

From Myths to Machines: A Review of Yuval Noah Harari's Prologue on Information Networks, Power and AI

Book Reviewed By

Somnath Palⁱ

Prof. Yuval Noah Harari (2024). *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI*, First International edition, Penguin Random House, New York, ISBN-9780593736814.

I am writing a book review entitled “*Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks*” by a military historian and author Prof. Yuval Noah Harari. In this book, he develops the key themes of his latest book “*Nexus*” exploring the intersection of humanity and technology. He shares his perspectives on the dangers of Artificial Intelligence, the future of humanity, and the evolving role of Sapiens in the Stone Age to the age of AI (Harari, 2014). From the impact of AI on our daily lives to the potential risks and consequences of creating intelligent machines. Prof. Harari offers a nuanced and thought-provoking analysis of the complex relationship between humans, technology, and the natural world. *Nexus* looks through the long lens of human history to consider how the flow of information has shaped us and our world.

In “*Nexus*” Harari develops into the historical development of new information networks tracing their impact on human civilization over the last 100,000 years. He argues that while these networks have granted humanity immense power they have also predisposed us to self-destructive behaviors. The book addresses the complex relationship between information, truth, bureaucracy and mythology, wisdom and power highlighting how different societies have utilized information to achieve their goals both positively and negatively. But despite all our discoveries, inventions, and conquests we now find ourselves in an existential crisis. The world is on the verge of ecological collapse. Information is not the raw material of truth; neither is it a mere weapon. This book explores the hopeful middle ground between these extremes and in doing so rediscovers our shared humanity.

This book is essential for anyone interested in understanding the historical context of our current information landscape and the choices we face as a society moving forward. “*History isn't the study of the past; it is the study of change. History teaches us what the same, what changes, remains and how things change*” – (Harari, 2024). Harari takes readers through

significant historical events, including the canonization of the Bible, early modern witch-hunts, and totalitarian regimes like Stalinism and Nazism illustrating how information has been wielded as a tool for control and manipulation. Author's intervention is timely in an age of AI, surveillance, populism and democratic erosion his reframing of information as a nexus rather than as a neutral mirror of truth has profound implications. The book is structured into three parts – *Human Networks*, *The Inorganic Network*, and *Computer Politics* with eleven chapters each of which focuses on a unique perspective on how information has shaped our societies, cultures, and political systems. The book traces the evolution of information from ancient myths to modern algorithms, offering a blend of historical synthesis, philosophical inquiry, and speculative warnings about AI's impact. This review analyzes the book's content highlighting its key arguments, strengths and criticisms as reflected in its structure and themes.

The first part of the book, *Human Networks* develops into the fundamental nature of information and its role in human history. This section traces the historical origins of information networks focusing on how primitive forms of communication such as storytelling and myths enabled large-scale human cooperation. Harari argues that myths are central to the evolution of human societies, allowing individuals who do not personally know one another to cooperate under shared beliefs and symbols. Key chapters in this part include: Harari begins with a foundational question: *What is information?* Rejecting the “naïve view” that information is merely the accumulation of facts leading to truth, he argues that information primarily functions as a connector. The Bible, astrology and conspiracy theories may be riddled with factual errors, yet their historical significance lies in their power to organize communities and mobilize collective action. He begins by defining information and exploring how stories have served as the primary means of connecting people and creating shared realities. Information is not just facts; it connects people, ideas and societies. Throughout history, humans have used stories, myths, and symbols to create connections of shaping how we think and interact with the world. Harari explains that the ability to manage and distribute information has always been a source of power from ancient times to today. Author introduces the idea that information has always existed in nature, but what differentiates humans is how they have learned to store, process and disseminate it through complex networks. He also introduces a philosophical dimension by engaging with the difficulty of defining information in fields like physics and biology. Rather than offering a universal definition Harari focuses on the historical role of information as a tool for building networks of cooperation. One of his key arguments is that humans have historically

relied on a combination of accurate information and fictions (such as myths and religions) to create large cohesive societies. Harari's most radical claim is that information matters because it connects people, not because it reflects reality. Falsehoods (astrology, propaganda, conspiracy theories) can be as socially powerful as truths. This challenges Enlightenment optimism that "more information = more wisdom."

In the second chapter, Harari develops into one of his key themes: the power of stories in shaping human societies. He explains that stories are myths, legends and religious narratives have acted as vital tools in creating social cohesion. Harari argues that these stories are not necessarily based on factual accuracy, but they are crucial in binding large groups of humans together under a shared belief system. For instance, religion relies on narratives to bring people together spiritually, while countries construct common historical accounts to promote national unity. The author discusses Third chapter profound impact of documents, arguing that written records, while enabling complex societies also introduced new forms of control and bureaucracy. Harari argues that while stories create the emotional and ideological glue for societies, documents create the logistical framework that allows complex societies to function. He explores how early civilizations such as Mesopotamia and Egypt used writing not for poetry or history but for recording taxes, land ownership and laws. Today, digital documents serve a similar purpose for organizing information in modern businesses and governments. He also discusses the idea of "*paper tigers*"—bureaucratic systems that while theoretically powerful often collapse when they cannot adapt to new realities.

In this fourth chapter, Harari explores No system is perfect; errors are inevitable in any information network. Harari points out that even powerful system like the Catholic Church has made mistakes by rejecting scientific truths. The key to progress is self-correction. Systems like science and courts evolve by acknowledging and fixing errors, ensuring long-term success. Harari warns that the belief in the perfection of religious, scientific or political frameworks can have dangerous outcomes when these beliefs clash with reality. He also highlights the importance of self-correcting tools in modern society such as scientific peer review and independent judicial systems that help curb the spread of misinformation. The final chapter in this part Harari examines the development of political systems through the framework of information networks comparing democratic and totalitarian approaches. He explains that democracies function through decentralized networks, where information flows openly and

citizens can access diverse perspectives to make informed choices. In contrast, totalitarian regimes attempt to centralize and control information frequently relying on censorship and propaganda. Tracing the historical evolution of these systems Harari argues that democracy emerged as a necessary response to the complexities of managing large, diverse societies which demand more flexible and distributed information processing. Conversely, totalitarian systems despite their initial strength often fail because they struggle to handle complex information effectively. This part reframes classical political and social theory instead of viewing history as driven by class struggle (Marx) or technological determinism (Innis, McLuhan). Harari shows how information networks whether delusional or rational underpin power itself.

The second part of this book is "*The Inorganic Network*" shifts from human-made stories and bureaucracies to machine-driven information systems. Computers unlike printing press or telegraphs do not merely transmit human ideas; they process and generate information independently. In this section, Harari discusses the emergence of technology-based information networks highlighting the development of computers, the internet and artificial intelligence. He stresses that transitioning from human-centered to machine-driven information processing marks a major transformation in the way information is managed and utilized. In today's digital world, information flows continuously with social media and online platforms constantly producing content through AI-driven algorithms. This nonstop stream keeps users engaged and influences their thoughts and choices in real time. Personalized feeds and constant notifications make it difficult for people to disconnect keeping them closely connected to these digital networks. However, AI systems are far from flawless they can make significant mistakes especially when based on biased or incomplete data. Harari emphasizes the importance of maintaining human oversight and ensuring transparency in AI to catch and correct these mistakes. Harari's argument in Part II is delineate for chapter six to eight focuses that while computers and AI are incredibly powerful tools for processing information they bring with them their own risks. He describes the relentless nature of these new networks, which are "always on" and constantly collecting and disseminating data. A key theme in this section is the fallibility of these networks, challenging the common misconception that digital systems are inherently more accurate or reliable than human ones. This chapter sets the stage for a broader discussion on how AI could reshape political and social structures. These include the potential for errors in judgment, the spread of misinformation and the centralization of power in opaque algorithms that few understand. Harari argues, leads to a paradox: despite having access to more information than ever before, people

may become more misinformed or disconnected from reality. This part serves as a crucial bridge between the historical context of human networks and the contemporary challenges posed by our digital world.

The final part of the book is “*Computer Politics*” tackles the political and social ramifications of the rise of AI and digital interconnected world. Here Harari delineates the chapter nine to elevens turns to contemporary geopolitics. Author highlights how democracies are particularly vulnerable in the digital age. Harari explores the challenges that modern democracies face in maintaining meaningful conversations in the age of social media and echo chambers. This often leads to increased polarization in public discourse. He then examines the potential for totalitarianism to be supercharged by algorithms which could enable unprecedented levels of surveillance and control (Arendt, 2017). Examples like China’s social credit system show how AI can be used to monitor and control people's behavior in real time. If left unregulated such systems could severely restrict individual freedoms and lead to a dystopian reality where human autonomy is diminished. Harari situates AI within global rivalry. Just as the Iron Curtain structured the 20th century, the “Silicon Curtain” may split the world into competing techno-blocs with catastrophic risks if cooperation fails. While AI holds promise for addressing global issues it also risks causing geopolitical fragmentation if regions develop isolated systems. Harari emphasizes that international cooperation is crucial to fully realize AI’s benefits and avoid deep divisions.

In this Milieu, Harari closes the book by urging readers to reconsider their assumptions about technology and its role in shaping society. He calls for a renewed focus on the human elements of information networks and warns against the dangers of blindly trusting in the infallibility of technology. The book discusses the current information revolution particularly the rise of artificial intelligence and its potential to create new forms of misinformation and delusion. Harari warns that as advance technologically, we must remain vigilant about the implications of these developments on society.

One of the key strengths of the book lies in Harari’s exceptional clarity and storytelling ability. He brings complex ideas to life through vivid fables such as the tales of Phaethon and the Sorcerer’s Apprentice as well as engaging anecdotes involving carrier pigeons, Facebook and Nazi propaganda. This narrative style makes abstract or intricate concepts accessible and memorable. Another notable strength is the book’s impressive interdisciplinary reach; Harari

moves fluidly between mythology, biology, politics and computer science weaving them together to build a cohesive and compelling argument. Harari's ability to draw parallels between ancient myths and modern AI algorithms makes complex ideas accessible to a broad audience. The book's relevance is also striking as it tackles some of the most urgent issues of our time including AI ethics, misinformation, populism and the fragility of democracy making it deeply resonant for contemporary readers. Perhaps most importantly Harari's work is provocative; he challenges readers to question their assumptions about truth, power and the role of information in shaping societies, encouraging deep reflection and critical thinking.

Harari emphasizes the urgent choices humanity faces today including ecological crises and the ethical dilemmas posed by AI. He questions why despite our vast accumulation of knowledge, we continue to engage in self-destructive behaviors. The author explores the idea that information is neither purely a weapon nor a source of truth; rather, it occupies a complex space that can lead to both enlightenment and deception. Harari's "*Nexus*" is not just a history of information networks; it is a call for humanity to consciously shape the AI revolution. The book challenges policymakers, scholars and citizens to recognize that networks held together by lies can be as durable as those grounded in truth. This insight complicates hopes that democracy, reason and transparency will naturally prevail. Instead, active effort is required to build networks that value both truth and cooperation. For political science perspective, "*Nexus*" reframes democracy and authoritarianism in terms of information flows. For media studies, it dismantles the myth that communication technologies inherently promote freedom. For ethics, it raises existential questions about delegating decision-making to non-human agents.

Lastly, "*Nexus*" is not just a history of information networks it is a mirror reflecting our current condition and a map outlining possible futures. Harari's accessible prose and panoramic perspective make the book essential reading for anyone seeking to understand how we got here and where we might be headed. It serves as a critical examination of how information networks have shaped human history and the pressing issues we must confront in the modern age. Harari's insights encourage readers to reflect on the power of information and the responsibilities that come with it especially as we navigate the challenges posed by emerging technologies like AI. Tune in to learn more about Harari's vision for the future, the key takeaways from his book *Nexus* and the important questions we should be asking ourselves as we navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. In this sense, Harari pushes us to confront a timely

paradox: *we may live in the most informed age of human history, yet still lack the wisdom to survive it.* It continues Harari's signature style of panoramic storytelling but sharpens its focus on the politics of information in the digital age. While some of his claims may invite debate the book's core insight that information networks, not individual genius drive human history is persuasive and provocative.

By situating AI within the long arc from Stone Age myths to the Silicon Curtain, Harari compels us to see the stakes of our present choices. The book is not merely a chronicle but a challenge: if networks can be built on both truths and fictions, then the future of humanity depends less on the quantity of information and more on the wisdom with which we choose to connect. His signature strength lies in bridging disciplines history, politics, philosophy and technology into a coherent narrative. While some may find the later chapters speculative, they are grounded in a well-researched understanding of human behavior and institutional evolution. For a balanced perspective, readers should supplement it with works that highlight AI's positive potential and non-Western contributions to information networks. In this thought-provoking book, Harari leaves readers with a clear message the future of humanity will be determined by how we manage the networks of information that have always been at the heart of our societies. If we fail to control these networks, we may find ourselves controlled by them.

References

Arendt, H. (2017). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Penguin Classics, London.

Harari, Y. N. (2024). *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI*. Penguin Random House, New York.

Harari, Yuval N. (2014). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. New York: Penguin Random House.

¹ Somnath Pal is a Research Associate of the ICSSR Project in the Department of Political Science, School of Social Science, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India. He can be contacted at soumyapal946@gmail.com