

Voyurl & Aurasma

by ROSE DE FREMERY

Voyurl

Do you bristle at the idea of sharing your personal web browsing history with perfect strangers? If so, you could hardly be blamed for having reservations. Online privacy is a major concern for everyone these days. Facebook was recently slapped with a class-action lawsuit alleging that it tracks users' web browsing histories even after they log out of the popular social networking site. Users were understandably concerned after learning that their web travels might have been tracked without their knowledge or consent for purposes unknown.

Not long ago I saw a quote appear in my Twitter feed that articulated this apprehension well: "We are being seduced into revealing ourselves - we are becoming data in the 21st century but we're not benefiting from it #wired11". BBC Technology of Business Reporter @FionaGraham had tweeted that quote out as speaker Andrew Keen was appearing at the #Wired11 Conference. It expresses a sentiment that Voyurl founder and CEO Adam Liebsohn can appreciate. Having worked in a marketing and advertising agency for several years in New York, he saw first-hand the methods with which companies were gathering people's data, hardly in a transparent way, for the purposes of enriching solely themselves and their clients. Witnessing that scene inspired Liebsohn to turn that practice on its head and pursue an entirely different model in which users have a far more direct and open relationship with their own data.

Thus Voyurl was born. Put simply, Voyurl is a browser extension for Chrome, Firefox and Safari that tracks your clickstream data for the purpose of providing personal analytics on your surfing habits. The company often compares itself to personal finance web site Mint.com, explaining that Voyurl similarly analyzes the data you provide it, compares it with larger Voyurl beta community

trends and then recommends sites in which you would likely take an interest.

Voyurl provides fascinating analytics on the macro level as well, drawing data from its users at an enormous rate and then presenting it in stats and infographics for the Voyurl user community's perusal. For example, as this article went to press Voyurl users had visited 12.6 million pages and spent over eight years total online

over the past month. Tuesday is the peak surfing day of the week, garnering 16,281% more time online than the least active day, Thursday. There's a particularly psychedelic-looking infographic available in the Member Trends section that shows the traffic flow between different categories of sites. For instance, several thin strands run from culture to all the other categories, indicating that Voyurl users are nearly just as likely to follow up a visit to a culture-related site with a visit

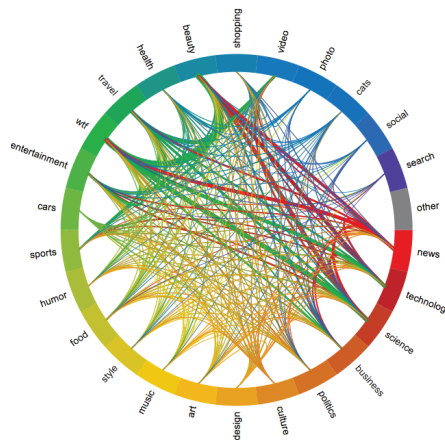
to a site of any other kind, whereas news, science and technology have strongly pronounced web traffic linkages just to beauty and a category somewhat enigmatically named WTF.

Understanding full well that potential users are likely wary of its intentions in collecting clickstream data, Voyurl takes pains to make sure you have control over how your data is shared (anonymously if you prefer - Voyurl claims "We're interested in how you browse, not who you are") and when it is shared (you can toggle sharing on and off by clicking the icon at the top right hand corner of your browser). You can even add certain sites to a blocklist so that they will never be shared as part of your

Voyurl stream regardless of whether streaming is set to on or off.

Right now Voyurl is in private beta, but you can create an account using your profile from Facebook, Twitter, Google or LinkedIn. As the user community grows, Voyurl promises to generate more eye-opening analytics on our individual and collective web browsing

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habits. While the ultimate value of all this data remains to be seen, it's a positive development to encounter a site whose express purpose is to put that value to work for its users.

Aurasma

Aurasma, produced by UK-based software enterprise company Autonomy, is an intriguing visual browser app available for iPhone and Android that offers curious smartphone users a peek into the world of augmented reality. Using visual recognition, you can access special video clips or animation sequences related to an object or a location. Clips, or auras as they're known in Aurasma, can be embedded in anything from print media to an actual physical landscape, and the creative applications are endless.

In order to get started using Aurasma, you will in a sense have to know what you're looking for, and that can be a bit confusing at first. If you click on the radio tower icon after loading the app, you will be presented with a somewhat lengthy list of options including My Auras (auras you can create and share within Aurasma or via SMS, Twitter and Facebook), Super Auras, and Location Auras. Super Auras is a good place to start since it contains a list of auras you can access using print media or the web. There are also several helpful YouTube tutorials for the Aurasma novice.

Some of the auras can be quite charming. If you download Aurasma and aim your smartphone at the New York Times masthead logo in print or on the web, the app will load an aura playing the classic song "New York, New York" as performed by Frank Sinatra while an elegant black and white animation featuring New York City landmarks flickers across the screen. Japan's Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper offers a sporty variation: a video clip of the Yomiuri Giants baseball team winning an important game. The marketing possibilities associated with such slick delivery of advertisements are obvious and several major brands have already recorded auras including Starbucks, Dr. Pepper, Delta, and the NBA.

Auras can also be geographically located, inspiring users to go on a scavenger hunt in search of them. Marvel Comics characters have Location Auras scattered throughout the island of Manhattan. If you're looking for Magneto, you can find him near a tony mansion on the Upper East Side. Spiderman's aura resides at Trinity Church in Lower Manhattan. There are several auras related to musicals and the theater clustered near Times Square. But they're not limited to densely populated urban settings. When I looked for auras located near my apartment in Queens I was pleasantly surprised that I could find neighbors' channels in nearby Sunnyside and Woodside, call them up on a map and subscribe to them. When I looked further afield to see what auras had recently been shared in Aurasma, an intrepid user from Wyoming appeared.

Production quality of the auras can vary: while the Dr. Pepper logo yields a full theatrical cross-promotional commercial involving

the movie Thor, the NYPD logo just presents you with a video of New York City police cars en route to the scene of a crime. Training your smartphone on the Dolce & Gabbana logo, however, calls up an attractive video clip offering a link to the fashion house's mobile web site where you can view its latest collection. This raises the

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question of whether auras could eventually become a more captivating, enhanced replacement for the QR codes in use now.

It can take a little while to get the hang of using Aurasma. You sometimes have to reposition your smartphone or just wait for a bit until the app can recognize an image and begin loading an aura. Once loaded, the aura can sometimes appear as a block that has been overlaid on top of the image, looking a little less than seamless and not quite what comes to mind when one thinks of the term augmented reality. And the quality of playback depends, of course, on the strength and speed of your network connection. The iPhone app I used was a bit buggy at first, crashing intermittently, but it stabilized after I downloaded an updated version. As of this writing Aurasma only offers a Lite version of their app but the company says on their web site that the full version will likely be available by the time this issue has hit newsstands.

Aurasma presents a playful and creative look at how technology can offer a content-rich overlay onto the physical realm. The only question is this: will it hold our interest long enough for us to want to go wandering around pointing our phones at various objects and landmarks in search of an advertisement? Perhaps not. But that remains to be seen – and the potential uses are myriad. It's certainly worth keeping an eye on Aurasma and other augmented reality tools like it to get a glimpse of what the future holds.

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