Global Trend Brief

Increasing Social Divisions

Developed by ASTC's Global Trends Committee, with support from ASTC staff, our Global Trends Framework and associated Trend Briefs offer a summary of a significant societal, economic, civic, scientific/technological, or other trends that are currently impacting the work of science and technology centers, museums, and other science engagement organizations. These briefs summarize key data and research about the trend and provide examples of promising ways that organizations within our field and across sectors are responding.

To access a digital version of this document with all references and hyperlinks, as well as the Framework and additional trend briefs, visit bit.ly/3URsOg6 or scan the QR code below.

What Do We Mean By "Increasing Social Divisions"?

Trends like the spread of misinformation; polarization around specific scientific issues; loss of trust in government, media, and other institutions; and increasing nationalism and authoritarianism, compounded by the increasing economic inequality impacted audiences as well as museum staff, will change both the ability of science museums to engage the public with science, and the approaches they must take. Briefly, this trend encompasses:

Polarization & Misinformation	**Trust**	**Government & Economy**
Polarization, or at least the perception of polarization, has increased over time, and increasing amounts of misinformation create a feedback loop with polarized attitudes. Museums can serve as common ground where people with differing opinions can meet, learn and discuss.	Trust in many institutions, as well as interpersonal trust, has been declining in recent years. This low trust damages social cohesion and political participation. Museums have maintained relatively high trust and must seek opportunities to maintain this trust and leverage it to increase trust in other institutions.	Many governments are increasingly enacting authoritarian policies that may influence museum operations, and within-country economic inequality is increasing worldwide. Political and economic changes can affect science centers and museums through things like censorship, funding cuts, and decreases in visitors' ability to pay ticket prices.

Framing the Challenge: Opportunity Amid Division

This brief outlines serious and interrelated challenges facing science centers and museums in an era of rapid political and social change. While these realities can feel daunting, the intention of raising them is not to fuel hopelessness or resignation, but to encourage thoughtful, strategic action.

Moments of disruption can be moments of reinvention. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how museums could quickly reimagine their programs, partnerships, and missions when the context demanded it. During a period of increasing social divisions, change may not feel as urgent and unavoidable as it did during COVID, but it represents an equally important moment that should drive rapid transformation in the field. It invites museums to ask: who is not being reached, whose voices are missing, and what new role might we play to unite people in a more fragmented world?

The topics raised in this brief offer opportunities for museums to:

- Deepen public trust by respectfully engaging with visitors as equals with important lived experience, and navigate complexity and uncertainty together.
- Broaden participation by designing more inclusive, locally-rooted experiences that reflect the lived realities of all members of increasingly diverse communities.
- Strengthen partnerships with civic, educational, scientific, technological, and cultural actors to address political pressure, misinformation, distrust, and inequality.
- Redefine science engagement as happening not only through exhibits or programs but also through dialogue, co-creation, and empathetic engagement with people who hold diverse values and beliefs.

Many museums worldwide are already embracing this shift, from redesigning exhibits and experiences to foster greater intergenerational engagement and trust-building to hosting community-lead assemblies and facilitating critical dialogues on scientific and technological issues. We hope this brief provides not only a reflection of urgent realities but also a sense of direction for hopeful, grounded responses.

Polarization & Misinformation

Polarization

It is often said that we live in a time when people are more polarized than ever, but whether or not this is actually true is a matter of some scholarly debate. Political polarization can be broken down into two components—*ideological polarization*, which is differences in policy positions, and *affective polarization*, which is the distrust and dislike of political out-groups. In many cases, perceived ideological polarization is greater than actual ideological polarization. Research conducted by More in Common illustrates this "perception gap". They found that Americans estimate that 55% of Republicans and Democrats hold "extreme views" while the reality is that only 30% do[1]. While many believe that U.S. politics is more polarized than that of other nations, comparative analyses with other Western democracies shows that the U.S. is in fact quite middling, with countries like Switzerland, Ireland, and Spain rating higher on affective polarization[2]. 72% of European museums responding to a survey in 2024 states that they felt that polarization within their country is rising[3].

→ *Implications for museums*

- Visitors —and staff — may believe that political polarization in their countries and communities is significantly more severe than it actually is and are likely concerned about this.
  - Seek to understand the local landscape of public opinion and views, rather than making assumptions based on national narratives, in order to begin with shared values.
  - Provide common ground for people to respectfully and productively engage with one another on issues where there is genuine disagreement, including through facilitated dialogues (See: Dialogue & Deliberation Toolkit – ASTC)

Misinformation

Misinformation has been a topic of concern for many years, as the increased use of social media facilitated its spread. Today, generative artificial intelligence (AI) is worsening the problem, as it makes it faster and easier to create false or misleading content, with entire fake news sites generated by AI appearing across the web[4]. In a 2024 international survey of what risks people were most concerned about, mis- and disinformation ranked as the #1 most impactful risk for the next 2 years. This finding indicates that many people around the world are deeply concerned by the evolving misinformation environment[5].

→ *Implications for museums*

- Increasing numbers of visitors may be arriving with misinformed beliefs, and/or concern about misinformed beliefs held by others in their lives.
  - Engage visitors in critical thinking, inform them about misinformation tactics, and reframe arguments to avoid reinforcing misleading framing (see Tackling Misinformation – Ecsite).

- AI will further fuel the misinformation crisis, and visitors may not know how to identify AI-generated content.
    - Help visitors learn the signs that can help them detect when content is AI-generated (see Faculty Guide to Generative AI – Pace University).

Socially Controversial Science and Technology Topics

As addressed in the previous section, trust in science generally remains high, however some specific scientific topics, such as climate change and vaccines, attract much more skepticism from the public. Vaccine hesitancy has spread globally, with fewer people planning to get the next available COVID-19 booster than last year, and 23% saying that their experiences during the pandemic decreased their willingness to get vaccinated for diseases *other than* COVID-19[6]. The COVID-19 vaccine has remained particularly controversial in the U.S., with only 62% of Americans agreeing that the benefits of COVID-19 vaccinations outweigh the risks (compared to 88% for the Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine)[7].

Another scientific issue viewed as controversial is climate change. While the majority of Americans believe in, and are concerned about, anthropogenic climate change, the proportion of people that the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication defines as "Disengaged", "Doubtful", or "Dismissive" has remained stable over the past decade at around 27% of the population, showing that information about climate change is either not reaching or not convincing a significant number of Americans[8]**.** However, climate and environmental policies like developing clean energy, addressing pollution, and maintaining national parks are actually a point of relative consensus between Democrats and Republicans, as compared to other policies[9]**.** A survey of Canadians aged 18-43 found a significant decline in the sense of responsibility that respondents felt to reduce climate change and greenhouse gas emissions[10]**.**

Some forms of technology have also attracted controversy and highly divergent viewpoints. As AI has become increasingly pervasive, American's opinions have become increasingly negative. The percentage of Americans who said that the increased use of AI made them "more concerned than excited" went up from 38% in 2022 to 52% in 2023[11]. Global views of AI range widely between countries, in India, 43% of people have a "very positive" view of AI, while in Australia only 7% of respondents agree[12]. Globally, 54% of respondents expect their job to probably or definitely be replaced by a machine in the next 10 years, highlighting the perception of a close tie between technological advancement and economics[13].

→ *Implications for museums*

- Museums may need to gather information on the community's perceptions to effectively approach controversial topics, rather than making assumptions about points of scientific contention within their own communities, which may differ from those in national studies.
- Some visitors may come to the museum with strong beliefs about these topics that conflict with what the museum presents.

        - Pay close attention to framing for these "controversial" topics. In many cases, focusing on local impacts, human stories, and hopeful narratives can be helpful (see Teaching Climate Change: Best Practices – National Center for Science Education).
    - Museums can provide entry points for engaging in action on these topics, to help reduce the overwhelm that many visitors may feel.
    - Museums must recognize that holding a singular "anti-science" viewpoint does not mean the person is entirely against or disinterested in science.

Fragmented Media Landscape

Polarization and misinformation are both amplified by an increasingly fragmented media environment. Distrust in media is a global phenomenon, with a study of 28 countries showing a significant decrease in trust in all forms of media from 2024 to 2025[14]. Americans' trust in media, in particular, has decreased over time, and displays a sharp divide between political parties. Republicans trust these institutions significantly less than Democrats[15], a pattern that could lead to increasing polarization as the parties trust different sources of news. Today, 86% of Americans get at least some of their news from digital sources, making it the most common way of accessing the news. Additionally, more than half of Americans say that they get news from social media at least some of the time[16]. A study of American news consumers found that the public is generally more influenced by the political alignment of news than its truth, with people being more likely to believe false headlines that aligned with their political views than true headlines that did not[17]. In Europe, while consumption of highly partisan news remains relatively low, those who already hold extreme views are more likely to seek out these partisan sources, and when they do, this further entrenches their beliefs[18].

→ *Implications for museums*

- As people get a higher percentage of their news from sources with partisan viewpoints, they may have vastly different understandings of the world from one another, causing more difficulties in communicating across difference.
    - Museums can welcome people with different perspectives, both online and in person, and serve as a source of information that is trusted by people with divergent views.
    - Museums can partner with trusted media sources to provide an unbiased, science-based perspective on the headlines.

Generational Divide in Opinion

In an international survey, it was found that in higher-income countries, young people (15-24) were significantly more likely than older people (40+) to say that equal treatment of various minority groups is "very important". Younger people are also more optimistic on average than older people, with each additional year of age leading to a 1% lower likelihood of endorsing the statement that "the world is becoming a better place"[19]. Generations also differ in how they view their country's place in the rest of the world. For example, American Millennials (29-44) and Gen Zers (13-28) are significantly less likely than older generations to

believe that the U.S. is "the greatest country in the world"[20]**.** These differences in opinion are further reinforced by age segregation, which has become an increasingly common and rigid aspect of society from the mid-19th century to today[21].

→ *Implications for museums*
- Visitors may feel that there is a significant gap in values between themselves and members of other generations.
  - Museums can serve as places for intergenerational learning and communication, to help different generations gain a better understanding of one another's perspectives.
  - Museums must be careful to follow through on their commitments to different age groups/generations to avoid losing trust (See: Teen artists portrayed their lives – some adults didn't want to see the full picture – NPR)

How Museums are Addressing Polarization and Misinformation

- Blurred Realities. An upcoming exhibition at the MSU Museum that will explore questions of what is real and address issues of generative AI, misinformation, deep fakes, and more. It will help to address the question "how do we distinguish between authentic information and deceptive fabrications?".
- Climate of Hope. An exhibition at the Natural History Museum of Utah focused on a hopeful view of climate change, in which humans have the chance to create a thriving future.
- Communities for Immunity. A project that supported 91 museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions in addressing COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in their communities. The locally-focused method of discussing this controversial science topic led to success in getting vaccine-hesitant individuals to vaccinate themselves and their children.
- Navigating Misinformation. A collection of resources from the Denver Museum of Nature & Science's Institute for Science & Policy , which provides guides for journalists and the general public to learn about and address misinformation.
- Science Up First. This initiative from the Canadian Association of Science Centers (CASC) began in 2020 as a way to fight misinformation and has an extensive library of resources on addressing controversial science topics**.**

Trust

Trust in Science and Technology

While trust in science remains high in general, there has been a decrease over time. In April 2020, 87% of Americans were confident that scientists would act in the public's best interest, but that number had fallen to 73% in 2024[15]**.** While no country has overall low trust in science, the level of trust varies widely between countries, Egypt, India, and Nigeria have the highest levels of trust in science, while the lowest levels are found in Bolivia, Kazakhstan, and Albania[22]. Trust in technology has followed a similar trend. For example, a 2022 international study found that technology was the most trusted of the sectors they asked respondents about, but also found declining trust over time in 14 out of 22 countries. In the U.S., which had the lowest overall level of trust in technology, this decrease in trust has occurred across genders, ages, incomes, and political parties[15].

→ *Implications for museums*

- Visitors may be coming to the museum with less trust in science, technology, and research.
  - Museums can help to increase trust in science by listening to visitors, humanizing science with personal stories, using trusted messengers and more. (see 9 Ways to Build Trust in Science – Luminary Lab).
- Researchers who drive the creation of new science and technology may lack a nuanced understanding of the public's perspective on scientific research and/or be uncertain about how to best address their concerns.
  - Museums can facilitate dialogue between researchers and the public, gather public perspectives to share back to researchers, and provide opportunities for the public to actively participate in the scientific process (See: Community Science – ASTC).

Trust in Academia

Additionally, changes around trust in science are also seen in academia. In the U.S., an increasing proportion of adults (now 36%) say that they have little or no confidence in higher education. Commonly cited reasons include "colleges pushing political agendas, not teaching relevant skills, and being overly expensive"[23]. In the UK, support for investment in higher education has decreased, with the proportion of people saying that universities should be mainly state-funded falling from 68% in 1988 to 19% in 2024[24]**.**

Trust in Museums

These decreases in institutional trust have, of course, led museums to question how trusted they are in their communities. While the 2021 AAM Museums & Trust study[25] found that the public had very high levels of trust in museums, the methods and interpretations in this work have been questioned[26,27]. A further question is not just how museums can maintain or grow public trust in themselves but also serve to increase trust in other institutions.

→ *Implications for museums*

- Loss of trust in other institutions may increasingly extend to museums, given our field's connection to the scientific enterprise.
  - Create stronger community connections, build transparency, and stick to your stated values (see A Framework for Building Trust – Knology).
- Trust may become an issue *within* the museum, especially between leaders and staff as institutions make decisions about tackling challenging social topics.
  - Both leaders and staff should act with reliability, integrity, and benevolence (see When Leader-Staff Trust Breaks Down – Knology).

Trust in Government

In a 2023 survey of OECD Member Countries, they found that only 39% of people had high or moderately high trust in their government[30]. In the U.S., only 22% of Americans say they trust the federal government to do the right thing, a far cry from the 70% figure found in the 1950s[15]. In the U.S., many people now feel that they aren't represented by either party and are frustrated by the negative and vitriolic tone of modern politics[31].

Trust in International Alliances and Institutions

Trust in NATO has actually increased in recent years, with 71% of respondents in member countries saying they would vote for their country to remain a member, up from 62% in 2020[28]. While the UN has seen a gradual decline in international trust over the past several decades, a much steeper decline in this trust happened between 2021 and 2024, however overall trust in the UN remains high, with 58% of people across countries expressing trust[29].

→ *Implications for museums*

- As perspectives on international organizations shift, be cautious about where and how you share information from these organizations and focus on content that is locally relevant.

Interpersonal Trust

In the U.S., the proportion of respondents who agree that "most people can be trusted" has shrunk from 46% in 1972 to 32% in 2018[32]. In 2022, across 30 countries, 30% of people agree that "most people can be trusted", with the highest levels of trust in China and India, and the lowest in Malaysia and Brazil[33].

→ *Implications for museums*

- Visitors may come to the museum with distrust for each other, museum staff, and other members of the community.
  - Museums can serve as welcoming places for community members to interact and create programs and environments that help build interpersonal trust across difference. See Building Trust in Communities – University of Minnesota Extension.

How Museums are Addressing Trust:

- The Copernicus Science Centre is leading a project to build public trust in science, testing different types of interventions to assess which approaches are most effective in fostering trust.
- Trust in Science Series. The Denver Museum of Nature & Science Institute for Science & Policy created this series of events that covers topics such as the neuroscience of trust and the future of vaccines.

Government & Economy

Authoritarianism

The 2025 Freedom in the World Report found that global freedom has declined for the 19th consecutive year. This continued loss of freedom can be attributed to election violence, ongoing armed conflicts, and authoritarian repression of opposition groups and parties[34]. In modern times, authoritarian takeovers rarely happen in singular moments but rather are precipitated by a gradual erosion of democratic principles in a country. Across democracies that fall into authoritarianism, there are certain patterns of behavior that are often seen, including politicizing independent institutions, spreading disinformation, quashing criticism, and scapegoating vulnerable communities[35].

Recent political changes in the U.S. have brought up concerns about the role of political influence in science. While 86% of Americans believe it is important for science to be conducted free from political influence, 77% percent of Americans are aware of current federal policy changes impacting science, which could continue to erode trust[36]. The perception of political influence, whether real or not, is also affecting museums. For example, when the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC removed a display about the impeachments of President Donald Trump, it led to public backlash that assumed the museum was bending to political pressure, although they have denied this accusation[37]. This is not limited to the U.S., in Europe in 2025, 58% of museum respondents stated that they felt museums are subject to political pressure, which rose to 76% for national museum organizations. They identified that the top area of political influence was their budgets, but 51% of museums and 74% of national museums say that programs and exhibitions are under political influence as well[3].

→ *Implications for museums*
- Museums may face direct or implied pressure around their content and programming from the government, philanthropic funders, boards, etc.
  - Prepare a risk management plan for how your museum would respond to attempted censorship (see Museums in the Changing World Order: The Rise of Authoritarian Nationalism – The Art Newspaper)

Immigrants and Refugees

Across the world, public opinion on immigration has shifted over time, today more individuals think the effects of immigration are bad (35%) than good (30%)[38]. In the U.S., opinions on immigration have seen significant shifts in recent years as the proportion of Americans who think that immigration should be decreased reaching 55%[39]. Europe has also shown a declining opinion of immigration, with many newly elected leaders pushing anti-immigration rhetoric[40]. This rising nationalism is bi-directionally associated with views on and policies for immigrants and refugees, as rhetoric about immigrants can increase people's interest in nationalism, and nationalist governments tend to produce stricter immigration policies[41]. This can be seen in Europe, for example in the sharp increase in votes for the

Alternative for Germany party in the 2025 German election[42]. In the U.S., as raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) increase, some museums have started to provide "know your rights" guidance, as well as creating exhibitions and programs on the topic of mass deportations[43].

→ *Implications for museums*

- Visitors who are immigrants (documented or undocumented) or are in a demographic disproportionately targeted by immigration enforcement, may avoid museum attendance to keep themselves safe.
  - Recognize that these fears are warranted, and that in some circumstances, cultural events may pose too high of a risk for the communities they desire to celebrate (See: Festivals and Parades are Canceled Amid US Immigration Anxiety – Bloomberg).
- Visitors may be increasingly suspicious of immigrants, refugees, and foreigners, and may be concerned or confused about changes to immigration policy and enforcement.
  - Create programs or exhibits that emphasize the humanity and contributions of these groups.
  - Provide clear information about rates of immigration, changing policies, and social/cultural changes affecting immigrants.

Civic Engagement

In spite of declining trust in government, both the U.S.[44] and Europe[45] have seen increases in voter turnout in recent years, so the perception of civic disengagement may be more severe than the reality. Other forms of civic engagement have also seen recent increases, for example, the number of Americans participating in formal volunteer work increased five percentage points from 2021-2023, bringing the level of volunteerism back to pre-pandemic levels[46]. In Europe, more young people are participating in youth organizations, with 58% of youth saying they participated in 2022, a 17-percentage point increase from 2019[47]. Where civic engagement is actually decreasing, there are successful tactics for helping to restore it. One study of college students found that teaching about potential policy solutions for socioscientific issues significantly increased students' political awareness, sensitivity to social justice issues, and interpersonal and problem-solving skills, all of which could underly increases in civic engagement[48]. Civic engagement is also a central aspect of social cohesion, so these civic activities can serve to reduce social division[49].

→ *Implications for museums*

- Many visitors may be interested in civic engagement and would like to see the importance of this reflected in museums.
  - Museums can include information about politics, voting, volunteering and other civic engagement opportunities alongside scientific information.

Economic Inequality

Rising economic inequality is a major issue throughout the developed world, with countries like the U.S., United Kingdom, Canada, and Italy, for example, following steep trajectories of increasing inequality since the 1970's[50]. While income inequality between countries has been declining for the past two decades[51], the COVID-19 pandemic may have reversed this trend, as the economic recovery of low- and middle-income countries has been less successful than that of high-income countries[52]. The effect of economic inequality is made worse by an increase in the cost of necessities like food and housing. For example, in the U.S. the cost of sugar has increased 70% since 2019[53]**.** This issue is not limited to the U.S., with 57% of households in the UK reporting an increase in the cost of living between December 2024 and January 2025, continuing a pattern of reports of increased costs since 2021[54]**.**

→ *Implications for museums*

- Families may have less disposable income to spend on museum visits.
  - Provide opportunities for free or reduced-cost museum attendance for low-income families, and consider ways to reduce other economic burdens of attendance such as transportation and food.
  - Seek new partnerships or funding models to help navigate the shifting economic landscape.
- Staff may experience economic hardship and may choose to leave their position or the museum field to seek higher paying work.

How Museums are Addressing Governmental and Economic Shifts:

- "Beyond: Unity in Community" - The Don Harrington Discovery Center in Amarillo, Texas. An installment to uplift and celebrate the culture of local refugee communities. The current iteration of the exhibit was designed in collaboration with the Afghan community of Amarillo, in part to highlight how they have positively influenced the local community. Canoo – Institute for Canadian Citizenship. A program in which place-based institutions (museums, science centres, zoos, etc.) welcome new Canadians to their venues, to help newcomers feel welcome in—and connected to—their new country.
- Museums4All. An initiative that provides free or reduced museum admission for low-income Americans who are eligible for SNAP. This expands financial access to museums, which will likely become increasingly important as economic inequality worsens.
- "Razem" ("Together") - Copernicus Science Center. A program in which Polish, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Roma immigrant children experiment side by side, discovering the world and one another through shared exploration. This helps to build empathy and understanding across groups.

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