

# Skinny robots wearing Emperor's new clothes

No stranger to new gadgets, **DICK LUMSDEN** believes the latest American invention is a pointless step too far

**W**hen I was a young lad, and we wanted a change from playing cowboys and Indians, a favourite substitute was to pretend we were crew members of the USS Enterprise and pleadingly ask; "Beam me up Scotty".

Even back then, in the grainy days of the late 1960s when the world only existed in black and white, everyone knew it was only a matter of time before you could wake up in your mum and dad's house, be beamed into school in a nano-second after breakfast, then re-appear at home for tea all without the aid of a bus or a bicycle.

I'm probably going to upset a few of you here now, but Star Trek, to my young mind at least, was far more plausible and aspirational than Dr Who.

Even on our cupboard sized TV, with a screen the size of a modern day iPad, I could see that the special effects on Dr Who

were anything but.

And living in a house with a particularly steep staircase, I used to scream at the TV that the easiest way to get away from Daleks was simply to go upstairs... how could they possibly follow you?

Granted they could wait at the bottom and starve you out I suppose. But with the three-tone whistle of the Star Trek transporter in your hand, you'd be out of the house in a flash and re-materialised somewhere safe.

You might be wondering by now what has set me off on this random trip into TV nostalgia. And, as usual, it is another piece of absolute nonsense from across the Atlantic.

We may not be able to de-materialise and re-appear on the other side of the world as yet, but for a few years now we have had Skype, and more recently with the tidal wave of Apple products we have FaceTime.

Either of these gives us the ability to speak face to face with children at university, or converse with colleagues in other offices, or just gossip with friends if we feel like it. (I did have a bit of an issue last week though when Skyping a friend in New York... apparently he could only see half of my face in a very tall and skinny picture...turns out I hadn't taken my tablet out of its leather case and half of the camera lens was obscured).

But this week I stumbled across a new invention currently trundling out of Palo Alto



■ The robotic Beam+ can monitor the grandparents but, like the Daleks, there is a drawback. Better to go Star Trek, reckons Dick Lumsden.

Photos: PA

in California – the Telepresence Machine. Yes, you read it right... a telepresence machine.

Like a skinny Dalek without the gun and the big sink plunger on the front, it rumbles around acting as a virtual you, wherever you happen to be calling.

Just fire up the software, stick on the camera and hey presto, you can be rolling around on your little grey wheels, in and out of rooms, chatting away to anyone and everyone. Well, anyone and everyone directly in front of the camera at the top of the robot...or who are not upstairs (or downstairs)...or who don't want to blank you and are sitting behind your back making rude signs.

What an utterly, utterly pointless invention. The Beam+ as it is called, is selling for \$995 – and among the many uses

advertised on the website of the manufacturer are – monitoring elderly relatives; allowing grandparents to "wander" through your home "talking" to your children as they happily show off their toys and games, or allowing you to "stand" behind your partner as they cook dinner and offer words of advice.

Has no-one over there ever heard the expression "Emperor's new clothes"?

Words very nearly failed me when I watched the video...I really do urge you to go take a look at [www.suitabletech.com](http://www.suitabletech.com) – particularly the bit where two robots talk to each other...I would say you couldn't make it up, but they clearly have.

Not only does the Beam+ suffer the same staircase related issues as the Daleks, but if you look carefully at the wheels, how are they going to cope with deep pile carpets? And anyway, if you want to be omnipresent in your elderly dad's house checking up on him; as well as being at home chatting to the kids, or in your office on the other side of town...you'd need a whole army of Telepresence Machines... and that won't be cheap, or practical.

Here we are, 50 years on from the Daleks and Star Trek's early appearances, and technology has still not cracked it.

But childhood nostalgia or not, I for one won't be saying "Beam+ me up Scotty" any time soon.

■ Dick Lumsden is managing director of Owl Marketing Solutions, a specialist in marketing and advertising to older consumers. If you have any views on this article, or are over

