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The Fear Factor

I do not believe RFID is the Mark of the Beast foretold by *The Book of Revelations*, but I have been accosted by more than a few people who do. They are always polite and intelligent. We've had some interesting discussions. And there is usually one subject where we find passionate agreement: RFID tags should not be implanted in people.

This odd application is real—although, so far, quite experimental. VeriChip markets an RFID tag for embedding in human beings. The company claims it's for applications such as access control and patient monitoring.



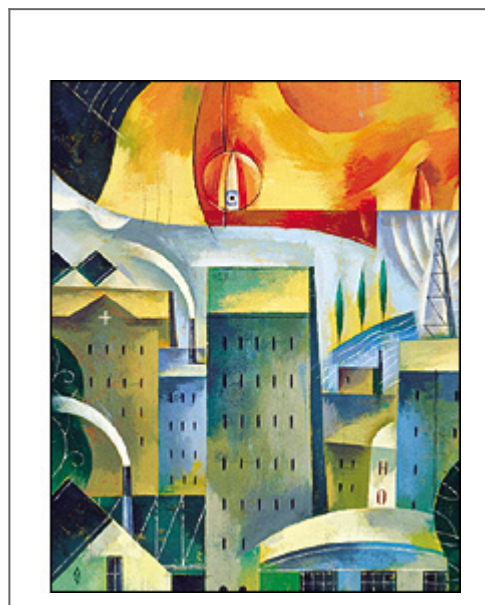
Occasional press releases tout that various minor celebrities have had VeriChip tags implanted. An academic from Bristol, England, made the cover of Wired magazine for declaring himself a “cyborg” after he stuck an RFID chip in his arm so the lights would come on when he entered his office. And Sun Microsystems' former CEO, Scott McNealy, once advocated implanting RFID chips in babies. “Slap that baby's bottom,” he said, “then slip an ID chip in their neck or between their shoulders so you can keep track of your kid. That's not Big Brother; that's Dad.”

If you want to stick an RFID tag in yourself, go ahead. That's your business. But most discussions on this topic involve someone—employers, governments, parents, you name it—forcing them into someone else. And that's where I object.

First and least, there's a technical issue. Passive RFID tags embedded in flesh will have a fairly short read range, and certainly won't offer the kind of tracking capability McNealy envisioned. Active RFID tags have better range, but they use batteries. Imagine cutting yourself open every few years so your batteries can be replaced.

Second, there's a moral problem. What gives one person the

right to track another? The common answer is security—preventing child abduction or kidnapping. But if everyone—or even a few people—were implanted with RFID chips to locate them, abductors and kidnappers would resort to gruesome measures to remove the tags.



Third and most important, I suspect RFID implants may violate human nature. One thing I do believe in is evolution. It seems likely that we have evolved a primal fear of surveillance—people with no such fear would have been selected out of the gene pool long ago by hidden predators they hadn't thought to notice. We may even have developed ways to sense surveillance. Ever had that uncomfortable feeling you were being watched?

And this is the main reason attempts to tag people are doomed. You can overcome anything except human nature. Ideas such as Big Brother and the Mark of the Beast stick in our minds because they tap into this primal fear of surveillance. Having an RFID tag stuck into you would give you that uncomfortable feeling of being watched all the time. People with implanted RFID tags won't wait for batteries to be changed or some abductor to go looking for the tag. Sooner or later, they'll take it out themselves.

Kevin Ashton was cofounder and executive director of the Auto-ID Center. He is the author of a soon-to-be-published book about RFID. Illustration by Brad Yeo.



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