



By: **Elise Quevedo**

AI as the biggest threat to sustainability?



This week, while watching the **Techritory** event in Riga, Latvia, one panel, led by Industry Analyst Will Townsend, focused on the intersection of AI, data centres, and sustainability. The main question is, has AI become one of the biggest threats to sustainability?

The rise of AI has pushed data consumption and energy demand to levels we have never seen before. Every query, every model, every piece of generated content requires enormous computing power. Behind every chatbot and every predictive model are data centres running at full throttle.

And as we know, data centres are not known for being environmentally friendly.

The Reality Behind the Data

According to the **International Energy Agency** (IEA) latest Energy and AI report, data centres currently account for 1.5 per cent of global electricity consumption, and that number could double by 2030 if growth continues unchecked.

At Techritory, several experts highlighted the need to rethink how these systems are designed and managed. The need for quicker and more effective data handling will only grow as a result of emerging digital industries, including artificial intelligence, 6G, cloud, edge computing, and semiconductors.

Europe needs to strike a balance between environmental responsibility and technological advancement to stay competitive

Europe is facing a unique challenge here. The continent has built a strong foundation in digital regulation, privacy, and sustainability. That is not in question; we receive new updates weekly. But when it comes to raw computing infrastructure, it still lags behind the US and parts of Asia.

The Techritory panel discussed areas where Europe leads, such as satellite technology and secure digital frameworks, as well as areas where it struggles, especially in microelectronics and large-scale cloud infrastructure.

Europe needs to strike a balance between environmental responsibility and technological advancement in order to stay competitive.

The Growing Tension

One comment made by the panel is highly relevant: "Data centres have to evolve." It captures the essence of the issue. We are in a moment where progress and preservation pull in opposite directions.

On the one hand, there is no indication that the demand for AI-driven services will slow down anytime soon. All businesses, from start-ups to global corporations, are incorporating intelligent technologies, automation, and predictive models into their everyday operations. However, there is no precedent for the enormous environmental cost of this expansion.

We cannot push forward on innovation while ignoring the planet that supports it

To top it up, local communities often react negatively when new data centers are announced. They fear noise, water consumption, and the heavy strain on local power grids.

In some areas, residents have protested against what they call "digital pollution," where the benefits of AI are global but the environmental burden is local.

I understand their concerns. We cannot push forward on innovation while ignoring the planet that supports it. We only have one, and we need to protect it.

Performance and Sustainability

The big challenge lies in balancing sustainability with performance. For AI to continue evolving, it needs infrastructure that supports rapid model training and deployment.

But for the world to remain liveable, that same infrastructure needs to become far more energy efficient.

Energy efficiency is a necessity. Some of the most exciting developments I've seen in recent months involve leveraging natural resources for sustainable cooling, building data centres in colder climates, and investing in renewable energy sources.

The key question is how we can make energy consumption cleaner, faster, and more sustainable

Remember, demos are cheap, but production is expensive. Building a proof of concept is relatively easy, but scaling it responsibly takes time, resources, and shared commitment. Global collaboration could collectively address storage and energy challenges.

The key question is how we can make energy consumption cleaner, faster, and more sustainable.

Lessons from Techritory and Beyond

6G, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, chips, and satellite networks are some of the digital industries that will shape Europe's technological identity beyond 2030, according to the Techritory panel in Riga.

Though it needs closer ties in semiconductors and cloud infrastructure, Europe is already in the forefront in some areas, such as sustainability frameworks and digital ethics.

The world cannot afford to choose between progress and preservation

Strategic investments over the next five years will be paramount. It includes supporting research in energy-efficient processors, promoting cross-border AI projects, and ensuring that data centres adopt renewable energy standards.

We are at an inflection point. The world cannot afford to choose between progress and preservation. The future depends on our ability to make both work together.

The Coveted Opportunities

Despite the current concerns in everyone's minds, the same intelligence driving AI innovation can also help solve the energy problem. AI can help predict energy consumption, optimise cooling systems, and even design greener data centres.

Some tech companies are already taking action. **Google's data centres** now use AI to reduce cooling energy by up to 40 per cent. Amazon, a leader in corporate renewable energy, reached its goal of matching 100% of its electricity consumption with renewable energy seven years ahead of its original 2030 target.



Google's data centres now use AI to reduce cooling energy by up to 40 per cent

It is now focusing on powering Amazon Web

Services (AWS) with 100% renewable energy.

There are also regional collaborations. In Northern Europe, for example, countries are working together to develop "green data corridors," connecting energy-efficient centres powered by wind and hydroelectric energy.

These efforts may sound small compared to global emissions, but every step towards efficiency is important.

Sometimes I feel we have gone backward in sustainability because of increased energy use. But let's not forget, it is all part of the journey. An arrow needs to go back before it goes forward.

The Road to 2026 and The Future

My key takeaway from the conversations at Techritory is that innovation is never linear. For every challenge, there is an opportunity to build something better. We are entering a decade in which sustainability needs to evolve from a slogan into a measurable standard.

If data centres are the engines of the digital world, then sustainability must be the oil that keeps them running smoothly. Without it, progress will eventually grind to a halt.

We need AI that learns not only from data but also from our values

AI will continue to transform industries, economies, and societies. But it must do so responsibly. We need AI that learns not only from data but also from our values. And that is a tough act to understand.

These are amazing times to be alive, and although the challenges are here to stay, so are the opportunities. Technology and nature are not enemies. They are partners in progress.

The goal is not to slow innovation but to shape it in a way that serves both humanity and the planet. As we enter this new phase of intelligent automation, can we create an AI-powered world that is also sustainable at its core?