Visualizing Email Archives

When I saw the number 9.6 billion [number of daily emails sent in 2001] I immediately dismissed most of it as spam. However, upon further research, only about 5-10% of that email was actually unsolicited junk – compare that to now, where somewhere around 90% of mail is untargeted bulk. Even with that huge amount of mail, Dunbar said that email doesn’t enlarge social networks. While I believe that is largely true, it does help people maintain and/or organize contact with some people. There is indeed a wide range of methods in which people handle their email. Some delete unnecessary messages for (the illusion of?) privacy, some keep everything, and some categorize their emails. I personally do a bit of everything, and I use Gmail’s labels rather than the filing folders found in older interfaces.

I agree with the assertion that having real-time visualizations in email clients would convince more people to save their email. It is naturally interesting to take a look at one’s own habits and behavioral patterns, and maybe taking a look at the visualization would even change someone’s approach to email. For example, I think I use email for mainly formal communications. If I saw that it was not the case, I might be less reluctant to give my email to friends because I already have personal emails in my inbox. Since many web-based clients like Gmail have labels instead of folders (which allows for multi-categorization), it’d be nice to see tagging patterns as well.

From just glancing at my recent email, I found that the response time rhythms do hold for me. If I know someone replies to my emails quickly, I am usually inclined to also respond within a short period of time. I had the same things in mind when reading about TimeStore, and we had seen Post-History in class before – I think it appears less intuitive in terms of time scaling but gives a more condensed reading of numbers of emails over time. As nice as these visualizations are, I wouldn’t want to use them as standalone clients, which was the general opinion.

The featured Social network visualizations are more useful as tools on the side again; they’re not too practical for use as clients by themselves. In my opinion, listing names based on usage frequency during composition is the best implementation of any of these ideas. I was going to comment on precautions about assumptions and associations with BCC, etc., but I’m glad they were mentioned in paper.

Due to different usages of email, I think visualizations can only have a limited appeal.
Social Network Fragments

Two subtle but very important observations mentioned early in the chapter are that multiple bridges weaken the original bridge’s power and that some people instinctively separate their social clusters.

While the first point may be somewhat obvious if information flow is considered, it is less apparent and sometimes invalid when measuring only trust and prestige. For instance, if a new member of a group demonstrates that he/she is a higher authority on a topic or proves the original “leader” wrong at some point, trust and prestige levels will fall and rise accordingly. In the case that the new member makes a fool of him/herself, trust in and prestige of the old bridge would remain unaffected for the most part.

Separation of social clusters seems like something that individuals who act as multiple bridges would do. If different groups of friends or colleagues have distinct standards of behavior, etc., then it may do the person well to have a larger degree of separation between those groups. While it would be more restricting when he/she is directly involved with either group, the bigger separation means more control of information and privacy, as the chapter says.

It’s good to see that digital social networks were taken into account. I believe that’s where everything is headed, and for most physical networks many people maintain equivalent digital ones as well. They may be easier to analyze because of technology to gather and properly format the data. However, it’s usually just as difficult to associate tie strengths between any pair of individuals without direct user input. Email messages were not my ideal data set, but I guess there wasn’t much else to work with back when SNF was created. Most of the tie categories made sense, but I don’t know why BCC implies trust. Most of the time I get a BCC because of the desire to keep other recipients’ addresses private.

I couldn’t see too much from the given screenshots, but the names and ties looked difficult to tell apart. The clumps of names and lines drew special attention to those groups, but if they were meant to be more important it might have been better to clearly distinguish between individuals within those groups. The font weight and colors help out but maybe not enough.
Public Displays of Connection

Being able to see the date on this article lets us know that it was written before MySpace and Facebook hit the scene. Many of the ones in the article are still around but seem to be struggling to grow or maintain membership. Because of MySpace’s and Facebook’s explosive growth and phenomenal success, I wonder if all of the same principles discussed in the paper apply as accordingly to any more social networking websites than the ones listed.

To answer one of the questions presented by the authors, I think people maintain online social networks simply because of the ease and utility with which it is carried out. People have to do less remembering on their own with a service doing that for them, and more distant relationships can be shared when it is easier to contact someone. This does, however, lead to weaker ties in the many cases where personal contact and networking would’ve had a stronger impact on both people/parties.

The section about verifying one’s identity reminded me of the discussions in class about people who created fake online characters and actually played the part for a long time. By putting their “real” reputations on the line in social networking websites, people indeed trust their associated networks to preserve them. With an unwritten mutual agreement to keep this sort of orderly conduct, most function without problems. One quirk I’ve seen with this system of open display [of lists of friends] is that someone will have a hard time deciding whether to accept a “friend” or not for fears or concerns of current friends judging him/her differently because of who’s on that online list. The phrase “she’s not my friend, she’s my friendster” is a direct parallel to the “Facebook friend I don’t know so well” of today. I think that it’s when these terms are used that the person has extended their social reach too far for even his/her own purposes.

Other than the section about real-life identity theft (or creation, as exemplified in ‘Six Degrees of Separation’) being a possibility and social networking being a trend or a craze, I think the predictions have been pretty accurate. Most recently I’ve seen the beginnings of account hijackings and spam postings, but the services providers have been doing good jobs of keeping most of the offenders at bay. As gimmicky as they might seem, I think social networking sites are here to stay.