

Evolution and the downsides of being so smart

With misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic, “cheap” and “deep” fakes of [elected officials](#), and targeted ads and [emotionally exploitative social media algorithms](#), it can begin to feel like all communication is manipulation.

Well, as it turns out, this is the thesis of an influential [paper](#) by evolutionary biologists [Richard Dawkins](#) and John Krebs.

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For most animals living in complex social systems, including humans, eating calorie-dense food, like fruit and meat, both made the stakes of competition much higher and made us able to afford the calorically expensive brains we needed—and of course still need—for social scheming.

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When the stakes are high, and the gatekeepers of reproduction and survival are other minds, competition and manipulation become central. This mental competition sets up an [arms race](#)—a scenario in which competition causes each side to accumulate potential to damage the other. There are many different arms races in nature. Some of the most innovative, beautiful, and horrific characteristics of plants and animals have also been shaped by arms races in nature. Trees get taller to reach the sunlight until they can’t reach any further up into the sky. Gazelles and cheetahs try to outrun each other. In our case, minds outran each other until they became as fast as possible.

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