

Jack and the Cloud Giant



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There was once a young farmer called Jack who helped his mother farm a small area of land. Like many small-scale farmers they were facing hard times and eventually Jack's mother suggested, reluctantly, that he should take their prize cow to market and use the proceeds to buy new seeds and animals.

Jack set off full of good intentions and sold the cow for a good price at the market. Unfortunately, however, he was a gullible young man, and he was soon accosted by a corporate agribusiness salesman who dazzled him with promises of precision agriculture and digital farming. The salesman explained that if Jack shared real-time information about his farm with his company Jack and his mother would get all sorts of useful farming advice from the company's Artificial Intelligence agents. The salesman convinced Jack to spend all his money on a subscription to the company's magical digital farming platform app.

When Jack got home and excitedly showed his mother the new app on his iPad she was livid. "Magical Apps?!.. you can't eat apps, you can't grow a field of software! Data doesn't fill a hungry stomach or improve the soil. That's not food sovereignty!" and she angrily tossed the iPad into the corner of the room and stomped out.

Moodily, Jack picked up the iPad again. He fired up the new digital farming app and spent the evening copying farm data from spreadsheets on his old laptop and downloading data from the John Deere tractor they rented. He'd show her it was a smart idea after all – she was just behind the times: Data and Artificial Intelligence were the real magic these days! When it got late he uploaded it all to the app, switched off his electronics for the night and went to sleep.



When Jack awoke early the next day he switched on his iPad and went to the porch to drink his coffee. But as he stepped over the threshold and looked up he beheld an incredible sight – a towering data-vine had become established between their little farm and a faraway data cloud in the sky. It was sparkly and blue and seemed to Jack to promise all sorts of alluring farming and agronomic information that might make farming easier and more productive and maybe even reduce his carbon footprint. As he peered into the distance he thought he could see golden leaves and other sparkling promises far away on the data-vine.

"Whooh!" exclaimed Jack, as he watched the roots of the data vine spread into the soil of his farm, sucking up data about pests, planting, moisture and production, and sprouting real-time farm gate prices as it grew. "I wonder where that all goes?" he thought, "If I can follow the data-vine up into the cloud maybe I can pick some of those golden promises up there? Then we can really save the farm!"

He knew his mother wasn't going to approve though, and he didn't want her to stop him, so he followed his instincts immediately and began to climb up the data-vine to find the golden leaves.

Jack climbed further and further up the data-vine and as he got further away from the soil and the realities of day-to-day life on the farm, he was able to see that the data-vine was not a single strand but just one tendril in an enormous network of data-vines all emanating from just a few large data-clouds overhead. They were putting roots down across the countryside as far as he could see. "Hmm," thought Jack, "This looks more like a big extraction system. I wonder what for?"

Eventually Jack managed to climb right up to the data cloud itself, where he found an enormous corporate fortress. There lived a greedy looking Data Giant surrounded by piles of cash, lobbyists and lawyers. The Data Giant (who looked suspiciously like Jeff Bezos) was overseeing swelling banks of data servers running Artificial Intelligence algorithms. "This must be where all the magic happens" thought Jack. The giant was barking demands at Alexa, his AI servant, asking where the most profitable land, soil and crop and livestock varieties could be found, and then immediately dispatching his



lawyers to buy them. Jack saw that the databanks and AI servers were all connected to the data-vines coming from the world below, just like the one he'd climbed up.

Suddenly the Data Giant stopped and sniffed the air, and then he roared: "Fee fi fo fam...I smell the whiff of a farming man. Be he alive or be he dead, I'll mine his knowledge to train my neural nets." And then, distracted by his own newly invented rhyme, he roared with laughter.

Jack didn't quite know what a neural net was, but he knew he didn't like whatever this Data Giant was up to. So he hid behind a nearby Whole Foods shopping trolley and held his breath, waiting to see what happened next...

"Alexa!" roared the Data Giant. The small white speaker quivered, and said, "Yes, how can I help you today??"

"Show me my bags of gold" demanded the Data Giant.

Alexa immediately loaded up some charts and graphs on a big screen. "Your stock price is at record highs and your market cap is now almost 2 trillion dollars" it said.

"Crikey," thought Jack, "If us farmers had some small part of that, our troubles would be over and we could eliminate hunger!"

"Excellent!" roared the Data Giant. "Now, Alexa, show me the Data Surveillance Harp that sings of everything everywhere!"

"Yes, here it is" quivered the AI agent, loading up another monitor with maps and models, a dashboard of statistics and representations of trends. The AI agent began to convey the Data Harp's complex harmonic description of consumer trends, weather patterns, disaggregated consumer groupings, logistics flows and bottlenecks, harvests, and disease outbreaks...it was a complex and rich symphony with peaks and troughs, loud signals and background noise. The Data Giant was able to zero in on particular refrains or zoom out to long slow crescendos at will.

The data harp reminded Jack of the promises that the precision ag salesman had made to Jack when he sold him the digital farming app – that he would get a ‘field view’ of his farm operations. Jack realized that it was the Data Giant who was really getting the field view – of all the farms and, heck, even the whole food system – using all that data, including the data he'd diligently tapped into his iPad the night before...it was one big surveillance system watching over food and farming everywhere.

'Pah...I was suckered!' Jack muttered in disgust.

The Data Giant continued on, oblivious to Jack's presence. He was grinning happily to the song of the Data Harp and dashing off a few emails to his lawyers to acquire some strategically important land and trading companies. "Alexa!" he yelled again, "Now bring me the Goose of Crisis that lays the golden eggs!"

"The what??" thought Jack. But then he saw what looked like an improbable half robot, half genetically-engineered feathered franken-fowl stumble into the room squawking and alarmed.

"Here's a new opportunity for you Goose of Crisis - Go!" ordered the Data Giant.

The Goose of Crisis stretched out its half-robot half-feathered wings, shook its tail and laid a golden egg right there and then. From behind the Whole Foods trolley Jack could see the words 'global pandemic' engraved on it. The Data Giant grabbed it and examined it. "Oh, yes!" he cooed, "More online



groceries, touchless food systems for hygiene, food system automation to circumvent labour losses from illness! Brilliant! That should add..." The Data Giant weighed the egg in his greedy paw..."several tens of billion dollars extra to my own net worth!" And at this the Data Giant sauntered out of the room to deposit the golden egg in a crypto bank vault.

The alarmed franken-fowl meanwhile came careening over to where Jack was hiding and started pecking at his hiding place.

"Psst...off with you!...go!" whispered Jack, not wanting to be discovered. But the Goose of Crisis misunderstood. It gave another triumphant squawk, and laid a further golden egg, this time with the words 'climate change' engraved on it. But now the goose was close enough to Jack for him to be able to see that there were other smaller texts on the egg's shell: 'carbon sequestration via digital ag', 'new alt-protein markets', 'weather and climate modification technologies', 'soil carbon markets'...

"Oh brother," sighed Jack, "this really is a disaster!"

And at that moment, hearing the Data Giant coming back for his Goose of Crisis, Jack realized that he was about to be seen.

"Hey!" called the Data Giant "Fee fi fo fam...I smell the whiff of a farming man....What?! You! Who are you?! What's that peasant doing here????!"

And Jack realized he had to run. He ran straight for the same data-vine he had climbed up and slid down it faster than you can stream a Tiktok video on 5G. As he tumbled back on to the soil of his farm his mother was there, glowering: "Who let this noxious corporate weed grow in our fields??"

"Sorry, Mum," said Jack, "That app was a really bad idea! There's a Data Giant up there and he's using all our data, everyone's data, to take over the entire food system!"

His mother, who knew a thing or two about food and farming, was not surprised "Listen, Son, it's the same old story, dressed up to look like a new



one. Every few years some corporate salesman arrives at the farm hawking a glittering and expensive new technology that's going to 'save' us! But it's always just another trick to hand over our power, seeds and knowledge to agribusiness. We risk losing our independence. And our traditional knowledge about how to produce food could vanish in a couple of generations! I've seen this treadmill before, with fertilizers and pesticides, and then with GMO's, and now this: digital agriculture! Pah!"

Relieved that her son had finally come to his senses, she handed him a



machete. And with a resounding 'thwack' Jack disconnected the data-vine.

"I told you," his mother said, "you don't feed people on data - that's not food sovereignty. Now let's get back to a real food system with real farmers in control, and find the means to get our cow back."

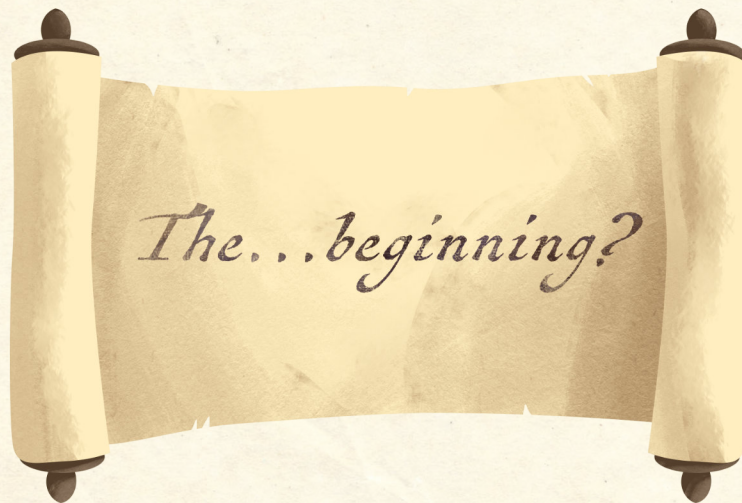
"But Mum," said Jack, "It ain't just us. We've got a way bigger problem." He pointed to all the other data vines streaming off of other nearby farms, trailing from cars driving down the highway, hanging from the smartphones

of passersby, from factories, hospitals, schools – all of them leading up into the same few data clouds up above.

Jack's mother's eyes grew big as she tried to take it all in. "You're right, kid!" she said, taking back the machete. "This is bigger than the farm. This is bigger than the food system. This one is a colossal corporate coup!"

Putting aside the machete she rolled up her sleeves and then looked Jack in the eye.

"Son" she said "we'd better get the neighbours together, and the neighbours' neighbours, and you can tell 'em what you saw up there. We've got some organizing to do!"



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