NAACP

AI DATA CENTERS & COMMUNITY IMPACT

WHY THESE STORIES MATTER

Stories about data centers often use distant or abstract language, calling them "the cloud." Those about AI and technology frequently focus on speed and innovation. As a result, many audiences do not realize that the internet and AI infrastructure can have environmental, economic, and health impacts that are felt unevenly across communities.

Storylines about data centers can connect our everyday internet and AI use to the physical infrastructure, resources, and communities that make those technologies possible.

They can make the impacts on Black and low-income communities more tangible and relatable, showing how development decisions are made, who benefits, who bears the costs, and how communities can respond when large-scale infrastructure arrives in their neighborhoods. These stories can also offer real-world examples of how communities can organize, advocate, and attempt to protect themselves from the potential dangers of data centers.

Right now, this infrastructure is being built in real time. The stories told at this stage will shape how audiences understand it—whether as something distant and inevitable, or as something that happens in specific places, with real and uneven consequences.

THE ISSUE AND WHAT'S AT STAKE

Artificial intelligence (AI) enables computers to perform tasks that usually require human thinking. These systems require massive amounts of computing power in "the cloud," which is made up of physical data centers: large buildings filled with computers and cooling systems that support the internet, cloud storage, streaming, and AI tools. As AI use expands, companies are building more and larger facilities across the country.

Data centers are huge, sometimes as big as 13 football fields, operating 24/7 and putting constant pressure on land, water, and power systems. They are found in urban, suburban, and increasingly, rural areas.

Many of these communities already face environmental, economic, or health challenges. Some neighborhoods are majority Black or low-income and have seen highways, warehouses, and power plants built nearby due to zoning and land-use decisions. Residents often have little say, even when these projects directly affect their daily lives. Many reports and advocacy efforts cite impacts including rising electricity costs, strain on water systems, air pollution linked to fossil-fuel energy and backup generators, worsening respiratory and cardiovascular health risks, and long-term environmental burdens that remain after short-term construction jobs end.

This seemingly invisible industry has real and often unequal impacts on specific communities, particularly communities of color that have historically borne the burden of industrial development.

MISCONCEPTIONS/HARMFUL FRAMINGS

- **The Cloud is Clean**: Digital life is portrayed as weightless and immaterial, disconnected from land, water, and fossil fuel or other energy use. In reality, projects framed as environmentally friendly will rely on fossil fuels and backup generators, linked to air pollution and health risks like asthma and respiratory illness.
- **Innovation Without Impact**: Focus remains on innovation, scale, or technical achievement, without showing how decisions are made or how they affect the environment and people's daily lives, such as rising utility costs, strain on drinking water systems, worsening air quality, land clearing, truck traffic, noise, and/or public health concerns in surrounding communities.
- **Tech as Unquestioned Good**: Projects framed as inherently beneficial, without exploring trade-offs or who is affected.
- **Jobs as Justification:** Development framed as a job creator, without examining what jobs are created (often construction), how long they last, or who gets them. Construction may provide a short-term employment boost, but the facilities can remain in communities for decades with relatively limited long-term staffing.
- **Centers in the Middle of Nowhere**: Infrastructure is treated as if it is built far away, in empty or unused places, rather than in existing communities where people live, often already impacted by other industrial infrastructure. Existing data centers are mostly located in urban or suburban areas. Most planned facilities, tied to growing AI demand, are being proposed in rural communities including some Native lands.

MORE ACCURATE/USEFUL PORTRAYALS

- **People's Perspective**: Stories told from the perspective of residents, e.g., rising electricity costs, changes in water access, new or worsening health concerns, or tension within a household or community when people disagree about what the project means.
- **Physical Scale**: What this infrastructure looks like in practice. Large parcels of land being cleared, construction reshaping familiar landscapes, and diverted water and energy supplies.
- **Incessant Hum**: Constant noise from giant cooling systems that run 24/7 to keep computers from overheating, with nearby residents complaining of headaches, vertigo, nausea, sleep disturbances, ear pain, and hypertension.
- **Overnight Lighting**: Bright exterior lighting and illuminated facilities operating through the night can disrupt sleep, alter neighborhood nightscapes, and interfere with wildlife behavior and ecosystems, including birds, bats, insects, and other nocturnal species.
- **How Decisions Get Made:** Stories that track how a project moves from proposal to approval. Who hears about it first, how information is shared, and what it takes for residents to understand and respond. Often, communities are working to get up to speed on complex proposals while projects are already moving forward, which can impede their influence over the outcome.
- **What "Benefit" Actually Means**: Characters pressing developers, elected officials, utility companies, or planning boards on what is being promised—jobs, investment, growth—and what those promises look like in practice over time.
- **No Choice Given**: Stories that connect current development to a longer history of where highways, power plants, and industrial facilities have been placed, showing how Black and other vulnerable communities have absorbed these burdens repeatedly.
- **Everyday Impact Over Time:** Stories that follow change as it happens—shifts in cost of living, environmental conditions, access to resources, and a sense of control over what is happening in one's neighborhood.
- **Language That Gets Questioned Onscreen:** Characters pushing on commonly used terms, e.g., bringing jobs, unused land, off-grid, the cloud, and asking what they mean in context.
- **Community Leads The Way**: Characters across communities (residents, environmentalists, faith leaders, public health advocates, utility experts, civil rights organizations, and business owners) coalition-building to oppose, question, and prevent data center development. Show characters galvanizing their neighbors around consequences of data centers (utility costs, water access, air quality, noise, traffic, public health, and local decision-making).

STORY STARTERS

A town trying to decide what it means to host a project described as "the future," while different groups define benefit in very different ways.

A public meeting where residents are presented with complex, technical information and asked to respond quickly, without clear answers to basic questions.

A community realizing that AI, something used by millions of people elsewhere, is drawing heavily on resources in their immediate environment.

A resident tracking changes over time (rising costs, shifts in water use, or changes in air quality) and trying to connect those changes to a project that is rarely explained in plain terms.

A developer presentation that frames the project one way, while residents compare that framing to what they are seeing and experiencing.

A local and vocal champion of a development project learns their teen is being led astray by AI.

A long-time resident reminds neighbors that not long ago, they accepted a similar pitch from another industry that left their community with pollution, illness, and loss.

A worker brought in during the construction phase, navigating what the job offers in the short term and what remains after the work is done.

An older couple, finally reaping the benefits of retirement, must suddenly adjust as their adult child's entire family moves in after losing their jobs to AI.

A neighborhood already living near multiple sources of pollution is being asked to take on more.

A story that follows not just what gets built, but how decisions are made, and who is left out.

A local official who genuinely believes the project will help their community, slowly realizing the terms of the deal don't match what was promised.

Two neighbors on opposite sides: one took a construction job, and one is tracking her kid's asthma. The friendship has to hold that contradiction.

A community organizer preps for a public comment period- often a series of town hall-style planning, zoning, or environmental review hearings, knowing most residents don't even know it's happening.

QUICK FACTS

Siting: Data center siting reflects long-standing patterns where "locally unwanted land uses" (LULUs) are placed in communities with disproportionately high percentages of people of color, immigrant, and low-wealth residents. Often, these communities already face very high levels of pollution and environmental stress, and increasingly high levels of health problems caused by both.

Electricity: Electricity bills could double by 2039 due to increased demand from data centers and associated grid infrastructure upgrades, with costs passed on to residents. AI queries can use ~10x the electricity of a traditional search. One data center can consume as much electricity as ~50,000 homes or even a mid-sized U.S. city.

Water: A single large data center can use up to 5 million gallons of water per day, comparable to a town of 10,000–50,000 people. In Texas alone, data centers are projected to use 49 billion gallons of water in 2025, rising to 399 billion gallons by 2030. In some cases, facilities have used hundreds of millions of gallons of water even during drought restrictions. Heavy water use strains local drinking water supplies, leaving less water available for residents, farming, and other community needs.

Cost to Local Communities: Public subsidies and tax incentives can reduce local financial benefits while infrastructure costs remain. At least 10 states are losing $100 million+ annually in tax revenue due to data center incentives and exemptions, highlighting the scale of public subsidy. Promised jobs are mostly short-term construction roles, while long-term impacts remain in the community.

GLOSSARY

AI Data Center: Industrial building that houses the equipment used to process requests from large language models - like ChatGPT - that use more computing power. These cloud services operate differently from traditional data centers. They're typically owned by large tech companies like xAI, Meta, Amazon, Google, and Microsoft, which have heavily invested in this new wave of data centers. Some of these centers can take up over one million square feet.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): A broad term for technologies that allow computers to perform tasks that usually require human thinking. Beyond chatbots, AI is used in social media, streaming recommendations, search engines, education, policing, and image or video generators.

Backup Generation: On-site energy production, often using fossil fuels, used during power outages or periods of high demand and can contribute to local air pollution.

The Cloud: A term used to describe internet-based storage and services that are actually powered by physical data centers located in both urban and rural communities.

Locally Unwanted Land Uses (LULUs): Infrastructure or industrial sites such as highways, waste facilities, or power plants, often placed in marginalized communities, that bring environmental or health burdens.

RESOURCES

Environmental and Energy Study Institute, Communities Are Raising Noise Pollution Concerns About Data Centers

Environmental Health Project, The Dangers of Data Centers

NAACP, Frontline Framework Community Guiding Principles

NAACP, The People's Report: A Gap Analysis of Data Center Infrastructure in Prince George's County, Maryland

NAACP, Did You Know? AI Data Centers

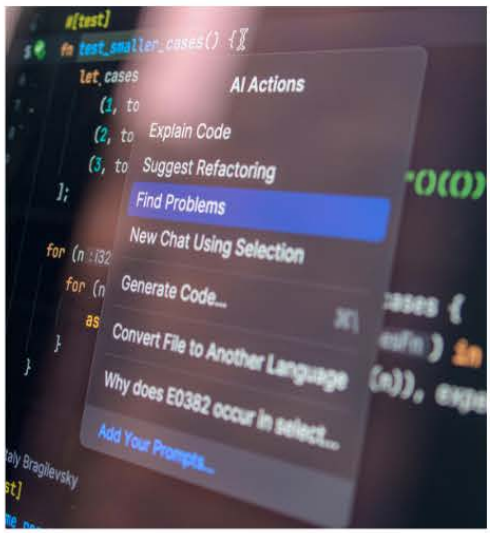
NAACP, Fact or Fiction: AI Data Centers

NAACP, Advocacy in Action: AI Data Centers

NAACP, Community Benefits Agreement Template

Pew Research Center, Most New Data Centers in the U.S. Are Coming to Rural Areas

Mother Jones, In Indian Country, Data Centers Come With a Familiar Threat of Colonialism.



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