

Book Review of *How AI Ate the World: A Brief History of Artificial Intelligence And Its Long Future*

Beyond the Doomers: What the Book Gets Right About Harm, and Whose Voices It Misses

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Abstract

Chris Stokel Walker's *How AI Ate the World* combines a short history of artificial intelligence with a documented account of harms already affecting workers, creators, and the information economy. This review focuses on the book's evidentiary method. Its named interviews give the reporting a strong documentary quality, but that method is not applied evenly. Western sources are often interviewed directly, while the experiences of data workers in Kenya, Uganda, and India are more often relayed through other journalists' reporting. The concern is not that these accounts are poorly sourced. It is that direct voice is distributed unevenly. That distinction gives the review its central argument and helps connect the book to questions of data governance, labour, inequality, and institutional responsibility. The review also considers how the book can inform action research in organizations through inquiry into AI procurement, vendor practices, employee experiences, bias auditing, and participatory governance.

Overall, the book is most valuable as a well sourced journalistic account of present AI harms and as a starting point for practical investigation rather than as a complete global or regulatory framework.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; technology journalism; data labor; algorithmic harm; global inequality

Chris Stokel Walker's *How AI Ate the World* arrives at a moment when public debate about artificial intelligence often swings between predictions of transformative progress and warnings of existential danger. The book is less interested in choosing between those positions than in documenting harms that are already visible in work, creative industries, and the information economy. This review's main concern is not whether those harms are documented accurately, but whose experiences are allowed to speak directly in the book. The uneven distribution of direct voice is the central critical contribution of this review.

Stokel-Walker does not ignore the debate over extreme AI risk. His chapter on "AI Doomers" gives space to arguments about possible extinction risk, including Roman Yampolskiy's case for near total containment (Stokel-Walker, 2024, pp. 124-126). The author states his own position only near the end, writing that he is "not convinced" artificial general intelligence is imminent (Stokel-Walker, 2024, p. 303). This restraint suits the book's journalistic method. Its strongest passages come from named, on record interviews with people such as Timnit Gebru, Margaret Mitchell, and Ed Newton-Rex, whose testimony gives the book a documentary quality that a more distant overview would not have.

That same method also reveals the book's clearest limitation. Google contractors Michelle Curtis and Ed Stackhouse speak directly about rushed and poorly

documented rating work for Bard (Stokel-Walker, 2024, pp. 232-233). By contrast, the experiences of Kenyan, Ugandan, and Indian data workers involved in difficult moderation and annotation work are largely relayed through reporting by Time and The Verge rather than through Stokel-Walker's own interviews (Dzieza, 2023; Perrigo, 2023; Stokel-Walker, 2024, pp. 233-235). The issue is not the credibility of those reports. They are clearly sourced. The issue is representation. People closer to the author's reporting network are more often heard in their own words, while workers further from that network are more often encountered through mediation.

The book partly anticipates this concern. Stokel-Walker notes that Western and English language material is overrepresented in the data used to build many AI systems (p. 216). Research on data work strengthens the significance of that observation. Miceli et al. (2022) argue that questions about machine learning data cannot be separated from the power relations surrounding its production. Wang et al. (2022), studying data annotation in India, similarly show how annotators' work is shaped by distant clients, platforms, and organizational priorities. These studies do not invalidate Stokel-Walker's reporting. They show why the distribution of voice matters when a book is describing a global labor system.

This concern also sharpens the review's reading of the Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 9 emphasizes innovation and infrastructure, while SDG 10 focuses on reducing inequality (United Nations, 2015). The data labor discussed in the book shows how those aims can come into tension. Building AI capacity may create new forms of work and technical infrastructure while leaving bargaining power and economic benefits unevenly distributed. The book does not frame the issue in these terms, but its

examples provide a useful basis for asking who gains from technological expansion and who carries its hidden costs.

The book's practical value extends beyond journalism. For organizations procuring AI services, the outsourcing examples raise questions about vendor due diligence, labor conditions, data handling, and accountability across supply chains. For advocacy groups, Newton-Rex's resignation from Stability AI over the company's position on fair use illustrates how internal dissent can expose unresolved ethical questions (Stokel-Walker, 2024, pp. 250-251). For policymakers, the comparison among the European Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, and China provides a useful picture of different regulatory instincts (Stokel-Walker, 2024, pp. 274-288).

Stokel-Walker does not ultimately endorse one regulatory model. That choice should not automatically be treated as a weakness, because the book is primarily journalistic rather than a policy prescription. Still, the comparison would have been more useful to policy readers if it had identified clearer criteria for judging the tradeoffs among these approaches. The book ends with a call for urgency rather than a specific regulatory pathway (Stokel-Walker, 2024, p. 308). Within the boundaries of its purpose, that is understandable, but it leaves readers to supply their own framework for deciding which forms of intervention best address the harms the book documents.

This is where the book becomes especially relevant to action research. Its cases can serve as starting points for organizational inquiry rather than as finished solutions. A company could examine an AI procurement process with employees, affected users, and vendors; document what data and labor practices are involved; introduce a change in vendor selection or oversight; and evaluate whether the change improves transparency, fairness, or working conditions. A public or nonprofit organization could

use a similar cycle to investigate employee experiences of AI implementation, audit a system for uneven outcomes, or test whether affected communities have a meaningful role in governance decisions. Participatory approaches are particularly relevant because they bring people affected by AI systems into the process of identifying problems and evaluating interventions (Reshef Kera, 2026).

For action researchers, the most useful lesson is therefore methodological. The book offers documented cases of AI related harm, but the next step is to turn those cases into questions that can be investigated in practice. Researchers can ask how a procurement decision was made, whose experience was missing from that decision, what intervention might address the problem, and what evidence would show that the intervention worked. This approach directly responds to the representational limitation identified in the review because it treats affected workers and users as participants in inquiry rather than only as subjects described by others.

How AI Ate the World is most useful for AI policymakers, organizational leaders, and action researchers who want a present tense account of the social consequences of AI. Stokel-Walker's reliance on named reporting gives the book much of its persuasive force, while the uneven distribution of direct voice defines an important boundary around that strength. Read as a well sourced journalist's account of AI's impact on the countries and institutions closest to his reporting base, the book is effective and timely. Read as the broad global account that its title might suggest, readers should pay closer attention to whose experiences are represented directly and whose are mediated through other sources. For action researchers, the practical task is clear: use the book's cases as starting points for participatory inquiry that tests how AI practices can be changed in real organizations.

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