

Submission to Enquiry into AI Data Centres in Tasmania;

I thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important matter.

AI data centres have the potential to cause harm in a variety of ways:

1. The use of large quantities of electricity.

Without any regulation this would result in increased cost to other electricity consumers, both business and household, simply through the supply and demand relationship. Under this scenario it also results in increased greenhouse gas emissions.

Some, including the Australian Government have suggested that it would be sufficient to require data centre proponents to agree to have sufficient renewable energy generating capacity build to offset their consumption.

This would be acceptable if we had unlimited potential for building renewable energy infrastructure, but this is not the case. We have already committed to building renewable energy projects in places where they will have negative social and/or environmental consequences. (Robbins Island wind farm is a prime example.) So even if the data centre proponents do build more renewable generating capacity to offset their usage, it could be expected to have negative social and environmental consequences.

It is worth noting that less than half of Tasmania's net energy consumption comes from renewables. Once transport, heating and industry transition out of fossil fuels we will need to more than double our renewable energy production even without factoring in population growth.

There is no foreseeable solution to this problem except refusing permission to build data centres.

2. The use of large quantities of water.

The situation here is similar to that of electricity. Fresh water is a finite resource and there are competing needs for it. There may however be potential to design data centres so as not to use significant amounts of water. The regulatory solution to this may be to severely limit permitted water consumption.

3. Light, noise and visual impact.

In a number of the places where data centres are proposed, local people have protested with these concerns. I think those concerns are genuine, but they would be of equal concern if the proposal was for some other factory. They point to inadequacies in how our planning schemes address these issues. I don't believe this calls for special planning law or regulations for data centres.

4. the product is of questionable value to society.

We do hear from time to time of positive uses for AI (medical research comes to mind), but I would assert that the majority of AI output is either harmful or trivial.

The AI we see most of is the Large Language Models. These are basically trained to produce a plausible output. There is no guarantee of veracity. Hence, they are the perfect tool for scams and misinformation.

The next most prevalent manifestation is deep fakes. Whilst it may be a bit of fun to see the Pope in a puffer jacket, being able to use the voice and image of prominent persons in order to deceive others into making foolish decisions is clearly not in the public interest.

This is an industry operating with few guardrails and in consequence doing damage to societies worldwide.

Amidst all the hype about AI, digital platforms are making it very difficult to opt out. This means there is a lot of false demand. If the nefarious and the trivial uses of AI were removed, we may well find there is already more than enough data centre capacity.

It will be very difficult to put the genie back in the bottle, but we should do what we can to limit the damage it does. At the State level we can do little other than refuse to allow the data centres to be

built, but at the national level, whether unilaterally or through international agreements we should be prohibiting certain uses of this technology. Deepfakes for instance should be banned.

I note that item 6 in the Terms of Reference is “Ensures the Tasmanian community receive tangible benefits from all AI and data facilities constructed in the state.”

In light of this we should perhaps consider allowing a data centre in Tasmania provided it provides facilities for scientific, medical and medical research only.

All other data centres should be banned.

Philip Stigant

