Paper #1 Critique

The first paper we were assigned to read for our critiques this week was about visualizing email. Email is a popular thing to visualize because almost everyone has email and there is a problem seeing all of your old emails. This is also a problem because people organize their emails differently. I usually only have about 50 emails from the past few years visible, and everything else is archived by gmail. Some other people, however, do not read all their emails or do not delete them, so they might have hundreds of pieces of unread mail, or hundreds of visible emails that they might want to go back and look at later. This is a problem when considering visualizations because it is difficult to decide how to represent read emails, unread emails, deleted emails, important emails if different people have very different ideas about how to organize their own accounts.

I also think that the way people use email is different enough that it is hard to describe visually what is going on. For some visualizations, people like to use emails as a social barometer and use contacts to show someone’s social network. But for different people, this is not at all true. For some adults, people who they email a lot might be co-workers, or close friends who they used to see often but now use email to keep in touch with. For college students, email is probably treated much differently. In a professional work place, I can see email as being something that could very well define a person’s social space, keeping in contact with college friends and relatives is very important. For me, however, this is not at all the case. I see most of my friends weekly or even daily and so have no need to email them very often. I also have a cell phone which I use to text or call friends with, as well as instant messaging systems to quickly send messages. My friends rarely email me, and in fact, most of the emails that I receive are not actually from people I know, but are from the university or someone associated with my major and often people I don’t even know, or updates from my favorite record labels or clothing companies. In addition, my relatives are old enough that I have no contact with them, so it is a useless way to communicate with them.

On the other hand, there is certainly lots to visualize from an email. This article talks about gleaning data from the header, content, user notes, and email data. This is already seen to some extent in current emails, such as in gmail, where emails are looked over and ads corresponding to content are displayed, along with options to add something to a schedule if a calendar date is mentioned in the email. Finally, filing emails is another problem mentioned, which I also have consistent problems with. I find gmail folders to hard to deal with, so I just ignore them altogether, and put labels on emails from certain people instead. When I used yahoo mail, I used folders more, but still sparsely, as it is hard to decide on what a folder should contain unless you know for certain what types of mail you will be getting about it in the future.
Paper #2 Critique

The second paper is called *Social Network Fragments*. In it, the authors attempt to display email in a visual way once again. In this visualization, the authors use a style of showing email that is similar to the calendar view we have seen earlier in lectures, combined with a spring system that is meant to show links between contacts. This is kind of interesting because not only does the calendar show generally how much contact each person has with each other but also allows for the user to view their contact visualization over time and see how their social network is changing. Some things that I don’t like about this visualization is the spring way of showing connections. I feel like spring connections are rarely the right visualization. Spring systems quickly grow complicated, especially when making the complicated assumptions that the authors make in this paper.

Authors assume that recipients will have knowledge of each other, and at different levels than those people who are CC’ed and BCC’ed, which may be true, but how can the authors know that this is always true? In addition, there are two levels of deepness to the graph, along with color, and length from the other items in the graph. I find that personally, this is a very confusing graph and I always need explanation to figure out why I would be closer to some people and why certain people are grouped together despite their differences of deepness levels. For me, it seems that the only way that spring graphs really work is if the data is very simple and if each line length shows the relative closeness of people. Once data starts to get complicated, there always seems to be too much data to display with a spring graph, and emails have a lot of data, and always seem to be some of the most complicated networks to graph.

Another problem that I feel lies inherent to the current proposed visualization is that since names are drawn towards the middle, people often have huge areas of highly concentrated names. This means that while they can see that they have people that are closely related, they might only be able to read one or two of those names, and so the goal is missed. By sorting the emails by group, the goal should have been to be able to see who is in what group and which people are more or less closely connected. Instead, the data is lost in a mass of grey people’s names in which only a select few stick out. Zooming in is a possible solution to this problem, but then you lose the original shape of the data that you were looking at before, and therefore will be more hard pressed to find small connections because the level we need to look at is much more highly connected.
This next paper is called *Public Displays of Connection*. This particular article references social networking and gives advice to future social networking sites that wish to represent their networks. This paper goes over the content of a few different social networking sites, which have since changed quite a bit. This paper was published in 2004, so a mere five years later, things have changed quite a bit and almost certainly, most of these sites would not have been used if this study had been run today. The sites that are still relevant today are LinkedIn, and slightly, Friendster. Back in 2004, these sites were the next big things, but since then Facebook has emerged as the clear lead in social networking, and Friendster has all but disappeared off the map. I remember in 2005 trying out Facebook and seeing it get more and more used by my friends, and then it really taking off in 2006. I am also a member of LinkedIn, although I question the authors use of this as a social networking site since I use LinkedIn only for business purposes, and do not know anyone who actually uses this site as a social site, although this could be different in the business world. The other sites mentioned are Orkut, Tribe, and Ryze, which I have never even heard of, so apparently these are not as popular and may not even be in existence today. If I were running this study today, I would probably try to use Facebook, Myspace, and maybe some sort of blogging sites, and I question the use of a site like LinkedIn, because despite its popularity, not many people use it for social reasons, and I believe that business networking is significantly different than social chatting on sites like Facebook.

Another interesting point that this article touches on is the one of deception. When dealing with an online community, sometimes people friend someone who they don’t know, and can eventually assume an identity that they have completely falsified. The danger comes from people agreeing to be friends with someone that they know nothing about, whether to gain more friends or simply to expand their network, or if they think the new friend might offer something more than friendship, such as a romantic connection. Through this method, almost anyone can assume an online identity and create friendships or relationships without ever even meeting someone. The article brings this up and proposes a few ways to solve this problem, including imposing advisors or administrators who would be able to oversee all members and try to catch suspicious activity. This dynamic gets more important as one’s social network grows, because when someone has 500 friends, they might be very nonchalant about who they accept into their circle of friends, considering that they might know any person through any combination of their current friends. The paper suggests introducing foci, or points of interest that people can gather around and create new friendships, but I worry that this will either be ignored by those who aren’t looking for random friends that they know nothing about, or used for malicious intent, such as on many random group sites on Facebook today.
Paper #4 Critique

The final paper that we had to read for today’s discussion is called *The Image of the City*. This is a very interesting paper, in that we study the way we remember our landscape and how we recognize the important elements that we use when trying to locate ourselves, or orient ourselves with respect to the things we are most familiar with. There is interesting data to suggest that humans need certain criteria to be met in order to be able to navigate around a city. The article claims that humans need years of training and skill to navigate around places such as the Polynesian Islands, but the streets of Boston remain largely liked and regarded as a friendly place despite its winding and confusing roads. It seems that the amount of organization in a place can be dealt with as long as it is confined, but without limit, the human mind becomes too overwhelmed and shuts off its squarely based roots. Personally this is extremely interesting to me, and I wonder if there is an inherent difference between people born and raised in Chicago, a very linear and square/box shaped street lines, and most of the streets are numbered so that its always easy to tell where you are relative to the city. This is as opposed to people born and raised in Boston, which from experience, I know is a very confusing city to navigate. Almost all of the streets are curved and twist around, occasionally overlapping. While looking at a map of Chicago allows for really easy navigation if you are given certain street coordinates, but if you were given the same starting information in Boston, an outsider would have no idea where to even begin looking.

I suppose that we can relate the idea of city recognition to email visualization as well. When visualizing the data you need to represent, it helps to have a semi-constant idea of what other people have done and so what the average user will be able to understand and relate to. Things like abstract representations of email will be charming for a while, but there must be some underlying structure or no one will understand how to control the two things. For example, I was studying a thesis project someone did to visualize her email and she decided to do an animation which involved little critters on the screen to represent each email. For a first time user this may have been very confusing, since there were multiple types of emails and not much direction on what meant what. However, there was an underlying structure that set emails from work to be a different type of email from a school friend, and longer emails were larger while threads were connected like a string of the animals holding hands. In this way, something completely unlike email in every way, small organisms, were related back to the familiar things that we sort emails with. Threads were represented, the age of the email was represented by how healthy the animal looked, and even type of email was represented by the type of animal. This combination of familiar signals, just as it is when entering an unfamiliar city, lets the user know approximately how to navigate around and which signals and symbols mean which things. This is where things like universal signs such as in airports or major ports of transportation come in so handy.