

Foreword  
The Futurist Muckrakers

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Everybody has a role in the RFID industry, because, as this remarkable book makes clear, we're not offered any choice about it. If you've never heard of RFIDs or "spychips," it would be quite a good idea to read this book pretty soon. It's very topical.

If you have any direct role within the RFID industry, then you need to read this book instantly. Hurry. Waste not another precious moment. You won't like this book. *Spychips* will hurt your feelings. You will blush, and itch, and sweat, and drum your heels, and perhaps tear entire chapters out with squalls of rage, to see a work about your industry which is so jaundiced, and uncharitable, and unflinchingly suspicious, and which makes so much effective, highly damaging, public fun at your expense. So read it, and make all your co-workers read it. You will learn a host of painful, valuable things in a hurry. For you, it may not yet be too late.

There have been many tech manuals and white papers written about RFIDs. They're mostly quite technical, all about transponders and supply chains and megahertz, with maybe a few bits about value-adding and stakeholder value. I'm a tech journalist, so I read a lot of dry, boring crap like that.

But RFID is not high-tech or hard to understand. It is not confusing, sophisticated or arcane. RFID is very dumb computer tech, the kind of computer tech that even grocers can understand. There's no need to get intimidated by the technology -- because the issues here are all about money and power.

This book is the most exciting book about RFID ever written. This is the one RFID book that every RFID enthusiast must own. Not because the book is enthusiastic about the new technology -- but because it's full of passionate, stinging contempt. It's like watching Big Brother come home and get a rolling pin broken over his head by Mrs. Big Brother, who knows that, even though he thinks he's everybody's daddy, he's a stalker,

and a voyeur, and a crook, and a cheat, and drunk on his own ego, and a handwashing, sniveling deadbeat who ought to be ashamed of himself.

This is the Devil's Dictionary for RFID, and in its own dainty, feminine, rapier-tongued way, this is a masterpiece of technocriticism. The nascent RFID industry is not Big Brother. Not yet, anyhow. Instead, it is a giant toddler whose supermarket diapers are already richly soiled. It's sure got a mighty ton of dirty laundry for a baby still that small, and in Katherine Albrecht and Liz McIntyre, the RFID industry has found a hardworking pair who'll willingly scrub that laundry, name and number every stain, and then pin it out to dry.

These two unique individuals, the Lone Ranger and Tonto of the RFID frontier, are the nightmare scenario for the computerized retail superstore of tomorrow: because they're the computerized super female consumer advocates of tomorrow. And boy have they ever got their industry's number. They've got all two-to-the-96<sup>th</sup>-power digits of it.

To understand what species of book this is, let me offer a historical analogy. Imagine yourself cruising along in the 1950s chemical industry, happily patenting and spreading potent toxins. Then this searching, thoughtful female journalist, Rachel Carson, who doesn't even have a chemistry degree, comes out of nowhere. A classic popular muckraker, Ms. Carson points out to a shocked public that you're killing not just the mosquitoes but all the pretty butterflies and birds. She writes *Silent Spring*, and it's so influential and damning, that even your own kids decide you must be nuts. That's also what's happening here.

To its credit, the RFID industry is very 21<sup>st</sup> century, and therefore a little cagier than the pesticide biz in the 1950s. Realizing that they had a world-shattering technical breakthrough at hand, they hired a top-notch public-relations firm first to go fish in the waters of public acceptance. Acceptance of what, exactly? Basically, acceptance of what this book describes in detail: an amazingly ambitious scheme to infest the entire physical infrastructure of the planet with a spray-on global blanket of Internet interactivity. This is truly a fabulous, earth-shaking scheme. It is awesome.

The hired PR firm, the gifted Fleishman-Hillard outfit, poked around some, trying to tell everyday people what this huge revolution might mean to them.

Having briefed a few focus groups, the PR guys returned, and told the industry's founders that normal consumers would surely react with superstitious horror and unfeigned Luddite dread. That wasn't good news, but the promised rewards were colossal, so the techies waded in anyway. They decided that the public should be told as little as possible about their project. Whatever the public learned should be obfuscated as much as possible, until the installation of RFID worldwide has become a *fait accompli*. So, first it would be obscure; then it would be old hat; and, with any luck, it would never quite become a public issue at all.

But, well, there's a big hitch. That's the so-called "secrecy." The Internet of Things is supposed to be invisible to all but its corporate and military masters. But the Internet itself is hugely obvious and famous -- because, even though the Internet is also corporate and military in its origins, for about a decade the Internet was all anybody ever talked about. You can't possibly have a hugely famous Internet made of pixels and an ultra-quiet Internet made of actual consumer objects. So we're seeing a violent collision of two models here: two loud, flamboyant, irrepressible Internet activists, researching and publicizing the secretive, business-confidential Internet of Things.

Anybody who can create that leak between the worlds is gonna get justly famous, and Katherine Albrecht (judging by Google and the hundreds of journalists she has briefed), is already, by far, the most famous RFID expert in the whole wide world. She thinks RFID is an evil crock, but she's sure got a lot to say about it -- all of it is fascinating, some is gross and revolting, and practically all of it hilarious. This is the first, and maybe the loudest, popular book on a crucial technology of our times. It's not the full or final story -- it's a futurist book, in anticipation of the story -- but history will treat this book kindly.

As this book demonstrates irrefutably, the RFID industry has patented some fantastically sinister, sci-fi style business notions. The authors are not making these things up -- the industry is. Patents are public documents, not trade secrets. Anybody can go look at patents. It's just, well, somehow, nobody was ever supposed to notice them or care.

Why? Because this is an industry with some deeply schizoid doublethink problems, which come directly from its wacky origins in the spy and security communities.

The people of the RFID biz are very covert, spooky and security-conscious, with deep, profitable ties into Homeland Security and the Pentagon -- and yet they're also very large, everyday public companies: Wal-Mart, Procter & Gamble, Tesco, Benetton, Philips, IBM, Cisco, Exxon-Mobil: dozens of familiar, everyday, publicly-traded companies, with big, soft, squishy, publicity-conscious brands.

It's really hard to be a big, public, for-profit spy -- with tons of shareholders, zillions of customers and even employees who don't like you very much. That scheme doesn't hang together. Riddle me this: how do you profit by telling your own shareholders that you've bugged their own clothes and shoes with tiny radio transponders from your stores? How can you have a board meeting when the clothes and shoes of your own board members might be full of a competitor's spychips? These eager pioneers have failed to think these issues through, mostly because they never expected or planned to face a reality check. But their situation is inherently unstable.

Enter Katherine Albrecht with her red suit, red hair, a TV talking head's makeover, and mirrored sunglasses. Still a university student, she places the new surveillance industry under some mild doctoral-dissertation surveillance of her own, and is astounded. She finds in short order that she can win awestruck, worldwide press attention just by repeating the industry's own private pep talks in public. She becomes the instant, planetary, go-to expert on RFID -- mostly because the real experts on RFID are so anxious to keep mum.

There's no need to unravel a Watergate break-in here; the so-called "secret" is literally and physically scattered all over the landscape. RFID bugs are attached to diaper boxes, shampoo bottles, and women's underwear, and they cost a few cents each and they're supposed to become ubiquitous. Only nobody is supposed to notice or care. *Huh?* All you have to do is point at the emperor's RFIDs; it's like revealing lice in the royal gown.

This book is a comprehensive, detailed and footnoted work of corporate futurism. But, unlike most such futurist works, it's not saccharine industry boosterism, *Spychips* is

something new in the corporate world -- its the work of Early Dys-Adopters, of Power-Users, of online activists who fully understand promotion, marketing and effective PR, and then use new media tools to beat unwise companies into pulps instead of serving as their paid handmaidens.

The authors of this book lack big budgets, a power base or an agenda. They are, however, energetic, clever, highly motivated, highly wired, and chock-full of feminine wiles. Thanks mostly due to legwork, Google, and chatty email from many likeminded souls, they have become a retailer's worst nightmare. They are as uncontainable and global as the industry they decry, for they are the Digitized Suburban Mom Shoppers from Hell, perceptive, well-connected, entirely self-educated, very American, highly skilled industry gurus; quotable, word-of-mouth branding killers with viral marketing voodoo; digital Cassandras who are second to none in downsides, dirty laundry and doomsaying. Plus they are witty and good-looking.

I expect to spend the next ten years watching the next Internet Revolution -- but the New Grocers of the Internet of Things have already gotten the customers they deserve.