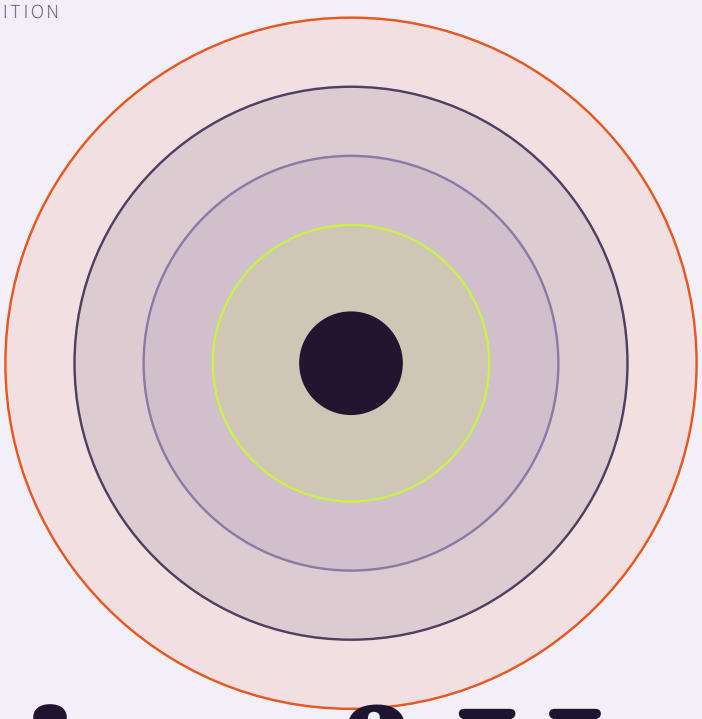


Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman's OpenAI

A reading of the book by Karen Hao (2025)

1. ACTION BOOK

CONTENTS

Inside this edition

The book in a minute 4

The takeaways 5

Your action book 7

Before you go 8

PART TWO · THE ACTION BOOK

The setup checklist 10

Ask who did the work 11

Turn hype into a checkable claim 12

Follow one local decision 13

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman's OpenAI, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Karen Hao is a journalist who has covered artificial intelligence for MIT Technology Review and The Wall Street Journal, and who profiled OpenAI years before ChatGPT made it famous. Empire of AI follows the company from its founding as a nonprofit in 2015, through the launch of ChatGPT, to the November 2023 crisis in which its board fired Sam Altman and then took him back days later. Hao argues that the industry OpenAI leads behaves like an empire: it lays claim to data, labour, land, energy and water that are not its own, and justifies the taking with a mission to benefit all of humanity. Drawing on interviews with around 260 people, she sets scenes inside the company beside reporting from the places that carry the costs, including data workers in Kenya and Venezuela and communities fighting data centres in Chile and Uruguay. The book ends by asking how that kind of power could be checked and spread out.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The AI industry runs like an empire: it takes what is not its own and tells a story about saving the world to make the taking feel right.

Hao borrows the frame from the colonial empires of the 1800s. The resources have changed: people's writing and art, cheap labour, land, electricity and fresh water. The pattern has not. The point is not that the people involved are villains, but that the structure rewards taking.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Scale at all costs was a choice, not a law of nature.

OpenAI bet that bigger models, more data and more computing power would win, and once it moved, its rivals followed it into a race. Hao argues that this one bet, rather than anything inevitable about the technology, is what drives the hunger for data centres, chips and workers. Other ways of building AI existed, and still do.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A mission big enough can be used to justify almost anything.

OpenAI was founded to make sure artificial general intelligence benefits all of humanity. Hao reports how that mission was later used to explain secrecy, a for-profit arm and an ever faster race. She keeps asking who is counted in that 'humanity', and who is left out of it.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Behind a chatbot's polite answers are people who were paid to read the worst of the internet.

Hao reports on Kenyan contract workers, hired through the outsourcing firm Sama, who sorted violent and abusive text so OpenAI could build a content filter. They were paid a few dollars an hour, and she describes the lasting harm the work did to some of them. The safety the user sees was built on someone else's exposure.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The industry goes where labour is cheapest, and a crisis makes labour cheap.

Hao reports how Venezuela's economic collapse pushed educated people into piece-rate data labelling on online platforms. She argues that the gap between their pay and a researcher's pay reflects how the industry values people, not some objective difference in the worth of the work.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The cloud is a building, and the building needs power and water.

Data centres draw electricity and fresh water, and they are often placed where local people have little say. Hao follows residents in Chile and Uruguay who organised against planned Google data centres while their regions faced drought. The costs of AI land on a map, not in the abstract.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Hype and fear can be two halves of the same pitch.

Hao describes a field split between people who think AGI will save us and people who fear it will end us. Both camps agree it is near and enormous, and both conclusions hand more power to the few labs building it. In her telling, that split helped set up the 2023 board crisis.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Controlling what the public knows is part of controlling the empire.

A company with 'open' in its name came to share less and less about its models and training data. Hao argues that when a few firms fund most research and decide what gets published, they also shape what everyone else believes about AI. OpenAI declined to take part in her book, so she built it from hundreds of interviews and documents.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Empires are weakened from below, by people who refuse the terms.

Hao does not ask readers to wait for a wise leader. She points to artists and writers who sue or strike, communities that demand real terms before a data centre is built, and small projects such as Te Hiku Media in New Zealand, which builds language tools with its community's consent. Power spread across the supply chain is harder to concentrate.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] List the AI you used this week
- [ ] Open your chatbot's data settings
- [ ] Find the data centres near you
- [ ] Choose one task you keep human
- [ ] Read one report on data work

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Ask who did the work
- ◯ Turn hype into a checkable claim
- ◯ Follow one local decision

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

List the AI you used this week

Write down every AI tool you touched in the last seven days, what you used it for, and whether the result was worth it.

Mark the uses you would happily drop.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Open your chatbot's data settings

In each AI tool you use, find the setting for whether your conversations train future models, and choose deliberately.

Note what the tool says it keeps and for how long.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Find the data centres near you

Search local news and planning records for data centre projects in your region.

Note what power and water they plan to use, and when the public can comment.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Choose one task you keep human

Pick one kind of work you will not hand to a model, such as a letter to a friend or your first draft of an idea.

Write it down so the choice is on purpose.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Read one report on data work

Read one long investigation into the people who label data and moderate content for AI companies.

Write down one thing that surprised you.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Ask who did the work

When a product feels like magic, name one group of people whose labour made it possible.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Turn hype into a checkable claim

When you read a big AI headline, rewrite it as one claim you could check, and note who gains if you believe it.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Follow one local decision

Once a season, follow one local decision about power, water or land use: read the agenda, and send a comment or a question if you have one.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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December 2026

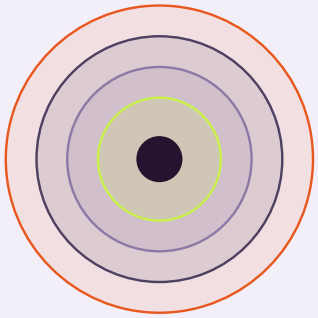
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Every answer a machine gives you was paid for somewhere, by someone. Ask where, and ask who.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER KAREN HAO