

Opposition to RFID Tracking Grows

News that Gillette will purchase 500 million tags has stirred privacy concerns among consumers.

Jan. 20, 2003 - The news that The Gillette Company plans to purchase 500 million radio frequency identification tags was widely reported around the world. One result has been a growing opposition to the use of RFID in consumer products.

A group called CASPIAN -- Consumers Against Supermarket Privacy Invasion and Numbering -- has recently added RFID to its hit list. The group, which describes itself as "an information clearinghouse and resource for community and national action," has posted a report on about RFID on its Web, which has been drawing a lot of traffic.

Written by CASPIAN founder Katherine Albrecht, the report says that some companies "are developing financial and consumer applications [for RFID] that, if adopted, will have chilling effects on consumers' ability to escape the oppressive surveillance of manufacturers, retailers, and marketers." The report adds: "Auto-ID would expand marketers' ability to monitor individuals' behavior to undreamt of extremes."

C/Net, the technology news site, recently ran a story by its Washington bureau chief, Declan McCullagh, entitled RFID tags: Big Brother in small packages. The article raises concerns about people being tracked through their positions: "Imagine: The Gap links your sweater's RFID tag with the credit card you used to buy it and recognizes you by name when you return. Grocery stores flash ads on wall-sized screens based on your spending patterns, just like in "Minority Report." Police gain a trendy method of constant, cradle-to-grave surveillance."

RFID Journal has also received an increasing number of angry e-mails to the editor since it first broke the news of the Gillette purchase back on Nov. 15 (see Gillette to Buy 500 Million EPC Tags). Here's a small sample of some of the comments:

"We, the public, absolutely oppose this technology. We, as opposed to you, love our freedom and will hold it!"

"I'm going to remove every item that says Gillette from the shelves and put them on other shelves in the same store. I'll grow a beard and f--- Gillette!!!"

"The word is out that you guys are in business without consumer consent. I will boycott any company that uses these things, and I plan on joining any group that will fight in their implementation."

"These things will destroy many peoples' jobs and enrich the investors. Without consumer input, it just looks like another idea based on greed."

The news this week that Gillette, Wal-Mart and Tesco will begin piloting a smart shelf that can monitor consumer activity inside the store is only likely to exacerbate concerns (see [Is This the Future of Retailing?](#)).

The Auto-ID Center has worked with privacy groups since it was established in 1999. Based on suggestions from these groups, the center added a "kill switch" to its microchip specifications, so that the Class 0 and Class 1 tags can be permanently disabled at a consumers request.

The center is working on a privacy paper that will likely be presented at its next board meeting in June and then made public September. It is not clear what that paper will say, but it is clear that companies that want to use RFID to track items on shelves and consumer purchases are going to have to do a better job of selling the technology to the public.

[RFID Journal Home](#)

Copyright ©2005 RFID Journal, Inc. All Rights Reserved