This paper was very interesting. Describing the limitations of online chat is something I have thought about a lot, but have never been able to come up with good solutions. There are a lot of interesting ideas of how to allow chats to become much more expressive beyond the limitations of just text on a page. Both Chat Circles and Loom are interesting ways to view conversation, but I think Chat Circles has a major limitation that, should it be adjusted, could make the application much more engaging and user-friendly.

The “Zone of Hearing” used in the Chat Circles program seems to severely limit the usefulness of the application. While the program is meant to facilitate conversations, the number of people per conversation is limited. If enough users cluster around a conversation, circles around the outside of the conversation may not be within the range of circles on the opposite side.

By showing activity of conversations outside the “hearing” range, the authors state, “if sufficiently intrigued, one can move to a new spot and follow another discussion”. However, moving to another conversation means leaving the conversation one is currently in which puts the user in the position of weighing the importance of conversation. In this setup, it is probably that a user might try and convince their current conversation to move closer to another conversation so that multiple conversations could be within range. Users who straddle two conversations will begin to confuse users who are within hearing range of only one of those conversations.

The “Zone of Hearing” effectively limits users to one conversation at a time, while constantly reminding them that other conversations are occurring. I would propose a way to monitor other threads to give users not only the ability to observe multiple conversations, but also give them a more informed idea of which conversations they want to listen to. One suggestion might be to allow users to adjust the size of their zone of hearing. Another would be to allow users to leave markers at interesting conversations, it would be like having a second zone of hearing, but they would be able to pick which conversation to listen in on.

I would like to see a mini tag cloud associated with conversations that showed heavily used words. From the paper, “if sufficiently intrigued, one can move to a new spot and follow another discussion”. Keeping heavily used words would help users overcome the barrier of having to become acclimated to a conversation before they could figure out whether it was interesting enough to stay and listen to more.
Managing the Virtual Commons: Cooperation and Conflict in Computer Communities - Peter Kollock and Marc Smith

Despite the broad title of the paper, what is mostly being discussed is a series of rules on real life social communities and their application to Usenet. The focus of the paper is narrowed from computer communities to a very specific type of online community. This is to be slightly expected given that online communities have flourished since this paper was published and both the scope and type have expanded greatly. It is important to realize that the paper’s analysis of Elinor Ostrom’s rules do not necessarily fit all computer communities.

It is interesting to read this paper and note how little has changed with Usenet in the last 13 years since it was published. While reading the Rules that Ostrom put forth I thought about our own set of CS newsgroups as well as online forums that I have read or been apart of. Some of them were very obvious and I saw the utility in them immediately. Having attempted to setup forums before for my social network to use and watched as the boards languished in disarray, rule #1, “group boundaries are clearly defined” made a lot of sense. While rules like #5, “a system for monitoring member's behavior exists; this monitoring is undertaken by the community members themselves” came as more of an ah-ha! moment where I was able to put a name to something that I had noticed in more successful newsgroups but never, but never realized that I noticed.

The rules, section 4, are really the center point of the article. Sections 1 – 3 are used mainly to get the reader up to speed on the type of communities being looked at, while everything from section 4.1 on gives examples of how the rules help fix the problems inherent in such social communities. This leads into something I wished the paper had done better. It could have been far more concise. The language is very verbose, and feels like there is a lot too read without much substance. For instance, section 2, the description of Usenet, reads more like a history book than background knowledge. It is definitely a research paper, and I understand that there is a necessary amount of “proving” that needs to be done, but it could have been much more concise if they had just said here are Elinor Ostrom’s rules of collective actions and public goods, they apply very well to Usenet.

One thing that I believe should be touched on regards FAQ’s. In my experience FAQ’s rarely address the questions of new users, but rather address what old users believe new users want to know. Or, the FAQ contains important or usefull information for new users but it is given assuming that they already have a working knowledge of the system. This in turn gives new users very little motivation to read the FAQ section of a newsgroup.
Medium Effects: Turn-Taking and Back Channels – Lynn Cherney

This paper provides a very interesting account on the similarities and differences of real-time discussion on computers and in person. It’s almost like reading an article that describes how to speak a foreign language in that there are certain tenses or colloquialisms that do not make sense in English but make sense to a native speaker. One of my problems with the chapter is that there does not appear to be much of an “argument” being made in the traditional sense. There is not any advocating one set of outcomes over another, instead there are just facts being presented and compared.

I really like having the differences in face to face interactions and online communications explained. It is comforting to know that other people have studied the topic and are aware of the limitations in expressiveness for online chats.

One aspect that is not really brought up is how readers feel about the phrases used by the speaker. Trying to close the gap of misunderstanding that occurs from the limited expressiveness of text is hard because translating the two is hard. For instance using phrases like lol, or hahaha, while expressive, can be very annoying for readers, especially when overused. Does the reader believe that lol is an acceptable term for anything that they deem to be spoken in jest, or do they only type it when they are literally laughing out loud? Personally, I like the use in the paper of just a simple grin or giggle to the onomatopoeia of ha. It feels somehow easier to stomach to me, but not everyone feels the same way. It can certainly be hard to talk to someone online for the first time that you know well and find out that while you can normally carry on conversation easily face to face it is very hard over the internet.