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## **Irresponsible Reporting on RFID**

Several people accused me of going over the top in a recent blog post in which I commented on a cyber-security segment by *PBS NewsHour* that had a brief and grossly misleading mention of radio frequency identification (see *PBS NewsHour Misinforms Viewers on RFID*). I wrote: "OK, *PBS NewsHour*, if your ratings

are not what you want them to be and you are prepared to mislead people to obtain them, then please don't say on the 'About Us' portion of your Web site that you are 'one of the most trusted news programs in television.' Instead, say something more accurate, like 'We ascribe to the *National Enquirer* standards of journalism.'"

Upon reflection, I realize that my comments were out of line. The *Enquirer* often seems to simply make up false information in order to boost its readership (though I don't know that for sure). *NewsHour* didn't make anything up. It just quoted someone—security consultant Chris Paget—who provided grossly misleading information about RFID, without checking his facts or providing an alternative viewpoint. A producer for the series told me that his team was at a cyber-security convention, Paget was there as well, and there was really no way to easily get a counterpoint.

*NewsHour* did do a follow-up piece on its Web site—which didn't set the facts straight, but at least quoted me to provide an alternative viewpoint (see PBS *NewsHour* Responds to RFID Journal and Radio Frequency Identification Tags: Identity Theft Danger or Modern Aid?).



I'm passionate about the issue of false reporting on RFID. Yes, it could have a negative impact on the industry and thus my business, *RFID Journal*. But it goes much deeper than that. I started out wanting to be a fiction writer. In 1984, fresh out of college, I packed my things and took a job in Hong Kong as a teacher. I was hoping to gain some experiences that would

be worth building a novel around. Instead, I learned I'm not a good teacher. I took a job in journalism to pay the bills—and I fell in love with being a reporter. What could be better than meeting smart, interesting people, asking them whatever you want and then sharing that information with a larger audience?

I quickly learned that facts were essential—not only because they informed the story, but also because people's livelihoods and reputations were often at stake. In the late 1980s, I spent two years researching and writing an investigative book about how Britain was handing Hong Kong back to China. I interviewed more than 150 individuals to reveal what the British government was agreeing to, without the knowledge or consent of the Hong Kong people. Every fact had at least two sources, often more. I kept reminding myself that I needed to be open-minded and follow the facts wherever they led.

I'm frustrated that journalists reporting on RFID don't take the time to understand the technology and learn the facts. It is certainly legitimate for Paget to demonstrate that he can read ultrahigh-frequency (UHF) tags from a distance of 200 feet. But if the *NewsHour* reporter had understood the difference between UHF and high-frequency (HF) technologies—or had checked with an objective expert before filing his report—he would not have accepted Paget's claims as gospel. He might have asked what data could be captured. And if Paget had said passport and credit-card information, the reporter could then have pointed out that credit cards and passports employ HF tags, not UHF tags, and that Paget was unable to read HF tags from 200 feet.

While I understand that it's difficult to be open-minded, I don't know why more journalists don't make a concerted effort to be objective. *NewsHour*'s bias clearly shows in its follow-up article. I "allege" things, while Paget "says" them. He is given a chance to respond to my comments about his original on-air claims, but I was not offered the opportunity to

respond to his reply. The follow-up article amounts to this: Mark Roberti says Chris Paget's claims are false, and Paget says no, they are not.

In the eight years that we have covered RFID, we have reported on the technology as objectively as possible. We have reported on privacy concerns, and have never denied or trivialized the issue. If RFID is ever abused, we will report it. (As a consumer, I think it's important to respect people's privacy, but it's also a good business policy, and I often explain why in my editorials.)

I believe accurate reporting is very important to any society, because without it, people can't make good decisions. Therefore, I welcome those who raise legitimate security and privacy issues, as it's important for the RFID industry to address them. It's also vital for consumers to understand what the technology is and does, and what potential risks it might pose to their privacy, so that they can decide, for instance, whether they want to purchase items that have tags in them. What I can't abide are people who try to make every issue about RFID a huge one (see *Academic Navel Gazing Continues*).

An intelligent discussion serves the interests of everyone. But an intelligent discussion means being objective about both the potential positive impacts of a new technology, as well as the potential negative effects. I pointed out to Kathrine Albrecht, the founder of CASPIAN and a well-known RFID opponent, that there was not a single positive use of RFID mentioned in her 300-page book, *Spychips*. She responded that it was not her job to point out the positive uses. I found that odd. How can you claim to be acting in the best interests of consumers if you don't tell them how this new technology might benefit them? How does that help them make smart decisions?

Those who expose legitimate problems related to privacy and security benefit the RFID industry by raising issues that must

be addressed. To the industry's credit, it is addressing them. New chips from Impinj and NXP Semiconductors have additional privacy protection, such as the ability to mask a tag's serial number and limit its read range. And working groups are developing a standard for encryption on UHF tags, which will help secure data stored on PASS cards and driver's licenses (which currently use tags without any security). But *NewsHour* and other news organizations don't report these facts. As a result, readers of mass-media publications or viewers of television news are being fed an inaccurate view of the technology.

In my view, that is the greatest sin a journalist can commit.

*Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below. To read more of Mark's opinions, visit the RFID Journal Blog or the Editor's Note archive.*



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