AI Basics for the Curious – Spring 2026

Session 5 of 6: The Hidden Cost of AI: Power, Impact & Responsibility **Environmental Systems, Energy Use, and Real-World Community Impact** **April 14, 2026**	
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Today's Class

- The Real Cost of AI: What's happening behind the scenes
- Environmental impact: energy, water, and infrastructure
- Community impact: how AI affects real people and neighborhoods
- Tradeoffs: benefits vs. consequences
- Who benefits—and who pays?

Why This Video Was Chosen

This video helps us move beyond the idea that AI is "invisible."
It shows that artificial intelligence relies on real physical systems—including energy, water, and large-scale infrastructure—and that these systems can have direct impacts on communities. Rather than presenting AI as simply good or bad, the video introduces a more important idea:

👉 ***AI is a tradeoff system*** 👉 ***And its impact depends on how it is used and who bears the cost***

The Big Picture of AI Impact

Artificial intelligence is not just software—it is part of a much larger system. That system includes:

- ***Massive data centers (warehouse-sized computing facilities)***
- ***Electrical grids supplying constant power***
- ***Water systems used for cooling***
- ***Supply chains for building hardware***

As AI use grows, these systems expand—sometimes rapidly—into real-world environments.

Key Ideas to Watch For

- ***AI is physical, not abstract — it depends on real-world resources***
- ***Scale matters — billions of small actions create large impact***
- ***Usage is now the biggest driver of energy demand***

- ***Data centers are expanding into local communities***
- ***Tradeoffs exist between innovation, cost, and environmental impact***

Five Questions to Keep in Mind

1. Where does AI actually operate—and what resources does it use?
2. How does scale change the impact of AI systems?
3. Who is affected when data centers are built near communities?
4. What are the benefits of AI—and what are the costs?
5. Who should be responsible for those costs?

Major Concepts Covered

• Data centers are the physical foundation of AI
• Energy demand and electrical grid strain
• Water usage for cooling large computing systems
• Community-level effects (noise, light, infrastructure, cost)
• Economic benefits vs. environmental and social tradeoffs
• System-level responsibility vs. individual use

Key Takeaways

• AI is **not invisible** — it relies on real infrastructure
• AI affects **real people and places**, not just technology
• The largest impact comes from **scale and frequency of use**
• AI is a **tradeoff tool** — it can help or harm depending on use
• The core issue is **system design and responsibility**, not just individual behavior

Session 6: AI and Society — What Comes Next? Can We Best Guess AI's Future?

In our *NEXT: Last Session (April 28, 2026),* ***Session 6 -*** we will explore:

• The future of AI in everyday life
• How AI may shape jobs, communication, and decision-making
• Risks, opportunities, and ethical questions
• What role can individuals and communities play moving forward

Final Thought

👉 *AI doesn't just live in the cloud—it lives next door to someone.*