

## Comfortably numb or conveniently negligent?

### *Policies on data centers, energy, and life-support systems deserve accountable scrutiny.*

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The enormous QTS data center development project in Fayetteville, Georgia.

MUCH HAS been said and written about Al Gore’s phrase, “inconvenient truth” – referring to his notion that the denial of climate change is politically motivated by those who benefit by discrediting scientific evidence of its human causes and consequences, the burning of fossil fuels.

In the U.S., as we pass the inflation-adjusted trillion-dollar mark, measured in the cumulative cost of damages related to extreme weather since 1980 – flooding, wildfires, wind, and high temperatures – reconsideration of the political resistance to preventative climate action is long overdue.

This reevaluation is especially relevant here in Georgia, as the Public Service Commission is deciding whether to further defy climate science by approving Georgia Power’s proposal to burn vast amounts of fossil fuels over the next decade to meet the hefty energy demands of data centers.

Calls by environmental advocates for mandatory transition to clean energy generated by solar and wind have repeatedly fizzled at the PSC.

Under state policies, including tax credits advanced by Governor Kemp’s 2024 veto of a bill that would

have eliminated those credits, metro-Atlanta has become a major hub for data centers. Data centers support the 'cloud' – growing use of digital storage for massive record-keeping by business, government, institutions, and individuals.

But the rapid emergence of Artificial Intelligence [AI] is imposing unprecedented demand on data center capacity – nearly 30% of growth in energy demand over the next 3 years is expected to result from AI applications, and the trend is predicted to rapidly accelerate – much like the exponential rate of rising temperatures caused by burning fossil fuels. This climate-heating acceleration is revealed by the fact that a quarter of extreme weather-event damages in the U.S. have occurred just in the past five years, more than double the annual average over the 43-year period evaluated.

Due to the perceived profitability of AI applications in industry and information technology, political support for data centers is overwhelming. This is in no small part because Big Tech behemoths like Apple, Amazon, Facebook and 'X,' whose profit horizons glow with promising AI opportunities, have become major campaign contributors, underwritten by the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Citizens United*.

The audacity of this empowerment of corporate wealth was vividly demonstrated when Elon Musk attempted to determine the outcome of a recent Wisconsin election by providing financial rewards to voters willing to do his bidding. This is only the latest and most transparent manifestation of such abuses.

Another dominant factor in the politics of state policy – supercharged by campaign donations and squadrons of lobbyists – are the energy companies, like Georgia Power, which reap greater profits by expanded use of fossil fuels to serve growing data center demands. The history of unjust outcomes caused by conflicts of interest between representatives of Georgia Power and the PSC are thoroughly documented and analyzed in the 2024 report *Plant Vogle: The True Cost of Nuclear Power in the United States*, readily found online.

A fundamental problem, woven throughout our multiple political and economic challenges – state, national, and global – is that, despite their public relations claims, most corporations, including power companies, use a fragmented and artificially truncated method for determining their interests. By excluding the social and environmental costs of burning coal, oil, and natural gas – not to mention the production of perpetually toxic chemicals – their calculations and political positions directly threaten the public interest.

By the false reasoning of those who condone the increasingly reckless trivialization of environmental harm, resolving climate and public health issues linked to unceasing pollution must be marginalized and indefinitely delayed.

Evaluating the relative effects of pathological, endemic cognitive dissonance, in contrast with callous exploitation of the public by corporate and political decisionmakers, is beyond my purpose or expertise. But there's another way to ponder the quandary posed by the engulfing conflicts between high-technology's insatiable growth and the limits of earth's life-support systems.

Are we rationalizing the convenient derision of science and its implications to maximize short term profits, or has our post-industrial world become so comfortably numbed by consumerism that, in our haze of gratifying delusion, we cavalierly cast aside the ultimate reckoning? Or both?

While contemplating this, I urge people to intermix the irony that we face these self-generated predicaments caused by denying facts about energy, science, equity, and ecology during the Information Age, sustained by technology that is subverting our capacity to serve humanity's collective interests.

Perhaps it's time to allow insightful AI algorithms to take control – assuming ethically reliable algorithms can even be created – because prevailing human intelligence seems to have a feature that's rapidly mutating into a treacherous bug.