

The Media-Sharing Mirage

Many tools now exist for capturing and sharing data collected on mobile devices. Will they turn us into globe-trotting personal publishers--or glorified file clerks?

By Wade Roush

Wireless laptops, home broadband connections, and camera phones are nearly ubiquitous, at least in urban parts of the industrialized world. And several Web-based media-sharing services--including [eSnips \(http://esnips.com/signin/index.jsp\)](http://esnips.com/signin/index.jsp), Nokia's [Lifeblog \(http://www.nokia.co.uk/nokia/0,,71739,00.html\)](http://www.nokia.co.uk/nokia/0,,71739,00.html), Motorola's [Avvenu \(http://www.avvenu.com/motorola/\)](http://www.avvenu.com/motorola/), and Six Apart's [Vox \(http://www.vox.com/\)](http://www.vox.com/)--can fuse all the information those devices collect into online journals.

The vision is clear: multimedia diaries should document all our experiences and gather our favorite files so we can share them as widely as we wish.

The implementation, however, is flawed.

I've spent the last couple of weeks trying out one of the services, Vizrea. The company's first product, launched in February, was Vizrea Snap, software for Nokia camera phones that simplifies the transfer of photos between the phones, Vizrea's website, and users' home computers. Last month, the company added videos, blog posts, and podcasts to the mix. New social networking technology is also included that lets users view files from friends and swap comments. And they've also created a PC program for organizing these files and have made the system available for more types of phones.

"People who are really into social networking and use sites like Xanga, MySpace, or other services seem to get super-excited about being able to instantly share their content with their social network," said Vizrea CEO Mike Toutonghi. "We wanted to build a robust, seamless platform that allows content to move easily between various devices and end up where users want it to be, already organized."

While the idea is great, Vizrea's technology isn't nearly as robust and worry-free as it should be, especially if the company has its eye on the mass market. And it's a limitation common to all the latest media-sharing services I've used.

Vizrea can do a bunch of neat things. I took some pictures around the neighborhood using a Nokia N70 phone, which includes a surprisingly good 2-megapixel camera. Using the Vizrea

Snap software on the phone, I uploaded selected pictures to a [personal account](#) (<http://www.vizrea.com/default.aspx?tabId=17371>) I'd created earlier on Vizrea's website. I could add titles and descriptions to the photos and specify which album or "collection" they should go into. I also created blog posts and uploaded those to the Vizrea website. From that site, I could view all of my collections and blog entries, mark them as public or private, invite friends to visit my pages, and browse other Vizrea members' collections.

What's more--and this is what makes a service like Vizrea a real advance--I could view Vizrea blogs and collections *from the phone*. Up to now, most of our personal data has been stranded on islands. My songs are stuck on my laptop or my iPod. My photos, unless I make the effort to upload them, are stuck on my phone, my camera, or my PC. The TV shows I record are stuck on my DVR. But using Vizrea, I can upload my entire photo collection to the Web, then use the phone to show puppy pictures to friends when I'm traveling.

The same goes for podcasts and other audio clips, including MP3 songs. (While Vizrea doesn't encourage the sharing of copyrighted material, it's certainly possible.) If you don't have one of the 16 Nokia, Samsung, or Panasonic [phones](#) (<http://support.vizrea.com/knowledgebase/root/public/vz04044.htm>) that support Vizrea's software, you can do most of the same things using a standard cell-phone browser and Vizrea's WAP interface.

It all represents a step toward what social media theorist Thomas Vander Wal calls the "personal infocloud": technologies that scatter your data across the Internet and reassemble them on demand, wherever you go and whatever device you happen to be using (see "[The Internet is Your Next Hard Drive \(/read_article.aspx?id=17195&ch=infotech\)](#) ").

The problem is that, so far, very little of this media-sharing is automatic or hitch-free. In an ideal world, I could snap a photo, give it a title or description, and be done with it. My camera phone would upload the photo to the proper media-sharing site behind the scenes. The site would send out automatic alerts to my friends, and would automatically download a copy of the photo to my PC, so it would be waiting there when I got home.

But with Vizrea and the other sharing services, each of these steps must be initiated manually. To transfer a picture I've just taken to Vizrea's site, I have to close the phone's camera application, open the Vizrea application, type in a password, select the data network I want to use, find my photo, choose the upload option, type a title, and target the picture to a specific collection. That's not what *I* call seamless.

Adding to the frustration, several of Vizrea's features didn't seem to work as advertised. Sometimes I couldn't log into the service from the phone. Using the phone or Web interfaces,

it is possible to send e-mail or SMS invitations to friends to view your recently uploaded files. But my messages often never arrived on my friends' phones, and when one friend clicked on the link in a Vizrea e-mail invitation, his computer crashed.

Some of those bugs can be chalked up to the fact that Vizrea's service is still in its infancy; most software companies would stick the "beta" label on a product in this phase. The rest probably reflect the inherent difficulty of making four very different technologies--media recording and playback devices, wireless data networks, Web services, and PCs--work together. Our information infrastructure wasn't developed to support "infoclouds," and making the vision real is inevitably a big kludge.

But in the not-quite-ready-for-the-average-Joe category, Vizrea has plenty of company. None of the other media-sharing systems I've tried, such as Wallop, Vox, or Flickr, make the uploading and sharing process one-click simple or wholly automatic.

What we desperately need--and what Vizrea and its competitors are still struggling toward--are common technology standards and simplified software interfaces that overcome the differences between our info-gadgets and make content-sharing as easy as snapping a picture or placing a phone call.

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