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‘Empire of AI’ reflects on cutting edge of innovation

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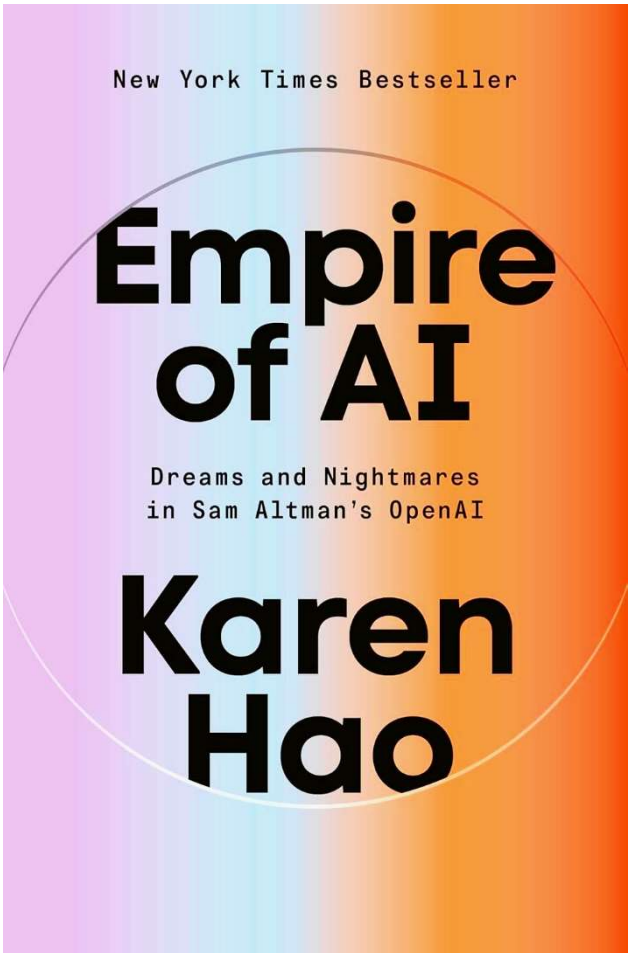
“Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman’s OpenAI” by Karen Hao. New York, NY: Penguin Press (an imprint of Penguin Random House, LLC), 2025, 496 pages, $32.00 (hardcover).



“OpenAI is now leading our acceleration toward this modern-day colonial world order,” Karen Hao explains near the beginning of “Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman’s OpenAI,” her recently released magnum opus on a technological development that will ultimately affect everything we do. “In pursuit of an amorphous vision of progress, its aggressive push on the limits of scale have set the rules for a new era of AI development.”

“The number of independent researchers not affiliated with or receiving funding from the tech industry has rapidly dwindled, diminishing the diversity of ideas in the field not tied to short-term commercial benefit.” the author continues a little further in the prologue. “Younger generations of scientists are falling in line with the new status quo to make themselves more employable. What was once unprecedented has become the norm.”

So begins a story that simultaneously reflects the cutting edge of innovation and boundless optimism as well as a continuation (and confirmation) of one of the oldest narratives associated with humankind. Hao chronicles the meteoric rise of OpenAI, the tumultuous political and economic implications and fallout that accompanied it, including the personal and professional toll it continues to take on the principal players, especially Sam Altman. In many ways, it’s the classic tale of the good guys eventually becoming the bad guys, emphasizing the dangers of groupthink and believing your own hype.

Hao is uniquely qualified to write this book. She has been interested in, and reporting on, AI since its remarkable ascension to prominence only a few years ago. As such, she has access to a formidable network of those who have had, and continue to have, a front-row seat to the events and developments she is describing with such eloquence and clarity. Honestly, this one has it all: Silicon Valley researchers, Kenyan data laborers, South African educators, Chinese chip developers, and Chilean water activists, just to a few of those who had a role to play in this still-ongoing adventure.

“Empire of AI” is one of the more extensively researched tomes I have had occasion to peruse on the topic in recent memory, with 40 pages of references at the conclusion of the prologue, 18 chapters arranged in four major sections, and epilogue. Her prose is easily accessible by a general audience, although some of the more intricate content will require the casual reader to work to achieve a functional understanding of the concepts that form the basis of her central thesis. It also helps to have a working knowledge of the business world in which much of the manuscript is embedded. Personally, I was able to keep up – although I did have to spend considerable time dissecting some of the more technical sections.

“The Two Prophets,” the thirteenth chapter, was one I found particularly enlightening.

“In May 2023, Altman arrived in Washington, DC, to testify before Congress,” Hao explains. “It was a remarkable performance. He reiterated the promises of AGI solving climate change and curing cancer, gave a compelling argument for why OpenAI’s technologies would improve and create ‘fantastic’ new jobs, dodged questions about copyright issues and the lack of transparency and privacy guarantees around its’ training data, and delivered a sincere call for regulation – that is, regulation with OpenAI’s blessing, evoking the specter of Chian to urge lawmakers not to slow down its innovation.”

“Senator loved him,” she continues. “In a telling exchange that captured Altman’s nimble rhetoric and the trust and enthusiasm he was garnering, he offered three policy recommendations that shifted the conversation away from existing issues like labor, environment, and intellectual property and toward regulating future AI systems and extreme risks: First, create an agency that would develop and administer a licensing regime for models above a certain threshold of capabilities; second, create a set of AI safety standards for measuring ‘dangerous’ capabilities; third, require independent audits on those standards to check for compliance.”

The rest of the chapter is devoted to the discussion and dialog that followed that appearance, including proposed legislation and a revealing look at the internal debate within OpenAI between the “Boomers and the Doomers.”

A regular contributor to The Atlantic and The Wall Street Journal, Hao was a senior editor for AI at MIT Technology Review. She leads the Pulitzer Center’s AI Spotlight Series, a program that trains journalists on how to cover AI. She has received numerous accolades for her work, including an American Humanist Media Award and an American Society of Magazine Editors NEXT Award for Journalists Under 30. She serves on the board of the Co-Opting AI Series, a resource from the University of California Press exploring the different social dimensions of AI, and on the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism AI Advisory council. Hao completed her bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering, with a minor in energy studies, from MIT.

Perhaps the essence of the significance of Hao’s chronicle is best summarized by Daren Acemoglu, an Institute Professor at MIT and recipient of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences:

“Our lives are about to be remade by artificial intelligence – or to be more accurate, by a few companies run by a few very self-confident people. If you ever wondered whether all this is inevitable, whether to believe all the promises of tech luminaries, whether we could save a little bit of our democracy in the age of AI, then read this book.

Good advice. Glad I took it.

“There is a different way forward,” the author concludes. “Artificial intelligence doesn’t have to be what it is today. We don’t need to accept the logic of unprecedented scale and consumption to achieve advancement and progress. “So much of what our society actually needs – better health care and education, clean air and clean water, a faster transition away from fossil fuels – can be assisted and advanced with, and sometimes even necessitates, significantly smaller AI models and a diversity of other approaches.”

“AI alone won’t be enough, either,” she adds. “We’ll also need more social cohesion and global cooperation, some of the very things being challenged by the existing vision of AI development.”

I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.