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Transparency is not a threat to the data center industry, but a prerequisite for legitimacy

The research of [Investigate Europe](#) exposes a painful reality: at a time when Europe wanted to gain more insight into the environmental impact of data centers, pressure from the sector actually took a step towards secrecy. Microsoft and DigitalEurope are said to have succeeded in getting a confidentiality provision in the European rules, which keeps data on the environmental impact of individual data centers out of public view. Lawyers even warn that this broad secrecy could be at odds with European transparency rules and the Aarhus Convention.

That is more than a legal detail. It goes to the heart of the social debate about data centers. Because anyone who consumes energy, uses water, claims space and in some cases puts further pressure on the electricity grid, cannot at the same time maintain that

the underlying data is too commercially sensitive to share. Certainly not at a time when data centers are increasingly being positioned as critical infrastructure. Critical infrastructure requires public legitimacy. And public legitimacy starts with transparency. That is exactly why the discussion should not only be about Brussels or Big Tech, but also about Dutch sector representation. The question is not just what Microsoft or DigitalEurope have done in Europe. The question is also what reflex the Dutch sector is now choosing. Will DDA and NLdigital continue to approach transparency as a defensive compliance issue or will they finally take on their role as mature advocates of a sector that operates at the heart of society? In an [earlier article](#), I have already sharply stated that DDA and NLdigital should reset their lobby: no longer gain time by stretching definitions or dosing transparency, but focus on predictable, verifiable and uniform openness.

This analysis is more topical than ever. Because the toll of years of slowing down is now becoming visible. If a sector reasons mainly on the basis of risk mitigation and public affairs for too long, the image arises that transparency should be avoided rather than organised. That is strategically short-sighted. In the short term, secrecy may seem comfortable, but in the longer term it increases distrust among governments, regulators, media, local residents and network operators. It is precisely because of this that permit processes become more sluggish, discussions more emotional and policy responses harder.

The data center industry should turn this discussion around. Not: "how do we prevent figures from coming out?" But: "which figures do we need to publish in a standard and verifiable way to organize governability and trust?" In my previous pieces, that answer was already on the table. Publish at least at the location level the total electricity consumption, contracted and measured peak power, PUE with clear measurement limits, WUE including source and methodology, and the status of residual heat utilization. Where relevant, add information about energy flexibility, such as batteries, curtailment or demand response. Not to shame companies, but to enable comparison, planning and policy.

This is where DDA and NLdigital come into the picture. Their role should not be to postpone transparency for as long as possible, but to standardize it. Industry organizations in particular can make definitions uniform, agree on reporting templates and organize a light form of independent verification. This creates a model in which the sector is not taken by surprise by incident politics, but shows itself that it is willing to take responsibility. That is a much stronger lobbying story than the classic argument that all data is sensitive to competition. Because as soon as everything is sensitive, nothing becomes credible anymore.

So the real strategic mistake is not that critical questions are being asked about energy, water or grid capacity. The real mistake is that the industry has too often tried to hold off those questions instead of answering them with hard, comparable data. This increases the very problem you say you want to avoid: social resistance and administrative uncertainty. Transparency is not an enemy of growth. Transparency is the access pass to the next phase of growth, the research by Investigate Europe underlines how justified that was.

If DDA and NLdigital really want to operate in a future-proof way, now is the time for a change of course. Agree on a joint Transparency and Accountability Code. Determine which data members publish at least annually. Make sure that measurement methods are auditable. Link this to a public discussion with the national government, provinces, municipalities and grid operators about clear assessment frameworks for permits, connections and spatial integration. Then the debate shifts from distrust to governability. And that is exactly what this sector needs now.

The lesson from Brussels is clear. As soon as the sector gives the impression that it would rather turn the knobs of secrecy than the knobs of accountability, it loses control. This applies to Big Tech in Europe, but just as much to Dutch interest groups. The choice for DDA and NLdigital is therefore simple: continue to defend what is no longer defensible, or lead the way in the transparency that inevitably comes anyway.