Evaluating and Mitigating the Environmental Footprint of Cloud Computing Data Centers

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science

University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

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Fall 2023

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

Cloud computing has revolutionized our interaction with technology, offering great convenience and efficiency. This technological shift, powering services from email and social media to data storage and online streaming, has not only transformed the digital landscape but also brought significant environmental concerns to the forefront. The rapid expansion of cloud computing and the data centers that drive it have led to serious environmental issues.

Data centers, the backbone of cloud services, are now major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, with their impact on par with the aviation industry's carbon footprint. Consuming energy at a rate ten times higher per square meter than an average American home, these centers underscore the magnitude of the environmental challenge. The energy demands of cloud computing, accounting for 1.8% of U.S. electricity consumption, highlight the urgency of addressing these environmental concerns for a sustainable digital future.

Beyond energy consumption, cloud computing's environmental impact is further compounded by the issue of electronic waste (e-waste). Rapid technological advancements result in accelerated hardware discontinuance, leading to a growing e-waste problem. The global increase in e-waste, up by 21% in just five years, not only reflects technological progress but also points to a culture of rapid replacement. With projections suggesting a near doubling of global e-waste by 2030, the need for effective e-waste management becomes critical. As less than 20% of discarded electronic items are currently being recycled, addressing these environmental challenges, including water usage by data centers, is essential in achieving a balance between technological advancement and its environmental implications.

As the issue of the negative environmental effect is growing, we need to evaluate the process of how the cloud computing industry works and analyze what needs to be understood and changed to mitigate this issue. Similar industries such as the utilities and power sectors are

under far more intense regulation which highlights a lack of awareness regarding the effects of cloud computing. Due to this lack of awareness, this research paper aims to make these consequences that are invincible to the users, visible.

Problem Description: Rapid Growth in Cloud Computing Affects the Environment

Data centers powering cloud services, with their enormous energy consumption, pose a significant environmental challenge. They are similar to small cities in their energy demands, contributing substantially to greenhouse gas emissions, especially carbon dioxide. The carbon footprint of a single data center, exceeding that of the commercial aviation industry (Lavi, 2022), illustrates the gravity of the situation. This comparison is also shown against other industries in Figure 1 below, highlighting the urgency of implementing environmental regulations like those in well regulated industries.
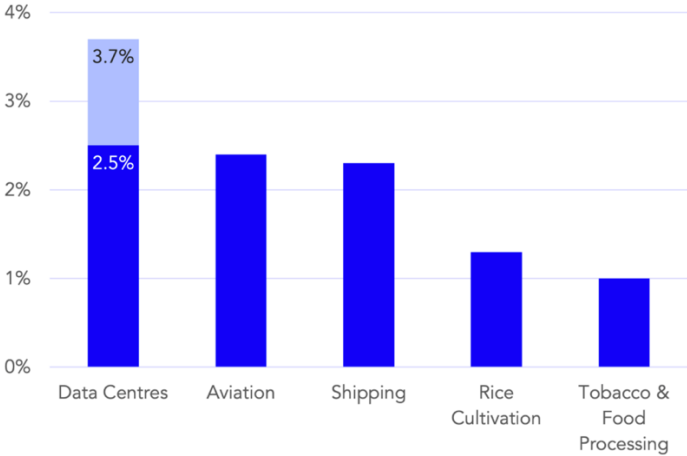

Figure 1: Share of Global CO2 Emissions Generated by Sector/Industry

This is a bar graph of CO2 Emissions in various commercial industries (Lavi, 2022)

Furthermore, the analysis of energy consumption in data centers, underscores the sheer magnitude of their power usage. The fact that these centers consume about 1,000 kWh per square

meter, which is ten times the energy consumption of a typical American home, highlights the colossal scale of the problem (Mahan, 2023). This excessive energy usage not only strains our existing energy infrastructure but also contributes significantly to carbon emissions, thus worsening the environmental crisis. Also, such levels of consumption from these huge operations emphasize the inefficiencies and the pressing need for sustainable energy solutions. Furthermore, cloud computing and data centers account for about 1.8% of U.S. electricity consumption and a substantial portion of tech companies' emissions (Pratt, 2023). Electricity is used in hundreds of different ways in the US but to learn that almost 2% of the U.S. energy being used by data centers shows the impact that they have on energy usage.

However, the environmental impact of cloud computing extends beyond energy consumption. The rapid technological advancements in the industry lead to increasing amounts of electronic waste (e-waste). The surge in e-waste, highlighted by the 53.6Mt produced globally in 2019 (Collins, 2020), reflects a culture of rapid replacement and poses a substantial environmental threat. The projection of global e-waste nearly doubling by 2030 further emphasizes the need for effective e-waste management. The fact that less than 20% of discarded electrical items are properly recycled (Walbank, 2022) and the lost economic potential of unrecycled materials, valued at US $57 billion (Collins, 2020), highlight a systemic failure in managing this waste.

In addition to energy and e-waste concerns, water consumption by data centers is a critical issue. Data centers, to operate at optimal performance, have become massive consumers of water, specifically for their cooling systems. A single large data center can consume between 1 million to 5 million gallons of water daily—volumes comparable to the water needs of towns housing tens of thousands of residents (Osaka, 2023). This paints a picture of how our digital

activities could be depriving communities of water resources. These consumption patterns have positioned data centers among the top water-consuming commercial industries in the U.S., with their 2018 water usage estimated at a staggering 513 million cubic meters (Osaka, 2023). But what makes these figures particularly alarming is the broader context of global water scarcity. The United Nations predicts that by 2025, half of the global population could be living in regions struggling with water stress (Zhang, 2022). In such a scenario, the water-intensive operations of data centers can worsen local water shortages, potentially depriving communities of essential water supplies. This is not just a matter of resource allocation; it's about striking a balance between technological progress and environmental stewardship. Furthermore, major tech players like Google have demonstrated the scale of this issue, with their global data centers consuming 4.3 billion gallons of water annually—enough to irrigate 29 sizable golf courses (Clancy, 2022). Such levels of consumption can also contribute to thermal pollution in nearby water bodies, endangering aquatic life and hurting local ecosystems. As we move ahead in the digital age, integrating water conservation strategies into cloud computing operations is no longer just an option, it's a vital step for ensuring a sustainable future.

Compounding these challenges is the discrete nature of data centers, mostly operated by private companies. This causes a lack of transparency and comprehensive data regarding their total environmental impact. The extent of the problems, whether it is in energy consumption, e-waste production, or water usage, is not fully visible as individual companies often withhold detailed information. This lack of openness prevents a complete understanding of the scale and specifics of the environmental impact. Moreover, there is no single entity monitoring the cumulative effects of these data centers on the environment. Without a systematic approach to evaluating and addressing the overarching environmental implications, efforts to mitigate these

impacts remain fragmented and less effective. This gap in oversight and coordination highlights the need for a more integrated and transparent approach to managing the environmental footprint of cloud computing, ensuring that technological advancements do not come at an unsustainable environmental cost.

Methods: Uncovering the Negative Environmental Effects

In order to comprehensively explore and understand the environmental consequences associated with the operation of data centers and their energy-intensive operations, this research adopts an intellectual framework rooted in sustainability principles. This approach not only allows us to scratch the surface but also dives deep into the different complexities of environmental impacts brought about by the rapid expansion of cloud computing. The sustainability lens, in particular, emerges as the keystone of our research methodology, serving as a pivotal tool that offers a structured and comprehensive approach to dissecting the myriad dimensions of this issue.

In emphasizing the 'sustainability lens' as our framework, the importance in evaluating the long-term effects of data center operations is acknowledged. This perspective enables us to view the issue through the lens of overall sustainability, considering not just the immediate impacts but the broader, long-term consequences on the environment. By focusing on the 'big picture' of sustainability, we gain insights into how current practices might shape future ecological and economic landscapes. This long-range view is crucial in understanding the full extent of the environmental challenges posed by cloud computing and in developing strategies that ensure sustainability in the long run. It provides a comprehensive framework that not only addresses current concerns but also anticipates future developments, ensuring that our research

and proposed solutions are forward-looking and sustainable in the broader context of environmental preservation.

As we continue to operate within the framework of sustainability, data centers naturally emerge as the focus of our analysis. These facilities, housing the servers and equipment that constitute the backbone of cloud computing, demand our critical attention. Guided by the sustainability lens, we evaluate key concepts, such as the electricity consumption of data centers, which plays a pivotal role in assessing their environmental impact. This comprehensive view also encompasses a detailed examination of the release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases resulting from data center operations, recognizing the significant contribution of these emissions to the global climate change issue. Additionally, we closely scrutinize the management and sourcing of water for cooling systems within data centers, fully understanding the profound environmental implications of this critical aspect.

In addition, with our sustainability-focused framework, another crucial aspect of our research methodology lies in our data collection and analysis techniques. To unravel the different dimensions of the environmental consequences linked to data centers, we will employ a multi-pronged data gathering strategy. This will involve a comprehensive review of existing literature, studies, and reports on the subject. By tapping into a wide array of sources, we aim to collect a diverse range of perspectives and insights, providing a robust foundation for our analysis.

Furthermore, we could conduct surveys and interviews with professionals working in the data center and cloud computing industry. This primary data collection process will help us gain first-hand insights into the day-to-day operations, challenges, and innovations within the sector. By engaging with experts and professionals, we will capture real-world experiences, opinions, and practices that may not be fully represented in existing literature. These interviews and

surveys will add depth into our research, allowing us to paint a more detailed picture of the environmental impacts associated with data centers and the practical solutions being explored within the industry.

In addition to the methods outlined, this research incorporates the concept of 'Engineering as Social Experimentation' as an additional methodological approach (Martin & Schinzinger, 84). This perspective views the technological advancements in cloud computing and data center operations not just as technical endeavors, but as experiments within the social realm. This method asks critical questions about the broader societal and regulatory impacts of these technologies against other industries with similar impact on the environment. A key question under this method is, 'To what extent does the way utility companies are regulated affect the environmental sustainability of data centers? By comparing the way utility companies are regulated to current data centers regulation, insights can be gathered as to what one group is doing to get a certain result, this is how the contrasts within standard experiments is seen.

Incorporating these methods into our research approach enhances the coverage of our study. By combining the sustainability lens with a robust data collection strategy, we aim to shed light on both the theoretical and practical aspects of the environmental consequences tied to data centers and cloud computing. This holistic approach empowers us to not only explore the theoretical foundation but also to ground our research in real-world scenarios and experiences, making our study more insightful and impactful.

In conclusion, our adoption of the sustainability lens sets the stage for a research mission that not only explores the various environmental consequences related to cloud computing but also provides a framework for informed decision-making and the formulation of actionable solutions. The urgency of understanding these environmental impacts and the practical

implications that arise are vital in steering the future course of cloud technology towards a more sustainable and ecologically conscious path.

Results – Relevant Data Center Modifications to Reduce Environmental Impact of Cloud Computing

The infrastructure supporting cloud computing, particularly data centers, is at the forefront of several severe environmental issues, including excessive water consumption, high energy usage, and the generation of substantial electronic waste (e-waste). These issues underscore the need for informed policy decisions and corporate practices within the technology industry, aimed at mitigating these environmental impacts.

A critical finding of this research is the contrast between the regulatory oversight of utility companies and the lack of similar oversight for cloud computing data centers. Public Utility Commissions (PUCs) serve as regulatory bodies for utility companies, focusing significantly on mitigating environmental impacts (EPA, 2010). PUCs ensure that utilities provide reliable and affordable services while adhering to strict environmental standards. They regulate the environmental effects of utilities by overseeing resource planning and mandating the adoption of clean energy standards, such as renewable energy and energy efficiency resource standards. PUCs also manage energy efficiency programs and play a crucial role in integrating distributed generation sources like solar and wind power, significantly contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

On the other hand, cloud computing data centers currently operate with minimal to no similar regulatory oversight. This absence limits the uniform application of environmental standards across the cloud computing sector and highlights the need for establishing a dedicated regulatory body. Such a regulatory agency is crucial in setting and enforcing sustainable

practices within data centers, thereby playing a vital role in reducing their environmental

footprint and aligning their operations with global sustainability goals.

Additionally, the research identifies the implementation of energy-efficient modifications

that can be implemented in data centers to reduce their environmental impact. The Hot

Aisle/Cold Aisle Layout, as seen in Figure 2, is a strategic modification that significantly

enhances cooling efficiency (Energystar, 2023). By organizing server racks to prevent the mixing

of hot and cold air, data centers can achieve cooling savings between 10% to 35%, a substantial

reduction in energy consumption. Similarly, the implementation of advanced energy-efficient

Uninterruptable Power Supply (UPS) systems, with efficiency ratings between 92% and 95%,

can lead to remarkable reductions in energy losses, translating into significant cost and energy

savings (Energystar, 2023). These modifications not only contribute to operational efficiency but

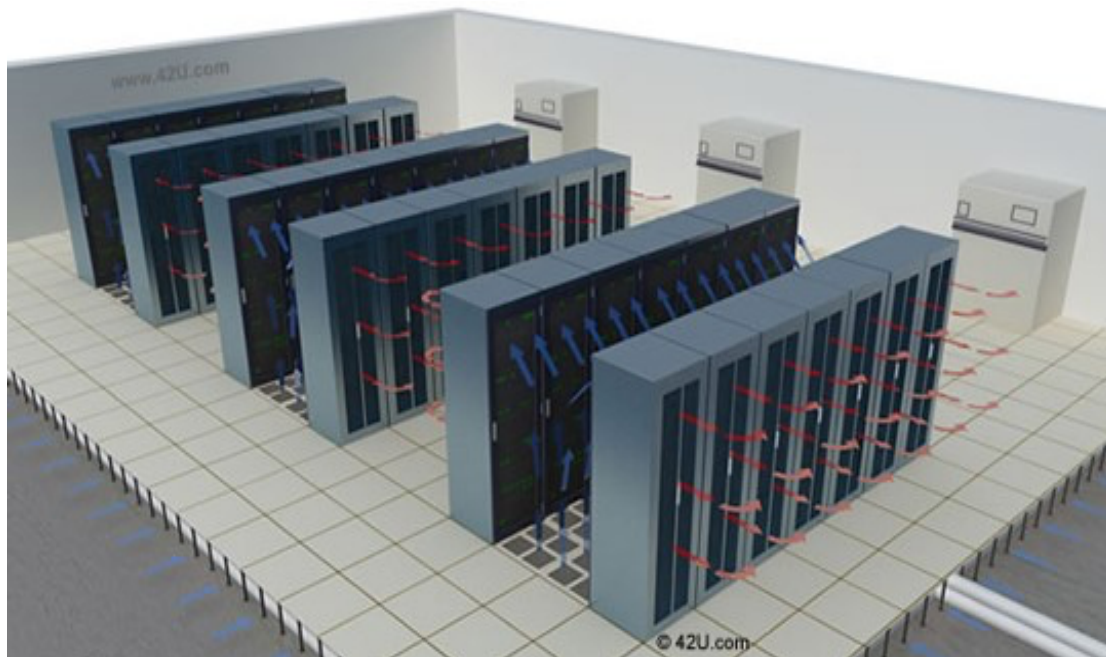also help in reducing the overall carbon footprint of data centers.

Figure 2: Hot Aisle/Cold Aisle Layout Diagram

This is an illustration of the aisles in data centers separated in terms of hot and cold to reduce energy
consumption (Mahan, 2023)

Additionally, the research highlights the substantial water usage of data centers due to their cooling systems. Addressing this issue is crucial, as it has a significant impact on local water resources and ecosystems. Innovative solutions are needed to reduce water consumption in these facilities.

The generation of electronic waste (e-waste) is also a significant environmental concern linked to data centers. The fast-paced evolution of technology leads to the frequent replacement and disposal of outdated hardware components, contributing to the mounting e-waste challenge. Implementing a more effective direct-to-data-center recycling program could revolutionize the lifecycle management of e-waste, enabling more efficient reuse of components and preventing the unnecessary disposal of potentially usable materials. This approach would not only reduce e-waste but also minimize the environmental footprint of data centers.

As this research concludes, it becomes evident that transforming cloud computing into a more sustainable practice is not just a corporate responsibility but a vital step towards environmental preservation. The implementation of modifications like regulatory agencies, the Hot Aisle/Cold Aisle Layout, energy-efficient UPS systems, along with strategies to reduce water usage, are essential in the movement towards a greener technology sector. The significance of these changes in the context of global efforts to combat climate change and environmental degradation cannot be overstated. By aligning cloud computing with environmental sustainability, the industry can support the world's information needs without compromising the health of our planet, ensuring its preservation for future generations.

Conclusion

The negative environmental impacts of cloud computing, particularly in terms of excessive water usage, high energy consumption, and the generation of electronic waste, are undeniable. This research has brought to light that while the rapid advancement of technology has captivated users worldwide, it has simultaneously showed the substantial environmental consequences. Many of these data centers operate privately, obscuring the full extent of their environmental impact. This situation is further compounded by the lack of a dedicated regulatory agency specifically overseeing cloud data centers, unlike the more strictly regulated utility companies. This research emphasizes the urgency of establishing such regulatory bodies to ensure environmental accountability in cloud computing.

The findings highlight the necessity of adopting a more environmentally responsible approach to cloud computing. Implementing strategic modifications such as specific regulatory agency, Hot Aisle/Cold Aisle Layout, energy-efficient Uninterruptable Power Supply (UPS) systems, and efficient water management strategies in data centers can significantly reduce the environmental effects. Furthermore, embracing server consolidation, efficient data storage practices, a transition to renewable energy sources, and responsible disposal practices can greatly minimize the industry's ecological footprint.

While we cannot change the past, the lessons learned from this research are vital for informing future policy decisions and corporate practices. They lay the groundwork for a transition towards sustainability, significantly reducing the environmental impact of cloud computing. It's a call to action for the entire industry to align its objectives with those of environmental safekeeping. The time to implement these changes is now, and it is imperative for the well-being of our planet. As we progress into a new era of technological advancement, it is

essential that we do so with a detailed awareness of our environmental responsibilities, ensuring

the preservation and protection of our planet for future generations.

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