Deciphering the dissemination of information In new age

Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus,* (Random House, 2024); 396

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Yuval Noah Harari's *Nexus* is an extension of the author's research on human history but with greater emphasis on data in societies. From the beginning, Harari delves into humanity's paradox: whereas, we have become technologically so powerful and informative but the thing is we have not become wiser at all. However, what we are confronted with is an ecological crunch as well as the threats from Artificial Intelligence getting out of hands. This question forms the basis around which the whole book is written; why are humans so good at collecting data, but so bad at getting knowledge and making good choices?

This book is divided into three sections. In the first, Harari takes the reader through human networks, and the position of information in the whole process throughout prehistory. He talks about, what he labels as, being the 'naive view' of information as the acquisition of more information equating to increased truth and power. However, he would contend that throughout history human beings have employed information to build hierarchy and dominance usually with the help of myths and religious beliefs as well as bureaucratic systems. Elimination of the notion that information equates to the truth is, therefore, done effectively by Harari where he exposes how societies are bound more by fables than realities. For instance, he explains how

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religious myths such as the Old and New Testaments, which are biologically historical in numerous ways, were instrumental in mobilising entire communities and prompting order out of chaos.

Harari builds on this idea in the later chapters by analysing how writings and the institutional structures have remained central in ordering and, at the same time, regulating societies. He looks at the differences between various types of information networks, from the mythology of more ancient civilisations to the bureaucratic states of the current era and expounds how these systems were useful in consolidating power and maintaining the running of societies. But the book does not limit itself to the historical work. Harari also goes back to the dichotomy between the democratic and totalitarian world when it comes to information processing. He points out that the totalitarian states attempt to monopolise the flow of information, on the other hand, the democratic states are based on networks that allow for error correction and discussion and debate. This leads to a deeper discussion on the nature of errors and fallibility, especially those systems that are seen to be infallible for instance religious organisations or absolute authoritarian systems.

In the second part of the book, Harari broadens his picture to the contemporary world especially the advancement in Artificial Intelligence and digital systems. He goes further to postulate that post-modern technology we are in the process of developing a new form of information infrastructure that is qualitatively different to anything that human history has hitherto witnessed. Unlike the previous technologies such as printing Press which disseminate information, todays digital networks are capable of producing and processing information on their own. Harari also states that currently we are in an age of perpetual information and such a state is changing people's behaviours and choices as well as the world as a whole.

One idea here is that of mistakes in these networks, especially by use of algorithms that post fake news or influence the opinions of the

public. Harari mentions the examples such as how social media algorithms contributing to violence in Myanmar or how information system is very unreliable, but at the same time it is unmanageable. He asks if societies can handle such levels of power afforded by AI and other permitted technologies and this is considering the fact that the systems are capable of being wrong or in some cases manipulated.

The third part of the book examines political impact of Artificial Intelligence. Harari writes about the problem of democracies in the future, in which the possibility of real discussion is subjected to the attacks of algorithms and bots. He poses the question as to whether dialogical and negotiated forms of a democratic persona can effectively sustain themselves in the modern global society that gets compartmentalised by digital networks. He also brings up an important potential for AI-controlled totalitarianism in which every decision of an individual would be made based on the preferences of algorithms, from economy to liberty. In this situation, power may be officially transferred not to human leaders but to machine networks that are incomprehensible to a regular person.

After going through the book, it ends with the author thinking of the future of politics in the age of AI and the possibility of the world being fragmented into areas of technological sovereignty or being one interconnected network under AI.

Nexus is a profound continuation of Harari's earlier books, in which he provides historical views on human history in terms of information. However, Harari's approach to explain historical processes as predetermined trajectories of information patterns may sometimes obscure variety of social and political relations. Although he does a particularly good job of demonstrating how information networks mobilise myth and fiction, his criticism of what he calls the 'naïve view' could be subtler. It might also lead to the situation where all major social changes – religious or technological – are explained

solely by the attempts to manage information, thus undermining the individual freedom and moral decision-making. At the same time, still, the deterministic tune of Harari may conceal the prospects of other scenarios, especially when it comes to the AI and the outcomes it is capable of entailing. For instance, his vision of AI as a potentially anarchical force that can cause new forms of totalitarianism fails to consider the possibility of human regulation and ethical governance of the technology in a positive manner that can give AI a less threatening future.

Nexus brings timely and valuable comments on the mutual link between power, information, and cooperation among people. The dystopia Harari is painting is a brutally honest. Thus, the book challenges the reader to rethink what information is and how it influences not only the past, but the future of mankind. ∎