

## BOOK REVIEW

Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (2024)

Yuval Noah Harari's *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (purchase price approximately \$35.00) offers a historical and philosophical account of how information networks shape human societies and how artificial intelligence may transform those dynamics. Harari is a historian and philosopher who teaches at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, best known for works such as *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. Although he has no technical background in computer science or AI, his earlier work on the future of humanity drew him into debates on artificial intelligence. His approach in *Nexus* is rooted in his historical and philosophical background, but he also conducted significant research throughout the writing process, including conversations with scientists, entrepreneurs, and political leaders.

Harari's central claim is that "humankind gains enormous power by building large networks of cooperation, but the way these networks are built predisposes us to use that power unwisely." In his view, humans depend on information networks to construct shared "realities," yet information is not necessarily always truthful, meaning the realities that information builds do not need to be truthful either. Harari compares AI to previous information technologies and comes to the conclusion that AI represents a new kind of information system with new potential consequences.

*Nexus* is organized into three parts: "Human Networks," "The Inorganic Network," and "Computer Politics." Part I, Human Networks, examines earlier information networks and how they have been used. Harari begins with a philosophical discussion of "information," "truth," and "reality," arguing that these are independent concepts: information is not necessarily truthful, yet our realities are created by the information we receive, and therefore our realities need not be true. He then turns to a historical analysis of key information technologies, the mechanisms we use to share information and create networks, such as stories and documents, highlighting both their advantages and their dangers, including their inherent flaws and catastrophes they have caused in both totalitarian and democratic systems.

Part II, The Inorganic Network, analyzes modern information technologies and how they differ from previous human networks. Harari argues that computers, and later AI, are information technologies whose impact is significantly distinct from that of historical information technologies. Unlike human actors, these systems are relentless. They operate continuously, do not sleep, and can monitor and process information at scales and in places far beyond human capacity. Like earlier information technologies, they are fallible and capable of spreading falsehoods, but their reach and speed amplify the impact of error, especially given

human tendencies to trust and act on information, even if untrue. Moreover, algorithms and computers do not merely transmit human-generated information; they now generate and disseminate content autonomously, becoming active participants in the network rather than just a means to spread information.

Part III, Computer Politics, explores how these new networks may reshape politics and global relations. Drawing on historical examples of how prior information revolutions affected democracies and totalitarian regimes, Harari considers how AI might influence surveillance, public discourse, and state power. He extends the analysis to global relations, discussing the potential for AI to deepen global divides. Throughout the book, Harari's research method combines history, conceptual analysis, and engagement with contemporary AI discourse, supported by substantial references and examples drawn from different periods and systems.

One of the book's strengths is its less common perspective within the crowded literature on AI. In a field where many volumes focus on technical mechanisms or narrow applications, *Nexus* offers a historical and philosophical perspective that gives readers a more holistic understanding of AI as part of a long history of information networks. This makes the book valuable not only to academics, but also to policymakers and practitioners who need to understand AI's broader social and political implications rather than just its technical details. Harari writes in accessible way that does not presuppose a background in computer science or philosophy; he explains complex ideas in detailed yet straightforward language, avoiding unnecessary technical language while still presenting a clear and nuanced argument.

Another strength is the balance in Harari's balanced stance towards the development of AI. Although the book focuses heavily on the dangers of information technologies, he repeatedly acknowledges the substantial benefits they have brought to humankind and the potential for AI to be used in beneficial ways. He frames his critical tone as an attempt to counter what he sees as hyper-optimistic narratives in the field and to draw attention to historical lessons that should inform modern choices.

AI is a rapidly developing field, information and discourse that is relevant at one point may not be just 6 months later. *Nexus* was published in 2024. However, because his analysis is anchored in long-term historical and philosophical perspectives rather than time-sensitive technical details, the book's relevance is less likely to be overtaken quickly by new AI developments, despite the rapid pace of change in the development of AI.

The book's main weakness is its organization. Harari provides a clear overall roadmap, but at times specific stories, examples, or arguments appear in sections where their purpose is not immediately apparent. As a reader, it can be initially unclear why a particular anecdote is introduced. The purpose does become clear later, but in some cases, that took chapters. This can cause the reader to disconnect and diminish the impact of the book. That said, the argument is generally clear and the overarching structure remains easy to follow,

Overall, *Nexus* offers an accessible, thought-provoking, and relatively balanced contribution to ongoing debates about AI and information networks. Despite some organizational shortcomings, it provides a valuable perspective for understanding AI as part of history of information networks. The book is well-suited for readers who want to learn about AI from a historical and philosophical perspective, and for decision-makers who need a broad, holistic view of AI rather than a purely technical treatment.

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