Lightbeam from Mozilla shines light on online tracking

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(Phys.org) —Marketing professionals often tell the public that tracking Website visitors has its positive side. After all, businesses offering services can transform the data they collect to produce more relevant ads and promotional content for users. They can get a better grip on customer tastes. Retailers can keep up with user preferences so that

customers can get what they want. All the same, one cannot take away that uncomfortable human response that someone from behind a curtain, which is not see-through, is watching you. The concept of tracking and being tracked is one that raises concerns for more than just a few.

Mozilla is now announcing a way to see who is watching you with its release of an add-on called Lightbeam. This is a Firefox add-on that will help Firefox users to both see and understand who is behind the data-tracking curtain. Announced Friday by Mozilla, the software community behind the Firefox browser, the plug-in is to show how one's Internet browsing is being monitored. You can stop Lightbeam at any time by disabling it or uninstalling the add-on. Your Lightbeam data can be easily saved or deleted. Mozilla's team points out that the "bad" in tracking lies in our lack of awareness of who is tracking and why.

"Not all tracking is bad. Many services rely on user data to provide relevant content and enhance your online experience. But tracking can happen without the user's knowledge," according to Mozilla. "It should be you who decides when, how and if you want your browsing data to be shared. We recognize the importance of transparency and our mission is all about empowering users—both with tools and information."

Once the curtain is lifted, the Mozilla idea is that the user can make better, informed decisions about protecting privacy. Lightbeam reveals the parts of tracking that are not transparent to the average user. Viewers get to see third-party sites that one interacts with on the Web. Lightbeam shows relationships between these third parties and the sites you visit, relationships which one may not have been aware.

Lightbeam comes to users via a download produced by Mozilla. The browser extension can create a real-time graph of all of the tracking cookies being deposited on your browser in your daily travels across sites.

The add-on has three graphic representations, Graph, Clock and List. The Graph view is a visualization of every site you visit and third-party requests made from your browser. The Clock view shows connections over a 24-hour period. The List view has options for zooming in.

Meantime, Mozilla is asking users' help so that they can learn something too. Users can contribute their data to Mozilla's Lightbeam database, a central open database showing how first- and third-party sites are connected to each other. Mozilla said, "Data from Lightbeam can help us and others to understand third party relationships on the web and promote further research in the field of online tracking and privacy."

The user also has the opportunity to disable crowdsourcing, however. The user can turn it off at any time. Lightbeam has its own "Privacy Notice," in which Mozilla says, " If you choose to send Lightbeam data to Mozilla (that's us), our privacy policy describes how we handle that data."

The code for Lightbeam has been posted to Github. Lightbeam was funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council. Lightbeam was also helped by students at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design, in implementing visualizations for the add-on.

More information: www.mozilla.org/en-US/lightbeam/

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