

Humans, and every other living thing, have always been “hackable.” Parasites alter the behavior of their hosts. Drugs temporarily or permanently alter our moods and behavior. Advertising appeals to our baser instincts in order to manipulate what we purchase. Harari himself says humans have been domesticated by wheat. While Harari’s article describes a major escalation in the war to hack humans, the idea that we might be controlled to behave contrary to our interests is as old as life itself.

Still, hacking humans with smart wearables and statistics is frightening because it’s happening so fast. This isn’t the slow-motion arms race of biological evolution, or even the memetic evolution of a culture. Our genes and our memes are ill-prepared.

What might be included in an education that helps students become “hack-resistant?”

Our current store of strategies for understanding ourselves on an intrapersonal level could play a bigger role in the school day. Harari sees his own practice of Vipassana meditation as one way of developing his resistance to being hacked. Hack-resistant students might study their own psyches and behavior through this or other introspective arts and sciences.

Hack-resistant students might take more time to investigate the strategies of their “adversaries,” and develop tools for understanding the causes and effects of their own behavior. How do we know when we’re behaving in our own best interest, and when we’re being manipulated? What are the effects of our choices not only on ourselves, but on our communities and other interested parties? What can we learn from history and literature about how we seek to control each other and why?

Educators could also work with students toward developing technological tools to mitigate the problem Harari describes. Some apps already take advantage of psychological “hacking” to nudge users toward healthier behaviors. How can we build on this foundation, hacking ourselves for our own benefit, rather than someone else’s?

The hack-resistant education sketched here might be useful in resisting nudges to suboptimal consumer behavior. I'm less optimistic about our ability to resist the effects of hacking by governments to gain and maintain political power. While each of us is individually capable of improving our responses to demands on our attention and money, resisting political hacking requires collective action. This collective action might be organized by a dissident group coordinating its own citizen-hacking. But then, where are the actual interests of citizens? Where is the contest of ideas that is supposed to result in beneficial policy? It seems like politics is at risk of becoming just an ongoing conflict between separate bundles of strategies for attracting and maintaining the loyalty of constituents. The idea that these strategies should be based on the actual interests and well-being of citizens might be obsolete.