

Summary of “Rebellion Of the Hackable Animals,” by Yuval Noah Harari. *Wall Street Journal* 5/1/2020.

Improvements in technology—especially health wearables and big data analytic tools—along with advances in biology mean that “humans are becoming hackable animals.” This means that powerful private sector and government actors have increasing access to the subjective psychological states of individuals. These actors could use this information to manipulate individuals’ behavior. And it could permit them to “sort” individuals in ways not previously possible.

Harari points out that governments and corporations can already draw some inferences about my political views and personality merely from the fact that I have downloaded this article. What inferences will be possible when “epidemiology gets acquainted with the smartphone”? Technology originally disseminated for tracking symptoms of Covid, or for recording details of a workout, could also “enable governments and corporations to know what you actually feel as you read these lines.” With information like this, collected over years from millions of people, institutions could come to know our preferences, priorities, and behaviors better than we know ourselves.

Why don’t we simply refuse to use this technology? Because it is the very same technology that enables us to go about our daily lives. Harari mentions Zoom in a paragraph on how government surveillance technology can help “21st-century Stalins” understand just who is insufficiently enthusiastic about the party line. The implication is that the same technology that allows us to hold classes remotely also enables institutions to scrutinize our facial expressions and reconstruct our social networks. Opting out of surveillance means foregoing part of your education during the pandemic.

The developing reality of humans as hackable animals raises new political and philosophical problems. If a “computer algorithm could know us better than our mothers do,” then who has the standing to make decisions in a person’s best interest? What good is democracy if institutions choose the behavior of voters, rather than the other way around? “That’s the most complicated challenge your generation faces.”