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Information technology — Artificial intelligence — Environmental sustainability aspects of AI systems

Technologies de l'information — Intelligence artificielle — Aspects de durabilité environnementale des systèmes d'IA

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Foreword

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Introduction

Unprecedentedly large and ever-growing deep learning models, large language models, natural language understanding networks and generative AI applications require vast data storage capacities, take weeks to train, are running continuously and require a lot of compute power as well as memory to load the models. And once completed they consume substantial amounts of network connectivity bandwidth in operation. Sixty per cent of IT industry carbon emissions come from the downstream use of products by customers.

The use of power intensive GPUs to run machine learning training (and non-AI uses such as crypto currency mining) has already been cited as contributing to increased carbon dioxide emissions.[1] Many machine learning packages have been modified to take advantage of the extensive parallelism available inside the average graphics processing unit. Often this resource intensity is used to exemplify environmental concerns with AI systems.

According to the World Economic Forum and experts in the field, AI has "the potential to accelerate environmental degradation, and is already doing so" [1,2]. In 2022, the OECD's Policy Observatory [3] that provided input into basic framework for understanding, measuring and benchmarking domestic AI computing capacity by country and region, did not consider environmental sustainability in its charter [4].

The AI system life cycle does provide opportunities to consider and positively influence the environmental sustainability aspects of the system: for example, using and applying teacher–student models [5] in deep neural networks represents a trade-off between more learning and better inference performance when in production.

Improving in-operation product performance can, conversely, aid sustainability. Publications from the European Union,[6,7] the United States,[8-10] the United Nations [11,12] and other regional [13] and global think tanks [14] have called for better understanding and disclosure with regards to ICT's environmental footprint and that of AI systems in particular.

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Information technology — Artificial intelligence — Environmental sustainability aspects of AI systems

1 Scope

This document provides an overview of the environmental sustainability aspects (e.g. workload, resource and asset utilization, carbon impact, pollution, waste, transportation, location) of AI systems during their life cycle, and related potential metrics.

NOTE 1 This document does not identify opportunities on how AI, AI applications and AI systems can improve environmental, social or economic sustainability outcomes.

NOTE 2 This document can help other projects related to AI system environmental sustainability.

2 Normative references

The following documents are referred to in the text in such a way that some or all of their content constitutes requirements of this document. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

ISO/IEC 22989:2022, *Information technology — Artificial intelligence — Artificial intelligence concepts and terminology*

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the terms and definitions given in ISO/IEC 22989 and the following apply.

ISO and IEC maintain terminology databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

— ISO Online browsing platform: available at https://www.iso.org/obp

— IEC Electropedia: available at https://www.electropedia.org/

3.1
environmental sustainability
state in which the ecosystem and its functions are maintained for the present and future generations

[SOURCE: ISO 17889-1:2021, 3.1.1]

3.2
social responsibility
responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that:

— contributes to sustainable development, including health and the welfare of society;

— takes into account the expectations of stakeholders;

— is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behaviour; and

— is integrated throughout the organization and practised in its relationships

Note 1 to entry: Activities include products, services and processes.

Note 2 to entry: Relationships refer to an organization's activities within its sphere of influence.

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