

New browsers aim to corral social-network explosion

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It just got to be too much - the 255 Facebook friends, the four e-mail accounts, the Flickr and Picasa photo albums, the LinkedIn updates, the daily tech blogs I follow and the Twitter feed that never stops disgorging rumors and tips.

So much information was pouring in about friends, relatives and sources that I was feeling swept downstream in a river of status updates. Trying to check in at all those online services - and remembering all those passwords - became overwhelming. For a while I just stopped visiting Facebook, [Twitter](#) and LinkedIn.

So it was with the relief of a rescued castaway that, at a recent Internet trade show, I stumbled across the booth of 18-year-old Diane Keng, a recent graduate of Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, Calif., who is already on her third business startup. Her website, MyWeboo.com has brought order to my online social life, along with a new Web browser service offered by a Menlo Park, Calif., company called Flock.

"The whole idea is that now you have control of your digital life," said Keng, the marketing director of MyWeboo, which she co-founded this spring with her 26-year-old brother Steven, a former engineer at AOL who is the CEO. "We don't just bring things together; we also push it back out to the social networks."

You could think of either Flock or MyWeboo as the hub of a wheel whose spokes radiate out to your accounts on Facebook, Twitter,

YouTube, MySpace, Blogger or [Flickr](#). Both allow you to channel content from multiple services into a single coherent stream. But even more useful, Flock and MyWeboo are easy ways to share your content back out to the world.

For example, you could upload the photos of the rattlesnake that almost bit you in the high Sierra to MyWeboo.com, and then parcel those pictures out to Flickr, Facebook or Google's Picasa. Flock's new browser, meanwhile, offers a great one-click way to post Facebook or Twitter links back to content you've posted online - a useful service for journalists or other content creators.

One of the few Silicon Valley social startups with a name that actually makes sense, Flock calls itself "the originator of the Social [Web Browser](#) ." It has two browsers: one based on Mozilla's Firefox and intended for more specialized users, and a new version, launched in June, that is based on Google's Chrome browser and intended for a mass audience, said Shawn Hardin, Flock's CEO. Both browsers are among the 20 most popular desktop apps available on Facebook.

Flock's new browser has a clean, uncluttered interface with a minimum of buttons and tabs. And because it is built on Chrome's open-source software, it can run any software extension available for Chrome, including features that allow the browser to automatically translate a Web page into English from other languages, or preview Adobe PDF documents without having to download them.

"It's hard sometimes to do less, in order to do more," Hardin said of the simplified design for the new browser. "That was a big focus - to keep the power but still to keep it really simple."

Flock pulls your Twitter, Facebook and RSS feeds into a single bar that scrolls down the right side of the page. When you see something

interesting, you just click and the browser takes you right there. You can create your own custom groups to share content, or, by clicking on a bubble icon at the top of a page, instantly share a Web page with all your Twitter followers and Facebook friends. An upgrade will soon allow users to incorporate LinkedIn; a Mac version will soon be ready.

While Flock is a browser, MyWeboo is best thought of as a Windows file manager for the social Web. But instead of navigating between the C: drive and the E: drive on your PC, you click between Facebook or MySpace in the Internet "cloud."

Like Flock, MyWeboo has an interface that emphasizes simplicity, and there is a nice little bonus - one of the MyWeboo "drives" is 1 gigabyte of free storage, one way that MyWeboo has elements of a cloud service like [Google](#) Documents. Besides allowing you to share pictures or other content to a large circle of friends via Facebook or Twitter, you can also use e-mail services like Yahoo, Gmail or Hotmail to share with a selected group.

"We kept it simple," Keng said of the design. "We took a lot of things out."

MyWeboo, like Flock, is still a beta service that is constantly going through changes and refinements. Keng, who will be a freshman studying computer engineering at Santa Clara University in the fall, says the service has about 16,000 users. While Flock has a revenue-sharing deal with Google that makes it the browser's default search engine, MyWeboo already includes some display advertising, and Keng is bubbling with other ideas to monetize the service. She is also enlisting a corps of interns across the country to evangelize for MyWeboo on campuses such as San Jose State University.

At this point, the Keng siblings still live with their mother in Cupertino.

Diane Keng takes the day shift, often working from a nearby Starbucks, while her brother, who prefers to write code at night, works the wee hours.

"We like what we do," Diane Keng said, "because our parents don't force us to do what we do."

The serial entrepreneur considers herself a child of Silicon Valley. She turned down admission offers at the University of Southern California and New York University to protect the cohesiveness of the MyWeboo team as she starts college.

"Diane is a problem-solver," said her high school business teacher, Carl Schmidt, who is thinking about using MyWeboo to distribute his course materials. "She loves to see the problem - hopefully before somebody else does. It's a different way of looking at the world. She'll not only see a problem; she'll see an opportunity."

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