

mike spinney

TOWNSEND, MASS

Aug
28
2006

Fear of the Unknown Part IV

Radio Frequency Identification

Time to wrap up the series, and I saved the best for last.

Thus far, we've looked at [adware](#), [digital privacy](#), and [biometrics](#). But for you conspiracy theorists out there, there are few technologies that can rival radio frequency identification, aka RFID.

The recent explosion of applications for RFID, including a big push by one of the world's biggest economic engines, Wal-mart, is seen by the black helicopter set as evidence of the government's insatiable desire to intrude on our lives and track our every movement. And the naked ambitions of at least one RFID magnate do little but add fuel to an already hot fire.

First, as a primer on RFID, check out these FAQs at [RFID Journal](#). There are many different types of RFID, broadly segmented as passive or active identification, but in short, RFID is a means of identifying objects by transmitting and/or receiving information embedded within or otherwise attached to that object. That's not always a bad thing as my [Spot-on colleague Nicole Martinelli](#) recounted, talking about her use of RFID at her gym in Milan.

Retail giant Wal-Mart, with its multi-billion dollar influence, is solidly behind RFID as a means of trimming cost from the transport and storage of the products it sells. Seen as a way of making it easy to stock shelves and keep on top of orders, Wal-Mart famously issued an [edict](#) to its suppliers three years ago to adopt RFID as a means of tracking inventory from factory to retail, or risk losing Wal-Mart as a customer. Already the target of much public enmity, Wal-Mart's zealous adoption of RFID was seen by some as further proof of the company's domineering business practices.

What's more, the idea that some products might include RFID chips piqued fears that the company, the government, and unknown criminal elements would be able to track consumers' every move by "watching" their purchase. Buy a package of socks, the theory goes, and clandestine receivers in the store, on the street, or circling somewhere in the firmament would follow you through the aisles, to your car, and all the way home.

Truly sinister stuff that has spawned a [cottage industry](#).

Recently, governments around the world adopted RFID as a means of thwarting document counterfeiting, such as the kind that results in fake passports being distributed to terrorists or other unsavory elements. Makes sense, right? Some shady traveler hands a border agent phony papers and, if the requisite checks don't match, John Law steps in and ushers said individual off to a side room for the rubber glove treatment. The rest of us can jet to our destinations safely and the world is a better place.

Not according to the folks who wear [foil hats](#). Nope, they believe there's a global cabal in place that seeks only to seize control of our lives and monitor our traipsings, a la George Orwell.

At the recent Black Hat conference, one researcher [took aim](#) at RFID-enabled passports by showing their security to be flawed. Lukas Grunwald, founder of German security consultant [DN Systems](#), has made a name for himself by [exposing deficiencies](#) with RFID systems. It's a coincidence, I'm sure, that DN Systems makes a living off of rampant paranoia over RFID....

But, for me, the real villain in this story is Scott Silverman, chairman of the board of a company called Applied Digital and its subsidiary [VeriChip](#). VeriChip made headlines a couple years ago when one of its products, an implantable RFID capsule, received FDA approval for use in human beings.

Since that nod, and in spite of public fears over RFID implants, Silverman has been on a crusade, advocating that anything that walks on two or four legs be chipped, implications be damned. Earlier this year he went as far as suggesting that ["guest workers"](#) be injected with RFID chips in order to be tracked by the US government. During a televised interview on Fox News, Silverman said that chip implantation could be either "an election on the part of the immigrant or an election on the part of the government."

Just this month he offered that the men and women of our nation's military service would make ideal [guinea pigs](#) for implantable RFID chips. Adding weight to Silverman's words is the fact that former Health and Human Services secretary Tommy Thompson is a member of VeriChip's board, allowed himself to be injected with an ID chip, and remains an influential voice in Washington DC.

And you wonder why there's so much hand-wringing over RFID?

I'll be the first to admit I don't want to live in a world where surreptitious intrusion into my personal business is the norm. I value my privacy as much as the next guy, but I also embrace the idea that technologies, such as RFID, can make my life better, safer, and move convenient. Shorter, faster lines at the checkout? Count me in. [Better service](#) at the hospital? It's got my vote.

For now, though, I'll be leaving my Reynolds Wrap headwear at home.

Posted by Mike Spinney at 9:14 PM | [Print this article](#)

TrackBack

TrackBack URL for this entry:

<http://www.spot-on.com/cgi-bin/mt/mt-tb.cgi/650>