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Sex, Lies and RFID

April 21, 2003 – When I worked in Asia, the prime minister of Singapore at the time, Lee Kuan Yew, said: “Journalists are people who separate the wheat from the chaff and publish the chaff.” This is an outrageous lie. Most journalists are way too lazy to separate the wheat from the chaff, so they either publish a photo of a supermodel in front of the wheat field, or write about some “expert” who says the wheat is bad for

you.

Okay, maybe I'm being too harsh. There are a lot of great journalists out there, some of whom died to inform us about the war in Iraq. But I despair of my colleagues who publish articles or opinion stories without doing any real research. On April 13, the *St. Petersburg Times*, a newspaper in Florida, ran an opinion column by Robyn E. Blumner. It said: "Marketers would love to be able to watch the way consumers use products – how often a particular sweater is worn or when it is thrown away, for example. By making RFID receivers as ubiquitous as security cameras, companies would be able to follow their merchandise wherever it goes."

Yes, yes, this is a great way to use RFID. If you are a middle manager at The Gap, or Benetton, and you've been trying to figure out how to get on the fast track to upper management, here's what you do. Go to the CEO and tell him/her you have a plan to invest maybe \$50 or \$100 billion dollars to put RFID readers on every streetcorner, in every airport, in every home. That way you can track your customers wherever they go and know how many times they wear that new pair of stretch boot cut jeans. When the CEO asks you what the return on investment will be on this enormous sum, simply rub your hands, smile gleefully and tell him: "There is none, but think of the fun we'll have spying on people." (Folks, I really should be charging a lot of money for this kind of invaluable career advice.)

The problem is not just with columnists. In its zeal to make RFID more sexy than it is, the business press often exaggerates what RFID can do. Last year, *Forbes* published an article entitled *The Internet of Things*. Accompanying the article was an illustration that shows a woman entering a store and readers scanning the tags embedded in her clothing. The illustration indicates that the woman will be identified in this store of the future by the tags in her clothes and "the store will know where she bought everything she is

wearing.” It even suggests that the retailer will know the price she paid for her pants and be able to pitch a lower-priced alternative.

That’s right, in the near future, retailers are going to put information about their customers on tags so that any competitor can just scan the tag and learn everything they need to know to steal that customer away. Or maybe retailers will store the information about their customers in a database and then put the keys to the database on the tag so that any competitor can simply log in and find out what they need to know. Either way, it’s a brilliant strategy that’s guaranteed to reduce excess revenue.

And here’s a brief extract from an older item that ran in USA Today: “Embed an RF tag in every pair of glasses. You lose your glasses, you go to a special Web site, which listens the world over for a little ping from your glasses’ RF tag. The site shows that you left them on the bar at Thirsty’s.”

Who creates this “special Web site” and the global infrastructure needed to make it work? How does it make money? Nevermind. Those are trifling details that most reporters can’t be bothered with. But I have to say, I’m truly impressed with Thirsty’s. Here’s a small corner bar that is willing to invest perhaps \$20,000 or \$30,000 in RFID readers, network routers and servers, so that its customers can find their glasses. The lost and found at my local bar is a little plastic basket next to the cash register.

I could go on, but you get the point. What these stories have in common is ignorance not just about RFID technology, but about business. The idea that one retailer – or even the government – will scan the tags on your clothes and know everything about you makes great copy. Problem is, it makes no sense. Companies jealously guard competitive information. (Of course, you don’t have to be Lee Kuan Yew to know that there are plenty of journalist who won’t let the facts get in the

way of a good story.)

I'd be happy to compete with publications that are so ignorant about RFID if it weren't for the fact that these articles, written in some cases by *business reporters*, fuel the worst fears of privacy advocates who think RFID is the answer to Big Brother's prayers. As I said in this column last week, I believe that the RFID industry can come up with enforceable policies that will allow business and consumers to get the enormous benefits RFID promises, while protecting people against the invasion of their privacy (see *A Setback for RFID?*). And I'm sure consumers will accept RFID tagging once they know the facts. But it's awfully hard to educate people when the business press is unwittingly feeding their Orwellian nightmares.

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