

# Are We In Fact Melding With Machines?

Here's a [headline](#) worth pondering: "Chinese parents want students to wear dystopian brainwave-detecting headbands." The story, on the website SupChina, details the latest innovation at the Jiangnan Experimental School in Hangzhou.

Interestingly enough, the electronic headband, dubbed [Focus EDU](#), is made by a Harvard-incubated American startup, [BrainCo](#), based in Somerville, Massachusetts—right next to Cambridge.

As the company's chatty [video](#) explains, in a traditional classroom, "It can be challenging to teachers to easily understand their students' comprehension of the material." Yet with Focus EDU, "teachers can easily observe all of their students' attention levels from one place."

It's easy, of course, to think the worst about such technology: just the thought of a sapient device on one's head is a little creepy, a little cyborg-y. And yet, of course, the same can be said about all sorts of cerebellum-related technologies, from [electroconvulsive therapy](#) to [deep brain stimulation](#). Indeed, just the other day, it was [reported](#) that scientists at Boston University believe that gentle brain zaps can help people over 60 with their memory, perhaps even combatting Alzheimer's Disease. If such zapping is proven to work, who *won't* want to get jumper cabled?

Moreover, if we step back a bit further, we can see that people have been using brain enhancements for a long time, starting with whoever drank the first cup of coffee. Beyond caffeine, plenty of other drugs have been tried. What was the ringing finale of "White Rabbit," that Jefferson Airplane rock song from the '60s? Oh yes: ["feed your head!"](#) Okay, it's true

that hard hallucinogenics didn't work out well, but plenty of other drugs, including marijuana, have found their places in society. There's a whole pharma chest full of newish stimulants, starting with Adderall.

In addition, it's often been argued that video games and social media are their own kind of self-doping feedback loops, delivering little highs with each click. And if that sounds scary, it must be remembered that gambling has been delivering the same cheap thrill for eons.

Furthermore, it's worth pointing out that BrainCo's Focus EDU headband has actually been on the market for two years. And the company offers other similar products aimed at aiding physical training and mental alertness. Are these gadgets truly helpful? Or are they helpful only because of a happy placebo effect? Or are they somehow harmful? It will take a while to figure all that out, and in the meantime, there are at least a [dozen other companies](#) in the same market space.

Still, there's something scary about the People's Republic of China using this technology. And so the word "dystopian" in that SupChina headline seems justified.

That is, if teachers can observe students, then so, too, can the state. Indeed, it's easy to imagine the sort of big data collection envisioned in Focus EDU becoming a part of China's [Social Credit System](#)—that's the system of metrics being developed by the PRC government to track the supposed virtue of each of the country's 1.4 billion citizens.

And of course, when Beijing thinks about virtue, it isn't just thinking, it's *doing*. As we know, over the last few years, China has locked up an estimated [one million](#) Chinese Uighur Muslims. And God only knows what technology—imported from Massachusetts or made at home—the PRC is using on those unfortunate souls.

To be sure, the Chinese communists were locking up people (or

worse) by the millions long before anyone had heard of big data. Indeed, the whole of the Chinese political tradition is not exactly Lockean. So in that sense, digital technology—including a [pervasive network of surveillance cameras](#) keyed to facial recognition—is merely a boost to the already familiar Chinese command and control.

Still, it's worth wondering what will happen when old autocracy and new technology achieve a full union. Will freedom in China be snuffed out for good? Or will its history take yet another unforeseen turn? One has to wonder, for example, about the long-term politico-cultural impact of tens of millions of [diasporic Chinese](#), including those who run feisty sites such as SupChina, which is based in [New York City](#).

In the meantime, here in the U.S. and in the West, we should wonder whether it can happen here—"it" being defined, of course, as the loss of freedom. We should be proud that over the last few hundred years, we've carved out real gains for liberty, and shared them, however fitfully, with the world. And we should recall that past predictions about the death of freedom—from bureaucratism, communism, fascism, advertising mesmerism—have proven to be greatly exaggerated.

Yet we've also never seen anything like the Internet. Just last week, [this author](#) noted the onslaught of digital dominion, sweeping away the last vestiges of analog privacy. So maybe now it's worth wondering what will come next.

Specifically, one must ask whether the Information Age is imprinting itself on all of us, East and West alike, in dramatic and civilization-shaping ways.

That was the argument of the late Alvin Toffler in his book from 1980, *The Third Wave*. The first wave of human history, Toffler maintained, was agriculture, and that imposed one way of interacting with the world. The second wave was industry,

and that changed everything. Now the third wave was coming in information—and yet another civilizational reordering was underway.

So today, it's fair to ask whether we are, in fact, melding with the machines. How else to explain why we seem inseparable from the gadgets in our hands, on our laps, jammed in our ears—and maybe soon wrapped around our heads?

Indeed, it could be argued that today's young "snowflakes" are the obvious products of a lifetime immersion in digitalism. Having lived their lives on little screens, the larger physical reality—sometimes dubbed "meatspace"—might seem scary. Hence the fear of being "triggered," the need for "safe spaces," and all the other crutches of political correctness.

We might further observe that computers, by their binary nature, bolster systems of rigidity, even orthodoxy. As techies might say, that's a feature, not a bug.

Of course, the geeks who designed all this tech might wish to think of themselves as wild-and-crazy bros, or even revolutionaries. Yet the ultimate Tofflerian reality is that computers and code are about engineering—and engineers are, of course, a rules-based bunch.

Meanwhile, since digital technology works so much better than its predecessors—better at producing wealth, better at providing choice—it's not surprising that the whole of human civilization is now surfing on this third wave, defying the rocks and the risks.

Yet if there's a third wave, then there's sure to be a fourth. And what might that be? One shrewd take on things to come is found in Jack Williamson's 1947 sci-fi novella, *With Folded Hands*. In that tale, Williamson imagines a new species of super helpful robots, operating according to the slogan, "The Perfect Mechanicals: 'To Serve and Obey, And Guard Men from Harm.'"

Sadly for humans—after 72 years, it seems safe to offer up at least something of a spoiler—it doesn't quite work out that way.

So will *With Folded Hands* be remembered as accurately predicting the fourth wave, which will be the robot takeover? Or will it be remembered as encouraging humans to think more carefully about who, and what, we're putting in charge—thus prolonging the prosperity of the third wave?

Surely that's the great question of the age.

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