

Good afternoon. This is my testimony regarding the development of data centers in Dickerson. Who am I? I am a retired software developer, what used to be called a programmer. And a father and musician and human being. Why should you listen to me? The fact that I'm a citizen of Montgomery County should be reason enough. We have, supposedly, a representative democracy. I want to take this opportunity to add my voice to the debate on this, above and beyond simply casting a vote every so often.

People more devoted and organized than me have and will get into some of the particulars of this proposed data center. I want to speak more abstractly about what it is part of, as a technology in our society.

Long ago, before I started working in software, when I was a naïve college student, I was very interested in the social implications of technology. I thought I should have some rationale for whatever enterprise I chose to sell my time to. That there must be some means by which at least some people are thinking through the implications of their actions, and taking actions for the general good. As I said, I was naïve.

What this hearing is about, this technology, is being called "AI". I consider it to be machinery, even if that sounds quaint. For as long as I've been around, there has been an important organization in computing called "The Association for Computing Machinery" and computing machinery is what this is. The machines used to involve punch cards, and more mechanical sorts of things, and maybe now they're microscopic circuits. But they are machines.

So, the whole world is hellbent on building data centers, nowadays. I propose that the reason is mainly what could be called "generative AI". I think that other things that get thrown in with this, like machine learning, are categorically different. It seems that this "generative AI" is a recent development, and that it coincides with massive capital and physical outlays. It seems it requires massive amounts of computing power, both to develop and to run. The tech companies, since this came into vogue, all quietly got rid of their climate change pledges.

"Generative AI" refers to the machines that can produce things that resemble human expression, such as images, music, videos, computer code, and writing – whether it be law briefs, screenplays, college essays, or whatever. As someone who loves technology, the "what it does" is pretty amazing. I can't draw even a crude cartoon, but I can employ these machines to realize an idea of mine as if painted by a master. Let's say I wanted a picture of the County Council, but in clown costumes, or at the Last Supper – "your wish is my command"! Or a computer program to build and run a website for me. Why bother learning to code? On the other hand, it is known to, as they say, "hallucinate". That law brief may cite non-existent case law. Or that picture of the County Council may show someone as having six fingers on one hand.

Recently, I saw an idea articulated by Cory Doctorow. It may not be original to him, but that's where I saw it. The idea is, when thinking about a technology, don't just think about what it does. Think about **how** it does it, **who** it does it **to**, and **who** it does it **for**. Let's apply that to this situation.

So, "what it does" is pretty remarkable. The "how it does it" apparently involves prodigious amounts of computing power. Quantities of computing power hard for anyone to understand, applied massively, produce things like so-called "Large Language Models". It's presented to us as just a couple mouse

clicks on our laptop, or even spoken commands to our “phone”. What really makes it work? Mines in Congo? E-waste dumps? Polluted water? Slave labor? Noisy, massive data centers. Others have done thorough research of these things. The picture is not pretty.

So, there’s a little about what it does, and how it does it. How about “who it does it to”, and “who it does it for?”

Well, I said it produces things that resemble human expression. Part of “who it does it to” is the people who are able to express themselves skillfully. Visual artists, writers, musicians, actors, even computer programmers. All these people find their skills commodified, cheapened, possibly their jobs or careers made obsolete. Why should anyone pay an artist anymore? Why put up with these often difficult so-called “content creators”? People in these fields are having “generative AI” “done to them”.

Another example of “who it does it to” is when a company has a machine-driven audio or text customer service interface, sometimes called a “chatbot” or “AI assistant”. There are people who could answer the phone and help you, and people who need help. The people who used to answer the phones, and possibly help people, are out of work. The customers are often not pleased with what they now have to deal with. Both classes of people are impacted by the replacement of real live humans with these machines. So both of these groups of people are people AI “does it to”.

All of us are being inundated with “AI”-generated content. We are deceived by fake media, our time is wasted sifting through AI-generated prose. So we are all “who it does it to”.

What about “who it does it for”?

Well, it’d be fun for me to make a picture of you all as circus clowns so easily. But I’m not really the target audience that these AI companies have in mind. I’m not going to give them the kind of money they need. The target audience is the people who employ human beings, and who strive to maximize their control over them and minimize the compensation they give them. These people always want to make workers replaceable by making the jobs as mindless as possible. Their enemies are the people who have real human skills they can’t do themselves.

The case of the Hollywood screenwriters, who are organized in a union and went on strike about this, are one good example. If ChatGPT or Claude can write your next sitcom, for a fraction of the cost of having skilled, educated humans do it – why, that sounds great! If the quality or artistic merit is a little diminished, that’ll be OK – it just has to get enough viewing share to convince advertisers to pay to place ads in it. Cutting costs is paramount. So the business side of Hollywood would love for “AI” to “do it for them”. Human beings are so troublesome by comparison!

A more sinister example of “who it does it for” is the use of these technologies in high-speed military decision-making about who to kill, what to blow up. The so-called Project Maven of the Department of Defense (or is it War?) is making the world into the future symbolically depicted in the Terminator movies. And another example of “who it does it for” is the business side of the music industry. I was just looking at a discussion with some music people and Bernie Sanders about how the charts are being taken over by “AI-generated” music. Why should people write songs and sing and dance, when they can work in data centers and we can all have machine-generated music? I’m sure the bean counters in the small set of companies that dominate the music business are happy to have this “done for them”.

There's a long history of skilled humans being replaced by machines. This is just a logical next step.

So, to come back here to Montgomery County, is this something we want to be involved in? Do we want to participate in replacing humans that express themselves with massive buildings of humming computers, generating heat and polluting our water? Do we think this is inevitable, and we have to get on board or be left behind?

I tried (with a search engine, not an AI) to find a motto of Montgomery County to use here. It seems the official one is "Gardez bien", which is French for "guard well". We should guard against the invasion of these machines. We should let them find no quarter here.