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Society's Problem

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This weekend, there were demonstrations across Nova Scotia against the planned construction of a data center near Port Hawkesbury. The originally-announced business plans of the company involved, EverWind, had involved the construction of wind farms, the electricity from which would produce "green" ammonia for export to Europe. Many Nova Scotians felt that producing energy for export while the provincial grid still relied on significant use of hydrocarbon fuels was a bad idea, though it can be argued that since Nova Scotia and Europe share an atmosphere, the important thing is not where, but by how much, global carbon emissions are reduced. Everwind's sudden announcement that they intended to focus on providing facilities for enormous banks of foreign-owned computers was not popular, especially if, as reported, the data center is to be constructed before the generators are in place, taking its power from the grid in the meantime. It's not clear what this will mean for consumer electricity prices, but a similar project in Alberta, to be powered by a methane-burning plant that will likewise not be built until well after the computers are running, is forecast by the Pembina Institute to boost that province's domestic power bills significantly. And, of course, we do have calm days here in Nova Scotia, though you wouldn't always think so. On those days the data center would buy power from the grid or burn diesel.

Nova Scotia is not the only place waking up to find data centers trying to move in, or the only one where they are not popular. It was recently reported that anti-data-center sentiment was one likely reason why the US midterm elections had gone even more strongly against the Republicans than had been anticipated. This is particularly true where water is in short supply (at least the Nova Scotian plant, while it will use a lot of cooling water, would use far less than can be safely taken from the local lake under normal conditions) but there do not seem to be very many places where people want a data center in town.

It's not just the environmental impact. People frequently tolerate strip mines, bitumen extraction, clearcuts, pulp mills, oil refineries, cement plants, and other dirty, power-hungry, industries, because "it's the smell of money." Many a business park dwarfs the hundreds of hectares of a data center. The new kid on the block is unpopular, I suspect, because of a widespread opinion that much of what it's doing is not, in the balance, beneficial. One the one side we hear about the lost jobs, the security leaks threatening the internet, the revoked literary prizes, and the harassing deepfakes that make even a school yearbook picture a possible source of shame and embarrassment. On the other side...what? More social media memes? Easier application letters? Higher share prices for the tech companies that are still plowing money into their data centers far faster than new value is emerging?

The mathematical community has its own problems with the sudden rise of generative AI. But the question of if, and how, AI can be made useful to society is everybody's problem, not just ours. Different groups have different problems, though also, sometimes, new applications that give some hope for the future. Are we, overall, going in the right direction? It would not be reasonable to expect the interests of those building the data centers to coincide with the professional interests of the mathematical community, but do they coincide with those of society at large? Right now it's not clear that they do, nor how this can be changed.

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