Re: Public displays of connection

Social networking sites are founded on the idea that as social creatures, we desire connection with others. In publicly displaying current connections, these sites facilitate formation of new connections.

Ideally, each virtual connection implies that the people connected know each other fairly well. If this is the case, having many friends implicitly strengthens the veracity of any personal information posted. As the authors point out, the low cost of making a connection on many sites undermines this premise. The signal sent is merely conventional in this case. As an exception to the rule, the cost of LinkedIn’s more rigorous connection process results in an honest signal.

Realizing this, profile information for a Facebook user having 800 odd friends may be viewed as less reliable than that for a user with 50. Facebook initially only allowed people with a university e-mail address to join. This was used as a proxy for a real name in an attempt to increase the integrity of member profiles. The lack of nuance and context in online networks leads to the development of Facebook applications such as “Top Friends” or Friendster testimonials. In this manner, personal information can be verified and friends can be separated from acquaintances. Facebook’s implementation of “Friend Lists” attempts to address this; while effective, separate friend and acquaintance types may be even more useful.

Classification of networks themselves reveals different purposes and reflects different aspects of culture. The evolution of rigid clan-like hierarchies into flatter and wider networks demonstrates changing norms. Family as last bastion in a cruel world necessitated some degree of rigidity in the past. Today a common random thing of 25 may be the extent of many relationships. A primarily dense network reveals communication with close friends as the factor motivating use of the site. A sparse network, on the other hand, indicates a desire for more professional and informational interaction as seen on LinkedIn.

Given these motivations, the ability to control access to network information is paramount. Norms between friends may differ significantly from norms between co-workers. Having a means to limit access to portions of personal and especially friends’ information allows these different spheres to remain separate.

Outrage over the introduction of the Facebook news feed and the addition of extensive privacy settings in response exemplifies this.

Re: Visualizing Email Archives

Producing a list of data is efficient, yet analyzing that list to extract meaning is not trivial for an individual. Imagine a list of names of professors paired with their teaching efficiency as determined by an ICES survey. Outliers may be easy to spot for individual commendation, but a sense of overall performance may be more difficult to gauge. Visualizing this data with a boxplot, for example, would lend context to each individual score while also providing a summary.

Ideally, email should be both efficient to access and provide a meaningful environment for communication. This is founded in the idea of email as a habitat containing many tools instead of simply being a tool itself. Email represents the residue of a social community in that it is a semi-permanent record of interaction between members. Just as the frequency and type of communication between members of a football team could distinguish quarterback from
lineman, analysis of email can reveal the structure of a social network.

At its core, email is no more than a vast quantity of data. Current mail clients do little more than translate this data into a human-comprehensible form. Beyond basic search and sort, the load is placed on the user to discover a meaningful way of accessing this data. As time progresses people make new contacts and accumulate ever more e-mail (assuming there is no space limit). If sorting email into mutually exclusive categories is cognitively difficult to begin with, more data will certainly exacerbate the problem. As an alternative, the author proposes annotation.

When searching for meaning in an ordinary email, there are two primary sources to consider. Header content is quick to search but tends to yield less meaning and message content which is the opposite. Annotation combines the brevity of header information with the contextual nature of the message body. This leads to an efficient way to extract meaning.

Of particular interest is GMail’s implementation of user generated “tags” to classify email in place of a conventional folder system. GMail seems to implement almost every improvement suggested by the author. The inbox display is limited to messages with a special “inbox” tag, others are “archived”. Archived email can be easily accessed by tag or search. Categories for different types of senders are implemented as contact lists.

Even Google’s implementation is more a tool than a habitat. Facebook actually represents a medium much closer to a habitat than any conventional communication system. Private and public spheres are kept separate, with messages for the former and wall posts addressing the latter. Contacts can comment on others posts or links and, more recently, indicate approval. A Facebook profile - including personal information, photos, wall posts/links and more - is a much nearer approximation of the digital scrapbook the author alludes to. It is available to only those the owner desires, and its contents compose a “presentation of self”. This is the digital analog of the adornments in a physical home that express a sense of self for the owner.

The idea of natural annotation (in the sense of EmailWear) is ultimately the direction the search for meaning must take. As it is not concerned with the actions themselves, it is rather difficult to deceive. Facebook already employs this sort of annotation internally with all the data it collects. When you browse for contacts, take note of whether the ones you interact with most are the first to appear.

Re: Social Network Fragments

Strong and weak ties between nodes both serve important functions in social networks. Strong ties to family and close friends form a sturdy skeleton of support. By nature, however, these ties are not as numerous and diverse as weak ties. Weak ties may not be as dependable, but they are very useful for gathering information or becoming aware of opportunities.

While useful for gathering information about others, weak ties also present this opportunity in reverse. Weaker contacts are more likely to spread sensitive information because of the lower level of trust associated with their status. This induces individuals to keep different sets of contacts, or cliques, separate. Known as the formation of structural holes, this separation allows each group access to only certain information. The author notes that separate cliques should be similar by transitivity, but this may not
necessarily apply. If an individual were to join one group because of one overpowering quality, they may come to accept less desirable (but less important) qualities that are norms within the group. If multiple groups are chosen in this manner, their convergence may be disastrous.

Social Network Fragments provides an excellent way to visualize a social network. Implicit in this is its ability to obviate structural holes and bridges between groups. Groups with stronger ties appearing closer to the middle allows for a number of interesting observations. Categorizing each contact by color in addition readily indicates which categories are the tightest and perhaps most influential. Groups “on the fringes” of the visualization seem to have fewer members, perhaps representing chance encounters between individuals. This could be verified by determining whether most outer groups are contain proportionally more colors.

While the history panel is not terribly useful by itself in determining the structure of a social network, time is a crucial component in the visualization. Displaying an interaction history with a single person over time is nice, but is more useful in the context of that person’s connections to others. The ability to see a network grow organically as time progresses is a useful and natural way of processing this information. It recalls the time-lapse videos of plants reacting to sunlight shown in an elementary science class. Seeing bridges form between groups as time progresses as well as the formation of new groups tells a better story than a calendar ever could.

Re: The Image of the City

It is said that to aid the process of memorization ancient orators would take a mental stroll. Each building, street corner and landmark would represent a particular point in the speech they were to give. When pressed to recite, they could simply walk through their virtual city.

The idea behind this is that in tying the new to the familiar, the process of memorization is facilitated. Without distinctive architecture or city design, this task becomes much more difficult. While the amount of time it takes to physically walk from point to point in may allow navigation of an unremarkable city, it is not as effective a model. Spatial memory is simply more transferable to applications in new situations.

Lending credibility to this idea is the finding that people store maps as collections of landmarks. Similar to the idea of a cartoon treasure map, mental models are made up of only the information the encoder deems useful. If all that’s needed to find the oversized ‘X’ is the number of steps to the grizzly-shaped boulder and which way to turn, there is little motivation to include the surf shop on the bay. Unless a street has special significance (like Lakeshore Drive or Les Champs-Élysées) there is no particular reason to include it. The relative size of landmarks may even reflect their importance rather than reality.

Given that unimportant objects are easily dropped from a mental model, it is no surprise that those kept are necessarily simplified. Simple geometrical shapes are easy to visualize, and are consequently used to represent a more sophisticated reality. This simplicity also naturally benefits from ease of separation and contrast between elements. Formation of multiple models of the same area but for different purposes addresses the problem of dealing with large and complex metropolitan areas. To put this idea into practice, design new maps for travelers centered around the airport.