

RFID Technology: Citizens press for open discourse to replace PR stunts

It cannot be denied that RFID acceptance is a problem. As soon as consumers understand how the technology works, they reject it. The RFID industry hopes to get this under control by running PR campaigns in the media and lobbying politicians. Retailers might try to lure sceptical consumers with discounts. While there is reason to doubt whether this will work, it certainly shows how valuable control over these data is deemed to be.

RFID is a threat to democracy, too. This technology affects people not only as consumers, but also as citizens in a state under the law. With an RFID-tagged product, every individual item will carry a globally unique number, which can be read invisibly using radio signals. A technology for unparalleled data hoarding, one that enables identifying, tracking and manipulating people at any time through the objects they carry. This makes RFID technology a threat to citizens' right to informational self-determination.

In 2006, the EU commission under Viviane Reding carried out an online consultation on RFID. The result was unmistakable: citizens are convinced that businesses will neither respect nor protect their privacy, and they are calling for legislation to regulate and limit RFID use. This clear result is now being ignored, along with all the issues about RFID that have been raised in the past. The current approach in 2007 as announced by Viviane Reding is: introduce RFID, do not regulate — and let a voluntary commitment by the industry take care of the problems. Let us make this clear: no “voluntary commitment” put forward by the industry to this day has offered any substantial content or legal protection. No independent verification or sanctions in cases of non-observance have ever been considered. These non-binding declarations of intent do not provide any security for citizens — they are just an alibi.

We demand:

- Data prevention before “frugal” data use
- Transparency: clearly visible hazard symbols for RFID chips and scanners
- Protecting privacy must be the default: “opt out” schemes are unacceptable
- No people tracking, whether direct or indirect (e.g. via a chip's ID)
- No RFID chips on or inside individual product items (such as clothing)
- No RFID chips on banknotes
- No RFID chips in passports, ID cards or similar identification documents
- RFID identification systems (such as key cards) must facilitate deactivating or switching off
- RFID technology must be regulated by legislation
- No RFID introduction without public debate

New ways of data collection and surveillance offered by RFID are one problem; a further one is an attitude of technological paternalism that is getting out of hand. Many RFID applications designed under the pretext of benefiting or easing consumers' lives are actually restrictive, patronising and imposing. Technology cannot and should not replace human thinking. And it is not suitable for solving social problems.

The singular interests of businesses must not become guidelines for politics. Governments have long-term obligations first and foremost to their citizens. To pump public money into a dubious desire for a leading role in RFID technology, without evaluating its compatibility with democracy and social values, is short-sighted and irresponsible. We therefore call on the EU as well as the German government to change their policies on RFID research and funding. Concerns from consumers and criticism from technicians and from proponents of data protection and civil rights must be given broad consideration.