraries lives primarily in daily service interactions with information professionals: the reference question, the digital navigation assist, the recommendation of a reliable source over a dubious one.

When work goes unnamed or undefined, it tends not to get counted, resourced, or advocated for. Just 14% of respondents said their library does not currently offer media literacy support, a figure that almost certainly overestimates the absence. Librarians and library staff without a formal program may not recognize the informal guidance already embedded in their everyday service.

FIGURE 5

Capacity Gap

7%

of respondents have strong capacity and active programming while

90%+

are operating below where they want to be

When respondents were asked to describe their library's current capacity for news and media literacy work, less than 7% said they have strong capacity and active programming. Everyone else described some version of constraint. 32.6% said staff time is the primary limiting factor. 23.9% have some programming in place but want to do more. 13.8% offer nothing currently. 10.3% cited budget as the main barrier, and 7.1% are only beginning to think about it. Taken together, more than 90% of respondents are operating below where they want to be.

This finding is unlikely to surprise librarians and library staff. The previous section makes clear that support for news and media literacy is widespread. What's missing is the capacity to act on that commitment in a consistent and structured way.

Libraries are being asked to address a growing range of community needs, often with limited staff and resources. While respondents clearly view news and media literacy as important, the challenge is not simply adding new programming. It is finding the capacity to support this work alongside many other responsibilities.

Staff training emerged as the clearest investment priority. When asked how they would prioritize additional budget across seven options, 30.6% of respondents named training in news and media literacy facilitation as their top priority, nearly double the first-place share of any other category. Community programming came second (18.1%), followed by digital news access (14.9%), technology and devices (14.8%), and partnerships (9.3%).

The programming data reinforces this finding. Just 27.6% of respondents offer facilitated workshops or group learning sessions. School and educator partnerships exist at 26.8% of libraries, while citizen journalism and community storytelling programs are present at only 12.7%. Fourteen percent offer no formal media literacy support. For a responsibility that 87.9% of respondents consider very or extremely important, these numbers reflect a significant gap between commitment and formal programming.

In addition, staff answer questions one at a time at service desks and through one-to-one interactions. While often effective, this informal service is difficult to scale, evaluate, or document. As a result, libraries struggle to demonstrate the need for additional investment even as staff absorb growing demand. Breaking that cycle will require funding, training infrastructure, and ready-made resources that libraries can adapt without building from scratch.

FIGURE 6

Where Libraries Would Invest Additional Resources

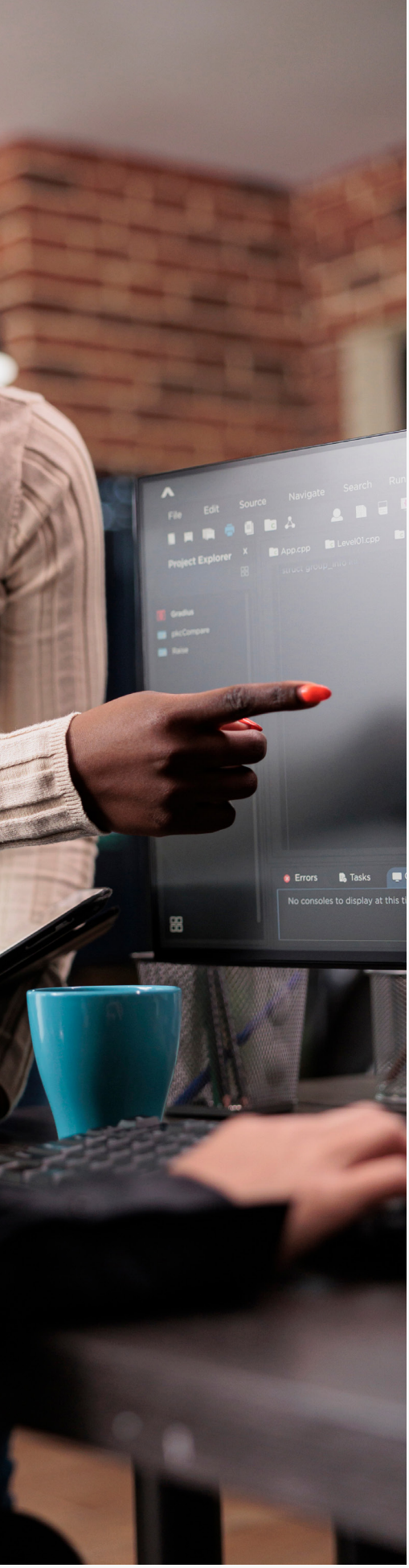
30.6% STAFF TRAINING

18.1% COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING

14.9% DIGITAL NEWS ACCESS

14.8% TECHNOLOGY & DEVICES

9.3% PARTNERSHIPS



FINDING 3

NEW INFORMATION CHALLENGES REQUIRE NEW SKILLS

Scam literacy emerged in open-ended responses as a pressing and underappreciated frontline issue. Staff described a steady increase in patrons, particularly older adults, seeking help recognizing phishing attempts, fraudulent websites, and digital scams of various kinds. This is a media literacy issue that requires the ability to evaluate sources, recognize manipulation, and understand how deceptive content is constructed and circulated. It also carries immediate stakes for patron safety and financial wellbeing in a way that other media literacy topics may not.

AI raises a related but distinct set of challenges. Evaluating news articles for bias or checking a source's credibility are skills with established frameworks and teaching traditions for librarians. Helping a patron understand whether an image has been AI-generated, whether a video has been manipulated, or how a language model can produce confident-sounding text that is entirely fabricated requires a different kind of knowledge, one that is newer, less settled, and evolving quickly for everyone. Librarians and staff repeatedly described feeling underprepared for these conversations because the conceptual ground keeps shifting.

That pace of change may be the most difficult structural problem of all. Training built around last year's challenges is already outdated. Curricula take time to develop and longer to disseminate. By the time a library has a workshop on deepfakes, the technology has moved on, and the questions patrons are asking have changed again. Keeping up requires initial investment in staff training and ongoing professional development infrastructure in terms of both time and financial support, something very few libraries currently have.

"Digital literacy is one of the biggest gaps that must be met before tackling media literacy."

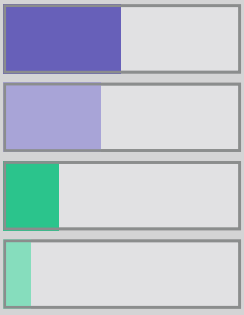
One of the most honest observations in the open-ended responses cuts to the heart of a problem that program models rarely solve: "The people who struggle most with media literacy are not necessarily the people who are going to find our programming, or self-identify as someone who needs support navigating digital information channels." Formal programs require awareness, motivation, scheduling, and often transportation. Each of those requirements functions as a filter, and the patrons most likely to be screened out are the ones the programming is most meant to serve.

The patron-side barriers reported in this survey are not marginal. 65.2% of respondents said patrons in their community struggle to use digital resources independently. 63.7% said patrons don't know what resources are available to them. 32.6% cited lack of reliable internet access outside the library, and 23.0% cited lack of a personal device. This describes the majority of libraries in this sample and suggests that the conditions many programming models assume, digital access, baseline familiarity, and awareness of library services, are absent for a significant share of the patron population.

How patrons actually move through the library adds another layer. When asked how patrons typically discover and access library resources, 49.5% of respondents described patrons who arrive knowing exactly what they want, and 41.0% described browsing by topic. Only 23.3% said patrons rely on staff recommendations, and just 11.4% reported discovery through library programs or events. The self-directed patron is the norm. Programming that requires active sign-up and advance awareness reaches a self-selected group that, by definition, already knows enough to seek help. It is not a reliable path to the patron who doesn't know what they don't know.

FIGURE 7

How Patrons Discover Resources



49.5% ARRIVE KNOWING WHAT THEY WANT

41.0% BROWSE BY TOPIC

23.3% RELY ON STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

11.4% DISCOVER VIA PROGRAMS/EVENTS

43.6%

said patrons primarily use library devices onsite

There's a related dynamic that open-ended responses describe repeatedly: the patron who believes they are already competent. Respondents noted that many patrons, particularly those who feel comfortable online, don't recognize themselves as someone who needs media literacy support. They scroll, they share, they feel informed. The gap between patron confidence and their actual ability to evaluate sources or recognize AI-generated content is real, yet those patrons feel internet savvy and media literate. That gap is itself a media and news literacy problem, and it's one that workshop models are poorly positioned to address. You can't reach someone who doesn't know they need to be reached.

The access picture does offer some grounds for optimism about embedded approaches. 43.6% of respondents said patrons primarily use library devices onsite, and a significant portion access services through some combination of in-person and remote use. A meaningful share of patrons are physically in the building, which creates genuine opportunities for point-of-need intervention at the service desk, through digital navigation support, and through the resources patrons encounter while they're already there.

The implication for both program design and funding is clear. A single annual workshop reaches dozens of patrons who opted in. Investment in service desk training, embedded digital navigation tools, and staff capacity for one-to-one guidance reaches everyone who walks through the door. If the goal is to support the patrons who most need help, the measure of success shouldn't be program headcount. It should be the quality and reach of everyday service.

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Multilingual Engagement

2.46 million
reads of Spanish-language content

1.69 million
reads of Chinese-language content

Plus
Additional engagement across French, Arabic, German, Italian, Portuguese, and other languages.

For a broader look at how language resources build civic engagement across geographic lines, see PressReader's report on media literacy in Australian public libraries as well as the PressReader x Library Journal "Building Community Connection" report

Source: PressReader U.S. public library engagement data, 2025-2026.

The survey asked respondents directly where potential future investment should go, and the answers were consistent enough to function as a practical brief.

Staff Training Emerged as the Top Investment Priority

When asked to rank seven potential investment areas, respondents were clear about where they want investment to go first: 30.6% named training in media literacy facilitation as their top priority, the highest first-place share of any category. Community programming came second (18.1%), followed by technology and devices (14.8%), expanding digital news access (14.9%), and partnerships (9.3%).

Staff training stood out not just in the weighted average but in first-place selections: 30.6% of respondents ranked it their single top priority, the highest share of any category by a meaningful margin. Trained librarians and staff are what make everything else work.

Sustaining Access to Trusted News Sources

Access to trusted news sources is a required component. 84.4% of respondents reported patrons consuming print newspapers and magazines, and 72.1% reported digital news consumption. Libraries are already maintaining this infrastructure, but open-ended responses show real threats to it: rising subscription costs, declining print availability, and digital licensing models that are increasingly difficult to sustain. The assumption that libraries can shift entirely to digital isn't supported by the data, particularly given that 32.6% of respondents serve communities with limited home internet access and 23.0% serve communities where personal devices are scarce.

Ensuring Equitable Multilingual Access

Multilingual access ranked last in the priority list at a weighted average of 5.1, but that ranking deserves some

scrutiny. 82.3% of libraries in this sample serve communities where Spanish is spoken, and 34.6% serve communities with other non-English languages. Under-resourcing multilingual media literacy programming has equity implications that a single ranking number doesn't fully capture.

The multilingual findings highlight the diversity of language communities served by public libraries. While Spanish-speaking communities were by far the most commonly represented, respondents also reported serving patrons who read Chinese, Arabic, and French.

The findings suggest that future investment will be most effective when training, programming capacity, and access to trusted information resources are developed in tandem rather than as isolated initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Across all findings, the same picture emerges. Librarians and library staff believe that news and media literacy is part of their mission, and they are acting on that belief every day, at service desks, in one-to-one conversations, through the resources they curate and the questions they answer. That work is largely informal, inconsistently resourced, and invisible in the ways that matter for advocacy and funding. Work that can't be named can't be counted, and work that can't be counted tends not to get supported.

At the same time, the demands on that work are intensifying. AI-generated content, political misinformation, digital scams, and algorithmically shaped information environments are challenges. They arrive at service desks faster than training and programming can keep pace. Librarians and staff are doing their best to respond, but good intentions are not a substitute for preparation, and preparation requires investment.

The participation paradox adds another layer of urgency. Formal programming reaches patrons who already know enough to seek help. The patrons most at risk of being misled, exploited, or simply left behind in an increasingly complex information environment are the least likely to show up to a workshop. Reaching them requires a different model, one built into everyday service rather than a program.

Taken together, the findings point toward the same set of needs: investment in staff training, resources for community programming, sustained access to quality journalism and trusted news sources, and funding models that recognize embedded service delivery as legitimate and valuable. Supporting informed communities requires both media literacy skills and access to trusted information resources across multiple formats, languages, and platforms.

Libraries occupy a position that no other institution quite replicates. They are trusted, free, physically present in communities that other civic and media institutions have retreated from, and staffed by trained professionals who have already demonstrated their commitment to this work.

The findings point toward a clear set of priorities. The following recommendations are addressed to the range of stakeholders who shape library capacity: funders, policymakers, state and national library organizations, and library administrators.

1. Invest in Staff Training as an Ongoing Commitment

Librarians and library staff want to do more and don't feel equipped to do it. Support should be sustained, modular training that builds staff competency in news and media literacy topics and refreshes it as the information environment changes. One-time workshops are insufficient. Training also needs to be accessible to libraries of all sizes, online and asynchronous formats will reach far more of the field than in-person-only models.

2. Build and Share Adaptable Programming Infrastructure

Building curriculum from scratch is not a realistic ask for systems already operating at capacity. State library agencies and national organizations should invest in openly licensed, modular curriculum covering source evaluation, news literacy, scam awareness, and AI literacy, flexible enough for libraries of any size to adapt, and maintained regularly as the landscape changes.

3. Recognize and Resource the Informal Work That's Already Happening

Most media literacy work in libraries happens at service desks and in one-to-one interactions, not in formal programs. Funders and policymakers should broaden how they define and measure this work. Reporting frameworks that count only registered programs will miss the libraries doing the most meaningful work. Library administrators can help by developing lightweight practices for tracking informal interactions, making the invisible visible.

4. Design and Fund for the Patrons Who Won't Show Up to a Workshop

Formal programming reaches patrons who already know enough to seek help. Reaching everyone else requires embedding support in the service interactions that already happen, at the desk, through community partners, and integrated into programs patrons attend for other reasons. Funders need to be willing to support staffing and service capacity, not just program budgets. Libraries serving older adults, recent immigrants, or patrons with limited digital literacy deserve particular attention.

5. Sustain Access to Trusted News and Information Resources

Media literacy skills only matter if patrons have access to quality information. Libraries are already maintaining that infrastructure, but rising costs, unsustainable licensing models, and the consolidation of local journalism are eroding it. Funders and policymakers should treat library access to trusted journalism as public information infrastructure and fund it accordingly.

6. Name Librarians as Partners in Broader Media Literacy and Civic Information Efforts

Librarians are doing this work but are largely absent from the policy conversations where it gets recognized and coordinated. State and national policymakers developing media literacy and digital equity frameworks should name librarians as implementation partners, not afterthoughts. Funders working in adjacent areas including local journalism, digital inclusion, and elder protection should consider what library partnerships would add to their reach.

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