

The Brodie Band

Andrew Wainwright woke up filled with enthusiasm for the coming day. He hung his Brodie Band on the bedpost, strolled into the kitchen, turned on the coffeemaker, and began making breakfast. After he ate, he carried a cup of coffee into his den and began reviewing his mail and the overnight news. One of the advantages of working from home was that he could take his shower and get dressed whenever he felt like it, and this morning he felt like getting some work done first. The shower would come later. Sometimes it came a day or two later.

The coffee tasted exceptionally good this morning. It was a new brand he'd recently switched to after hearing other people praise it. Life was pretty good, he thought. He wasn't normally a reflective person, but it occurred to him that he had been feeling better about himself for a couple of years now. Ever since he started wearing a Brodie Band at night. He didn't really know that much about the device. It was supposed to stimulate REM sleep or something, but he bought one after hearing other people rave about how it changed their lives. He didn't think it was *that* amazing, but he did seem to sleep better when he wore it, and he woke up feeling refreshed. He'd never really been a morning person before, but now he sometimes did his best work in the morning. He finished the piece he was writing about how the President's policies were beginning to bear fruit in the Mideast and sent it to his editor at the online magazine he wrote for. Then he felt ready for a shower. He'd use the research materials he'd gathered to write a parallel article for his news blog after lunch.

A few days later Andrew left on a long-planned fishing trip with two friends. They drove to a fly-in service in Canada, and a floatplane took them to an undeveloped lake deep in a provincial forest. The service didn't know if anyone else had ever fished that lake, but they'd spotted a promising looking camp site from the air and that's where they left Andrew and his friends. After unloading their gear, the plane took off and the three of them had two glorious weeks in the Canadian wilderness. No sign or sounds of other human beings, no cell phones or Internet, great fishing, and glorious stargazing. They weren't totally roughing it, as all three of them brought their Brodie Bands. The devices took very little current, and they could be recharged from a portable cell phone battery.

When their two weeks were up, a floatplane took them back to the base camp where they'd parked their car. They took turns driving back home, and the two who weren't driving generally slept fitfully in the car. They'd had a wonderful time, but all that activity and fresh air had worn them out. Andrew was especially weary, as his Brodie Band had broken on the second day of their vacation. He had slept OK in his sleeping bag and air mattress, but not as soundly as the other two. They nicknamed him "Grumpy" on the trip, as he was the one who staggered around muttering while the other two cheerfully made coffee and planned the day's fishing.

Andrew didn't get back to his house until two in the morning. He took a quick shower, scraped two weeks' stubble off his chin, and collapsed into his real bed. He slept like a log, even without a Brodie Band. The next morning he was surprised at how bland his coffee tasted. It had tasted great before the trip, but now it just tasted weak. Maybe he hadn't sealed the container tightly and it had gone bad, or maybe the strong camp coffee had affected his taste buds, but he just didn't enjoy his morning coffee.

He was planning to get a new Brodie Band that morning, and he decided to stop at a grocery store on the way and pick up a can of the brand he'd previously liked.

When he got to the store he couldn't find the brand of coffee he was looking for. In fact, he couldn't find any brand except the brand he'd recently started drinking. He asked about this at the customer service counter, and a lady told him they'd stopped carrying several brands because people weren't buying them anymore. "It's not just coffee," she said. "We keep track of what people buy in all our categories. We make certain we stock what people want, and we don't carry products they don't want. We feel that's the best way to serve our customers."

Curious, Andrew walked down all the aisles, paying attention to what was on the shelves. The coffee department was the only place where he found only one brand on the shelves, but there were several other departments where one brand clearly dominated the shelf space and only a few alternatives were available. This seemed to be most common in high volume items. Soft drinks, toilet paper, paper towels, laundry detergent – products that everyone bought. Surprisingly, the brand that dominated was the brand he generally bought. Some were brands he'd bought for years, and some were brands he'd recently switched to, but the brands he liked were available. That's why he hadn't noticed there were so few alternatives. When he started paying attention to what *wasn't* on the shelves, he realized many brands he'd grown up with, brands that he thought were top sellers, had disappeared completely.

As a news columnist, his curiosity was piqued by this discovery. There probably wasn't a big story here, but still he rushed home to begin investigating. He was surprised by how excited he was about this story. He hadn't been this excited about a story in years.

He was disappointed by his findings. He found lots of stories about how this company and that company had enjoyed phenomenal growth in the past few years, but nothing about the long-established brands that seemingly faded out of existence. The reporters who wrote the success stories seemed to accept without question the company explanations of a commitment to quality, being true to their principles, and treating their employees like family. None of the reporters dug any deeper, and apparently it never occurred to them that some of the companies that failed might have been following the same strategies. What was wrong with reporters nowadays? As he thought about that he began to feel uncomfortable about some of the articles he had written.

Andrew pored over all the columns he'd written or posted to his blog over the last five years. The early ones struck him as being tough, biting, and inspired. The newer ones seemed more insipid than inspired. Similarly, his earlier blog posts led to emotional responses from followers. Some loved his posts, and some hated them, and they'd argue for or against his position for weeks after he'd posted it. His recent posts drew only weak praise. "Well said" and "I agree" were common responses. If anyone disagreed with a post they apparently didn't think it was worth mentioning. The transition was gradual, it was hard to say exactly when his posts had become less divisive, but it appeared to begin two and a half or three years ago. That was about the time the companies who were now enjoying phenomenal success began prospering.

He looked at trends of other types of data, trying to see if anything else had changed around that time. Weather, earthquakes, sunspots, and other natural events seemed unchanged. On the other hand, major crimes began declining. Worker productivity increased. Drug addiction seemed to be down. There was tantalizing but inconclusive evidence that some chronic health conditions – asthma, epilepsy, anxiety disorders, etc. – were decreasing. While looking into those health issues he found articles that claimed these were side benefits of the Brodie Band, which began to be widely used about that time. Some authors even cast a wider net and gave the Brodie Band credit for the decline in crime and the increase in productivity. Apparently, the anecdotal evidence was strong enough that the government had begun providing bands at reduced cost, or free, to people who couldn't afford them.

The stories about the Brodie Band really caught Andrew's attention. He didn't remember for certain, but he thought he started wearing a band about two and a half or three years ago. He looked for articles with hard data about the effects of sleeping with a Brodie Band. He found several older articles about the development of the band. It was invented to help people suffering from specific medical issues: autism, PTSD, night terrors, and sleep disorders. The lead researcher was a doctor named Samuel Brodie. He called it a DSPI, Disturbed Sleep Pattern Interrupter, but it became popularly known as a "Brodie Band." The band monitored the patients' sleep patterns and stimulated a "white noise" brain pattern when it detected non-restful sleep. Clinical trials showed it was beneficial in treating patients with the targeted problems, but the trials also showed that a control group of people without sleep disturbances who wore the band reported more restful sleep, relief from multiple non-neural ailments, and a more positive outlook on life. Additional testing confirmed these results and found no harmful side effects, so it was approved for over-the-counter sale.

All the articles Andrew found written since that approval seemed shallow, relying on anecdotal evidence. They were invariably positive, giving the Brodie Band credit for nearly everything that was going right with the world. The writing still struck Andrew as being insipid – just like the articles he had written after he started wearing a Brodie Band at night. His reporter instincts told him the other writers hadn't looked for any negative side effects. They felt good when they slept with a band on, so they looked for evidence that other people felt good, too. Andrew looked to see if there were any negative trends since the Brodie Band hit the market.

He didn't find a "smoking gun," but he found several trends that caused him concern. Productivity was up, companies were making more of the products people preferred and their employees were being more efficient at making them. New product introductions were down, though, as were patent applications. The movie industry was making record profits, but they were also making fewer movies. Profits were up because people flocked to see the movies they did make. Book sales were up, but fewer new books were being written. Opinion polls showed people were more satisfied with incumbent politicians, but now many politicians ran unopposed.

Andrew spent a lot of time thinking about these and many other "pairs" of positive and negative trends. Some seemed to make sense. If people were satisfied with incumbent politicians, why would anyone oppose them? On the other hand, in the past even very popular politicians made at least a few people unhappy, especially at the upper levels of politics. You might find a county coroner or a city auditor running unopposed, but now congressmen and governors were running unopposed. And if

more people than ever before were going to the movies, why weren't the studios cranking out more movies?

He was well aware of the fact that correlation is not causation. Just because these positive and negative trends seemed to coincide with widespread use of the Brodie Band didn't mean it was the cause of them. And what did these trends have to do with sleep? He toyed with the idea that maybe the band suppressed creative thought, but that seemed a stretch. That might explain why there were fewer books being written, and fewer movies being made, but did a lack of creative thought make people more satisfied with their politicians? And how would the band suppress creative thought? As far as he knew most of his creative thinking was done while he was awake. Then he had another idea. What if, by suppressing everything the band detected as a sleep disturbance, it was suppressing all negative thoughts. People woke up happy, cheerful, and fully satisfied with their lives. They were more productive because they were happy and more rested, and since they were happy they saw no reason to make changes. Like writing a new book. Or creating a new product. Or electing a different politician. It didn't resolve his original question about why people were gravitating toward certain products, but maybe that had something to do with being easily satisfied.

Andrew searched using every keyword and phrase he could think of, but he found no indication that anyone had ever looked to see if the Brodie Band suppressed negative thoughts or hindered creativity. As far as he could tell, no one had ever looked for *any* negative side effects. Next he looked at the web site of the company that made the Brodie Band, MediMorpheus. They offered lots of testimonials from users who said the band had changed their life for the better but, not surprisingly, no indication that there was any downside to wearing the band. He called the number listed as a "press contact" and spoke to a company PR specialist who would only tell him that extensive clinical trial showed no negative side effects.

Frustrated, he began searching for a way to contact Dr. Samuel Brodie, the man who developed the band. He found lots of Samuel Brodies, but none seemed to have any connection to the Brodie Band. The man had no presence on any social media platforms, never spoke at medical conferences, and hadn't published any papers about his research. Finally, searching a real estate site, he found an address for a "Samuel Brodie, M.D." in the same zip code as MediMorpheus. He couldn't find a phone number linked to that address, but the town was only two hours away so he decided to try a personal visit.

The next morning he drove to the address and rang the doorbell. A distinguished-looking gentleman whom Andrew guessed was in his late 50's answered the door.

"Dr. Samuel Brodie?" Andrew asked.

"Yes," the man replied, looking at Andrew suspiciously.

"I'm Andrew Wainwright. I'm a journalist researching the Brodie Band and I'd like to talk to you about that project."

“I’m retired. I no longer have any connection with that product.”

“But you were the lead developer. I just want to ask you some questions about how it works.”

“I don’t wish to talk about it,” Samuel said. “As a matter of fact, I can’t talk about it. I’m bound by a non-disclosure agreement.”

“This would be an anonymous, off-the-record discussion.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t wish to talk about it.” Samuel stepped back and began to close the door.

“I know that by suppressing negative dreams it reduces dissatisfaction and creativity,” Andrew said.

Samuel wavered for a moment. “No, I can’t,” he said at last as he closed the door.

“Didn’t you take an oath to ‘First do no harm?’” Andrew shouted through the closed door.

There was a long pause and Andrew turned to walk back to his car when he heard the door opening again.

“That’s not actually part of the Hippocratic Oath,” Samuel said. “But it is generally accepted as a guiding principle in medicine. Can you guarantee me this conversation will be anonymous?”

“I can promise you that I will go to jail rather than reveal your name,” Andrew said. “This state has a shield law to protect reporters, and most Federal courts respect a reporter’s first amendment right to not name their sources. In any event, I don’t think that’s applicable in this case because I’m not aware that any laws have been broken. I just want to learn more about the Brodie Band. If I write any articles about it I will not disclose my sources.”

“Appearing in court is not what worries me,” Samuel said as he motioned Andrew to enter his house. He led Andrew into the kitchen, poured a cup of coffee for each of them, and they sat down at the kitchen table.

Samuel began the conversation. “First of all, I want to make it absolutely clear that the ‘Brodie Band,’ as the press has dubbed it, is very effective in treating certain types of mental and physical disorders. That was our goal when we developed it, and we never intended it for any other use. During clinical trials we discovered it also promoted better sleep and an overall sense of well-being among users who didn’t suffer from the problems it was designed to help. That’s what led to it being used by the general public.”

“But does this sense of well-being suppress initiative and creativity?” Andrew asked.

“There was some indication of that in the clinical trials,” Samuel admitted, “but it wasn’t definitive. I suspect it may cause a measurable decline in those traits if it’s used for a long time, but the clinical trials

didn't last that long. I wanted to list that as an area for additional study in my final report, but the company didn't want to muddy the waters with any unproven concerns. I couldn't prove it was a concern, so they pulled it from the report. They did give me funding to do additional research into how to fine tune the brain wave sensing so we could only suppress the negative dreams that were contributing to the problems we were trying to cure, but that proved difficult to do. After six months of research with no results, they cancelled the research and released the product. That's when I took an early retirement."

"And signed a non-disclosure agreement to do it," Andrew said. Samuel nodded in agreement.

"Now that the product has been on the market for several years, do you think wearing the band every night for a long time decreases initiative and creativity?"

Samuel thought about his answer for a long time before he spoke. "Let's just say I don't wear a band when I sleep."

"So, it's like we now have an entire population on Prozac," Andrew said.

"I'd hardly say that," Samuel protested. "It's not like people who wear the band at night are drugged out zombies. In general, they're healthier and happier than if they didn't wear the band. It has some very positive impacts. I believe the suicide rate declined when the band became popular, among other benefits. But wearers may be a little less creative. If the company had been up front with the side effects, if they'd given people the choice of wearing the band and being healthier and happier than they had been, but maybe a little less creative, or not wearing the band and having their life be unchanged, I'd have no regrets. It bothers me, though, that people weren't told about the choice they were making."

"Fair enough," said Andrew. "It also appears to me that wearing the band seems to affect people's tastes. Some products seem to have become very popular, and others have disappeared. In my own case I noticed the brand of coffee I prefer changes when I wear the band. Did that show up in your clinical trials?"

The smile disappeared from Samuel's face and he looked bitter. "That," he said, "is an entirely different matter. That is why I must insist on anonymity. During the clinical trials we suppressed the negative brain waves with a meaningless but not unpleasant brain wave. The equivalent of white noise. I have it on very good authority, let us say my own anonymous source, that after I left the company replaced the meaningless pattern with subliminal advertising, which they sell to the highest bidder. The band was designed to receive automatic wireless updates to its code, so the company has complete control over what it advertises and can change the ads at any time."

"That's outrageous!"

Samuel nodded his head in agreement. "But, it's apparently true. I knew another research team was studying the way the brain stored memories. What I didn't know was that they'd found a way to connect directly with the memory storage and inject new 'memories.'"

"But isn't subliminal advertising illegal?" Andrew asked.

"That's a gray area," Samuel said. "It's definitely immoral and reprehensible, but illegal? The FCC made it illegal to transmit advertising 'below the threshold of normal awareness,' but the FCC doesn't regulate brain waves so that probably doesn't apply. In any event, I don't think the government is ever going to prosecute this, or even acknowledge its existence."

"Why not?"

"Because the company was smart. They took out an 'insurance policy.' Before they began selling commercial advertising, they quietly offered to let the government utilize their system for 'public service announcements.' The government started using the bands to suppress 'disinformation' long before it was used for commercial advertising. Now the government can't prosecute advertisers without risking exposure of their own use."

"Is that why the polls show that public satisfaction with government is up, and why many candidates run unopposed?"

Samuel nodded. "If anyone criticizes the government, they lose support because people think their accusations are not true. Even the accusers soon begin to doubt their own charges, and they never know why."

"Holy" Andrew's voice trailed off without finishing his sentence.

"Now you know why I felt I must tell you what's happening, and why I can't let my name be associated with any of this." Samuel explained.

Andrew thanked him for his information and left, his mind still dazed by what he'd learned. By the time he got home he'd worked out an outline of an exposé he was going to write. The words seemed to fly off his fingertips, and he finished the article in a few hours. Normally he let his articles "sit" for a few days so he could proofread them with a clear head. He'd discovered that if he proofread them too soon after he wrote them, he tended to read what he meant to say instead of what he actually said. In this case, though, he felt the subject was too important to delay. He emailed it to his editor immediately.

Normally his editor would comment on his articles a few days after he submitted them. He'd respond by email, include a marked-up copy of his draft, and sometimes suggest Andrew make a few changes to the tone or emphasis of the article. This time his editor called him within an hour of receiving the article.

“Are you crazy?” his editor demanded. “You’re accusing one of the most respected medical research companies in the country with conspiring with the government and with advertisers to turn Americans into Zombies?”

“It’s not just Americans,” Andrew protested. “MediMorpheus sells Brodie Bands around the world. I’m sure they tailor the advertising to the local markets, and they probably work with other governments on the propaganda as well.”

“That’s crazier still!” his editor shouted. “Now you’ve turned it into an international conspiracy of governments and multi-national corporations. And you haven’t got one shred of evidence! Do you have any idea how big the lawsuits will be?”

“I have inside sources,” Andrew insisted. “I can’t name them, but I promise you they are above reproach.”

“Then your inside sources are f—ing crazy! And how do you think our readers would respond to this? They worship MediMorpheus. The Brodie Bands have made everyone’s lives better. They love them. And you expect them to believe the bands are whispering evil messages in their ears at night? They’ll write you off as a tinfoil hatted nutcase! And with good cause! I’m going to delete this article and pretend I never saw it. I suggest you do the same. And if you want me to continue publishing your stuff, don’t you ever send me anything like this again!” His editor terminated the call without another word.

Andrew was shocked and outraged by his editor’s reaction. He *knew* his article was truthful, and he knew the subliminal messages would allow a small group of politicians, working with the CEOs of a few multinational companies, to eventually control the entire world. He had to issue a warning. To hell with the lawsuits! He logged into his blog and, with a few minor tweaks, posted the article as his next blog entry.

He suddenly realized he was very hungry. It was hours past dinnertime. He’d been so focused on his article he hadn’t even thought about eating. He found something in the freezer to microwave and wolfed it down, guzzling a beer between mouthfuls. When he finished that, he returned to his den to check the early feedback on his post.

His blog was gone. Not just the most recent post, the entire blog. No explanation, just a “site not found” when he typed in the address. He tried searching for his blog using several different search engines, but with zero results. He searched for posts he had made weeks, months, and years ago. There was nothing there. It was as if his blog had never existed.

His doorbell rang. He checked his security camera and saw two uniformed police officers and a man in a dark suit. He answered the door.

“Mr Andrew Wainwright?” the man in the dark suit asked. When Andrew identified himself the man handed him a warrant. “We have a warrant to search your house based upon a red flag report of child pornography.”

Andrew knew about the new red flag law. It was based upon popular gun control laws that let people anonymously raise a “red flag” over anyone they felt was not mentally competent to buy a firearm. He’d posted an article on his blog supporting the law, but he never dreamed anyone would use it against him.

“I assure you I have absolutely no child pornography, and no interest in anything of the sort.” He said.

“In that case you have nothing to fear,” the man in the suit replied. “Under the law, however, we have to impound all your electronic devices and detain you for up to 48 hours while we search your devices for kiddie porn. We’ll try not to disturb you any more than necessary, and with your cooperation we should be able to wrap this up quickly.”

“But I’m a reporter,” Andrew said. “I have research data, unpublished articles, and confidential source material on my devices.”

“We’re only looking for porn, sir. We won’t touch anything else.”

“I’d like to call my lawyer about this.”

“Under the law you don’t have that right because you’re not being charged with anything. This is just an investigation to find out if a crime has been committed. If we find any evidence of wrongdoing, you’ll have the right to be represented by a lawyer.”

Andrew decided that, under the circumstances, it was in his best interest to cooperate with the police. He showed them where he kept his computer and his laptop, and he turned his phone over to them. He also showed them an old computer he’d been meaning to take to recycling. They took that too, and because he was being cooperative they didn’t ransack his house looking for more devices. They carried these devices out to their car and ushered Andrew into the back seat. He was uncomfortably squeezed between the man in the suit and a uniformed policeman, while the other policeman drove.

When they got to the police station they carried his devices into a back room to examine them for prohibited materials. Andrew had given them the passwords they needed to examine them, as otherwise he would have had to stay in detention until they cracked his passwords. They led Andrew to a small cell with a bed, a sink, and a toilet. The jailer tried to make him as comfortable as possible, giving him an extra blanket, a toothbrush and toothpaste, and his choice of magazines. Then the jailer held out a Brodie Band.

“Since it’s night, you’ll need to wear this” he said.

“Thanks, but I really don’t care for a band,” Andrew said. “I can sleep fine without one.”

“I’m afraid that’s not an option,” the jailer said apologetically. “We’ve had many fewer problems when people wear the band, so now it’s mandatory. If necessary, I’m authorized to handcuff your arms behind your back and strap this onto your head. I don’t want to do that, and you’ll be much more comfortable if you just wear it voluntarily.”

“OK,” Andrew conceded. It didn’t sound like he had a choice in the matter, and he didn’t want to spend the night handcuffed. Besides, he hoped they’d finish searching his devices soon, and he’d be home before he fell asleep. And, while he no longer trusted the band, he’d worn one for years with no major problems. One more night wouldn’t make a difference.

He put on the band, sat on the bed, and tried to interest himself in a fishing magazine. He was still too keyed up from all the events of the day to focus on the article, though, so he put down the magazine and just stared at the wall, thinking. He heard the door to the jailer’s office open and he heard muffled conversation. Some additional people had obviously come in, but they didn’t come back to the cell to see him. He heard the clicking of a keyboard as someone entered information into a computer. He suddenly felt very tired. “It’s been a hectic day,” he thought as he lay down. “I guess the adrenaline rush is over and I’m crashing . . .”

He woke up in his own bed, filled with enthusiasm for the coming day. He hung his Brodie Band on the bedpost, strolled into the kitchen, turned on the coffeemaker, and began making breakfast. After he ate, he carried a cup of coffee into his den and began reviewing his mail and the overnight news. The coffee tasted especially good this morning. When he was ready to begin work, he was puzzled for a moment. He couldn’t remember what article he had been working on. He took a quick look at the files on his computer. The most recent file was over two weeks ago. It was about the President’s foreign policy.

“That’s right!” he thought. “I wrote that just before I went on the fishing trip. My Brodie Band broke on the trip so I bought a new one. It’s funny how your memory can play tricks like that. For a moment I was drawing a blank, like something was missing, but it all makes sense now.”

He pulled up his blog to see what the comments were on his last entry. Pretty positive. People seemed to agree with him about the President’s foreign policy. Well, now it was time to write a new article. He’d heard somewhere that suicides rates had dropped since people began sleeping with a Brodie Band. Maybe he could find enough data to write an article about that.