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Thursday, October 30, 2025



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Are we helping to destroy the planet every time we ask ChatGPT a question? Stephen Witt joins us to answer that and other burning questions about the future of artificial intelligence. Plus:

- [The President wasn't always a troll](#)
- [How activists are tracking ICE](#)
- [A début film shows the power of nonprofessional actors](#)

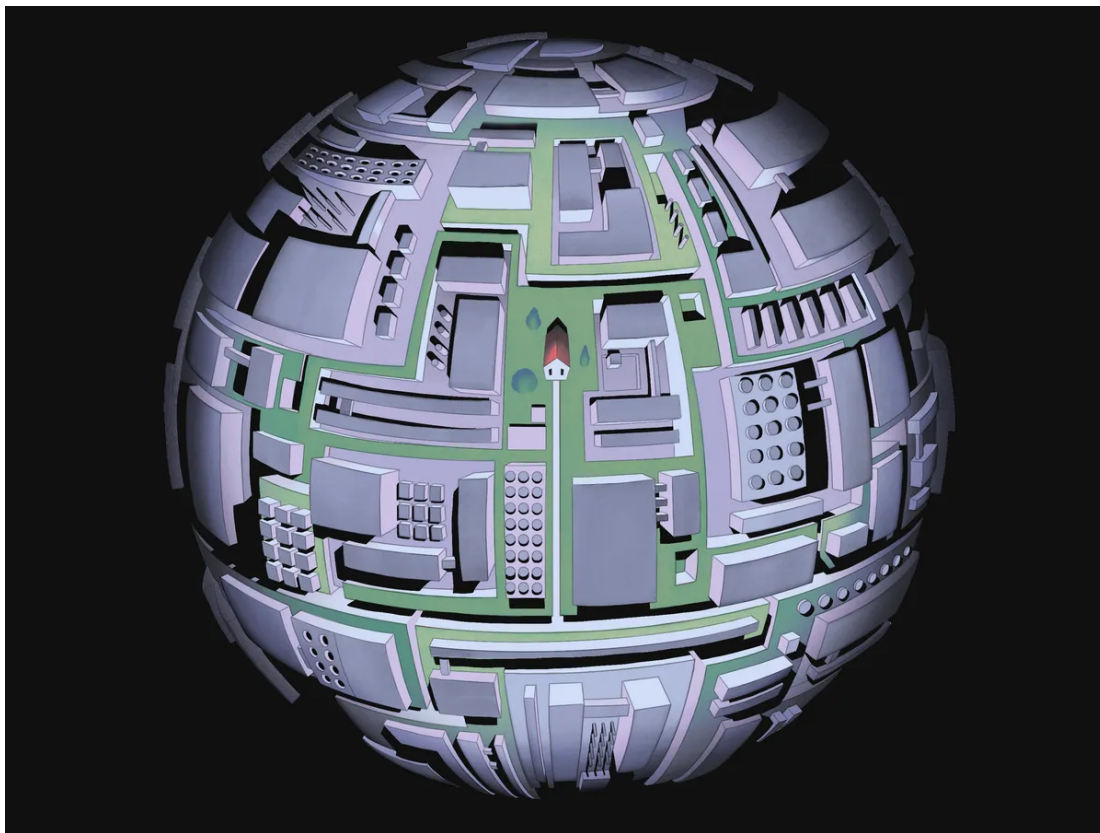


Illustration by Jun Cen

Caroline Mimbs Nyce

Newsletter editor

A single data center can use as much power as the city of Philadelphia. And they're popping up everywhere. These sprawling buildings, filled with rows of computing equipment, are the factories of the A.I. economy; they power all those mundane chatbot searches, sucking up tons of energy in the process. As the OpenAI C.E.O. Sam Altman put it, "I do guess that a lot of the world gets covered in data centers over time."

For our latest issue, the reporter Stephen Witt was invited ("after what felt like two hundred phone calls") [inside a Microsoft facility](#), still under construction. I caught up with Witt to discuss what he saw there—and what A.I.'s massive energy consumption means for our planet.

This conversation has been edited and condensed.

What does a data center actually look like?

It's a barn. It's a giant shed full of microchips. From the outside, they keep

them as anonymous and boring-looking as possible, and then the inside is just racks and racks of computing equipment stretching off into the distance.

Was it totally crazy to be in there?

It does not feel like a place a human being should be inside. In fact, they try to limit the amount that people go into them. They're totally clean, contamination-proof, humidity- and temperature-controlled. It feels like going into a bank vault almost. You're inside the computer's brain.

Talk to me a little bit about how these data centers are being built.

It's one of the largest movements of capital in human history. You really have to go back to electrification, or maybe the building of the railroads or the adoption of the automobile, to see a similar event in terms of money deployed.

Jensen Huang, the co-founder of Nvidia, has called the data center the A.I. factory: data goes in and intelligence comes out. All of this is being built to develop neural networks, these little files of numbers that have extraordinary capabilities. That's what all that computing equipment is in the shed doing. It's fine-tuning your neural network until it has superhuman capabilities. It's an extremely resource-intensive process.

Essentially, A.I. is a brute-force problem, and I don't think anybody anticipated how much of a heavy industrial process the development of it would be.

Are we going to completely destroy the planet with A.I.?

Yes.

Great.

So, we're already on track to cook the planet. It's a huge problem, even before any of this happened. Now, having said that, I think the data center build-out is totally irresponsible from a climate perspective. But I don't know what the answer is, other than building tons and tons of carbon-free energy. You just have to make so many nuclear power plants. And we have

to do it at a scale that gets the cost down.

Are we contributing to this every time we use ChatGPT?

If you're just asking A.I. questions, don't worry about it. You use just as much electricity watching TV or turning on the light. Not a problem.

If you're building a lot of short-form, A.I.-generated video content, that is like running a microwave all day. If you're in pro-research mode, and A.I. goes and thinks for an hour before it gives you an answer, you know it's using a lot of juice. The A.I. companies will not tell us how much power these things use. We had to back into an answer through open-source academic work, and then take a guess. But our equivalent for a three-thousand-word term paper was about three minutes of using your microwave.

That's a lot.

Is it? When you microwave food for three minutes, are you, like, "Oh geez, I'm destroying the planet"? It's an equivalent concern.

Is using A.I. driving up utility costs?

Yes. The grid does not have the capacity to support this right now. And a massive build-out is going to take years.

Electricity costs are going up anyway, due to inflation—but they're way outpacing inflation. This is putting tremendous strain on America's electrical infrastructure, and you, the rate payer, are picking up part of that.

And this is already happening?

Oh, yeah, it's well under way. You're paying. The grid is just a giant pool of electricity. When you connect the data center to the grid, it's like someone coming and sticking a fire hose into a well. This big snaking thing is dipped into the pool, and starts draining it from everyone else. It makes everyone's costs go up.

We're essentially paying for A.I. companies to train their models.

In a way, yeah.

What do you say to people who feel stressed out about all this?

I am also stressed about this. I mean, I go back and forth. The end goal here is that most of what humans do becomes obsolete.

Do you really think that?

Yeah, one hundred per cent. I think that in the future, all forms of labor will at least be conceptually done by a computer. With the combined push for robotics and hyper-intelligent computing systems, what's left? I guess we should all go to clown school—study live theatre, or something.

Writing, maybe?

Writing, I don't think so. No, I think the computer will catch up to us if it has not done so already.

You sound pretty confident about A.I. getting better and replacing us all.

That's data-driven. The premise of all of this is that putting more Nvidia microchips in the barn will result in better A.I. Empirically, so far, that has been true. Now, as the A.I. pioneer Demis Hassabis has wondered, how long will this work? Will we hit a brick wall? No one knows. But right now, the evidence shows that this is working.

And the evidence shows, conclusively, that people love this. People are using A.I. all the time. Especially young people. It's, like, their best friend. They call it "Chat." Eight hundred million weekly average users—I think ChatGPT is maybe the most successful internet product in history. And that's just Chat; there are dozens of other services that are also exploding in popularity. Whatever people say about their concerns or fears of A.I.—and I think those are real—people are using it all the time.

Read or listen to the story

Editor's Pick

Trump and the Presidency That Wouldn't Shut Up

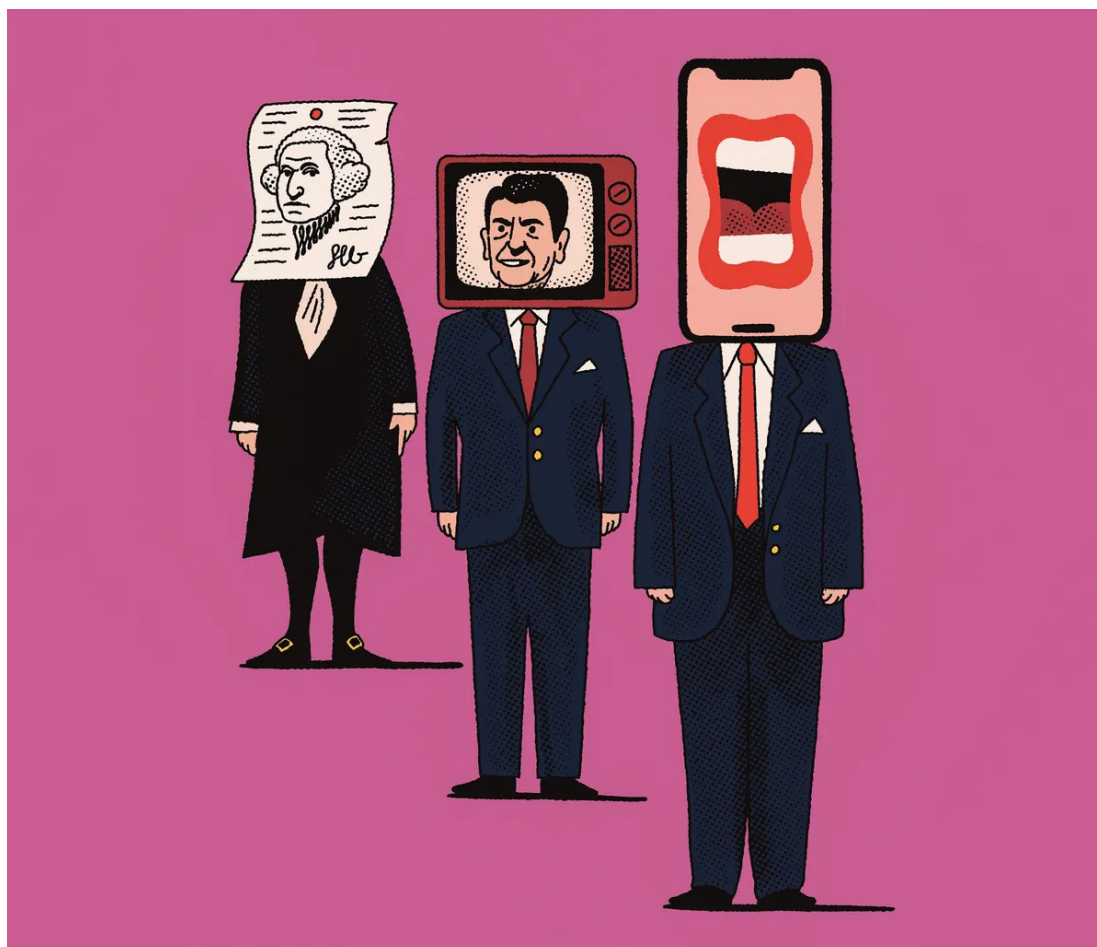


Illustration by Robert Samuel Hanson

The Framers of the Constitution never expected Presidents to speak directly to the public. But, as technology advanced, communicating with Americans became a key part of the job. No President, though, has talked the way that Trump does. “He is the world’s most outspoken troll, and its most dangerous,” Jill Lepore writes. “He posts day and night, about everything from taco bowls to possible ceasefires.” And, she notes, he’s getting worse. [Read the story »](#)



How Bad Is It?

Donald Trump announced on social media yesterday that the United States would begin testing its nuclear weapons “on an equal basis” with other nations. The U.S. has not detonated a nuclear weapon in more than thirty years.

What does this mean for the future of global nuclear conflict?

The President made the announcement just moments before meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, whose country has been growing its stockpile of nuclear weapons. Even though Trump has not provided further details about his plan, Russia has said it will respond if the U.S. resumed tests. Rivka Galchen [recently reported about the growing risks of nuclear conflict](#)—and how, simultaneously, a formerly strong anti-nuke movement has lost its urgency. “I think the biggest difference between then and now is that we’ve normalized nuclear competition,” a scholar on technology and national security tells her. Galchen also outlines the dangers posed by countries, such as the United States, that vest the authority to use nuclear weapons in a single individual. As she notes, “In the current protocol, the President can act without congressional or military approval; although the Secretary of Defense is expected to be part of the chain of communication, the secretary does not have a vote.”



Today's Podcast

Trump continues to cast Antifa as a major terror threat. On this week's Political Scene podcast, Andrew Marantz joins Tyler Foggatt to discuss how the Administration's sweeping definition of extremism sets the stage for a campaign against dissenting voices. [Listen and follow »](#)

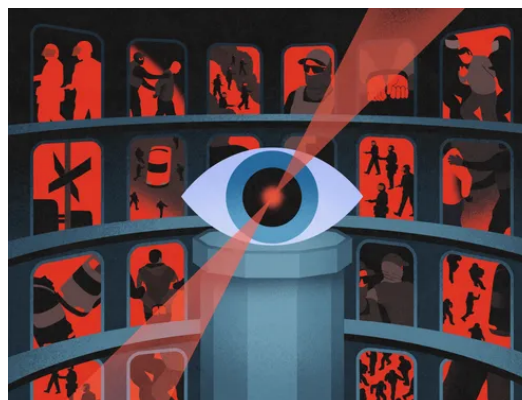
More from The New Yorker

Infinite Scroll

ICE and the Smartphone Panopticon

A new wave of digital tools has emerged to help citizens monitor Trump's crackdown. But internet surveillance can also be used against you.

By Kyle Chayka

*The Front Row*

“Fire of Wind” Is a Bold and Inspired Début

The first feature by the Portuguese filmmaker Marta Mateus, featuring nonprofessional actors in natural settings, explores and expands modern traditions of political cinema.

By Richard Brody

*The Lede*

How to Endure Authoritarianism

A visit to a poet's home in Kraków recalls the lessons of East Europe's dissidents.

By Adam Gopnik



Our Culture Picks

- **Read:** Standup comedy, American history, and social media all feature in Sasha Debevec-McKenney's zany debut poetry collection, "Joy Is My Middle Name." See more of [what we're reading this week](#).
- **Watch:** It's Mischief Night, traditionally an evening for pranks. But, if you want to play it safe, leave the shenanigans to [the "Jackass" boys](#).
- **Listen:** If you do go out looking for trouble, be careful! You may run into a [pack of dancing zombies](#).

Daily Cartoon



Cartoon by Polly Adams

"Your finest ale! And a funnel."

See more cartoons



Puzzles & Games

- **Today's Crossword Puzzle:** Object made of vulcanized rubber—[four letters](#).
- **Laugh Lines:** Test your knowledge of [classic New Yorker cartoons](#).

P.S. As you prepare for your Halloween celebration tomorrow night, consider [forming an impromptu neighborhood-wide parade](#). 🎃

Ian Crouch contributed to today's edition.



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