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A generation is all they need

One day we will all happily be implanted with microchips, and our every move will be monitored. The technology exists; the only barrier is society's resistance to the loss of privacy

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

By the time my four-year-old son is swathed in the soft flesh of old age, he will likely find it unremarkable that he and almost everyone he knows will be permanently implanted with a microchip. Automatically tracking his location in real time, it will connect him with databases monitoring and recording his smallest behavioural traits.

Most people anticipate such a prospect with a sense of horrified disbelief, dismissing it as a science-fiction fantasy. The technology, however, already exists. For years humane societies have implanted all the pets that leave their premises with a small identifying microchip. As well, millions of consumer goods are now traced with tiny radio frequency identification chips that allow satellites to reveal their exact location.

A select group of people are already "chipped" with devices that automatically open doors, turn on lights, and perform other low-level miracles. Prominent among such individuals is researcher Kevin Warwick of Reading University in England; Warwick is a leading proponent of the almost limitless potential uses for such chips.

Other users include the patrons of the Baja Beach Club in Barcelona, many of whom have paid about \$150 (U.S.) for the privilege of being implanted with an identifying chip that allows them to bypass lengthy club queues and purchase drinks by being scanned. These individuals are the advance guard of an effort to expand the technology as widely as possible.

From this point forward, microchips will become progressively smaller, less invasive, and easier to deploy. Thus, any realistic barrier to the wholesale "chipping" of Western citizens is not technological but cultural. It relies upon the visceral reaction against the prospect of being personally marked as one component in a massive human inventory.

Today we might strongly hold such beliefs, but sensibilities can, and probably will, change. How this remarkable attitudinal transformation is likely to occur is clear to anyone who has paid attention to privacy issues over the past quarter-century. There will be no 3 a.m. knock on the door by storm troopers come to force implants into our bodies. The process will be more subtle and cumulative, couched in the unassailable language of progress and social betterment, and mimicking many of the processes that have contributed to the expansion of closed-circuit television cameras and the corporate market in personal data.

A series of tried and tested strategies will be marshalled to familiarize citizens with the technology. These will be coupled with efforts to pressure tainted social groups and entice the remainder of the population into being chipped.

This, then, is how the next generation will come to be microchipped.



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It starts in distant countries. Having tested the technology on guinea pigs, both human and animal, the first widespread use of human implanting will occur in nations at the periphery of the Western world. Such developments are important in their own right, but their international significance pertains to how they familiarize a global audience with the technology and habituate them to the idea that chipping represents a potential future.

An increasing array of hypothetical chipping scenarios will also be depicted in entertainment media, furthering the familiarization process.

In the West, chips will first be implanted in members of stigmatized groups. Pedophiles are the leading candidate for this distinction, although it could start with terrorists, drug dealers, or whatever happens to be that year's most vilified criminals. Short-lived promises will be made that the technology will only be used on the "worst of the worst." In fact, the wholesale chipping of incarcerated individuals will quickly ensue, encompassing people on probation and on parole.

Even accused individuals will be tagged, a measure justified on the grounds that it would stop them from fleeing justice. Many prisoners will welcome this development, since only chipped inmates will be eligible for parole, weekend release, or community sentences. From the prison system will emerge an evocative vocabulary distinguishing chippers from non-chippers.

Although the chips will be justified as a way to reduce fraud and other crimes, criminals will almost immediately develop techniques to simulate other people's chip codes and manipulate their data.

The comparatively small size of the incarcerated population, however, means that prisons would be simply a brief stopover on a longer voyage. Commercial success is contingent on making serious inroads into tagging the larger population of law-abiding citizens. Other stigmatized groups will therefore be targeted. This will undoubtedly entail monitoring welfare recipients, a move justified to reduce fraud, enhance efficiency, and ensure that the poor do not receive "undeserved" benefits.

Once e-commerce is sufficiently advanced, welfare recipients will receive their benefits as electronic vouchers stored on their microchips, a policy that will be tinged with a sense of righteousness, as it will help ensure that clients can only purchase government-approved goods from select merchants, reducing the always disconcerting prospect that poor people might use their limited funds to purchase alcohol or tobacco.

Civil libertarians will try to foster a debate on these developments. Their attempts to prohibit chipping will be handicapped by the inherent difficulty in animating public sympathy for criminals and welfare recipients — groups that many citizens are only too happy to see subjected to tighter regulation. Indeed, the lesser public concern for such groups is an inherent part of the unarticulated rationale for why coerced chipping will be disproportionately directed at the stigmatized.

The official privacy arm of the government will now take up the issue. Mandated to determine the legality of such initiatives, privacy commissioners and Senate Committees will produce a forest of reports presented at an archipelago of international conferences. Hampered by lengthy research and publication timelines, their findings will be delivered long after the widespread adoption of chipping is effectively a fait accompli. The research conclusions on the effectiveness of such technologies will be mixed and open to interpretation.

Officials will vociferously reassure the chipping industry that they do not oppose chipping itself, which has fast become a growing commercial sector. Instead, they are simply seeking to ensure that the technology is used fairly and that data on the chips is not misused. New policies will be drafted.

What might Hitler, Mao or Milosevic have accomplished if their citizens were chipped, coded, and remotely monitored?

Employers will start to expect implants as a condition of getting a job. The U.S. military will lead the way, requiring chips for all soldiers as a means to enhance battlefield command and control — and to identify human remains. From cooks to commandos, every one of the more than one million U.S. military personnel will see microchips replace their dog tags.

Following quickly behind will be the massive security sector. Security guards, police officers, and correctional workers will all be expected to have a chip. Individuals with sensitive jobs will find themselves in the same position.

The first signs of this stage are already apparent. In 2004, the Mexican attorney general's office started implanting employees to restrict access to secure areas. The category of "sensitive occupation" will be expansive to the point that anyone with a job that requires keys, a password, security clearance, or identification badge will have those replaced by a chip.

Judges hearing cases on the constitutionality of these measures will conclude that chipping policies are within legal limits. The thin veneer of "voluntariness" coating many of these programs will allow the judiciary to maintain that individuals are not being coerced into using the technology.

In situations where the chips are clearly forced on people, the judgments will deem them to be undeniable infringements of the right to privacy. However, they will then invoke the nebulous and historically shifting standard of "reasonableness" to pronounce coerced chipping a reasonable infringement on privacy rights in a context of demands for governmental efficiency and the pressing need to enhance security in light of the still ongoing wars on terror, drugs, and crime.

At this juncture, an unfortunately common tragedy of modern life will occur: A small child, likely a photogenic toddler, will be murdered or horrifically abused. It will happen in one of the media capitals of the Western world, thereby ensuring non-stop breathless coverage. Chip manufacturers will recognize this as the opportunity they have been anticipating for years. With their technology now largely bug-free, familiar to most citizens and comparatively inexpensive, manufacturers will partner with the police to launch a high-profile campaign encouraging parents to implant their children "to ensure your own peace of mind."

Special deals will be offered. Implants will be free, providing the family registers for monitoring services. Loving but unnerved parents will be reassured by the ability to integrate tagging with other functions on their PDA so they can see their child any time from any place.

Paralleling these developments will be initiatives that employ the logic of convenience to entice the increasingly small group of holdouts to embrace the now common practice of being tagged. At first, such convenience tagging will be reserved for the highest echelon of Western society, allowing the elite to move unencumbered through the physical and informational corridors of power. Such practices will spread more widely as the benefits of being chipped become more prosaic. Chipped individuals will, for example, move more rapidly through customs.

Indeed, it will ultimately become a condition of using mass-transit systems that officials be allowed to monitor your chip. Companies will offer discounts to individuals who pay by using funds stored on their embedded chip, on the small-print condition that the merchant can access large swaths of their personal data. These "discounts" are effectively punitive pricing schemes, charging unchipped individuals more as a way to encourage them to submit to monitoring. Corporations will seek out the personal data in hopes of producing ever more fine-grained customer profiles for marketing purposes, and to sell to other institutions.

By this point all major organizations will be looking for opportunities to capitalize on the possibilities inherent in an almost universally chipped population. The uses of chips proliferate, as do the types of discounts. Each new generation of household technology becomes configured to operate by interacting with a person's chip.

Finding a computer or appliance that will run through old-fashioned "hands-on" interactions becomes progressively more difficult and costly. Patients in hospitals and community care will be routinely chipped, allowing medical staff — or, more accurately, remote computers — to monitor their biological systems in real time.

Eager to reduce the health costs associated with a largely docile citizenry, authorities will provide tax incentives to individuals who exercise regularly. Personal chips will be remotely monitored to ensure that their heart rate is consistent with an exercise regime.

By now, the actual process of "chipping" for many individuals will simply involve activating certain functions of their existing chip. Any prospect of removing the chip will become increasingly untenable, as having a chip will be a precondition for engaging in the main dynamics of modern life, such as shopping, voting, and driving.

The remaining holdouts will grow increasingly weary of Luddite jokes and subtle accusations that they have something to hide. Exasperated at repeatedly watching neighbours bypass them in "chipped" lines while they remain subject to the delays, inconveniences, and costs reserved for the unchipped, they too will choose the path of least resistance and get an implant.

In one generation, then, the cultural distaste many might see as an innate reaction to the prospect of having our bodies marked like those of an inmate in a concentration camp will likely fade.

In the coming years some of the most powerful institutional actors in society will start to align themselves to entice, coerce, and occasionally compel the next generation to get an implant.

Now, therefore, is the time to contemplate the unprecedented dangers of this scenario. The most serious of these concern how even comparatively stable modern societies will, in times of fear, embrace treacherous promises. How would the prejudices of a Joe McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover, or of southern Klansmen — all of whom were deeply integrated into the American political establishment — have manifest themselves in such a world? What might Hitler, Mao or Milosevic have accomplished if their citizens were chipped, coded, and remotely monitored?

Choirs of testimonials will soon start to sing the virtues of implants. Calm reassurances will be forthcoming about democratic traditions, the rule of law, and privacy rights. History, unfortunately, shows that things can go disastrously wrong, and that this happens with disconcerting regularity. Little in the way of international agreements, legality, or democratic sensibilities has proved capable of thwarting single-minded ruthlessness.

"It can't happen here" has become the whispered swan song of the disappeared. Best to contemplate these dystopian potentials before we proffer the tender forearms of our sons and daughters. While we cannot anticipate all of the positive advantages that might be derived from this technology, the negative prospects are almost too terrifying to contemplate.

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