Visualizing Email Archives

This paper discusses design interfaces to reveal the social information contained within email archives, and how to transform the archives into meaningful information for users. Time-based, social network and topic-based visualizations are discussed. Time-based visualizations help users determine patterns around project deadlines, relationship evolutions, and work patterns. Social network visualizations help users find patterns among different social networks. Topic-based visualizations can be used to inform what projects, ideas, people, and places the user has discussed.

An interesting finding is that people save emails to save the history of their experiences. Considering several emails as a whole creates a meaningful pattern. This is interesting to me personally, because when I think about my emails, I do save all of them, especially emails from family and friends. I also tend to save meaningful emails, just in case I ever need them. This is also mentioned in the paper. People, especially with their work email, like to save emails for fear of needing them someday and not having them.

TimeStore is an example of a time-based visualization. This visualization plots people vs. time on a 2-dimensional grid. When asking people their opinions about this visualization, people wanted more features. This is a good sign that email visualizations are a useful direction to explore. I think it would be interesting to incorporate color into this visualization. There could be different colors for the emails you replied to, the ones you forwarded, and the ones that you ignored. If you replied and forwarded, then that could be a mix of the replied and forwarded colors. This would allow users to find patterns, such as people who email them and they always respond, and people they often ignore. People might have an idea of who these people are, but they could still be surprised by the findings. Another additional feature with color is there could be different colors for emails that you were cc'd in, bcc'd in, sent directly, and sent as part of a mailing list. This could be used to analyze the senders’ relationships with you.

Personal Map is an example of a social network visualization that depicts the user’s email-derived social circle. It places the user in the center, surrounded him/her by his/her contacts. The contacts are arranged in groups based on their co-appearance in emails and are arranged radially based on “importance.” The author of the paper does not describe what “importance” means. He should have specified how the “importance” of a person is determined; it could be provided by the user, in other words, the user could provide a list with names in order of importance to him/her or importance can be based on how many emails from that person the user receives. This was a little confusing.
Social Network Fragments

Social network fragments makes information about the different types of ties between different networks more easily accessible. The system allows people to see the impact of their networks on their identity.

The author classifies different types of ties in an email spool as: knowledge ties, awareness ties, weak awareness ties, list awareness ties, and trusted ties. The ways to classify the different types of ties make sense, except the trusted ties. A trusted tie is when someone blind carbon copies someone. A lot of times companies BCC everyone they are interviewing, not because they consider their future interviewees trusted, but because they don’t want them to be aware of each other. The author should’ve made this distinction when saying that trusted ties are for BCCs. Maybe if all the receivers are BCCed that should be considered a knowledge tie and an awareness tie. The author acknowledges this weakness of the use of BCC in the end of the paper.

I liked how the author discussed the weaknesses of the system, such as the fact that some nodes are geographically closer to one another even though they are unrelated. Explaining this problem with the smaller example (with A, B, C, D, and E) made it more clear to understand. I also liked how the author mentioned that the problem could be fixed with a 3-dimensional space, but that 3-dimensional would add too much confusion and would not outweigh the advantages of an extra graphical dimension. I liked that a 2.5-dimensional space was used. I’ve never seen 2.5-dimensional visualizations so I think this one was extremely creative. I also think that it was helpful that the author explained why this visualization is considered 2.5-dimensional, for those who do not understand what the .5-dimension adds. As a footnote, it is stated “2.5D uses both X and Y coordinates as well as applying layers. Thus, the information appears to be laid out along a third dimension that cannot be navigated.”

I’m confused as to what is in the history frame. There are a lot of different colored boxes, with different numbers of squares inside of them. I think that the author should’ve done a better job explaining this feature, and perhaps made the image bigger so that one could read the history frame.

I liked how the visualization was done for a real person, Drew. I also liked how the author described Drew's insights while viewing the visualization and how it helped her make sense of her networks. I think this made the visualization seem even more useful, than just saying what it does and not relating it to a real-world example.
Public Displays of Connection

Signaling theory focuses on the display of connections in social networking sites and on the signaling value of the network itself. The author claims that public display of connections is an implicit verification of identity. She discusses how widespread less reliable identity representations are in the online world and two predictions that can be made about the effect of a public display of connections.

The author also discusses how creating an online persona is a lot easier than becoming a new person in the real world. There is no need to acquire physical documents or have surgeries. She also discusses that in some situations it is ok to make up a persona, while in others it is not. I liked how she gave examples of situations where it is ok and situations where it isn’t. For example, it is ok to make up a persona when you are playing online games, but not ok when you are providing goods and services, or speaking to potential employers.

I also liked how the author provided an example of how social networking sites can prevent people from making up personas. It was to require invitations from existing members and then keeping the host members’ names on the invitees’ profiles. I would’ve liked to read more examples about this particular issues, but at the same time I understand that it is beyond the scope of this paper.

The paper also described the concept of a “Friendster whore,” someone who wants to be connected to a lot of people, mostly people they don’t even know personally. I would’ve liked to read about what the motivations are in becoming a “Friendster whore.” The term is used to reflect the negative reaction of people who realized that someone had asked to become friends, not because they were interested in them, but because the person was only interested in collecting links. Because the term “whore” is a negative connotation, I think it would’ve been interesting to see why someone is motivated to become a “Friendster whore” and maybe some statistics on say, how many total people are on Friendster and how many of them are considered to be “Friendster whores.”

Although this paper did not mention Facebook, it made me think a lot about it. Just like Friendster, there are “Facebook whores” and people do meet a lot of other people on Facebook. One feature of Facebook that is particularly interesting is the “Top Friends application.” The paper states that several networking sites have links where there is no distinction between a close relative and a weak link. The top friends application allows users to distinguish who their top friends are. From my observations, my friends who have the application seem to have about 300-500 friends, while only about 20 are in their top friends.
The Image of the City

The book analyzes the fact that legibility is crucial in the city setting. A legible city is one whose districts and landmarks are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an overall pattern. Analyses were done in Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles to better understand the role of environmental images in our urban lives. When interviewing people, 30 were interviewed in Boston, 15 in Jersey City, and 15 in Los Angeles. In Boston the analysis were supplemented by photographic recognition tests, trips in the field, and numerous requests for directions. The author does not explain why the analysis was only supplemented in Boston and why more people were interviewed there. It seems that in order to better compare the 3 cities, the study would have to be identical in all 3 cities, and use the same number of interviewees.

I thought it was interesting how the author stated that an environmental image might be analyzed into three components: identity, structure, and meaning. First, an image needs to be distinguishable from other things and be recognized as a separate entity. It must also include the spatial or pattern relation of the object to the observer and to other objects. Lastly, it must have some meaning for the observer. I also liked how the author gave examples explaining how sometimes these three components aren't truly separable. For example the identity of a door can be the same as its meaning.

The study done with people in Jersey City yielded interesting results. It seems that the subjects repeatedly stated that “nothing special” came to mind and that the city was hard to symbolize and that it had distinctive sections. The most interesting thing about the city ended up being the sight of the New York City skyline across the river. The interviewees also had a strong tendency to describe the city by street names and the types of use, instead of using visual images. When thinking about Champaign-Urbana, it seems that what symbolizes it is the University of Illinois and perhaps some distinctive sections include Prospective Avenue (with restaurants and stores) and Neil Street (with car dealers and the airport).