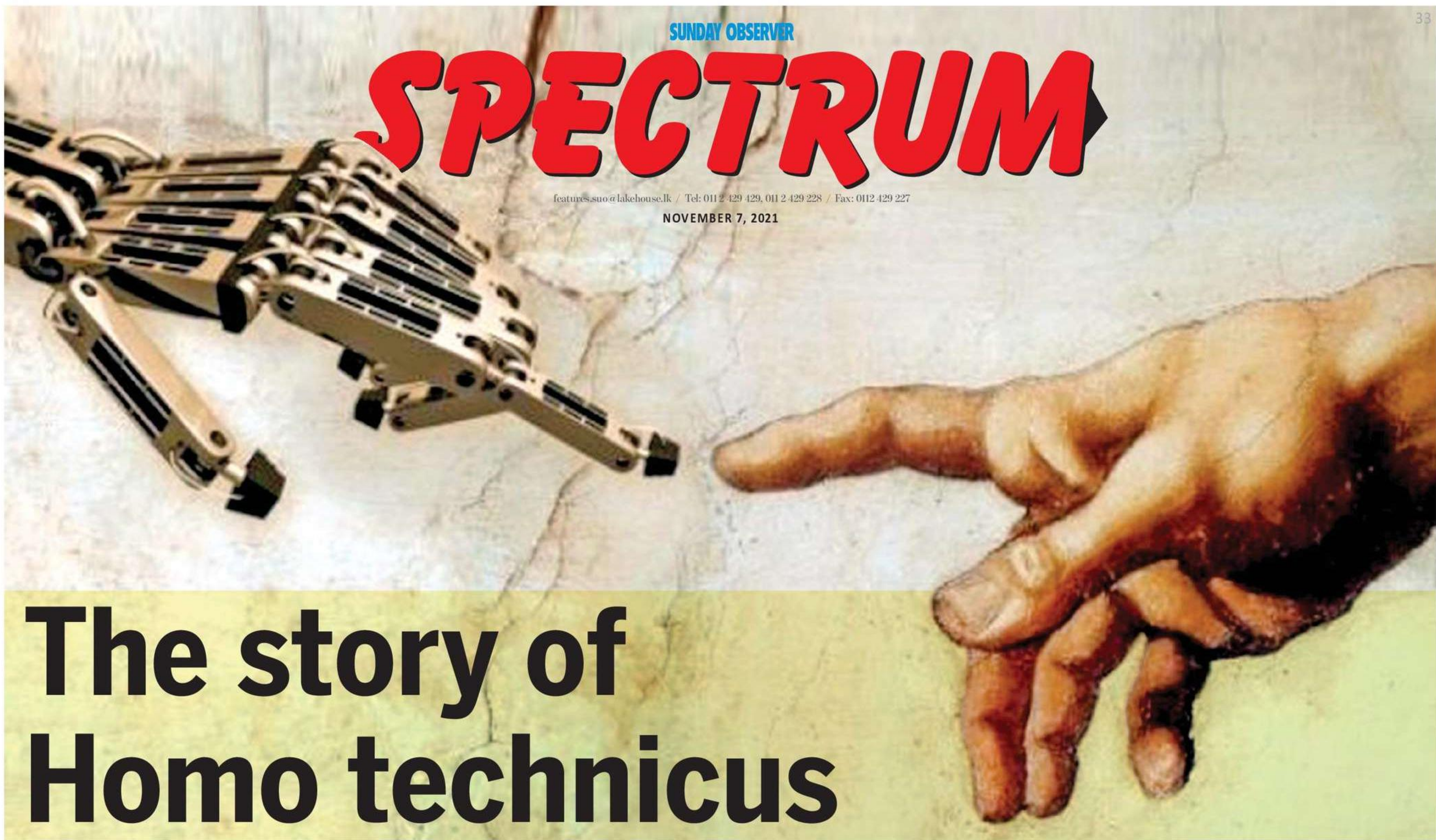


SPECTRUM

features.suo@lakehouse.lk / Tel: 011 2 429 429, 011 2 429 228 / Fax: 0112 429 227

NOVEMBER 7, 2021



The story of Homo technicus

BY SACHITRA MAHENDRA

In a friendly discussion with Mark Zuckerberg, Professor Yuval Noah Harari contests the Facebook mission - that it was built to bring people closer together and build relationships. Facebook does quite the opposite. The people, glued to the screen, have become the users distanced and distracted. Harari did not aim at Zuckerberg's empire solely. He referred to technology in general terms. Well, we do not want a Harari to tell us that. But then that's our story with interesting elements in continuity.

Zuckerberg is the Founder of Facebook. Prof. Yuval Noah Harari is a historian. Zuckerberg represents the digital community, whereas Harari represents the scholarship in the Humanities. Though poles apart, a combination in the subjects of technology and Humanities is now making inroads into academia. That opens the modern cave called Digital Humanities. Full of fancy it may appear on the surface, but the term continues to be paradoxical. Can humanity be digital? Can a digit decide humanity?

Humanities subjects

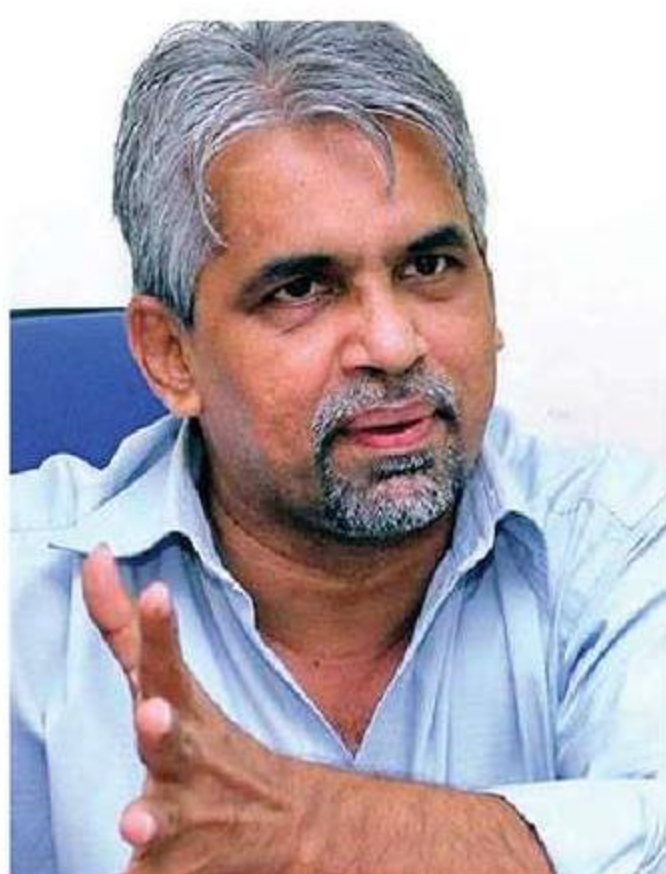
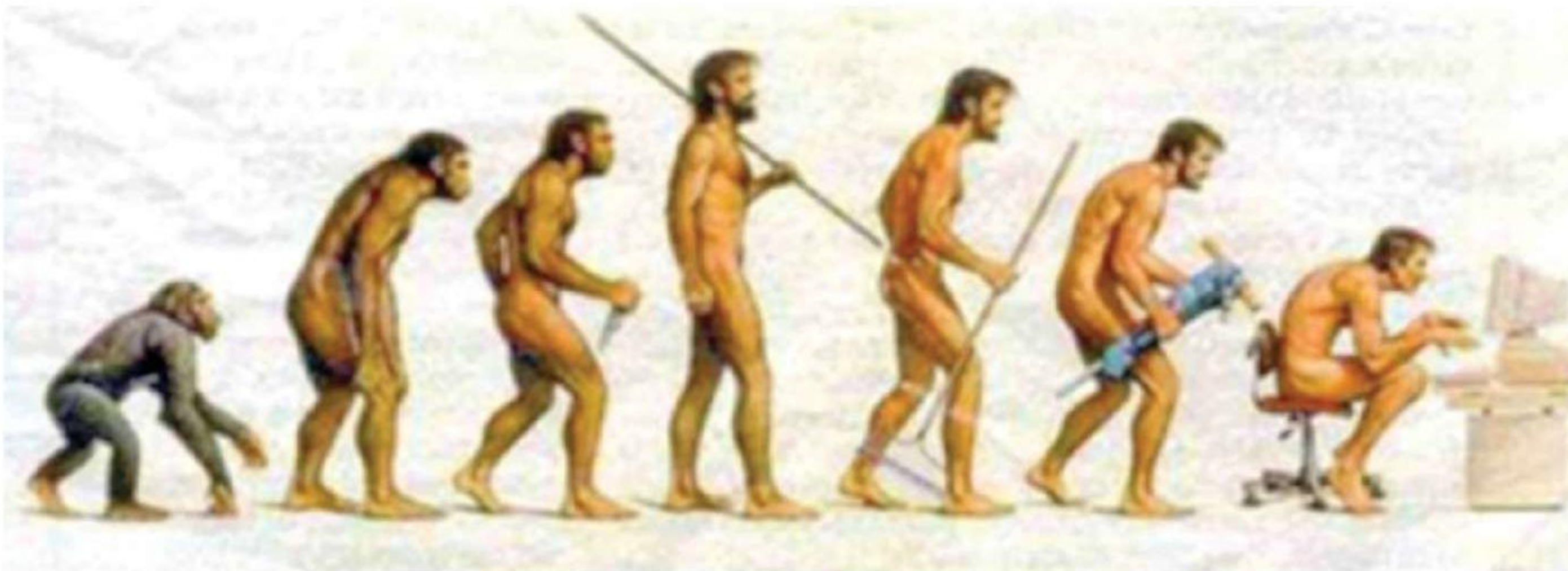
It is this question that looms large in the 21st century and the centuries to come with digits invading our territory more than ever before. The academia once confined to natural sciences unlatched doors to social sciences and humanities subjects such as philosophy and history. That spectacle met with resistance as philosophers such as Karl Popper questioned the scientific basis of Humanities subjects. Nevertheless, the Humanities subjects strived thanks to the serious effort and energy of the academics.

The territory expanded insofar as Humanities and Social Science. The subject areas had unique research methods, mainly qualitative primarily weighed against the traditional quantitative methodology. When the digits began invading humanity, paced slow, yet steady, the Humanities and Social Sciences were to be benefitted perhaps on par with natural sciences. Now most Humanities research is mediated through digital technology. Most Humanities scholars, however, raise a concern. They are worried about the digital technology's effect on the traditional epistemology and ontology that determine the strength of solid research. Despite this concern, academics without access to digital technology is a rare entity.

The library catalogue is the most classic example. Google Scholar and other online databases are ensuring the slow decay of the index-card tradition. Bibliographies are ceasing to exist in dusty corners.

Computers, the first sign

Computers are the first sign of digital appearance in the Humanities. The first use of computers in Humanities subjects such as literature is recorded in the 1940s. The University of Cambridge ensured expansion by establishing a Literary and Linguistic Computing Centre in 1964. The centre was tasked with using computers to catalogue historical texts. The computers made matters easy for Humanities subjects in terms of research and teaching. Qualitative research was more solidified as thesis, antithesis, synthesis, investigation, interpretation and



Dr. Tudor Weerasinghe

analysis produced more accurate and sharp results, leading the scholars to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scopes.

This is only one aspect of the Digital Humanities phenomenon - apart from the common story of the humans scrolling up and down on a screen. This did not come to be an overnight journey. The digitality we experience today is an offshoot of what has been brewing for decades following industrialisation.

Human evolution

Dr Tudor Weerasinghe, a communication and Marxist scholar, characterises human evolution in two major forms: biological and social. Biological evolution had been the subject long before its counterpart. The human's social evolution

ZUCKERBERG IS THE FOUNDER OF FACEBOOK. PROFESSOR YUVAL NOAH HARARI IS A HISTORIAN. ZUCKERBERG REPRESENTS THE DIGITAL COMMUNITY, WHEREAS HARRARI REPRESENTS THE SCHOLARSHIP IN THE HUMANITIES. THOUGH POLES APART, A COMBINATION IN THE SUBJECTS OF TECHNOLOGY AND HUMANITIES IS NOW MAKING INROADS INTO ACADEMIA. THAT OPENS THE MODERN CAVE CALLED DIGITAL HUMANITIES. FULL OF FANCY IT MAY APPEAR ON THE SURFACE, BUT THE TERM CONTINUES TO BE PARADOXICAL. CAN HUMANITY BE DIGITAL? CAN A DIGIT DECIDE HUMANITY?

triggered interest only following the industrial revolution.

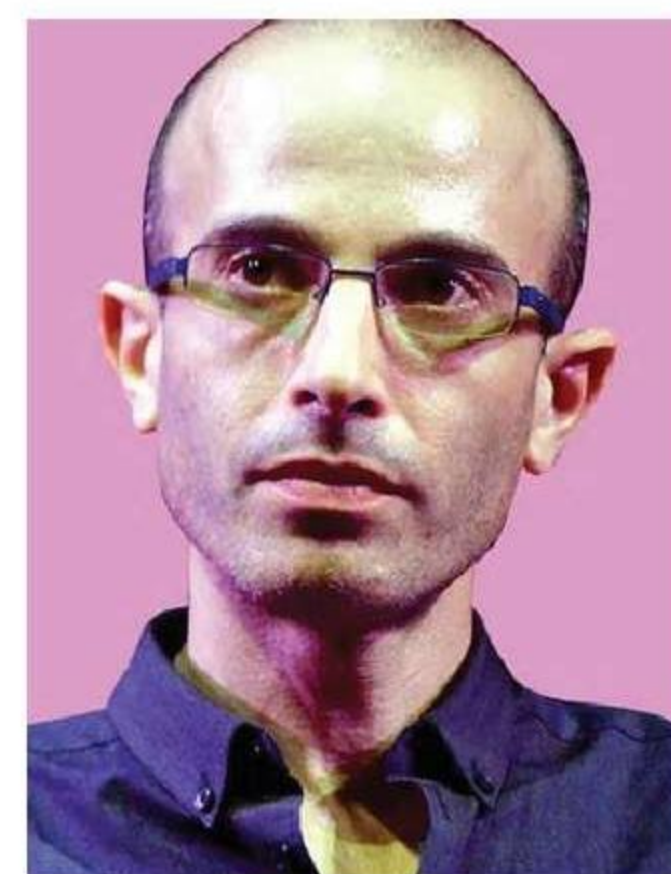
What we experience today could be considered the consummation of our social evolution. For the past few decades (or centuries may be) we have not undergone much of a biological modification. But we have experienced a weighty social transformation.

"The origins of the civilisation rest in the human's need to settle down. That's when the agricultural society came to be. That was the solution to the human's basic requirement: accommodation. Then the other needs arose. The solution was industrialization."

Most interestingly, human needs never reached an end. Industrialisation led to post-industrialisation. Then it was the information age. And now we are living in the digital

age. This century is witnessing a human whose behaviour is determined by digits. Sociologists find this phenomenon fascinating as it marks a considerable transition. If the focus of industrialisation was manufacturing, the post-industrialisation concentrates on service - knowledge and information.

The usual human activities such as finances have been integrated into a technological process. We no longer share our ancestor's basic requirement of accommodation. Networking has become our mainstay. That the human has become distanced and distracted was the opinion of Harari the historian. And he is right, we know very well. Dr Weerasinghe takes that explanation a step further. The distanced and distracted human being is now accommodated in a network manifested by digits.



Professor Yuval Noah Harari

The digital human

The digital network has created a digital human. This human remains identical with his immediate ancestors in the biological form. The social form, however, bears drastic modifications. The traditional human with humanistic qualities such as empathy and sympathy ceases to exist. That's where the transition of Homo sapiens begins. That's where the story of Homo technicus begins. The term came into existence in 2003 to offer a precise definition to the contemporary human trapped in the technology whirlpool.

As Dr. Weerasinghe said, the Homo technicus phenomenon provides us with the most accurate account of the Marxist alienation concept. Marx's original idea of alienation was to explain the predic-

ament of the proletariat during industrialisation. His elaborate vision was that the worker is made to feel foreign, alienated, to the products of his own labour. In the context of digital humanity, human is alienated from themselves. Human no longer has any right to themselves.

That solidifies the position of the Homo technicus who can also be known as post-Homo sapiens. This species has no interest in cultural and social norms. Trapped in digital comfort and convenience, Homo technicus is clueless about alienation. The society which was based on a cultural foundation is now determined by the digits and thereby technology.

Fascinating laboratory for researchers

This phenomenon is now becoming a fascinating laboratory for researchers, teachers and students of Humanities. The digital approach to the humanities has become intriguing primarily because of the Homo-transition from sapiens to the technicus.

But then the story would not end. Homo technicus would further evolve. If Yuval Noah Harari is right, 'history began when humans invented gods, and will end when humans become gods'.

A few decades later the gods fascinated sociologists, anthropologists and ethnomethodologists. The concept of gods has been a subject of controversy for so long. But then that seems no longer a concern for the Homo technicus, the human of today.

It will be an absolute zero concern for tomorrow's human, Homo Deus. The humans will be the gods themselves. Yuval Noah Harari is the author of three bestseller works: 'Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind', 'Sapiens: The Birth of Humankind' and 'Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow'.

'Homo Deus' examines the fate of the world when old myths are coupled with new god-like technologies such as artificial intelligence and genetic engineering.

Homo sapiens transitioned into the Homo technicus. As the story would not reach an end here, and we have a 'tomorrow's history' as Homo Deus, what shall be our destiny? Where shall be our destination?

These key questions appear before us, right now.

