The Invisible Hand Guiding Technology: Crossing the Boundary of Humanity

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines attitudes towards Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology and explores the wider concerns of the ever increasing prospect of social tagging. Capturing vignettes and narratives from a sample of study participants, the paper highlights concerns about adopting RFID implements now and in the future. The views captured through qualitative methodology act as the platform for a wider argument concerning the human rights and privacy intrusion concerns over IT applications. Intended as an insight into the reality of technology impact, this paper lists a series of questions for leaders to consider over matters of human rights specifically concerning RFID adoption. The authors conclude that caution, naivety and fear are the underlying reasons for society accepting RFIDs without question and that RFIDs will be a part of everyday working and domestic life in the near future.

Keywords: Biochip Implants, Human Rights, Privacy Intrusion, Radio Frequency Identification, Social Tagging

INTRODUCTION

Scholars continue to ask the on-going question ‘how can we relate ourselves to technology in a way that not only resists its devastation, but also gives it a positive role in our lives’ (Dreyfus & Spinosa, 1997, p. 159)?

Captured in the Book of Genesis is the story of the tree of knowledge (Etz haDaat tov V’ra) located in the garden of Eden. The tree contained the knowledge that separated Man from God. Adam ate the forbidden fruit on Eve’s insistence which led to their banishment and forced them to survive ‘by the sweat of [their] brow’ (Genesis 3:19-24), thus marking the beginning of human interdependency on technology. Again historically, in ancient Greek mythology, Prometheus (“Forethought”), known for his intelligence, stole fire from Zeus and gave it to mortals, for which he was eternally punished.

Philosophers and scientists have wrestled with the ongoing dilemma of the place and price

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of knowledge and technology for the last 2,500 years, beginning with Plato’s articulation of metaphysics (Heidegger, 1993). Since ancient times, scholars have viewed the *techne* (i.e., technical knowledge) as a “process of reflection” that could transform the world. However, even then, they recognised that the maladaptation of *techne*, in effect technological modelling, will eventually leave humans unable to think outside of its narrow confines (Heidegger, 1993, p. 218). This realisation led Rousseau (2003, p. 48) to famously conclude that ‘man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains’.

Heidegger (1993) also argued that the essence of an object is more than just its visible qualities for it includes both the seen and the unseen. In this sense, technology has un concealed (*aletheia*) and hidden or concealed (*lethe*) characteristics. The visible aspect is the benefit of technology for mankind, that of making life richer, easier and available for all. However, “ubiquitous computing” has made the *techne* more invisible, amorphous and embedded (Weiser, 1993). It has become even more opaque with the advent of radio-frequency-identification (RFID) and nano-technology.

Although modern technology has not yet achieved optimal invisibility, it is on its way to doing so ‘away from attention on the machine and back on the person and his or her life in the world of work, play and home’ (Weiser, 1993, p. 3). The concealment of the human essence consideration through the enframing aura of technology has two related and unprecedented consequences: 1) the minimisation of the uniquely human capacity to ask critical questions and 2), the dulling of the human sense to the point of being unable to recognise or critique this enframing process.

The notion of invisibility is a powerful consideration as the ‘most profound technologies are those that disappear’ (Weiser, 1991, p. 96). The manner of invisibility operates on two levels. The first is the level of concealment where many of the workings of ubiquitous ICT (i.e., Wifi and radio frequency) are hidden from view.

The second and more subtle level is the level of familiarity. We have become so familiar with certain technologies that they have become a part of everyday life. They are no longer a focus of conscious attention. They ‘weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it’ (Weiser, 1991, p. 96). In fact, ICT transcends from being a mere “human assistant” (Tesler, 1991) to an “intimate” gadget (Kay, 1991). The mobile phone is such an example. Everyday intimacy renders it a constituent part of the human body, ultimately morphing into a “human bar code”. Understandably, scholars are raising concerns about the possible implanting of radio frequency identification (RFID) tags in people for the purpose of tracking and monitoring individual citizens (Kanellos, 2005).

What is more clearly emerging is that RFID adoption is gaining a stronger foothold in society and has even penetrated a visible human boundary, the human skin. Trickling to the surface is the fact that governments and corporate interests have implanted citizens of various countries with microchips, yet there has been little debate about its deployment or its impact (Kakabadse et al., 2010). In fact, policy consultation concerning RFID adoption is nonexistent (Lewin 2007a). The repercussions therefore for individual privacy and freedom are enormous (Foster & Jaeger, 2007).

Bearing in mind concerns over the opaque presence of certain ICT innovations and the invisible but increasing adoption of personal tagging, this paper presents the findings of an exploratory study that investigates why individuals agreed to an RFID epidural implant and/or have seriously considered its adoption for wider use. In particular, the study examines why individuals volunteered to accept an RFID presence under their skin or alternatively why they rejected such addition. We hope that the
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