



Level Up

The Most Important Survival Skill for the Next 50 Years Isn't What You Think

In the future, Automation will disrupt your job and AI will try to hack your brain—and probably sooner than you think. Historian Yuval Noah Harari (author of *Sapiens*, and, now, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*) explains why the best preparation has nothing to do with learning to code or building a bunker.

By Clay Skipper

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Yuval Noah Harari just may know you better than you know yourself. After all, he's made a career out of studying humans. First, he chronicled the history of mankind in his book *Sapiens*; then, he followed it up with thought-provoking contemplations about the future of mankind in *Homo Deus*; and in his latest book, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, he's looking at what's happening right now and trying to figure out what it means for the rest of this century. The prospects are... gnarly.

Basically: technological innovation and artificial intelligence are going to accelerate at a pace we've yet to really comprehend. (Fifteen years ago, Facebook wasn't even around. Now it's so efficient at micro-targeting that it helped sway a democratic election. Imagine what it might be capable of in *another* fifteen years.) That means automation will likely disrupt your current job (and your next one, and the one after that), and you'll be the target of attention-grabbing, behavior-modifying algorithms so exponentially effective you won't even realize you're being targeted.

The best defense against that? An emotional flexibility that allows for constant reinvention, and knowing yourself well enough that you don't get drawn into the deep Internet traps set for you.

It sounded crazy to us, too. And then we talked to Harari.



You write that one of the only things we can be certain of going forward is some level of uncertainty. So what's the best course of action?

Unless you are 80 years old or something, you will have to repeatedly reinvent yourself in the coming decades—you'll probably change your job a number of times. Some people imagine that it will be like this one time, big revolution, that—I don't know—in 2025, 60% of the jobs are taken over. And then we have a couple of rough years in which people have to retrain, and new jobs appear, and some people don't find new jobs and you have a large problem of unemployment. But then eventually things settle down into some new equilibrium, and we enter a new kind of economy.

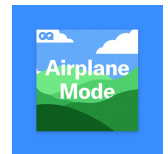
The problem with this scenario is that it assumes that AI will kind of reach its maximum capacity by 2025, which is extremely far from the truth. We're not even approaching the full capacity of AI. It's going to just accelerate. So yes, we will have these huge changes by 2025—but then we'll have even bigger changes in 2035, and even bigger changes in 2045, and people who have to repeatedly re-adjust to these things.

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What steps have you taken to guard against this?

As individuals, what we can do is quite limited. If you are very rich and successful, then of course you have all the resources in the world to cushion yourself against these kinds of upheavals. But if you're an average person then you will need a lot of help. I think the most important thing is to invest in emotional intelligence and mental balance, because the hardest challenges will be psychological. Even if there is a new job, and even if you get support from the government to kind of retrain yourself, you need a lot of mental flexibility to manage these transitions. Teenagers or 20-somethings, they are quite good with change. But beyond a certain age—when you get to 40, 50—change is stressful. And a weapon you will have [is] the psychological flexibility to go through this transition at age 30, and 40, and 50, and 60. The most important investment that people can make is not to learn a particular skill—I'll

learn how to code computers,” or “I will learn Chinese,” or something like that. No, the most important investment is really in building this more flexible mind or personality.

How does one build a more flexible mind?

I practice meditation, I practice vipassana. I do two hours every day of meditation. I go to a lot of retreats, up to 60 days every year, and it works for me. I won't say that it will work the same for everybody. Different techniques work for different for people. Some people go to therapy, some people do art, do sport. I mean, you can go to hiking in the mountains for a week and this can, for a particular person, be far more effective than almost anything else. So it's really personal, because I don't think there is one size fits all.

But we should be more clear about the goal: we need to get to know ourselves better and we need to develop this mental flexibility. Not as a kind of hobby for the side. This is really the most important quality or skill to just survive the upheavals in the coming decades.

It's important to give concrete examples otherwise it's only a lot of theory. So let's say you work in a bank and you have your successful career. And then after 10 years, your job has just been automated: you're trading the stock exchange and all of a sudden the algorithm is much better than you, so you lose your job. You need to go relearn much of what you've learned for the last 10 years—you need to go back to the beginning in many, many ways. It's giving up on not only on much of what you've learned and accomplished, but on your perception of yourself. So you no longer know exactly, what do you do? So it demands a lot of this flexibility and emotional intelligence—how to manage such a transition in life.

"Basically, the same kind of technology that enables you to hook people on YouTube clips also helps you to save a million lives a year [via self-driving cars]."

How has your work changed your relationship to technology?

I don't have a smartphone. My attention is one of the most important resources I have, and the smartphone is constantly trying to grab my attention. There's always something coming in.

I try to be very careful about how I use technology and really make sure that I'm using it for the purposes that I define instead of allowing it to kind of shape my purposes for me. That sometimes happens when you open the computer: you have a couple of minutes to spare, so you start just randomly browsing through YouTube, and two hours later, you're still there watching all types of funny cat videos, car accidents, and whatever. You did not say to yourself, "Okay, I want to spend the next two hours watching these videos." The technology kind of dictated to you that this is what you're going to do by grabbing your attention in such a forceful way that it can kind of manipulate you.

How has removing those attention-grabbing technologies changed your quality of life?

I have much more time. I think it makes a much more peaceful... I mean, it's not such a big secret. The way to grab people's attention is by exciting their emotions, either through things like fear and hatred and anger, or through things like greed and craving. If somebody [is] very afraid of immigrants and hates immigration, the algorithm will show him one story after the other about terrible things that immigrants are doing. Then somebody else maybe really, really doesn't like President Trump, so they spend hours watching all kinds of things that make them very, very angry. And it doesn't matter if it's true or not—they see this headline of "President Trump Said the World is Flat," they feel this irresistible urge to click on it.

It grabs your attention because you already have this weakness. But if you kind of sit there and just read infuriating stories for an entire hour you are basically feeding your mind with things that make you more angry and hateful. And this is especially bad if many of these stories are just not true. Sometimes they are true, quite often they're not. But the net result is that you now just spent an hour feeding your hate and your fury.

It's the same way with the other side of the coin, with greed. Because if you really want something—the perfect body, the perfect car—and you watch all these videos, you want it more and more. And if you don't have it, then you feel worse and worse that you don't have this kind of body, or you don't have this kind of car. So you just spent one hour feeding your cravings and your greed, and it's really not good for you.

The better you know yourself, the more protected you are from all these algorithms trying to manipulate you. If we go back to the example of the YouTube videos. If you know “I have this weakness, I tend to hate this group of people,” or “I have a bit obsession to the way my hair looks,” then you can be a little more protected from these kinds of manipulations. Like with alcoholics or smokers, the first step is to just recognize, “Yes, I have this bad habit and I need to be more careful about it.”

So how do you get your news?

I rarely follow the kind of day-to-day news cycle. I tend to read long books about subjects that interest me. So instead of reading 100 short stories about the Chinese economy, I prefer to take one long book about the Chinese economy and read it from cover-to-cover. So I miss a lot of things, but I'm not a politician and I'm not a journalist, so I guess it's okay I don't follow every latest story.

Why do you think we're so reluctant to change our ways? This reminds me of the recent issue of *The New York Times Magazine* on global warming. In the 1980s, we knew this was gonna happen and we didn't do anything about it, and now we're suffering the consequences. And it feels to me like this is a similar situation: we know this is going to happen and yet, again, we cannot seem to keep ourselves from doing the very thing that's going to ultimately destroy us.

Well, one reason is that there is some amazingly wonderful potential about many of these developments in artificial intelligence. If it was all bad news then there would be more temptation to go in that direction, and there would be no reason to invest billions in these kinds of research and development. But there are also a lot of potential benefits.

Replacing human drivers with self-driving cars, this can save more than a million lives globally every year. Currently more than a million people die in car accidents every year, most of them are caused by human error. It would be a good idea to save these million lives, but in order to put a self-driving car on the road you need the ability, to some extent, to hack human behavior and human emotions. It's not about turning that ninety-degree angle on the road—that's the easy part. The really difficult part is how to be careful if there is a child walking along the road and he suddenly jumps right in front of the car because he was running after a ball.

So to put self-driving cars on the road, we need cars that can replicate children and know a lot of things about the behavior of children. So this, to some extent, is also hacking human beings, and learning how to recognize the behavior patterns of human beings, right? Basically, the same kind of technology that enables you to hook people on YouTube clips also helps you to save a million lives a year. So just saying, "Oh, it's all terrible, it's no good"—this is not going to be so easy.

Sides of a coin, I guess. Are there ways to harness the good without also getting the bad?

Hopefully the culmination of government regulation, and the pressure of the public, and the self-awareness and the intentions of people in the industry. Many people in the industry—certainly all of the engineers, and the scientists sort of leading this revolution—they don't have bad intentions. I guess there are a few with bad intentions. But most of them, they don't want to create some kind of creepy dystopia. In many cases, they just don't fully realize the implications and potential consequences of what they are developing. Hopefully, if we bring more attention to what is happening—and not just for the people in the industry itself, but the entire public—we can steer these developments in the right direction.

For me, this book's not a book of prophecies about the future, like: This is coming and there is nothing we can do about it. If there's nothing we can do about it, there was no point in telling people about it. The whole idea is: Let's bring attention to these issues. We need to talk much more about what artificial intelligence, and what technology is going to do to the job market, to the human psychology, to human relations. And this should be central issues in, for example, the political debate. There is a midterm election coming up in a few months. If you go to the town hall meeting and there is somebody who wants to be elected to congress, ask this person: What do you think about the potential impact of AI on the job market, or on the development of child psychology, and if I elect you, what are you going to do about it?

So one of the ideas I loved in *Sapiens*, and obviously explored again here, is sort of the imagined orders or myths that we believe in. I'm curious what you think, right now, are the most dangerous myths that we believe in?

There are actually two competing dangerous myths. One very dangerous myth is in the political arena. We see the lies of nostalgic fantasies about the past. In more and

more countries you have political leaders that, instead of offering a vision about the future, how are we going to deal with artificial intelligence, and with climate change, and all that, they don't have any real solutions to these questions. So instead they kind of dazzle people with nostalgic fantasies about the past: “If you vote for me, I will bring back some golden age.” Which is absolutely impossible. Usually the golden age never existed, it's just a fantasy. And even if it did, you can't really go back.

And this is very dangerous because instead of trying to find real solutions to the new problems we face, people are engaged in this nostalgic exercise. If it fails—and it's bound to fail—they'll never acknowledge it. They'll just blame somebody: “We couldn't realize this dream because of either external enemies or internal traitors.” And then this is a very dangerous mess.

The other danger, the opposite one, is, “Well, the future will basically take care of itself. We just need to develop better technology and it will create a kind of paradise on earth.” Which doesn't take into account all of the dystopian and problematic ways in which technology can influence our lives.

This interview was edited and condensed.

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