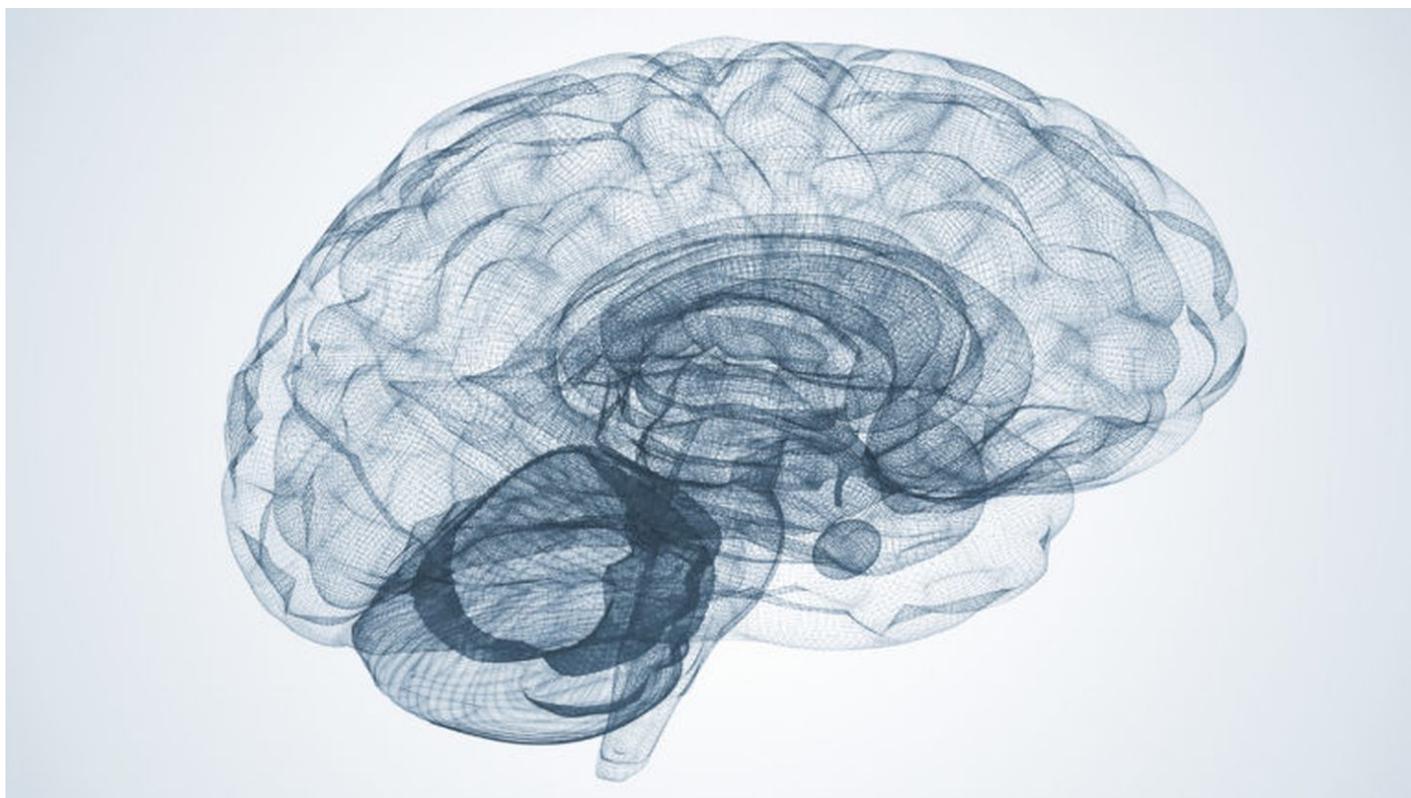


# Entrepreneur donates brain-computer company to Tufts

The company, Braingate, is developing ways for disabled people to regain functions.

By [Hiawatha Bray](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 10, 2020, 8 minutes ago



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For more than a decade, scientist and entrepreneur Jeff Stibel's company BrainGate has been developing ways to connect the human brain directly to computers.

But Stibel doesn't think the world is ready for his technology, because of the potential for abuse. So he's giving away the company.

Stibel is donating [BrainGate](#) to his alma mater, Tufts University, complete with more than a dozen patents covering the company's work in brain-computer interfaces, the parties announced Thursday. He is also endowing two professorships at the school to lead a research program that will further develop the BrainGate technology, while grappling with its ethical challenges.

"I want to make sure, given my science background, that we're focused on doing good and not harm," said Stibel, cofounder of venture capital firm [Bryant Stibel](#), whose partners included the late basketball star Kobe Bryant.

BrainGate is based on research conducted at Brown University, where Stibel earned a master's degree in cognitive science. It uses electrodes implanted in the human brain to intercept and translate a person's thoughts into signals that can control machines. The goal is to allow disabled people to a robotic arm or transmit text messages over a smartphone, just by thinking about it.

"It is very much mind-reading," Stibel said. "We are able to interpret signals of the human brain and translate that into output."

The company has not brought products to market yet. It's been funded through grants from major universities that work with BrainGate on research projects.

But Stibel said that brain-computer interfaces could someday be worth hundreds of billions of dollars, for the medical applications alone. And some tech industry giants are moving quickly to commercialize the technology for the rest of us. For example, Facebook is running a research program in brain-computer interfaces for use with a new generation of augmented-reality glasses. The user might think about a Facebook friend and instantly see his friend's page displayed on the lenses of his glasses. Elon Musk, founder of carmaker Tesla, has also launched a brain-computer interface company called [Neuralink](#).

“I don’t see anything scary about this technology,” said Tufts biology professor Michael Levin in an e-mail. “We already have ways to put information into brains – paintings, books, movies, and to read out information from brains... this is just a more efficient way to do it.”

But Stibel worries about ethical challenges. Who will control the collected data, for instance? Could companies use it to violate our privacy, monitoring our thoughts much as they now monitor our mouse clicks? And as the technology improves, could such a system be used to alter the thoughts of those using it — a kind of mind control?

“These are individuals who are not asking whether to do it, they’re asking how to do it,” Stibel said. “I wanted someone to control the underlying technology and ask the question whether we should be doing this and when we should be doing it.”

Because BrainGate’s new owners are scientists and scholars, rather than business people, Stibel believes they will be free to focus on developing safe and ethical uses for the technology, and set higher standards for the entire industry.

James Glaser, dean of the Tufts school of arts and sciences, said Stibel’s gift to the university reflected his loyalty to the school where he earned undergraduate degrees in philosophy and psychology.

“It’s powerful technology but one we have to be careful with,” said Glaser. “He believes that Tufts will honor that trust.”

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