First and foremost, I noticed that the authors here are coining the term “social visualization”. I wonder if this is the first social visualization paper. I imagine that there may be some earlier works in the area, but they may not have considered the social aspects of those visualizations. In any case, reading this paper reminds me how young this area is.

The next thing that struck me was that the authors do not seem to hold avatars in high regard. Donath et al. describe the avatars used in graphical chat systems to be “a far cry from the subtlety of verbal expression...” While I agree that maybe avatars are not perfect replacements of one’s physical representation, I do feel that avatars can do a lot of good. The avatar one chooses, whether it is medieval, sci-fi, or some other theme, can say a lot about a person. A sci-fi themed avatar is can be compared to wearing a Star Wars t-shirt. For people who tend to be shy in person, these avatars can be a medium for them to express themselves. Even if there are few facial expressions an avatar can hold, if a normally shy person felt comfortable using them, this could be a huge opportunity for this person to get to know others and others to get to know him or her.

A bit further in the paper Donath et al. mention that the gradually fading circles mimic real life conversations. I disagree. After one person speaks, another person begins. No one is looking at the first speaker anymore; everyone is looking at the current speaker. Three or four speakers later, people may not even remember the speaking order. I feel that the fading effect does what Hollan and Stornetta (in the paper Beyond Being There) talk about. The fading adds something to the conversation that a face to face conversation does not even have. Users get to see a short history of their conversation with this fading effect. The ephemeral state of audio does not allow this.

One thing that has bothered me about the Loom visualization is that I feel the setting that “traces the connections between sequential postings” is chaotic. I can see the meaning in the first setting – seeing who posts and how much. I can see the meaning in the thumbnails, to get an idea of what a newsgroup is like. Even after reading the description that the authors provide about the connections setting, and seeing the related images, I still feel that the chaos overshadows any salient information that can be gathered.

Throughout this whole paper, we did not get an idea of what others thought about these visualizations. I am very curious to find out if looking at the thumbnail mood visualization of newsgroups actually helped users find newsgroups they were interested in joining. I would be interested in learning if that one person who posted more than anyone else as shown in the first Loom visualization knew that he/she posted that much. Regarding Chat Circles, I would have liked to see something on how users felt about using abstract representations over no representation, or using abstract representations over avatars. Even some pilot studies would have been insightful, especially in the early years of social visualization. Like mentioned in class, social computing is becoming more and more prominent in the world today, but before, it was seen as frivolous. It is possible that users were apprehensive about using a system that visualized conversation space, as in Chat Circles, or visualized usage, as in Loom. However, it is very possible that these visualizations may become part of one’s daily computer usage routine, just as Visual Who did.
One aspect that I find interesting about Cherney’s paper is that right from the beginning, in a paper that was written in 1995, she brings up the characteristics of communication that we are still trying to use in social CMC today. That is, she talks about how message storage (archival), asynchronous or synchronous transmissions (presence), and the feeling of being in another location (bridging the gap), and most prominently in her paper, back channels. These are all aspects that today social CMC is still working towards enhancing. I am not trying to say that this is an easy problem to solve; I am just stating my surprise. Cherney seems to be at the forefront of a movement that she might not have even known was happening.

Cherney claims that long messages decrease the sense of co-presence and awareness of others. It seems that this is based off of opinion. There are no references here, and it does not seem like a study was done to support this idea. I have to disagree with this thought. One of my biggest pet-peeves is when a person in the conversation is sending four to eight word messages that do not complete a thought. This person will need numerous messages to finish out his/her idea. During this time, myself and other users have no opportunity to respond because this user is rapidly firing message after message. The user may believe that he/she is doing this to maintain presence; the user is actually monopolizing the conversation, especially nowadays, where many messaging clients report to others that “this user is currently typing”. In my opinion, I would rather a person just express their entire thought, and allow me or others to respond. The shorter messages that Cherney describes may not necessarily always be better, especially with users like this.

Another part of Cherney’s paper that I do not agree with is that interruptions have no place in text communication. I do agree that turn-taking in chat systems are not exactly easy to point out. While the author’s paper calls each sent message an utterance, it makes the interaction sound trivial. That what a person says does not matter because it is only an utterance. Text communication can be compared to face-to-face communication in terms of turns though. One just has to put forth the effort in figuring out where a turn ends. Completed thoughts might be a start. In situations where a user chooses to break up their thought into multiple messages, the users thought can easily be interrupted with another’s input or a backchannel. When responses do not follow the appropriate message, how can the messages between the message and response not be considered interruptions?

Repair-mechanisms bring up an interesting point when it comes to interruptions. I was having a conversation with a friend about football over the weekend and my friend kept writing “couch” instead of “coach”. I was able to comprehend his messages anyway, but later, when we were on a different topic, my friend just wrote the word coach as its own message. This was my friend’s attempt to repair the earlier mistakes. Had this been an audio conversation, the repair would not have been needed. I have no doubt that my friend would have spoken the correct word. I wonder why Cherney did not include examples like this in her paper when talking about repair-mechanisms between text and face-to-face conversations.

Cherney claims that back channels are full turns since they are “utterances” like any other sent message. Here, again, I have to disagree. Conversations are not simple formulas that one can deconstruct and examine each entity on its own, whether it is a text conversation or face-to-face conversation. Parts of conversations all have their own meaning and significance. To say that each part of a conversation is equal is on the level as saying that all music is the same. While Cherney was able to bring out some
important and interesting data about text conversations I do not think this method is one that should be followed blindly. The subjective portion of social CMC will always be there. It may make the jobs harder for people working in or studying the area, but it also makes it worthwhile.

**Paper: Managing the Virtual Commons: Cooperation and Conflict in Computer Communities**

**Author:** Peter Kollock and Marc Smith

The first things point that has come to my attention is that I disagree with the use of the term “free-rider”. Kollock and Smith claim that these people are either lurkers, never posting to the newsgroup, or they ask a question and once they have their answer, they leave. It is possible that these “free-riders” do not know enough about the topic at hand to answer any questions. It is possible that these “free-riders” are lurking (never posting) because they want to learn about the topic and then some time down the road, they may choose to answer someone. It is also possible that others may have had the same question, but were too scared to ask (at the risk of being embarrassed or sounding “dumb”). By asking this question, it may spur into larger conversation or discussion. But to group everyone that does not participate often, and claim that they are a detriment to the newsgroup is an exaggeration and an unfair assumption.

I am confused by the author’s description of why larger numbers in newsgroups can discourage free-riding. The authors say that since “every individual’s behavior is visible”, that free-riders will not be able to hide? However, if there are 10,000 members in a newsgroup and I post once get my answer and then leave, how will that hurt me? Are the 9,999 other members going to come and search for me? Are they going to harass me to rejoin the group? If I was a lurker and just read the threads, I do not feel that it is likely that those people will confront me and if so, I can choose to leave the group or simply not answer their post.

In the section on Rules and Institutions the authors state that it is often better when a group creates and modifies their own rules, instead of having an outside force come in and impose rules on the group. Then they go on to talk about how groups sometimes create FAQs to help answer questions that are commonly asked and set the rules. If it is found that self-imposed rules are followed? How do users learn what these rules are if new users do not read the FAQs? If some answers to questions are missing or ambiguous, how is a user supposed to figure out how to proceed? For users who do not care about the rules, these FAQs do not state what will be the consequences for not following the rules. It seems like these rules have to be portrayed in some way. If they are not portrayed to the user then it may be possible that another force is at hand keeping the community strong and successful.

The monitoring and sanctioning section mentions that some people might be insulted or parodied as a form of sanction. I find this ridiculous. This must be the reason why that most of the dots on the thumbnail view of the Loom were red (indicating flames). It seems as though people find it much easier to be disagreeable when not having to talk to a person face-to-face. One is simply typing on a computer and apparently people think that means it is ok to be rude to others. If this is how rules are meant to be enforced I would rather stay far away from newsgroups and Usenet. I am shocked that rules were ever followed where people felt that it was ok to be rude to each other.

Overall, I feel that this paper is outdated, and seeing that it was written in 1996, it seems that I am on the right track. I would be interested to see a follow-up paper written now about newsgroups today, and other areas, like forums, Google groups, etc. I wonder like to see how much of what was true then, still holds today.