

NEXUS: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI

Author: Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (Penguin Random House: 2024), 481.

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Yuval Noah Harari's *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* offers a sweeping exploration of how information has shaped human societies throughout history. It is both a historical account and a warning about the future, blending narrative, philosophical reflection, and political critique. The book explores the ways information networks have functioned not just as tools of communication but as powerful instruments of control, ideology, and transformation. Across democratic and totalitarian systems alike, information has been used to manipulate, persuade, unify, and dominate populations. Harari's central thesis is that power flows through these networks — and the way leaders and institutions use or abuse this power reflects their wisdom, or lack thereof.

Throughout the book, the author emphasises that while humans have mastered the art of building information networks and amassing power, they have consistently failed to couple this power with wisdom. "Power is not wisdom," he cautions. This foundational idea is informed by analysing historical and contemporary case studies. In discussing the Nazi regime, for instance, he shows how an initially nationalistic goal, securing a "living space" for Germans, was transformed into a vast apparatus of ideological expansion and

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oppression. Such a transformation was made possible by the manipulation and mobilisation of information to serve authoritarian aims.

The book illustrates how information serves as a connective tissue of society. It binds individuals into larger networks, nations, empires, religions and corporations, by constructing shared narratives. These narratives, whether grounded in truth or fiction, provide the framework through which societies understand themselves and others. However, the same narratives can be used to mislead, divide, and oppress. The book draws a line between the responsible use of information (rooted in the pursuit of truth and wisdom) and its misuse (as propaganda or ideology). Whether in the service of democracy or dictatorship, the effects of information depend heavily on how it is curated, disseminated, and interpreted.

In the first part of the volume, Harari explores the human tendency to evade responsibility, often by attributing crises to divine or external causes. This reflects a broader failure to learn from history and to act with foresight. He discusses Stalinism as a modern myth of salvation — a form of political religion that offered hope for suffering populations but in reality delivered terror and repression. Delusional ideologies, while sometimes effective at imposing temporary order, are ultimately unsustainable. They collapse under the weight of their contradictions. Such regimes, the book argues, fail not just because of external pressure but because they are built on fragile and dishonest information networks.

Democracy, Harari observes, appeared to triumph in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Yet he warns that this triumph is provisional. While figures like Hitler and Stalin failed, future totalitarian regimes

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could succeed, especially if they learn to control and weaponise information more effectively. For democracies to endure, the responsible handling of information is crucial. Wisdom stems from access to truth — and truth requires the collection, comparison, and interpretation of diverse and expansive data. The more interconnected and open the information network is, the closer one gets to an accurate understanding of reality. Barack Obama's belief that "the more freely information flows, the stronger the society becomes" captures this democratic ideal. However, this notion does not hold the grounds universally. In societies with low literacy and weak critical thinking, unfiltered information can reinforce sectarian or ethnic divisions rather than building unity.

The book also categorises information itself, not only as an account of objective data but also as a form of constructed meaning. Anything, even a pigeon, can become an information when it serves communicative purposes. This concept emphasises the contextual nature of information and how its value is determined by its use. Throughout history, information has taken the form of songs, myths, religious texts, and propaganda. Harari highlights the distinction between misinformation (spread unintentionally) and disinformation (spread deliberately). In both cases, the outcome can be social disruption. The only defense against such manipulation is the development of strong critical reasoning, wide engagement with diverse sources, and a culture that values truth.

In the second part of the book, Harari turns his attention to the digital age and the transformative power of computers and artificial intelligence. Unlike previous technologies, which amplified human capacity without making autonomous decisions, modern AI systems are becoming independent agents. They collect data, produce content, and make decisions without human intervention. This marks a

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fundamental shift in human history. While earlier technologies, such as nuclear weapons, were devastating but controllable, AI introduces a new level of unpredictability and autonomy.

The author warns that the appearance of objectivity in AI is misleading. These systems are trained on data sets that reflect human biases and are shaped by the intentions of their designers. Once deployed, they can make decisions that are opaque, unaccountable, and potentially harmful. The example of Facebook's role in fueling violence in Myanmar is a powerful illustration. Algorithms prioritised inflammatory content, incited hatred, and contributed to real-world atrocities. These developments highlight a broader trend: AI systems can reinforce social divisions and escalate conflict — often without direct human control or accountability.

In the final chapters, Harari addresses the political implications of AI and digital networks. Democracies, he argues, are being undermined by algorithmically personalised content, bots, and deepfakes. These trends erode public discourse, making it harder to distinguish truth from fiction. He proposes strict measures—such as audits, legal regulations, and restrictions on synthetic content—to preserve democratic integrity. Authoritarian regimes are already exploiting AI for surveillance, propaganda, and control. They can use AI-generated videos, fake news, and digital manipulation to suppress dissent and engineer loyalty.

Interestingly, the book points out that totalitarian systems may also be vulnerable to collapse from within. Their reliance on centralised control and rigid narratives may not withstand the complexities and contradictions that AI can reveal or exacerbate. In this paradox lies a

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fragile balance: while AI strengthens the hand of authoritarian regimes, it may also accelerate their internal disintegration.

Looking ahead, the book predicts the rise of rival “data empires,” with the world increasingly split between competing digital superpowers. The United States and China represent the poles of this divide, separated by a “Silicon Curtain.” In such a fractured world, global cooperation on AI ethics and governance appears unlikely. Despite the existential risks posed by unregulated AI, political leaders often fail to grasp the urgency of the threat. This lack of foresight, the author warns, could have devastating consequences.

In conclusion, the book is both a retrospective study and a forward-looking warning. The author traces the evolution of information from Stone Age myths to AI-generated deepfakes, showing how networks have always mediated power, identity, and truth. The book blends historical analysis with political urgency, emphasising that humanity’s future hinges not on how much power we possess, but on how wisely we use it. It is a call for critical engagement, ethical governance, and a renewed commitment to truth in an era when information is both our greatest asset and our greatest vulnerability. The ultimate message is clear: we cannot change the past, but the future depends entirely on the choices we make now.■