

Funmilola Fadairo: [00:00] My name is Funmilola Fadairo, and I'm working on an AI rhetoric podcast and interview series. And here with me, I have Doctor Edwards. So please can you sort of like give me a more broad introduction of yourself, your university affiliation and awesome work that you're doing that I'm itching to say by myself, but I'll just let you.

Dustin Edwards: [00:27] Okay. Well, thank you so much for the opportunity to share. My name is Dustin Edwards. I am an associate professor at San Diego State University in the Writing and Rhetoric Studies department. I'm the director of the writing center here on campus. My work broadly looks at the kind of environmental implications of digital technologies. And I recently published a book on that topic. The book is called *Enduring Digital Damage Rhetorical Reckonings for Planetary Survival*. I think we'll be talking about some of the themes of the book and some more recent work in this interview, so I'm looking forward to it.

Funmilola Fadairo: [01:17] Yeah. Thank you so much. I read your book for like what for one of the classes I took and it was like a huge highlight. And we read it alongside *Empire of AI*. So it was like a very good flow from like your book to like *Empire of AI*. I was like, yes, it gave such a very good hack. So I'm really grateful for the work that you're doing. That sort of gives us a foundational sense of what it means for like digital technology to be material, but more from like a rhetorical perspective.

Dustin Edwards: [01:44] Well, thank you for saying that's kind of you. Thank you.

Funmilola Fadairo: [01:46] So moving on to the questions that I have for you. So my first question would be like the inevitability of AI is usually posed as a major motivation for building infrastructure, such as data centers, especially at an accelerated rate. Do you consider this clamor to be misguided in its framing, and if so, why do you think it's misguided?

Dustin Edwards: Mhm. Yeah. This is such an interesting question. I think it's true that many of the kind of big players in AI. So if we think of like the Googles, the OpenAI's, Microsoft's meta AI, etc., have really kind of used this moment to really explode their infrastructure footprints. And of course, many of these companies have already had data center infrastructure and lots of it, but I think generative AI really kind of sped up the scale and scope of data centers. They're getting bigger as we know, they're requiring more computational power. They're requiring more energy but also like, you know, not only has the scale and scope changed, but I think the narrative has changed as well. So a lot of the big tech companies, I think once had pretty substantial sustainability goals or, you know, they at least played kind of lip service to sustainability. They often built data centers with a lot of renewable energy. So when I was doing work on my book, that was one of the major narratives that they were telling. But I think this generative moment has kind of thrown a lot of those promises out the window. Many of the kind of new massive hyper scale projects that are coming online with natural gas or other fossil fuels. And often as I understand it, these sources of energy are kind of both faster to source. And they're also just

more kind of consistently reliable, which is why they're wanting him for kind of winning the AI arms race.

But to your question about, you know, whether or not this build out is misguided, I think that my answer would be yes. I don't think that's a surprise, but in my recent research, I've been interviewing community coalitions, opposing data centers. They're often told by developers or by government officials and sometimes even like institutions like colleges and universities that AI is, you know, the future and that, you know, by building AI infrastructure in a certain place that that community is going to kind of ensure their economic viability for the future.

You know, but one of my participants, I think he said something to the effect of this is a battle of narratives. And developers and AI companies want to make us feel like this massive infrastructure is not only inevitable but also desirable. But I think, you know, many communities are refusing this narrative. They're entering into that battle of narratives and they're, they're not buying it. Right. And ultimately, why I think a lot of what's going on right now is depressing. I think that, that, that's hopeful that there are, people who are refusing and, and saying like, this is misguided, right? And we need to pay attention to that. So, I think that that's helpful.

Funmilola Fadairo: [05:43] Thank you. Thank you so much. I really love the quotes that you shared. It's from one of your participants that he talked about how it's a battle of narratives. That's, that's such a very profound quote that you sort of captured in your interview.

Dustin Edwards: [05:56] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Funmilola Fadairo: [05:58] Moving on to my next question. So in your book, *Enduring Digital Damage*, that I read, you present stories that centered on material effects of our digital connectivity through themes that focus on land, copper, water, and the adverse effects of settler colonialism. Like you already mentioned that this is a battle of narratives. There are narratives around like artificial general intelligence, how that AI tools would either match human intelligence or supersede human intelligence and replace jobs. And there's also another narrative of like, maybe sometimes even on data centers about how AI will create new jobs. What do you think is the role of the counter narratives that you have in your book and your research in sort of dismantling these existing promises, and do you even think they should be dismantled in the first place?

Dustin Edwards: [06:50] Yeah, yeah. I really love this question about jobs and labor, mainly because I think it's making me think about my book in different ways, you know, or it's about ways maybe that the framing of the book can be put to different questions. So that's exciting because the book does exactly what you say. It looks at the narratives we've inherited about digital technologies and then kind of tries to crack those narratives open and try to, you know, think differently, or make different kinds of stories. And the book is especially about, you know, how cloud based technologies are actively creating harm to particular environments and

communities. So I think counter narratives can be helpful to the question of labor as well. As you mentioned, I think, you know, the grand narrative that people like Sam Altman or Elon Musk are pushing often revolves around what they, you know, sometimes they call it the the age of abundance. You know, they're making their pitches to make or scale up to artificial general intelligence. They want to envision often times like a world beyond work. I think sometimes is what they're trying to sell. And this might be a world where maybe people receive a universal basic income. I know that's something that Elon Musk has talked a lot about.

And that, you know, everything will maybe be at our fingertips because kind of the magic of AI and, you know, I think so there's like no friction, there's no conflict, there's only kind of time to do what we want. So that's kind of the grand narrative, but I think it doesn't take much to see that this is a hopeful projection. And it and it kind of starts to fall apart. Right. And we can think about all the underpaid or in many cases, unpaid work that goes into the making of AI systems. So you mentioned Karen Hao's book at the beginning of the interview, but if you've read that book on Empire of AI, you've likely read all about the workers who get paid very little to kind of fine tune AI chatbots and the answers that we might receive. And from that book, we've learned these really sobering stories about how workers have experienced PTSD, or other kinds of psychological trauma as part of doing this work.

Funmilola Fadairo: [09:33] Mhm.

Dustin Edwards: [09:34] So those are definitely some counter narratives worth amplifying. I think we're getting that in kind of journalism and books like Karen Hao's book. I also wanted to just, I was thinking in response to your question, something else I might say, which is about AI robots. I have a future publication with Mel Hogan and Zane Cooper. It's just this little piece that we did together but it's called the Futureless future of AI theater and in that little article, we talk a lot about the kind of aesthetics of AI humanoid robots. You know, those kinds of robots that are designed to do maybe, household labor or even more complex tasks as maybe like the tech advances. But what a lot of the kind of public launches of these things has revealed. And you can think of like the Tesla robots as an example here is that the robots are often being controlled by real people from a distance.

So it's kind of like a show or a performance. And I think we hear this about Waymo vehicles as well, right? That there seems to their position is these kinds of autonomous driving vehicles, but oftentimes there's somebody that is controlling parts of them, often in the global South or somewhere where people are paid not much. So in that article, Mel had this great idea to theorize AI robots as what she helped us call AI theater and this is kind of a nod to security theater, which is a term that people have talked about that often happens at airports. You know, so in the case of airport security, it's often a performance. It's something that we all kind of take part in but when people and especially marginalized, marginalized people are kind of routinely surveilled or stopped, at airports, do they really feel safer? And that's kind of what that security theater term helps us understand.

And I think AI robots are kind of a performance theater too. It's not and kind of it's more kind of like an in your face spectacle or performance. But the labor, the materiality, the kind of structural underpinnings of that performance are all happening elsewhere. So that performance is being staged elsewhere is what we, how we phrase it in the article. So it might be in a data center, it might be in a power plant, or it might be on a kind of underpaid worker's computer screen, right? That they're helping control that robot and so on. Right. And so I think these are also counter stories, counter narratives that we need right now, especially when that kind of grand narrative being told and sold to us feels so frictionless and kind of utopic in a way. And also just one last thing about labor. and that's, you know, I think there's a lot that you could say right now about how generative AI is changing labor and kind of everyday jobs. You know, I work with some MA students right now who are professional writers and they're seeing it at their workplaces in small and big ways how companies are requiring a certain amount of generative AI usage. And that's really shifting how teams operate, how revision and reviews take place. Right. And so on. So there's a lot that's happening right now in these kinds of professional writing examples. And I think, those are also maybe counter narratives to pay attention to. The labor maybe isn't getting easier, but it's changing and to kind of pay attention to that, to what's happening in that space as well.

Funmilola Fadairo: [14:10] Thank you so much. That is such a very packed response. And it's sort of like bringing up more like questions in my head. And I think the one you talked about, your students, it just made me think about like the impact of like AI on the job market, like expectations are on like students, professional writers, and even sort of like the roles that even teachers of like professional writing rhetoric classes. What kind of responsibilities do they have? They have students on one hand who need some sort of AI expertise to get certain kinds of jobs. And on the other hand, there are data centers, water, land, colonial, so settler colonialism, underpaid jobs. So how do we sort of like manage this kind of tension between trying to ensure that students get the professional skills that they need, but also like the awareness, like, yeah, they're like implications to what you're like using in this, like your job, your everyday sort of interactions, or even an AI generated script they told you to edit.

Dustin Edwards: [15:20] Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, I mean, I feel like this is the tension, this is what a lot of people right now are having to wrestle with. And for me, I think a lot about it, I go back to what I think education is all about. I, I don't think that we should be in the business of creating capitalists or creating people to just join the workforce. I think that that is obviously part of today's education, but I also want to think about what it means to, you know, produce citizens who can live in the world and, and be part of critical thinking and do all that kind of work too. And I think that's what I want to be focusing on. So I do want to be focusing on the awareness piece. I do want to be thinking about how we can bring in narratives and journalism and all sorts of critical work that thinks about some of these questions about labor and materiality, while not sidestepping the real realities about what it means to enter the job market right now and having conversations about that too.

But I do think, students are, they were in this really interesting moment, right? I think we all of the commencement speeches that have happened this season and, and people just booing, like when AI is uncritically invoked, I think students are realizing that there's a tension there too, that they're being told that AI is the future and they need to learn some of these skills. But then also seeing reports that like job numbers are down and big. You know, like software, or big tech companies are laying off lots of people and not hiring. Those salaries aren't as good and the work isn't as good. So it's like this, it's this tension that they're working out too. Yeah, I don't have like a real perfect answer there, but just to say that, like staying with that tension and working through it and having conversations about it, I think is something that we can do right now. And then maybe two, like the bubble will burst soon and, we won't be having to spend so much time on some of these questions in the future too.

Funmilola Fadairo: [17:42] I definitely love what you said about how education should not be in the business of creating capitalists? Yeah, that's very profound. Moving on to my next question. So your current research, which I've heard you sort of talk about on two different occasions, seems to focus on community resistance to building data centers, specifically in the US as a researcher. What are you observing in how communities are championing this move, and how is the collaboration process sort of been with you working with these communities, interviewing them instead of getting out there, working around these very situations that affect their lives so deeply?

Dustin Edwards: [18:23] Yeah, yeah. Remind me of the collaboration piece when I finish my response, because I want to be sure to touch on that because I don't know if I will. At first, but yeah, so this is the project that I'm kind of undertaking right now as we speak, interviewing lots of coalitions across the country. So, different states. I've talked to people in New Mexico, I've talked to people in California, in Oklahoma and Ohio and with plans to reach out to other folks too. And I'm learning so much in these interviews. And so I'm kind of almost just sitting on it, not wanting to push it out too quickly and just thinking about what stories I'm being told. But I think I've seen some communities feel or see some wins as in like, a community took on a data center project. They protested it. They did all sorts of work, like organizing work, and then maybe the project was delayed, or maybe it was stopped or pulled altogether. And those are very exciting moments. And I've actually only seen it once in my interviews. So I'm seeing a lot of losses as well. You know, we can put that in quotes, but so a community does all of that work and maybe even more, but then maybe they're unsuccessful at stopping a project from being approved and eventually built.

And I said, put that in quotes because I think even in those cases, what might be perceived as a loss, I'm also seeing communities not stop organizing, and not stop, you know, thinking about ways to slow down the process or, or stop another data center from coming in. And interestingly, I think there's a lot of ways that community and solidarity is being built in this

moment. And that's exciting. So, you know, the common uniting factor for these folks might be being against this data center that's coming in, but then the community will also kind of come together in other ways to think about maybe what they want to support economically, or what they want to build. And so one example that I've been able to follow a little bit is, and I mentioned this in the two places where you heard me talk about this, but after, a data center was approved in Dona Ana County, New Mexico, and this is called Project Jupiter. And it's a massive, data center project that the tenants for that project is going to be Oracle and OpenAI in the southern part of New Mexico. After this was approved and it was very controversial, committee community members met and they formed what they called the fight. Chihuahuan Desert Extraction Coalition.

And what I've seen from these folks is that they're still organizing against the data center. So they're having all sorts of meetings about it and calling people together. But then they're also doing other things like holding political education meetings. They're hosting, like writing workshops and events where they're kind of imagining or thinking together about what they want. I've seen them kind of make posts and, like social media posts about, what it means to participate in mutual aid and kind of solidarity. So this data center project was maybe something that brought them together, but then they're going on to other causes as well. And I think that that's pretty exciting. So yeah, to me, even though this organizing was kind of brought about by something that was maybe, you know, environmentally disastrous or health impacts has a lot of negative impacts. The community is coming together to really kind of think creatively about the future that they want to build. So I think there's lots of reasons to feel despair right now about this particular moment with so much data centers being built and how it's being steamrolled through the process.

But when I look at something like the Chihuahuan Desert Extraction Coalition, I think there's lots of reasons to feel hope too. And like that there's something that could come out of this that is positive. So that's exciting to me. And then I think I could talk about the collaboration process about what that's looked like for me. Yeah. So I mean, eventually, or to begin with, it was more like, I'm just doing this research. I want to understand a little bit about how it is that these coalitions are organizing. And just doing interviews with various people asking if I could see some of the documents that they use to maybe get people involved. And so at first it was just, yeah, hearing their kind of stories doing these interviews. But I've had opportunities to work with certain people more closely. So, after some of these interviews was able to invite some coalitions to my campus at San Diego State University and they were able to give some public remarks about what it means to have a data center being built in their backyard. And I think that that's been pretty important for my particular campus, which is branded as an AI powered university, to have some community members come in and say like, this is what it means to build an AI powered university. Here's the material consequences of that. Here's the environmental consequences of that. And so I've been trying to kind of stay in, in closer contact with, with some members that especially that are more, closer to me geographically. And then more recently, we've been able to get a grant here at Sdsu, uh, through my college, to put

together a public archive of stories, kind of voices from the borderlands of, of, of what it means to build data center infrastructure. And so it's going to continue, it's going to be a two year project, and we're going to be able to continue to be in dialogue with the communities that are are facing this extraction and hopefully, you know, like pay them for their time and their expertise and participate in like participatory action research where they're kind of guiding the questions and they have the research agenda. Not, not just me. Right. So that we're at the beginning stages of that. So I'm not sure what's going to kind of come from that. But that is how the collaboration for this particular group, this particular community, what that's going to kind of look like hopefully going forward.

Funmilola Fadairo: [25:54] Yeah. Thank you so much and congratulations on the grant.

Oh thank you. Yeah, we're very excited about it. Yeah. It's a group of researchers here at Sdsu. I'm the PI on the grant, but there's all sorts of people from geography. Um, library. And also my department rhetoric and writing studies. So it's exciting to bring all those folks together. Mhm.

Funmilola Fadairo: [26:20] And it's also like interdisciplinary from what you've just mentioned.

Dustin Edwards: [26:23] Yeah, yeah. It's very exciting.

Funmilola Fadairo: [26:26] Yeah. I remember from like your keynote speech you mentioned, not in my backyard or anyone else's backyard. That was a very quote I couldn't get out of my head. And while you were talking about the coalitions, I sort of thought about what that meant in material sense. We didn't like some of like the coalitions and the communities that you've been meeting up with. It's very incredible work and public archives on those stories. They're more important now than ever before.

Dustin Edwards: [26:55] Yeah, yeah, I one hundred percent agree. And I think like we're getting quite a bit of journalism work on this, but I do think it's kind of it's more flashy or it's just more like a reporting on what's happening. And it's not really super in depth or staying with like one thing we want to do with this public archive is tell the longer history of extraction in these places, because it's not just I mean, one of the participants calls it the next chapter in extraction. Like this isn't just something that just randomly happened, right? It's these data centers have been placed in these areas for a reason. And so telling that deeper history is something we want to do with this project.

Funmilola Fadairo: [27:37] Yeah. It's just also making me think about how this is also like a, I don't know if a counter narrative might be the right word to like more like extremist framings of like community coalitions and sort of push back to like data centers. Because I know you shared one of like this article recently about how like more like pushbacks against AI are considered more like extremists, like, yeah, yeah, activities and all of that.

Dustin Edwards: [28:00] Yeah, yeah. I hope that, yeah, this is, it could be. Yeah, a counter to that. Like, how is this violent and extremist where it's almost like the, the people pushing AI is more the violent and extremist that's happening. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Funmilola Fadairo: [28:21] Thank you so much. So to my last question, so, within digital rhetoric research on data centers and material infrastructure seems underexplored. What kind of work would you like to see more in the context of like AI and data centers within digital rhetoric specifically? Also, do you have any recommendations?

Dustin Edwards: [28:41] Yeah. Yeah, no, I think you're, I think you're right. Like there's certainly room for more work in this area. But I know you have done some excellent work recently, with the digital rhetoric collaborative. And I think there's other folks often, kind of early career folks. I'm thinking, Hannah Hopkins, her dissertation, she was at UT Austin. Now she's at Georgia State University. She worked a little bit on data centers. I think there are other folks at UT Austin doing similar work. Will Flores, who's at UNC Charlotte, has done some work in this area too, and I think is writing a book on some of these kinds of questions. So I think there are some touchstones in the field. And I hope that just more and more work will start to come out. But yeah, I'll say I think there are a few different routes that people can take. And then I'm sure there's even more and I'm very excited to see what might happen in the future. But I think one is more kind of community driven community literacy work. I think that could be very rich.

You know, how are communities using writing and communication to challenge the AI industry on a local level? I've even seen communities try to organize without big tech, right? Because they're realizing that that that's so implicated in what they're doing. So thinking about ways to maybe, you know, organize in person on the ground, that sort of thing. There's, there's lots of work to be done there. And then I also think a lot about what it means for rhetoric and writing scholars to maybe be part of this work, you know, especially if they're asked to do so, if they're trusted. So in talks lately, I've been kind of gesturing back toward Ellen Cushman's article, that I think she wrote in the nineties, it's called the rhetorician as an agent of social change. But in that article, which is like a fantastic article, she's arguing that our kind of training, our expertise, our background, really equips us to intervene in maybe political contexts. And I think a lot about how we can maybe work with communities to kind of both document damage and resistance and data center development. So I'm hoping you might see that. That's kind of part of what's inspiring that public archive project that I just talked about.

But I think, you know, this is one example in this part of the country, but there are so many other communities that I think, this kind of approach could be really useful. So that's one, and then I think another route, and I've seen this a little bit at conferences and actually in an article that I reviewed that I hope gets published. We'll see. I don't know what the other reviewer said. But I think this is to think about data centers like harms, from a more multi-sensory perspective. So like, how can we represent and attune ourselves to say the sound of a data center, right? Because if you've been near one or if you heard reports of one, there's often this really low

frequency hum that is emitted from a data center that sometimes you can't even perceive, but it's like there in the background and that hum is given us, you know, it's, it's given people chronic health problems, headaches, these sorts of things. But, but I think, you know, attuning to that thinking about sound rhetoric, sonic rhetoric, right.

There's a dimension there that I think we can definitely tap into. And then relatedly, like, how can we capture the light or the pollution that is emitted from the data center, the air pollution? There's been a lot of interesting things with like infrared cameras that look at what a data centers and what they're emitting. So I think there's a kind of rich, multi-modal, multi-sensory kind of stories that that rhetoricians can think about composing. So I would love to see a digital book on, on data centers and rhetoric. I think that would be very interesting and exciting. And then one final thing I'll say is, and this is really kind of in my book, and, and some subsequent publications, but I think there's a lot of work that can be done on the kind of supply chain of data centers.

So kind of all the extractive conditions that allow a data center to be a data center. So the making of chips and hardware, you know, the mining of earth materials, the energy that it takes to power a data center, the water it takes and so on. And what I think, so my book is very focused on one particular place. It's focused on New Mexico. I make the case for why I want to make that the focus. But I do think that there's a lot of work that can be done more from a transnational perspective. And I think, you know, there's lots that can be said about maybe the uneven conditions of harm that are felt throughout the globe, for this build out of cloud based AI infrastructure. And I think that that tension is only going to be exacerbated in the, in the coming years. And to pay attention to that, I think is super, super important.

Funmilola Fadairo: [34:28] Thank you so much. Thank you. While you were talking, I was thinking about this part in your book where you talked about going to a New Mexico data center yourself and not being able to like get into the building or even like get. Yeah, I got a picture. Yeah. So there's so much like opacity around like data center work. And I see that most of your recommendations are towards sort of like pulling out that veil and sort of making things more clearer, more glaring for people to see what is actually going on behind those closed doors. So it just made me think about that particular part in your book.

Dustin Edwards: [35:08] Oh thank you. Yeah. That's a great way to kind of sum up what I think we should be doing. Absolutely.

Funmilola Fadairo: [35:14] Thank you so much. This has been a very fruitful, fruitful conversation. And I got to hear so many like, fruitful perspectives, ideas that you were just like sharing from your book and your work. And I, and I've always said it, and I'll say it again, your work is very instrumental in such great, amazing work. That's sort of paving ways for people to sort of enter this conversation within the digital rhetoric field. And that's something I'm very grateful for. Thank you so much for your time. Very kind. I very, very much appreciate it.

Dustin Edwards: [35:46] It's great to hear. Thank you so much for your time and your attention to my work. I really appreciate it. Thank you so much. Yeah.