Visualizing Email Archives

In this paper, the authors set out to explain why the email clients of today do not provide the necessary tools to allow people to use email to its fullest. The authors claim that while the process of email sending and receiving is adequately handled by today’s email clients, the process by which users store and archive their emails is not. Current systems of archiving often involve placing read (or potentially unread, I suppose) emails into specific, named folder for future viewing. The main problem with a system such as this that forces each email to fall into a single category (i.e. folder) is that, in order for the system to function in an ideal manner, each of the folders would have to be named such that they do not overlap and are independent of one another. As creating email categories in this manner is almost impossible (without having many nearly empty and a few overfilled folders), it is likely that a given email could be categorized in one of many different folders. Deciding in which folder to place such an email can (and often is) a frustrating and cognitively difficult, which can lead a person to either mis-archive the email or simply to not archive it at all. Furthermore, it is likely that, once an email has been archived into one of these (presumably overlapping) folders, an old email will be difficult to find via browsing the folders.

The authors also explain how email has grown from a simple place where people send and receive work-related messages to a place where people send and receive some very personal or important information that, because it has meaning, she would like to keep forever. The email clients commonly used today, the authors explain, were made with message sending and receiving efficiency in mind rather than the need to act as a personal space for the user. Indeed, since a given user often has many archived emails that she cherishes and holds dear, it makes sense that email should be redesigned in order to allow the user to properly display her social history.

In an attempt to show the direction that they believed email should go, the authors discuss the merits of four (two temporal, to social) visualization: TimeStore, Post-History, Personal Map, and Social Network Fragments. TimeStore is a simple two-dimensional graph of contacts vs. time that displays individual messages as small dots on the graph. Post-History is a modified calendar where brightness and size of each day on the calendar represent the number of messages sent received on that day. Personal Map is a simple social networking visualization where people in the network are represented by circular nodes and connections between two people are represented by a line connecting the two appropriate nodes. Social Network Fragments is similar, yet slightly more complex, social visualization that uses a spring system to position contacts within a two-dimensional field.

While I do not necessarily agree that all of the features of the four above-given visualizations would, if implemented as part of an email client, improve email. However, I do agree that, because of the apparent transformation of email from a tool to a personal space, email should be changed in such a way that it allows the user to more easily visualize her past. I also very much liked the authors’ comment on how some emails had special value to the user in much the same way a letter from the
mayor or president of a company might have (I have several of these ‘special’ emails myself – some personal, some more work-related). Because such emails exist, I believe it would be good if an email client would provide the user with the ability to somehow display these ‘special’ emails. A virtual picture frame or mantle may suffice. Additionally, the visualization need not be available for public viewing. I believe that, even in privacy, displaying meaningful emails in prominent places in a virtual ‘house’ of email would be enough to please the user.

Social Network Fragments

In this paper, the author essentially just explains how the visualization Social Network Fragments came to be and also discusses the motivational factors that lead to its creation. The author first discusses key aspects of social network theory. According to theory (and the author), a given individual will usually be a part of several different social groups. A person does this, apparently, because he is attempting to gain the most amount of information possible. By being a part of several different networks, a person will have access to several different (instead of a single) sources of information. Additionally, theory indicates that it is to a person’s advantage to be the only link between two groups (i.e. person involved in both groups). Being the solitary link between two groups allows the person to follow the social norms of each group independently and thus allows the person to have a multi-faceted social face (and also is less restrictive since the person need not follow the social of both groups simultaneously). In addition, being the solitary link allows one to control the flow of information from one group to another and also makes it easier to prevent the unwanted spread of information through gossip. After discussing social network theory, the author moves on to explain what went into the creation of her social visualization Social Network Fragments. The author then finishes by explaining how the visualization should be used, what flaws were discovered, and how the visualization could be improved.

While I am unsure that I agree with all of the given motivations for meeting people and being involved in multiple groups (to ‘want increased access of information’ rather than to ‘want to feel a sense of belonging’ or ‘to wash away one’s feeling of loneliness’), I do believe that one’s social network could be appropriately represented by a set of lightly connected clusters. Thus, while the reasons for making Social Networking Fragments I do not agree with, I do believe that the resultant visualization is one that well-represents the data set.

Also, while I assert that it is possible that the spring and gravity parameters and weights could require some tweaking in order to create a more accurate visualization of one’s social network, the principals behind the design seem to be sound. That is, the default repulsion of each of the members of one’s social community coupled with the slight gravity that affects everyone and the attractive force applied to connected members seems to comprise a sound set of rules for creating the visualization.

Overall, I thought that the visualization was a good one. However, I do believe that it has some flaws (many of which were addressed by the author) that need to be fixed. The first of these flaws is that the program requires the user to create four input files before the visualization can be created. It seems likely that the information contained in these files would be difficult (perhaps even impossible) to acquire otherwise, but I also very much doubt that if the user was required to create these four files that
he would actually use the visualization. The second flaw is one that is inherent to all spring-based systems: it is possible for one person to be close to another without actually being socially connected to that person. While it helps that a line will not be drawn between two people, even if they are close, unless those two people are actually connected, this is not a perfect solution to the problem. Lastly, using the names of people to represent their position in the visualization, while it allows the viewer to immediately know the identity of a contact, can be quite confusing. Names often become blurred together or are hidden behind other larger, brighter names and, because of this, are unreadable.

**Public Displays of Connection**

In their paper, the authors seem simply to want to talk about how online social networking websites fit into the greater social scene and whether or not these websites are changing that social scene in a significant way. The authors first discuss how such personal things as taste in music, political views, and social status may be inferred by the company that one keeps – electronic or otherwise. Additionally, the authors discuss how having one’s network be viewable by the public (i.e. a public display of connection) affects how a person acts and interacts with others. That is, the authors explain their belief that a public display of connections forces one to be more honest (or at least makes it more difficult to be dishonest) about one’s personal information and how one describes oneself. The authors then move on to a discussion concerning how the public display of connections is only effective at keeping its owner honest if those public connections are real people that both know the person in question and who also would be willing to take action if they discovered that the person was lying about his identity. The discussion then moves on to discussing how, while it is indeed true that making one’s connections available to the public makes it easier for one’s identity to be verified, it also makes identity theft simpler for the would-be thief. That is, to effectively become someone else, all one needs to do is have some rudimentary knowledge of the connections in another person’s social network (and a healthy amount of charisma). Next, the authors tell how social networking websites could be improved by allowing one to selectively choose which of his connections can see which aspects of his profile. The paper finishes by talking about how social networking websites make it easier for one to make connections, but that these many connections come at the cost of weak ties to connections.

Most of what the authors said seemed to be quite reasonable. As a user of Facebook, I have come across very few cases where a person lies about his identity or personal information (actually, I cannot think of a single case where I have seen this). Additionally, while I have never myself used an e-dating website, I have heard many stories of false identities and fudged facts (I have also heard no such stories concerning Facebook). While I had not before given this disparity much thought, it seems reasonable to believe that it is the pressure of the public eye that keeps the Facebookers honest and it is the lack of this monitoring force that has lead to the trust issues of e-dating websites.

Additionally, I have noticed also how using Facebook has not resulted in any new close friends, but that it has provided me with a means by which I may maintain and build relationships that I had previously, and in-person, established. For this reason, I agree that social networking websites indeed will probably not increase the number of ‘close friends’ that one is likely to have, but that it will increase the number of good acquaintances that one will be able to keep.
Having one’s number of close friends remain within the three to six range while also making it easier to maintain past relationships gives rise to an interesting question: will these social networking websites, provided they are not simply a fad that will die out in a few years, make it unnecessary (or at least less necessary) to meet people and make friends after moving to a new location? And indeed, if this is so, is this a good thing or a bad thing (or neither)? Keeping in touch with friends one made during his youth is important and indeed seems like something that should be done. However, it also very important that one meet different types of people and also people with whom he can have face-to-face conversations with so that he may grow as a person. Thus, I believe that social networking websites offer a good means by which one may maintain past connections, but I also believe that these websites should be used in moderation and that the value of making physical (as opposed to virtual) connections should not be forgotten.