

# Big Brother's Enemy

Some believe that RFID is going to usher in an age of government control, but that's only because they don't understand history.

By Mark Roberti

July 21, 2003 -- I get a lot of e-mails from people telling me that RFID is God's gift to Big Brother. Most of these correspondents, of course, have never met Big Brother. Unfortunately, I lived in his shadow and know him better than I'd like to.

I lived in Hong Kong for eight years, during the 1980s and early 1990s. I carried an identity card with my photo on it everywhere I went. If a policeman asked to see it, I showed it to him. That was the law. The Official Secrets Act was so strict in Hong Kong that if a civil servant gave me some benign document, like a census report, he and I could both go to jail. Luckily, Britain never enforced these Draconian measures.

But Hong Kong was going to be taken over by a very different type of government in 1997. So Big Brother was very real to me. And that was driven home on June 4, 1989. Some of my friends at Beijing University and in the Hong Kong press were in Tiananmen Square when tanks rolled in to crush the pro-democracy demonstration. We still don't know how many died that awful night.

What can one do in the face of such violent tyranny? I put aside my journalistic independence and joined a pro-democracy political party made up of businesspeople, professionals and Westerners who had made Hong Kong their home (I was, by then, a legal resident with the right to vote). I helped to draft the party's manifesto. Today, the people of Hong Kong are still fighting for their rights. They recently marched en masse to protest Beijing's attempts to revoke some of their freedoms through anti-sedition legislation.

It offends me, frankly, that people use the term "big brother" so glibly to try to discredit RFID. I also think that the notion that RFID will give some future dictator in the US or Europe the ability to spy on us and therefore control us is more than a little misguided. Has anyone noticed that the most open, free and democratic societies on earth are also the most technologically advanced? Is this just a coincidence? I don't think so. I've been to Cuba, and trust me folks, Fidel is not using RFID or any other technology to control people.

Information technology, in fact, is big brother's biggest enemy. Stalin and Mao and Kim Il Sung all controlled their people not by putting video cameras outside their windows, or tapping their phone or even opening their mail (though all of those things happened). They controlled people through fear and intimidation and by controlling information. But you can't control information and have a modern economy. I know this because I saw several dictators try it and fail.

When I arrived in Asia in 1984, South Korea was run by a former general named Chun Doo Hwan. The country was developing rapidly and the giant conglomerates that dominated the economy were trying to compete with Japanese companies. Chun's government felt it could import technology and modernize the economy, but maintain iron-fisted control over the population. It didn't work. First the students demanded democratic reforms. Then, they were supported by the growing middle class and finally the heads of the

conglomerates themselves accepted the need for change, and the military government fell. The same thing happened to the Kuomintang in Taiwan, and there's no doubt in my mind that the same fate awaits China's leadership.

Ah, but RFID is different. It's a *tracking* technology. It's going to let Big Brother know where you are at all times, right? Wrong. RFID is not different. Computers, networks, satellites, video cameras, microphones, cell phones, pagers and many other devices all can be used to help track people. You could certainly argue that governments and companies know way too much about us. But you'd have to be brain dead not to see that the average person in the US, Europe and Asia -- even in China -- is freer today than he/she has ever been before.

Technology, of course, is a tool, and a tool can be used by anyone. Police can use video cameras to spy on citizens, but citizens can use video cameras to record police brutality. Companies can use the Internet to gather information on consumers, and consumers can use the Internet to expose breaches of trust and organize boycotts. RFID may give companies greater opportunities to track their customers' purchases, but it will also make it harder for companies to get away with abuses, such as using counterfeit airplane parts, because everything they do will create an audit trail.

And here's a major point that always seems to get overlooked: Companies can't control RFID tags or RFID information. Some companies might try to make money by using RFID to track people against their will, but others will make money by stopping them. Last week brought the news that a French developer has created open source software "that will enable users to read and modify the chips." The [article](#) was vague, so I'm not sure what the product is or how it works, but I'm in favor of software and hardware that give consumers the ability to kill or modify tags in products they purchase.

It's always been obvious to me that these kinds of products would emerge, and I've been eagerly awaiting them because they will assuage some fears about RFID by giving some power over the devices to consumers. I'm tired of opponents scaring people with ignorant notions about the future. I'll give just one example of what I'm talking about.

I was on a panel at a privacy gathering a few months ago. One opponent of RFID told the audience how she shreds her mail. "But in the future there will be this very tiny microchip embedded in the envelope or stamp. You won't be able to shred it because it's so small, and I'm thinking, Someday soon, someone will come along and read my garbage and know every piece of mail I received." The audience was horrified. And I'm thinking, Yeah, that's a huge threat because no company that makes paper shredders will ever figure out that they can sell more shredders by including a device that kills an RFID tag as it shreds the envelope.

But what if you can't kill tags? And what if somehow the government forces us to wear tracking devices in or clothes, or worse, imbeds them under our skin? What will an all-powerful government do with this information? Record our movements? For what? To prevent us from gathering so we can't plot against it? That strikes me as utterly absurd.

In Stalin's Soviet Union or Mao's China, the only way you could communicate was by gathering physically because most people had no phones, and there were no cell phones, no pagers, no Internet, and no instant messaging. Today, people from around the world can gather regardless of their physical location (thanks to information technology). And it's very difficult to control the spread of digital information (just ask any record industry exec).

In ancient China, patriots hid messages in cakes as they plotted a revolt during an important festival, which is why some moon cakes still have messages in them today. And Andrei Sakharov's works were photocopied and disseminated in the Soviet Union. Think of how much easier it would be to spread those messages today.

Will Big Brother use RFID to hunt down and arrest political enemies? Unlikely. Even if a dictator were stupid enough to spend billions to put a reader on every street corner, it's hard to imagine a technology more easily defeated than one that relies of passive radio frequency. First, you can hide video cameras but you can't hide RFID readers. The minute they emit radio waves, they can be detected. And the tags can be easily detected and removed from clothing. They can also be shielded from the reader with nothing more high-tech than some aluminum foil.

For RFID to be a threat to free and democratic societies, governments would have to do a lot more than just deploy an RFID reader on every street corner. They would also have to find some way of preventing RFID tags from ever being killed, from ever being shielded and from ever being read by those outside the government. They would also have to put very tight controls on the Internet, cell phones, computer networks and the like, so that only they could use these networks to share information.

Since information is the lifeblood of business, as well as democracy, it's inconceivable to me that wealthy, educated people will let that happen. It's equally inconceivable that businesses will stand by and let that happen. That's not to say I think its okay for the government to know what books I buy, what movies I rent and how much beer I drink. But let's stop trivializing the deaths of those who died in Tiananmen Square -- not to mention the millions who perished at the hands of totalitarian governments -- and put the Big Brother nonsense to rest.

*Mark Roberti is the Editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, send e-mail to [mroberti@rfidjournal.com](mailto:mroberti@rfidjournal.com).*

[RFID Journal Home](#)

Copyright ©2005 RFID Journal, Inc. All Rights Reserved