

Rebellion of the Hackable Animals; Defending freedom will be even more urgent once government can use technology to look into our innermost feelings.

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FULL TEXT

PHOTO: John W. Tomac

Commencement speeches are usually an occasion to give graduates advice, but instead I'd like to ask for your help in dealing with an unprecedented challenge to humanity. You have probably heard many times that your smartphone can be hacked. But the real game-changer is that soon, corporations and governments might be able to hack your body and brain. The most important thing to know about the 21st century is that humans are becoming hackable animals.

Throughout history, parents knew their children well, and lovers could sometimes peer into each other's hearts. But the knowledge gathered by priests, merchants and tyrants always remained only skin deep.

To the Class of 2020

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Aleksander Solzhenitsyn describes a Soviet conference where the audience clapped their hands enthusiastically to applaud Stalin. After a few minutes of clapping, everybody became very nervous. They were all tired, but nobody wanted to be the first to stop. Finally, after 11 minutes, the director of a paper factory took the risk, stopped clapping and sat down. Immediately everyone else stopped and sat down too. That same night, the man was arrested and sent to the gulag.

Stalin could force people to smile and clap, but he couldn't know how they actually felt. To hack human beings, you need a lot of biological knowledge, data and computing power—and Stalin didn't have enough of these. But 21st-century Stalins—and there are already quite a few candidates for this job—might have everything it takes.

You are coming of age at the precise moment when biology is merging with computer science, when epidemiology gets acquainted with the smartphone, when the coronavirus meets Zoom. In recent years, governments and corporations have developed surveillance technologies that allow them to know that you are now reading this article. They can learn something from this about your political views, your artistic tastes and even your personality.

But now we are entering the era of biometric surveillance, which goes under our skin and into our bodies. This will enable governments and corporations to know what you actually feel as you read these lines. Are you afraid? Angry? Doubtful? Imagine that 10 years from now, your narcissistic boss proudly presents his new business plan, and all the employees are smiling and clapping their hands in approval. But the biometric bracelet on your wrist tells your boss that you actually think it's rubbish.

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This technology will revolutionize not only brutal dictatorships but also democracies. You have probably been told

many times that the voter knows best, that the customer is always right and that you must follow your heart. All of this is now doubtful. Once an external system can hack humans and learn their deepest fears and desires, it can convince voters and customers to buy anything it wants, be it a product or a politician.

And if you try to just follow your heart, be careful. There might be something out there that watches your heart 24 hours a day and knows it much better than you. Your heart might be a double agent.

How to live in a world where human beings can be hacked? How to protect democracy and the very meaning of human life when a computer algorithm could know us better than our mothers do? That's the most complicated challenge your generation faces.

Your elders have provided you with the knowledge and values necessary to solve this problem. But they cannot solve it for you; they don't know how. You will have to do it for yourself—and for the whole of humankind. We are all counting on you.

Mr. Harari is a historian and philosopher. His most recent book is "21 Lessons for the 21st Century."

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What advice would you give to new graduates? Join the conversation below.

Credit: By Yuval Noah Harari

DETAILS

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