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New privacy hope for RFID?

Concerned about privacy and public policy? Me too, which is why I'm cheered by an alliance revealed yesterday between [MIT](#) and [HID](#), one of the companies making quite a lot of these RFID (radio-frequency ID) chips we've been discussing. I sat in on a presentation by Dr. Dan Greenwood, an attorney and lecturer associated with MIT's Media Lab, who's leading the thinking of big thoughts on how to get folks using RFID-ful technology in ways that are convenient, privacy-respecting, and safe. It's a huge job requiring much forward thinking, so we're lucky to have MIT on board to, as Dr. Greenwood puts it, "look around the corners."

Recognizing the importance of giving tired journalists amusing toys to fiddle with, he passed around a prototype of a most unusual RFID card: one with on-off switches. The item we saw included not one RFID chip (one is generally all you need in the cards that you wave to open your office security door) but four, each of which could be powered on and off with an individual switch. Fun and gadgety? Sure – we pixel-stained wretches dig anything with das blinkenlights. A potential problem solver? Could be, and for more than one problem. One of the great concerns about RFID chips is that they might be broadcasting heaven-knows-what to any transmitter in range. An "off" chip doesn't transmit information, so an on-off switch might mean that people who might hesitate to carry a RFID-type card could remain in control of whether it was getting in touch with transmitters unbeknownst to them.

The allure of multiple chips on one cards is obvious to anyone hauling a bunch of them around – who needs more wallet padding, especially when these things are still a couple of credit cards thick? Why four? Dr. Greenwood said that it seems like the right number to start with, though one of the things MIT gets out of this alliance is "whole boxes of cards and readers" to play with. (The gleam in his eye when he said this makes me hope that whoever might have been sending him presents on Valentine's Day included a big box of Legos. And why a card, anyway? Is this going to be like that first generation of high-capacity MP3 players, many of which were shaped like CD players just because that's what folks were used to? Maybe, but Greenwood hinted that MIT's wearable-design crew may be in the mix as well.

Giving folks the ability to switch off "contactless" communications like those made by RFID cards could answer the concerns of those who worry about stealth info-gathering. Greenwood, however, points out that those transmissions are just one security issue with RFID cards – and that two equally valid issues aren't even specific to that tech at all. Database breaches and comprehensive compulsory programs such as Read-ID have implications for everything from your library card to your relationship with the IRS to your car's telematics system. In other words, it's a huge public-policy issue, one we maybe haven't even grasped the magnitude of quite yet.

After all, can you name every single entity that's got data on you? Impressive – but I'll bet you can't name everything they know, not in the age of ultra-cheap data storage and fast data-sifting technologies. Technology has developed faster than the public policy for such things, and one of the goals of this alliance is to get smart thinkers into the public-policy loop sooner rather than later.

Everything's in flux, of course, but it's heartening to hear that intellectuals, creative folk and privacy-oriented thinkers, rather than just marketing folk and tech-unaware Congresscritters, have a chance to steer this ship past the twin rocks

of blind acceptance and intractable paranoia.

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