Judith Donath, in her paper Visualizing Email Archives discusses methods of turning standard email interfaces into social spaces. She cites several reasons for thinking that email, as a medium, needs to be improved, including users' difficulties managing and filing their emails—problems that definitely still exist, but have been mitigated somewhat by including search in mail interfaces. That said, her impressions of email clients as being generally unsociable are still accurate—email's spartan text frequently sends ambiguous messages about the mood or intention of the sender and cues such as inflection and facial expression (which can be approximated 8P) are usually completely missing.

Donath spends a good deal of time discussing how users save mail—whether they file, sort, delete, or simply leave it all in a great heap. She seems surprised that so many users are reticent to delete messages at all, something I would have expected given humans' preference for having options even if a small cost is attached to keeping one's options open as seen in Dan Ariely of MIT's Closing Door experiment.

The discussions of past visualizations was substantially diminished by the lack of images, but several interesting ideas were proffered nonetheless. The time based email visualizations seemed to be a bit obvious in their scope and implementation, though their usefulness may outstrip the creativity of their creators. Seeing patterns in one's own (or one's employee's) behavior could help users determine their most productive times, what stimuli provoke responses (which would be extremely useful information for advertisers and employers) and what list-serves should merit unsubscription. The social network visualizations were surprisingly similar in content and intent as those created by CS498 class members.

Donath's discussion of email as a habitat was rather disappointing—it seemed rather tacked on to a paper on visualizations, and was unfortunately shallow and preliminary. It is clear that she intends to do more research on this topic. It seems likely to yield several fundamental changes in email clients, but as of this writing, only a few incremental changes are proposed.
Going From Donath’s paper to the Boyd & Potter paper was a delightful step up in concreteness. The discussion of the organization of social networks and the effects of strong and weak bonds on the interaction between individuals was fascinating and satisfying in its depth. Once the data is in their tables, the more fascinating portion of their discussion begins.

Combining gravitational attraction and (magnetic?) repulsion with the strength of ties generates what must be a compelling view of social networks forming. If the networks were to form over time following the paths of communication over time it might be even more compelling, but as it is, the view is both beautiful and complex. Given then inherent difficulties of presenting an n-dimensional space on a flat display, Social Network Fragments is remarkably successful. Color, space, opacity, and grouping are all used well and provide pertinent information. The authors admit that their resulting visual is not “resounding,” and it does require some study and explanation to glean all the information presented.

The complexity of the information presented necessitates that the display be complex as well, though the complexity of the display serves as a barrier to entry for users. While color, in SNF was used to some advantage, it may be that it only added complexity or contributed to confusion. If color instead contributed to the positioning of the base relationship instead of to describing by what means a person is known, even names that are grouped closely together visually as “artifacts of the algorithm” could be differentiated. It seems that the creators are trying to do too much at once, and so present an overly complicated and needlessly busy set of images.

Donath and Boyd's article *Public Displays* (of identity?) is generally well written, if a touch verbose. They spend a good bit of space defining what social networking sites are, how they operate and how people initially join them – information that is increasingly becoming part of public (or at least young public) knowledge. At first I was happy to see a discussion of social networking not dominated by Facebook, but then I noticed the date of publication. The inevitable discussions of lack or loss of privacy and identity verification or lack thereof make appearances early.

One of the better quotes in the article basically duplicates a slightly more ecumenical version
of the lecture now held in every “how to get a job” seminar on campus

My issue with Tribe is that the boundaries between personal and professional are TOO fuzzy. I want to get to the person, rather than to the pitch. On the other hand, I really DON’T want to know that the person I’m getting ready to do business with is in an open marriage and into kinky redheads. I don’t want to see half-naked pictures of them from Burning Man. It’s not that I’m a prude, or offended by that stuff in general, it’s just not stuff that I want to have pushed on me when I’m talking business’.

All told, it is not a bad or uninteresting article, just one that is not especially relevant to a modern college/high school/middle school student who “grew up” with these applications affecting their daily lives.

The chapters from Lynch on creating and holding visual models mentally were informative, and did quite a lot to bolster the natural desire not to live in Boston. The author points out that the only way to navigate some American cities is either by brute force or by using a map. Very little distinguishes one street from another, much as poorly designed applications or websites give little or no feedback on where a user is in their processes.

Cities, unlike applications tend to be built over very long periods of time by many disparate parties, which leads to the conclusion that it is only because people have a better mental vocabulary for navigating cities than they do for navigating electronic tasks that it is easier to find a coffee shop than it is for a new user to figure out how to access some of the more 'advanced' features of software suites.