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Tech oligarchs on the brain

EDITORIAL

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The big tech companies gather data on almost every aspect of our lives, something that gives them enormous power. We must not allow them to claim ownership of information about our thoughts, emotions and fears.

Photo: Sturlason

At the start of 2026, the Norwegian Language Council crowned *tekoligark* (tech oligarch) word of the year for 2025 (1). The term refers to the new elite of extremely wealthy individuals who exercise near-total control over digital technology, thereby wielding enormous power over our lives. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), which are effectively controlled by the tech oligarchs personally, harvest vast amounts of data on our online and real-world activities, boosting their already high profits and enabling them to exert even more influence, including over political processes (2).

These same tech oligarchs have for many years been interested in more direct access to our brains and nervous systems. Companies such as Elon Musk's Neuralink, Sam Altman's Merge Labs, and Synchron, where Jeff Bezos is a co-owner, specialise in various forms of neuroimplants, which are technological devices that communicate directly with the central nervous system. Merge Labs is reportedly named after Sam Altman's vision of one day being able to merge humans and machines (3).

> ***«Combinations of brain implants and artificial intelligence (AI) are already being used experimentally to decode thoughts by reconstructing words and sentences from neural data»***

Basic neuroimplants, such as those used for deep brain stimulation in Parkinson's disease, are already in routine clinical use worldwide. However, the devices being developed by these new companies are far more sophisticated. Neuralink, for example, has created a probe with 1024 electrodes that is implanted directly into the brain. To date, at least 13 people have received the implant, currently restricted to the motor cortex, and have used it to control robotic hands or play computer games (4). On 31 December 2025, Elon Musk announced that Neuralink would begin mass production of the implants, and that the robotic surgical procedures required for implantation would be fully automated in 2026 (5).

The long-term objective is to expand application to other regions of the brain, potentially even to decode subconscious processes. From a technology perspective, this could be achievable within a few years. Combinations of brain implants and artificial intelligence (AI) are already being used experimentally to decode thoughts by reconstructing words and sentences from neural data (3). EEG data have been employed to reconstruct mental imagery (6), and advanced neuroimaging studies of the brain have demonstrated the potential to detect, for example, sexual orientation (7) and political ideology (8).

Once neural data can be recorded from the brain, it may also be possible to transmit information back into it. Neuralink is just one of several companies openly pursuing two-way communication between the brain and external AI (3). Tom Oxley, CEO of Synchron, has said that digital interfaces encompassing the entire brain are the future, and that the need to treat psychiatric disorders and other neurological conditions will drive their development (4).

> ***«National and international regulations urgency need to be established to govern its use, particularly with respect to ownership of data harvested from the brain»***

However, even before such developments are realised, our neural data is already merging with the electronic devices we use every day. In 2023, Apple patented an AirPods prototype with the capability to monitor brain activity. In autumn 2025, Mark Zuckerberg's Meta launched smart glasses which, in combination with a 'neural band', enable users to communicate with AI using only subtle wrist movements (3).

A 2024 survey in the United States found that 29 of the 30 neurotechnology companies it surveyed did not specify any limits on the type or amount of neural data they could collect from users (9). Only one company had self-imposed restrictions on the resale of such data to third parties.

> ***«Neurotechnology has considerable potential to help people with brain injuries and neurological disorders. However, this is matched by the potential for misuse»***

Neurotechnology has an enormous commercial potential. National and international regulations urgency need to be established to govern its use, particularly with respect to ownership of data harvested from the brain.

UNESCO, the OECD and the World Economic Forum are among several international organisations that have recently proposed guidelines for the use and ownership of neural data (10). Nevertheless, as is often the case, legislation and regulation continue to lag behind technological development.

Neurotechnology has considerable potential to help people with brain injuries and neurological disorders. However, this is matched by the potential for misuse. In 2023, UNESCO cautioned that neurotechnology can give direct access to, manipulate and simulate structures in the brain, thereby revealing information about our identity, our emotions and our innermost fears (11).

Society has so far failed to adequately regulate tech oligarchs' power over social media. We must not allow them the same power or ownership over data obtained directly from our brains.

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