

Visualising Generative AI with Collage

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Acknowledgement of Country

In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

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Australian Government

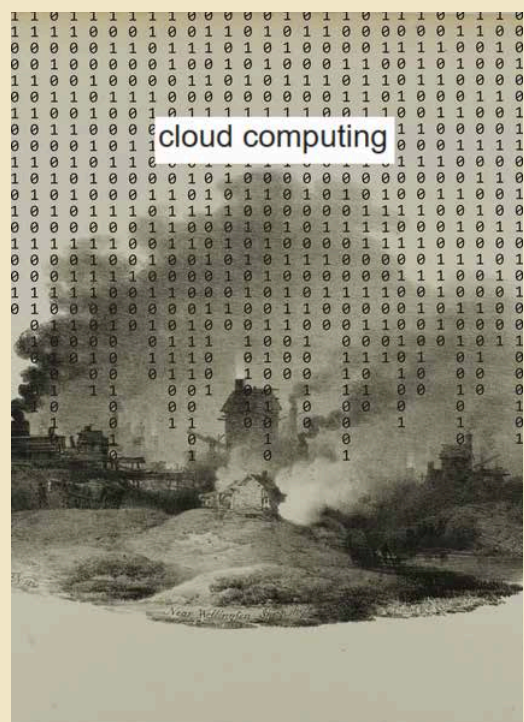
Australian Research Council

Overview

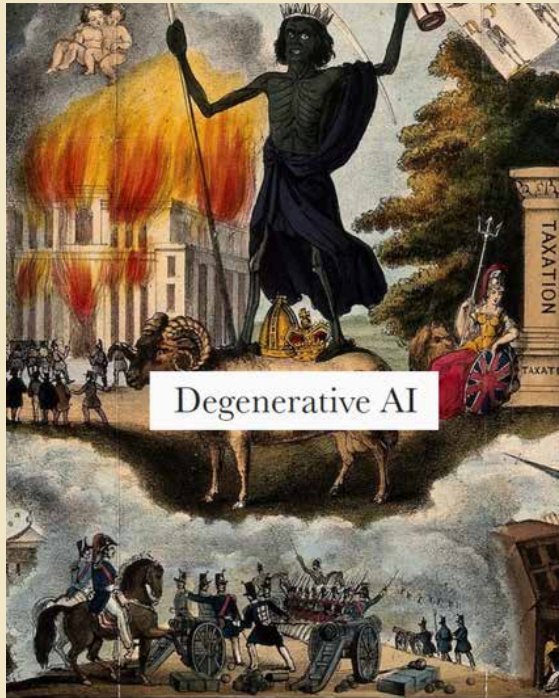
The 'Visualising Generative AI with Collage' project applies the artistic method of collage to highlight and critique the language used to describe generative AI (GenAI). It is an initiative contributing to what is sometimes referred to as 'critical AI literacy', working towards developing understandings of GenAI that recognise the social, political and cultural dimensions of the industry, including the vested interests involved and the impacts on the environment. It also ties into recent explorations in using arts-based methods for critiquing and resisting GenAI technologies.

The term GenAI is used to refer to recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI) software involving large language models trained on massive data sets, mostly collected from the internet, to identify patterns that are then used to generate new text, code or images.

The Big AI Tech corporations are devoting significant resources to developing and promoting GenAI. In the interests of profit, they are attempting to insert GenAI services into as many domains of social and economic life as they can. I made the collages displayed in this booklet to draw attention to the impacts of the exploitative and extractive ethos underpinning Big AI Tech's initiatives.

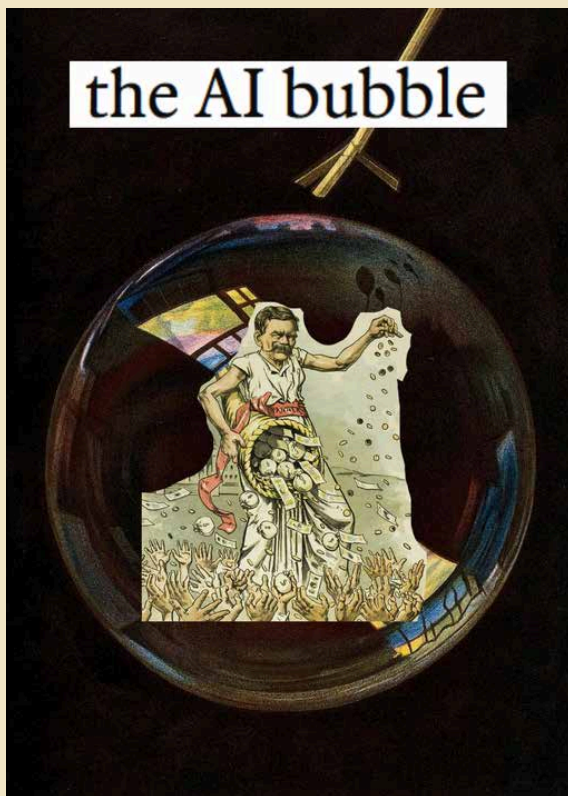


Remixing as resistance



I was inspired to make these collages by the Better Images of AI initiative. Its objective is to challenge image makers to avoid the fanciful and misleading stereotypes of AI in the stock or AI-generated images that are typically used in industry and government sources as well as popular culture. These stereotypes include drawing on science fiction tropes; portraying AI as a humanoid robot; as like a human brain; as having magical powers; being used only by white men in suits; or as a powerful entity that can control humans. Instead, Better Images of AI calls for hand-crafted images that place AI tech into the realities of people's everyday lives and the built and natural environments.

Better Images of AI provides a useful playbook with information and advice about how to use non-GenAI image manipulation tools, links to public domain image repositories, a bank of images they have put together for people to use, and examples of images made by artists using the playbook. (See the final page of this booklet for the link to their website and other inspirations.)



In the playbook it is noted that using archival images from digital heritage collections is one way to disrupt contemporary stereotypes of AI. Creatively repurposing these images, placing different images and texts in conversation with each other, can tell stories that open up new ways to visualise human experience with these novel technologies and create counter visions of its futures. This approach can be viewed as remixing as a form of resistance.

Why collage?

Collage is a visual art method that involves combining text or images, or both, to form a novel visual assemblage. It can be used as a pure art form or for social inquiry as well as research communication. As is the case with many arts-based methods, collage provokes and expresses ideas, tacit understandings and feelings. It can be a form of self-expression or a stimulus for group discussions.

Collaging can be done using traditional 'cut and paste' approaches with pens, scissors, glue and paper or deploying digital tools and services. Collages can be collected to create colourful and engaging zines or booklets like this one.

With these collages, I am attempting to provoke thought about how the language used to describe GenAI denotes meanings and affective responses. By pairing images with words, I am aiming to surface these meanings and feelings, and examine what they reveal about the current moment in which a huge amount of hype but also critical responses to GenAI are circulating in news reporting, popular culture and social and philosophical inquiry.

My collage making was inspired by research I was conducting on the social and environmental impacts of GenAI. As I was reading academic articles, news reports and activists' reports, I was struck by the use of language to describe these novel technologies. I took screenshots of words and phrases about GenAI taken from these sources and combined them with images. Some collages feature photos I have taken myself with my iPhone, while others use images I have found in public domain archives.



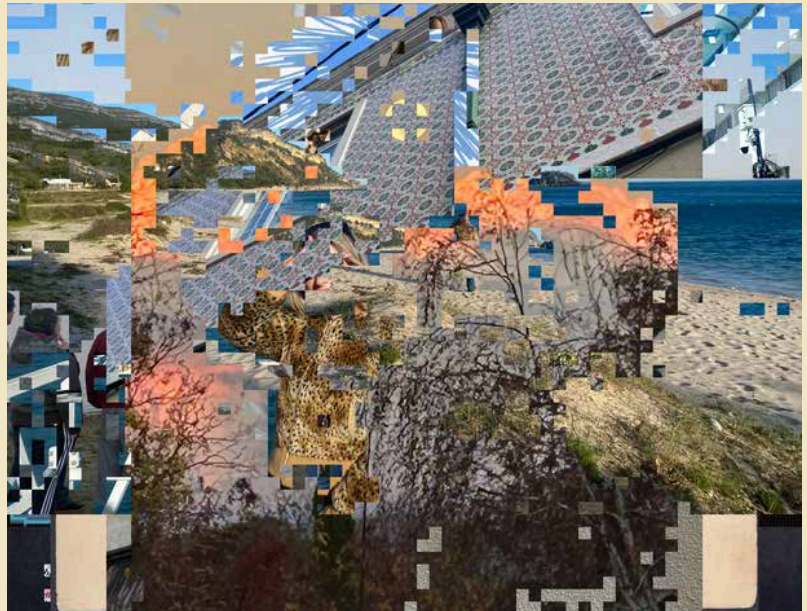
Experimenting with image editing

Some of the images featured in these collages have been manipulated by me with Canva tools (e.g., to remove background, crop or cut out around images, pixelate or otherwise distort them, or alter their colour). Others were altered with open access tools from Constraint Systems, a collection of alternative interfaces for creating and editing images and text. I experimented with a few different ways of altering images this way.

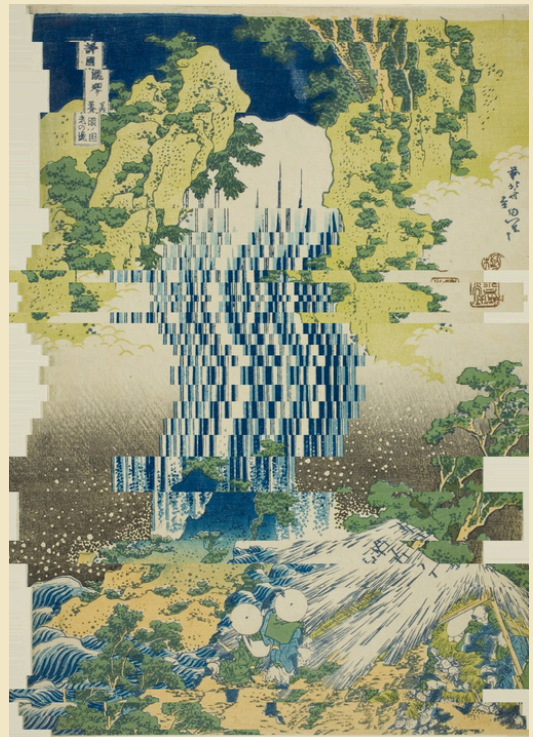
The images on this page and the next show what I did using various Constraint Systems tools. On this page, the original images (vintage botanical prints) are on the bottom far left-hand side. The effect I was trying to achieve was demonstrating how GenAI use can distort portrayals of the natural world and also impact living things (hence the colour change in the mushroom image on the bottom far right, denoting global warming and bushfire risk through human-made climate change). With these images, I am asking what is lost and what is gained when living things are digitised and datafied? How does it change how we view and experience other living things in the ecosystems we inhabit?



The image to the right was made using Constraint Systems' 'Collage' interface, an experimental public collage that combines images according to their complexity. I added a photograph of a landscape I had taken with my phone to the images that had already been contributed by others, and this collage was the result.



The two images of natural phenomena below were made using public domain prints that have been glitched with Constraint Systems' tools.

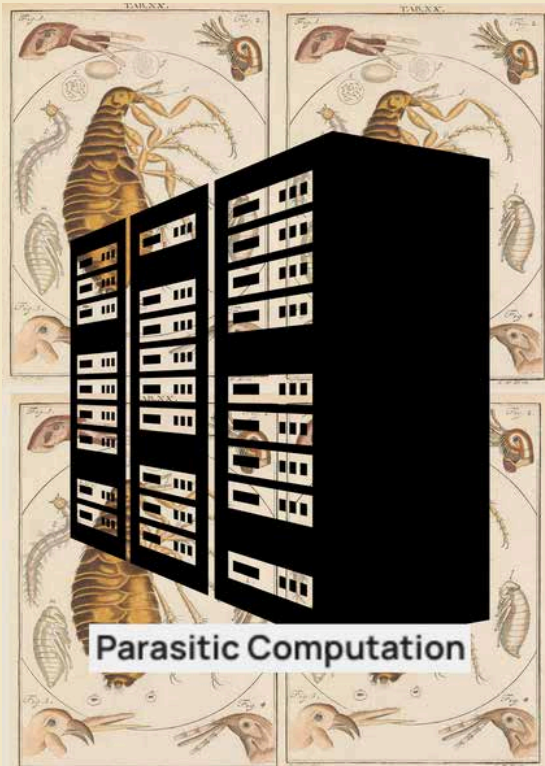


Challenging the hype

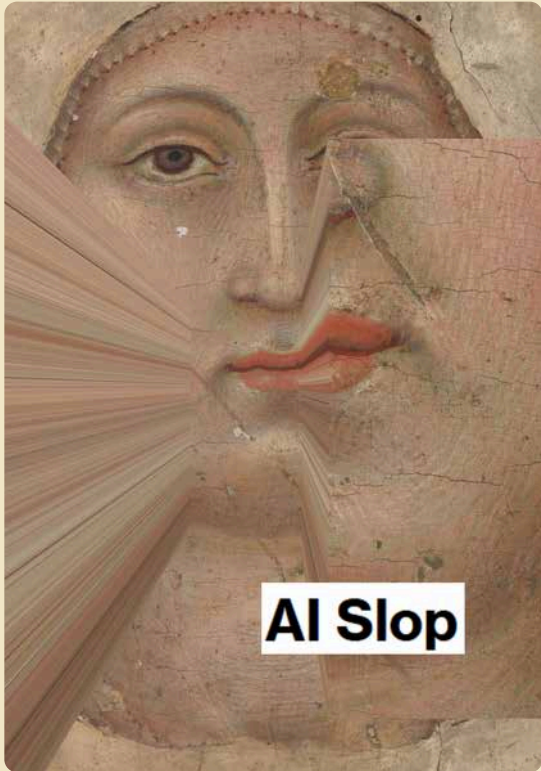


The collages on these two pages draw attention to the ways that GenAI is portrayed in hype-filled industry documents and websites as close to magical. Some critics have suggested that boosters of this new technology seem to have a religious fervour for promoting it, refusing to accept that it is prone to errors ('hallucinations'), produces poor quality outputs ('AI slop') and fakery (by suggesting the vast workforce of people behind automation, machine learning, data processing and checking do not exist). There have been many criticisms made of how these data workers, many of whom live in the Global South and work for a pittance, are exploited by Big AI Tech corporations ('parasitic computation'). The data privacy issues involved in GenAI use and processing are also highlighted by the use of language such as 'predatory data' and 'degenerative AI'.

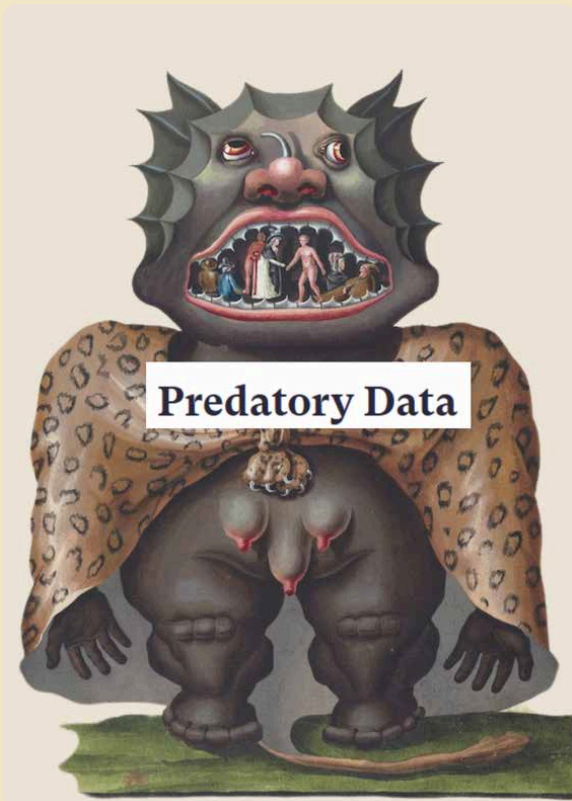




Parasitic Computation



AI Slop



Predatory Data



Exploited

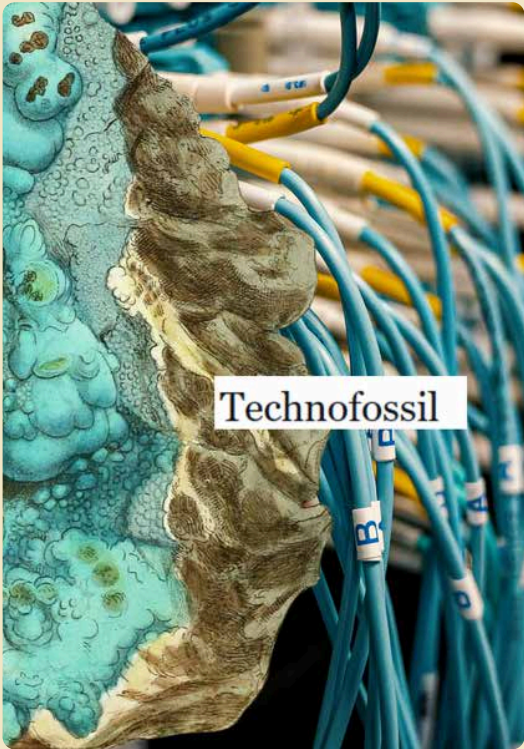
Extraction

GenAI's environmental impacts

Big AI Tech companies are building hyperscale data centres in many parts of the world to support the training, processing and storage of digital data. These enormous data centres are fitted out with computer chips, circuit boards, cables, servers and cooling technologies to keep the machinery functioning smoothly. Many concerns have been raised about the detrimental impacts on the ecosystems in which the data centres are sited, including the greenhouse gas emissions they generate, their use of water and energy resources and the landclearing required to make way for the massive buildings. Mining for the minerals used to make data centre components is wrecking the environment and having major impacts on human and planetary health. GenAI expansion leaves behind mountains of digital rubbish (e-waste) that won't break down, polluting the air, water and soil and creating 'techno-fossils'.



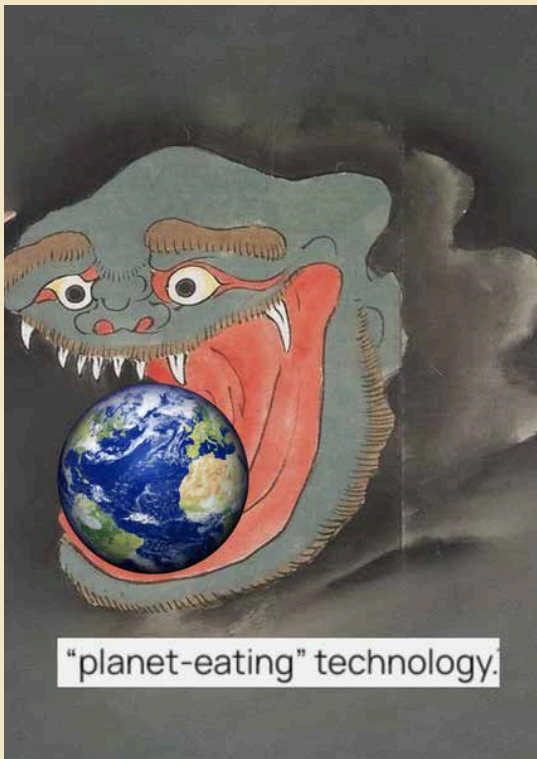
The environmental impacts of GenAI can be difficult for users to perceive because AI itself appears ephemeral rather than something with a physical, material existence. Digital data are transmitted by and stored through buried cabling, transmitter towers, servers and data centres that are often invisible to the people who use devices to connect to Wi Fi and mobile data services. The collages on these two pages are attempts to render these impacts more visible and tangible through the combination of words and images.



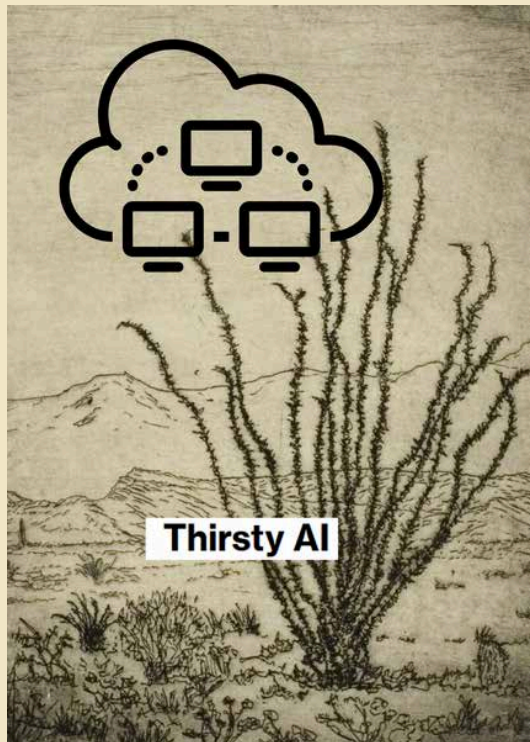
Technofossil



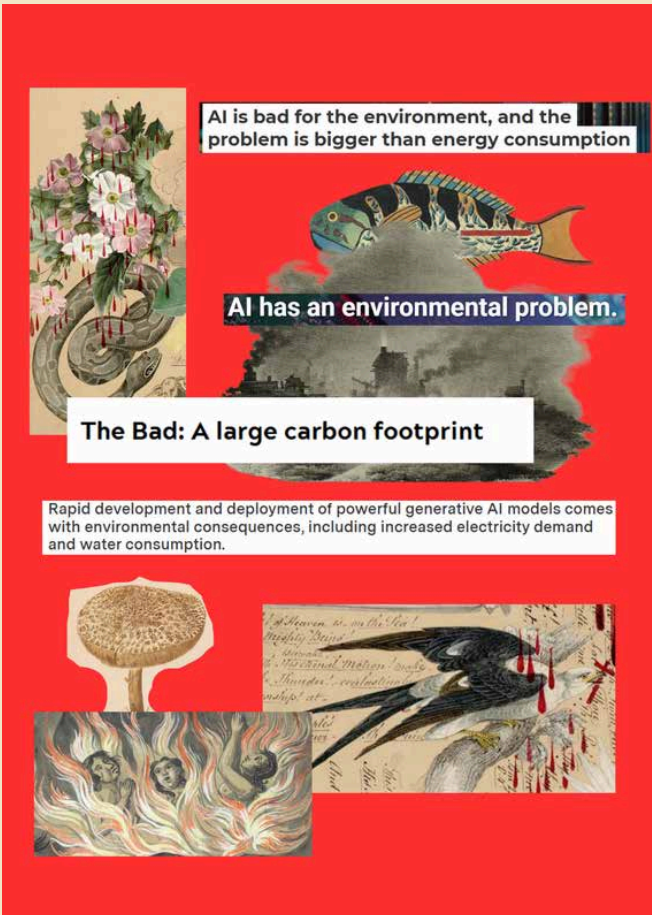
digital footprint



"planet-eating" technology.



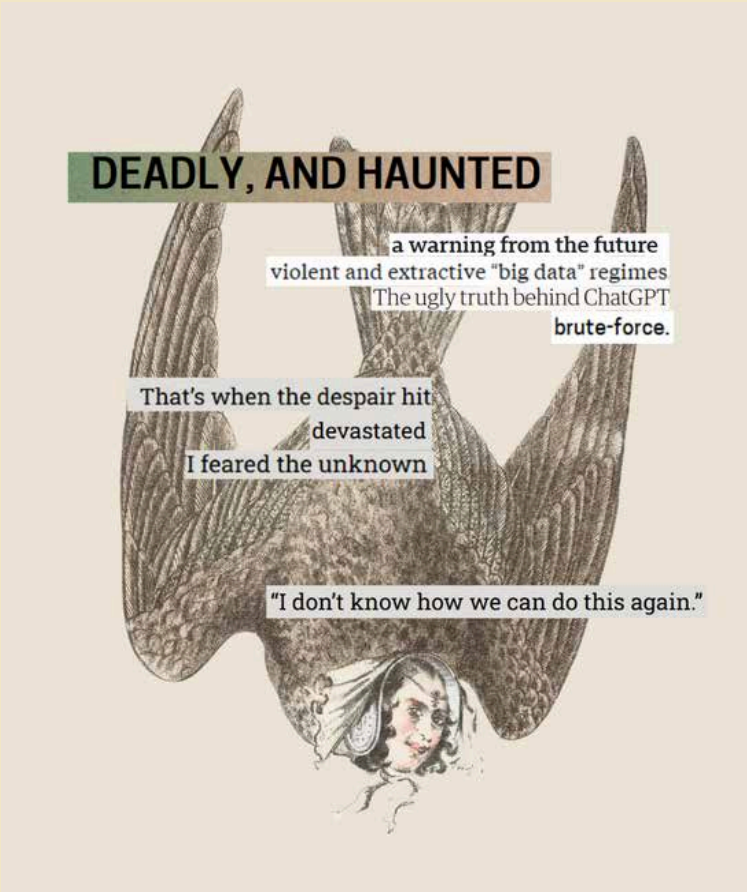
Thirsty AI



The collages on this page assemble multiple screenshots and images from diverse sources in ways intended to emphasise the extremity of the climate crisis we face, to which the massive growth of hyperscale centres is contributing. The collages also highlight the growing concern expressed in the mainstream media about these impacts.

The top collage uses text from online articles and news reports about the environmental impacts of GenAI together with an assemblage of vintage archival prints.

The bottom collage features a single archival image with a 'found poem', made by combining screenshots of phrases from various internet sources. The first stanza is made from internet articles while the second and third stanzas are made from extracts taken from different people's accounts of their traumatic experiences of extreme weather events such as bushfires and floods. These stories can be found on the 'Climate Trauma: The Growing Toll of Climate Change on the Mental Health of Australians' website supported by the Australian Climate Council.



Data servers in strange places



Data centres are often built in pristine environments - it has even been suggested by some tech companies that they should be built on the moon. The collages on this page were made to highlight the incongruity of placing data centres in such environments. I used a stock image of data servers (the central infrastructure within data centres) taken from Canva, recoloured it, and inserted it in gorgeous archival images to emphasise how these buildings violate landscapes.



Inspirations

[AIXDESIGN](#): zines and other creative ideas for critical AI activities)

[Better Images of AI](#): lots of ideas for how to make images and guidelines for uploading your images to their website for others to view and use

[Constraint Systems](#): collection of open source alternative interfaces for creating and editing text and images

[Looming zine](#): a zine dedicated to exploring the impacts of digital technologies

[Reimagining AI for Environmental Justice and Creativity](#): collection of open access essays

[The Distributed AI Research Institute \(DAIR\)](#): activist and creative work to cut through the AI hype

