

## PeerBook: Student develops new social networking software

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A Scottish student who became worried about the lack of privacy on sites like Facebook has come up with a solution - he's developed his own social networking program.

St Andrews University Computer Science student Benjamin Birt was so concerned about the way some sites collect and trade in personal data that he set about developing his own software which guarantees to protect users' personal information.

Now Ben's software - "PeerBook" - is one of a number of alternatives poised to mount a challenge to the global dominance of sites like [Facebook](#).

The original social networking site set up by [Mark Zuckerberg](#) at Harvard in 2004 has become a worldwide phenomenon, attracting over 400 million users and earning Zuckerberg and his colleagues billions. But recently concerns have grown about the way sites like Facebook and MySpace collect, store and in some cases pass on users' personal information to advertisers and third parties.

Facebook's growth as an internet social networking site has met public criticism on a range of issues, especially the privacy of their users, child safety, the use of advertising scripts, data mining and the inability to terminate accounts without first manually deleting all the content.

“Facebook and other social networks are growing in popularity by the day,” said Ben, who graduates from St Andrews today.

“However there are serious privacy and data control concerns with these social networking services. Since virtually none of them are centrally located inside the EU they are subject to little or no data protection legislation, and as such can legally sell their customers' data to third party organisations.”

In the States, concerns about the vulnerability of personal information on [social networking sites](#) have spawned growing public interest in possible alternative services.

A group of US students who launched a web campaign for funding to build an alternative [social networking service](#) - Diaspora - were flooded with nearly \$200,000 and messages of support - even although they haven't actually written the program or proved it works yet.

In Scotland, Ben is already several stages ahead.

He's built a prototype of PeerBook in St Andrews, proved it works and

has had its security robustly tested.

“PeerBook does what Facebook can’t,” he continued.

“Firstly, there’s no central control of users’ data - personal information stays personal and is only shared with people whom the user wants to contact.

“Secondly, when [personal information](#) is sent from one friend to another, the data is encrypted using a complex set of encryption standards. It can only be read by PeerBook users.

“The aim of the PeerBook project has been to produce a piece of social networking software that demonstrates the functionality of sites like Facebook, whilst guaranteeing that no third-party may access, read or distribute any private user information to which they were not privy.

“Tightening up the security of personal data on the web can only make [social networking](#) a safer experience for everyone - and there is growing evidence that this is what the public wants.”

Ben plans to spend the summer refining and testing the PeerBook software - he will then make it available for free on the web.

Provided by University of St Andrews

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