Keswick Reminder 26.09.25: NfWW No.96 We need to talk about AI

You may think – claim even – that you have not used AI (Artificial Intelligence) and never would, but the chances are you already have, unknowingly.

If you have done a Google search, followed recommendations on Netflix or YouTube, used social media feeds on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, been protected from debit or credit card fraud, used Google or Apple maps – then you have, albeit unwittingly, used AI. For in the marketplace of cyberworld AI is everywhere.

Does it matter? It depends on what you mean by 'matter'? Matter for what and to whom? In this article my focus is on the planet, and why AI matters for the planet – and ultimately for us.

AI is voraciously power hungry. And because of that, it has a significant and rapidly growing carbon footprint (already greater than aviation's). This, at precisely the time when we are trying to reduce our national and global emissions of greenhouse gases.

Consider this: a single data centre (where AI servers are based) under construction in U.S.A. will use the same amount of power in a year as New Zealand.

And this: in Ireland, host to multiple data centres, one fifth of the country's electricity is now used to power them, a figure which will rise to one third by 2026 when 130 centres are projected to be operative. This trajectory is so steep that it will make it impossible for the country to meet its ambitious emissions reductions targets – 51% by 2030.

The Netherlands, by contrast, is so concerned by what AI may do to its targets that from most of the country it has banned all large data centres and implemented strict energy requirements: by 2027 all centres will have to use 100% renewables. Despite this it still may fall short of its emissions targets.

The UK is much better placed than either Ireland or Netherlands. It has a large and increasing share of non-fossil fuels – renewables and nuclear – in its energy mix (42.2% in 2024). On data centres' energy demands the situation is said to be 'manageable'.

Clearly countries with an abundance of renewables are better positioned to host data centres, but there is an inbuilt tension between their expansion and the achievement of net zero.

Globally data centres will double energy use by 2030 just as countries face legally binding net zero deadlines. Of course, those driving AI don't want us to know this. They claim that AI will help us to solve the climate crisis, but that is 'greenwashing': they may slow it down a little but, in the process, will heat the planet even more.

Countries now face an uncomfortable choice: constrain the development of AI or sacrifice climate targets for 'technological advancement'. The next few years will test whether they have the courage to choose wise restraint (like the Netherlands) over seductive expediency (like Ireland).

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