Viewfinder

Case Study

Implementing an AI Platform for Local Governments

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Project page for Viewfinder:
www.lib.montana.edu/responsible-ai/

Abstract

This case study examines the mid-implementation phase of Madison AI within the City of San Leandro, with particular attention to its impact on the San Leandro Public Library as a City department. Madison AI is a web-based AI platform designed for local governments. Using Madison, municipalities upload public records to a secure, dedicated system, where they are used to generate responses and support staff tasks. Because this tool was selected at the City level and is designed primarily for administrative work, its usefulness in a public library setting is limited. Viewfinder provided a clear method for evaluating how the project aligns with library values, particularly around privacy and consent. The reflection also informed clearer communication with IT and highlighted considerations for future AI projects that may affect the library.

Project details and background

For this case study, I am focusing on the implementation of Madison AI at the City of San Leandro and what that means for the San Leandro Public Library as a City department. I work as an Adult Services Librarian where I provide reference support, develop programs and events and help connect community members with information and resources. Many of my responsibilities involve answering questions and helping patrons find what they are looking for, making me particularly interested in how AI tools might fit into these common library workflows.

Madison AI is a third-party vendor that provides a web-based AI tool specifically designed for local government use. Using Madison AI, authorized City staff can upload public records that the system uses to generate informed responses. Employees can then use the web interface to ask questions about city-related topics including budgets, contracts, permits and City Council minutes. Responses are based on the uploaded records and include links to sources. The specific module in use is the one designed to develop staff reports, though it can also support general inquiries and assist with tasks such as answering basic software questions, generating Excel formulas and basic data analysis.

As of late September 2026, the implementation is mid-process and has so far been accessible only to a group of cross-departmental employees serving on the City's internal AI Task Force. There are plans to make it available to all employees

in the near future, but it will not be accessible to the public. The goal of the project is to provide a highly curated and secure AI tool to assist City employees in navigating relevant information efficiently.

Many City departments have contributed to this project in varying capacities, with the IT Department taking the lead in managing the rollout and coordinating the participating teams. Key supporting roles include the City Attorney's Office, which is evaluating compliance; the City Clerk's Office, which is responsible for submitting public records to the system; and the Risk Management Office, which is assessing potential risks associated with implementation. In addition, the internal cross-departmental AI Task Force, which includes staff from multiple departments such as the Library, has been providing general feedback throughout the process.

As one of the staff members with early access, I have had the opportunity to experiment with using Madison AI in a few ways that have highlighted the benefits and shortcomings, especially in a public library setting.

Viewfinder exercise

Viewfinder provided a clear structure to explore our mid-implementation Madison AI project. Using the provided values cards, I selected the following values for myself and the three stakeholders I considered.

Myself - Librarian • Alignment • Trust • Privacy and Consent	Library IT Professional • Alignment • Privacy and Consent • Fiscal Responsibility
Community Member • Privacy and Consent • Fiscal Responsibility • Social Responsibility	Vendor • Privacy and Consent • Human Centeredness • Service Quality

The process of selecting the values prompted me to evaluate either what I knew about each stakeholder or what I could infer from what is available to me. For myself, as a librarian, I considered the values we use to guide many of our practices, which can extend to the Madison AI project. Alignment was an interesting value to consider as it includes applying a "professional code of ethics." As a librarian, this includes the American Library Association's Code of Ethics

which covers concepts such as respecting intellectual property rights and users' right to privacy which are important considerations in this project. For the Library IT professional, I considered our City's IT staff and what I gauged from related conversations to the project. In selecting values for IT, alignment made another appearance, but from a different angle, including the importance of aligning with legal and IT security standards. For community members, I reflected on current concerns I have seen expressed in our local paper and social media forums where there are debates over issues like data centers and the City's fiscal health.

Working through the reflection prompts provided a structured way to examine the values exercise. It was interesting to see how privacy and consent emerged as key themes across all perspectives, though for different reasons: the vendor highlights them as a selling point, IT focuses on them for risk mitigation, and community members are concerned about how their personal information is handled. Fiscal responsibility also appeared for both the IT professional and the community member, largely due to the city's ongoing budget cuts. IT, and the City more broadly, have an ethical obligation to use public funds wisely during this period while the community members who have been impacted by these budget constraints will be watching carefully to see how the City chooses to spend money, especially on technology people may be unsure about.

Another part of the exercise that led to deeper reflection was the "Accountability and Scope" portion of the prompts. The questions listed pushed me to consider the potential harm or negative effects of the Madison AI project. I have limited information on the environmental impacts of this service, so I focused my attention on potential harm to our City and the community. The tool helped me articulate concerns that had previously been vague – ranging from the extreme idea of the AI system going rogue, which is unlikely given the safeguards in place, to the more realistic concerns such as hallucinations or outdated information that could misinform important decision makers. It also prompted me to consider whether funds directed towards this project are being diverted from other areas in ways that negatively impact the community.

Discussion and outcomes

The Viewfinder exercise provided a useful lens for evaluating the Madison AI implementation project. It was flexible enough to adapt to our situation as a public

library that functions as a City department. It facilitated the articulation of the values we hold as an organization and the examination of whether this project was in line with them. It also helped guide discussions with stakeholders.

One of the more interesting aspects of this project is that the Library is responding to a tool that was neither selected nor designed with library services in mind. Because Madison AI was selected at the City level, our role has been to adapt to the implementation rather than shape it. This created a useful opportunity to reflect on what it means for the Library to participate in a broader technology project, especially when the tool is more curated for tasks such as staff reports and briefings rather than common public library workflows. Libraries can contribute a distinct perspective to these projects by considering how technology decisions may affect information access, patron privacy, and the communities we serve. For us, this meant using our seat at the table to ask value-driven questions about privacy, better understand a new information tool, and share the Library's perspective and information needs so they can be considered in future City technology decisions. The Viewfinder exercise was particularly helpful in articulating those perspectives and identifying where the Library's values fit within a larger city-wide project. This is a situation other libraries that function within other institutions may encounter.

Another theme that emerged was the tension between privacy and data protection features and practical functionality. Madison AI relies solely on public records which the City inputs – a practice which aligns with the Library's values of privacy and consent. This approach reduces risk in terms of data protection and protecting private or sensitive information. However, it also greatly limits how we may be able to use it in a library setting. For example, this has limited use in assisting patrons with reference questions, generating book lists and developing programming. While Madison AI has some usefulness for internal tasks such as generating Excel formulas or providing basic software support, these features do not substantially benefit our library work, especially since similar assistance is already easily available through other tools. For future AI projects, especially those meant to support the library, the balance between privacy and utility will continue to be a delicate line to navigate.

Finally, working through the Viewfinder Prompts helped me develop clear, more focused questions for our IT partners. Because the project is in mid-implementation, details are still evolving. Viewfinder assisted me in identifying

what I needed to understand better. The conversations that came from the Viewfinder exercise clarified the City's approach to data handling, security safeguards, and the complexity and thoroughness of how the ongoing implementation is being monitored, troubleshot and vetted. Even though the tool itself may have limited direct use in the Library, the exercise strengthened communication across departments and prepared me for conversations surrounding future projects.

Overall, this exercise was valuable in examining how a City-wide AI implementation project impacts the Library. Viewfinder provided an organized way to reflect on various stakeholders and their values, followed by reflection prompts that supported deeper reflection of the ethical considerations involved. Working through this exercise in the context of the City of San Leandro's Madison AI project highlighted how libraries can evaluate AI systems even when they are not designed for library use, and how privacy choices can shape functionality. It also demonstrated how these reflections can guide conversations with the broader AI implementation team and help prepare for future projects that may connect more closely to the kinds of services public libraries provide.