This draft by Judith Donath is a good overview of the motivation and current studies into visualizing email. I particularly enjoyed Judith’s expression of email as a virtual “habitat”... a kind of home away from home, rather than just a tool. The word habitat helps give a goal for the eventual usage of email as a place for contemplation, for recalling events or thinking things over. Visualizations, then, are not only inhibit features of the current email clients such as responding and organizing communication, but also “provide a place to explore, review, and arrange one’s accumulated collection of correspondence ‘objects’.” Naturally, I agree that email has become my second habitat as I always have it up, refreshing, and it is more of a center of communication than any other homepage or online social network. If anything, most of my social networks, tasks, and other feeds get plugged into my email interface through plugins and email reminders.

Social networks that can be formed from email correspondents are also just as important as formal networks such as LinkedIn or Facebook. Social patterns can be found in the weekly and rhythm of our email routines. However, the email interface is spare because it flattens space and time by presenting our mail in linear, bunches of text. Using email to communicate is a shift to efficiency but not helpful to maintain social ties. Dunbar predicts email will not help us enlarge our social networks. Therefore, we need visualization tools to extend beyond the limits of our information capacity.

Some visualizations were mentioned in the paper to help give an idea of what current things are being done to address the issue of information overload. Unfortunately, none of the visualizations mentioned had any images associated with them because, I’m assuming, this paper is in draft stage. The visualizations were broken up into two main categories: time based and social network. For the Time Based Visualizations, PostHistory was mentioned again. I believe we talked about it during one of the first days of class. It’s always interesting to see the usage of a calendar view instead of a linear flow scheme. Content also need to be even more carefully assessed. I always worry about the accuracy of computers evaluating emotion in the content of messages.

For Social Network Visualizations, I enjoyed the description of how “awareness” of people was captured. It’s important because that type of connection is not seen in typical social network visualization. However, “awareness” needs to be treated with caution because of the different motivations of people for CC or BCC-ing people. Also, frequency of communication and the different ways contacts are treated need to be shown in the visualization. How people are treated can be visualized as what action is taken on the email. Capturing one’s actions as a data source seems to be an important part of email visualization.

It was interesting seeing “time based” visualizations mentioned. For my future email visualization, I’m still thinking about how to visualize silence. Although silence wasn’t explicitly
mentioned, I feel like it’s an important aspect of email communication that leaves meaning to the dead, unfinished email conversations.

Reading Critique - Social Network Fragments

The paper starts off with a discussion on social networks and the motivation behind studying these connections between people. The particular focus of interest is on holes in awareness or knowledge. These holes can be described as “structural holes within an individual’s network, where the only relationship that one person has to another is through the ego whose network is being considered.” If visualization can help a person see the holes within their own social network, it can provide valuable, unknown information about one’s potential network.

There was a lot of emphasis on the self awareness title for social visualization. Before, I always thought as social networks something you SHARE with other people, but it’s become a more reflective term now. Social networks are described as vehicles of emotional, economical, functional support. There are strong ties vs weak ties and a person must maximize weak ties to increase access to information. Here is where I’m personally a bit uneasy. Do you go out of your way to make “weak ties” or do they just sort of happen because lack of time and commonality? Until now, I never saw myself as “controlling” my network, only providing connections as I see fit. In a way, it does explain the way I network because I do try to separate my academic friends from my church friends, from my business connections. However, I didn’t see why until the paper mentioned that even though converging social circles increase information flow, it also constrains appropriate behavior as defined by both groups. Does that mean I’m doing it out of my own selfish motivations and trying to protect my multiple social masks? I’m a little disturbed with the thought that I act THAT differently between groups.

The SNF visualization itself was well done with a full critique at the end. One of my main concerns was what would happen to the color of a person if there are multiple contexts the person is known in. Apparently, the mix of the multiple context colors will be the result, as shown by Drew’s purple activist friends and green collegiate friends becoming blue if in both context. Also, I appreciated the history panel to the right. Another great visualization of how things change over time is if the network connection changes could be shown to flow like a movie. Since people had a lot of stories to share about certain clusters, a place to annotate that would also be useful. Also, it is interesting that the authors noted adding confusion of 3D does not outweigh advantages of having an extra dimension. We discussed the dimensionality issue in class but was never clarified to exactly why 3D is not widely used in visualizations.

As for the paper in general, there are some things of note. There were LOTS of typos that bothered me a lot... especially the lowercase ‘i’ throughout the page. The critique of the visualization was right on target. Nonetheless, it seems that the visualization does what its stated goal was. It raises the level of self awareness that only provides a system for telling stories, but also for reflecting on one’s behaviors and intentions through a compelling interface.
Reading Critique – Public Displays of Connection

First off, love the play on words in the title of this paper to Public Display of Affection. This paper by Donath and Boyd goes through the history, motivation, and implications of online social networking with a focus in displaying connections publicly. The main question being asked is what do people learn about another’s identity through the signal of network display? It’s an especially pertinent question because of the uniformity of the model of interpersonal links on social networking sites. They are mostly mutual, public, unnuanced, and decontextualised. Because of this widely accepted format, the implications can also be generalized.

The motivations in displaying a social network are many. Some mentioned in the paper include enhancing social status through name-dropping, reminder of memories of pleasant times with friends, and establishing information for viewers about their interests, musical tastes, political beliefs, etc. Because of the information drawn from public displays of connection, the connections can be manipulated to give a false testimony of status, interests, or overall who a person is. The reliability of the information gathered by these ‘signals’ should be questioned. Public display of connections found on networking sites should ensure honest self-presentation because one’s connections are linked to and implicitly sanction it. However, unless the person has real life contacts or care about what the contacts think of his profile and reality of the connections, the sanctioning doesn’t always follow through. The paper reasons that if the connections listed on the profile were always a) real people who b) knew the subject and c) would impose sanctions on false self-portrayals, then these sites would be more reliable. I feel like this is especially pertinent to HR representatives who try to find out more about a potential candidate on a social networking site.

Another aspect of displaying the social networks publically affects the people who you are showing. The authors mention John Guare’s play, which depict how the main character Paul, utilizes public knowledge about social networks to manipulate his own image. People fell for Paul’s story because of their own desire to believe it and have a connection with fame. By exposing sensitive data to the public, it is easy for someone to manipulate that knowledge in a similar way that Paul did. The authors recommend that users of on-line social networks be aware of the value of the data they are making available on-line and of the ways that it can potentially be used. Some line of protection must be put up for your networks and the “public” display should be reconsidered for different viewers. Networking sites like Facebook have already implemented this by allowing different privacy settings for different groups.

The last part of I would like to comment about is about expanding the network. Since growing your network means increased access to information, it’s difficult to see immediately what the additional costs could be. Without reason for making a connection, the adding of people into a network can be soon seen as just a collection of links. We have to remember that people should be added because they were perceived as an interesting or desirable person NOT simply as an addition to a collection of links, one among hundreds.
At first, it was hard to see the connection between this reading and Visualizing Email. However, the more I read, the more I could see how interactions in the cities can represent the chaos of interactions in the cyber domains. How one sees and navigates through a city can be similar to how one navigates through a visualization or webpage. The foundations of building a city scheme and online interface are the same.

There are several steps that the book emphasizes to develop the city. First, the environment’s image must be built. As planners of the physical environment, the interest lies in the agents that produce this image. Although every person has his own image depending on his own perspective, there is commonality shared between people. What we care about is that shared mental picture to help determine the organization for the city. The image is analyzed into 3 components: identity, structure, and meaning. These three components focus on distinction of objects, the spatial relation to the observer, as well as the meaning for the observer.

To illustrate the concepts, three cases were analyzed in Chapter 2. The first city was Boston, Massachusetts and the area analyzed was somewhat unusual due to its European flavor. Despite its new mixed with old constructions and confusing paths, it has a structure understood by almost everyone. One failure of Boston is that though it has distinct districts, the districts were not designed with distinct character. It is said the same about the path system. Although individual paths may have had distinct character, the linkage of the elements is confusing. Somehow, there needed to be a balance between differentiation and uniformity without falling to either extreme.

Later in Chapter 4, the visual elements are explained further through discussion about form and design. The book recognizes that there are key functions that must be expressive: circulation, major land usage, and key focal points. It starts off with designing a path to maximize utility. Things to consider are whether or not the direction is clear, identification along the path, and avoiding mistakes in going the wrong way. There is motivation to using different styles of paths, depending on the focus and differentiation need.

Overall, this reading was interesting but difficult to apply to designing visualizations. The general concepts are the same, but when it comes to the specifics such as designing a path, examples using visualizations would have been more helpful. This makes me frustrated that there is no standardized textbook for social visualization, even though there is a wealth of visualizations and research being done.