In part of the introduction, Donath reflects on the question of why people do not delete emails – that is why people amass huge email archives. Her thoughts are that people do so to create a history of experiences, achievements, and relationships. While I suppose to some degree, I keep some emails for that purpose, I believe my main reason for not deleting emails is because I use it as part of my memory. She touches on this aspect, but she does not go into great detail. I would be lost without my email archives. It allows me to remember what needs to happen, things I discussed with group members for a class project. It helps me recall things I need to do. Even if the email is years and years old, one never knows when an old email might come in handy. I have witnessed this numerous times. If I had a memory good enough to remember these details, I doubt I would keep such an extensive email archive. The sole purpose of keeping it as an artifact might not be enough. (However, if there was a cool visualization of these emails, I might be encouraged to keep the emails around so I could see patterns in my email usage, even if I had a good memory).

In the User Annotation section of the paper, Donath mentions that placing emails into folders is limited and rigid. I completely agree, however, without them, I do not think I would find much use in my email archive. The labels I use in my email archive allows me to scan for certain emails quickly. In the paper, Donath brings up the issue of how to decide where to place an email. I agree that this is a problem. However, Donath makes it sound like it is impossible to figure out, which is a little extreme. With labels instead of straight folders, I can give an email two labels, so if the email fit into two areas, I would not have to decide between them. However, I rarely do this, I have created my own “order of operations” when it comes to labeling emails. Sometimes it is based on the sender, and sometimes it is based on the content of the email. Donath does not seem to go into depth about how users in her study finally picked a folder, if they had a hard time doing so. I would be interested to see if anyone was as meticulous as me.

When Donath goes on to describe the four visualizations, I was a little sad that she did not include pictures from the two visualizations that were not from the MIT Media Lab. It would have been nice to see them to compare them to Social Network Fragments and PostHistory.

One of the best parts of this paper, I thought, was the section on “Display”. Basically, in this section Donath was talking about using these visualizations of emails as artifacts of one’s experiences, achievements and relationships. I need to find the final version of this paper because it seems extremely related to my research in using visualizations of conversations as artifacts.

I also liked the idea of “email as habitat”. The idea that email has become more than just a tool, but a means by which to live one’s life. It is so true, there are very few people today, that can get by without email. It is very much so a habitat.

Overall, I thought this paper was good, but I also felt that it was a little weak. While I thought the end of the paper was great, the “email as habitat”, display, and cultivation sections. I did feel that the beginning of the paper needs to be stronger. I feel that Donath was making assumptions more than stating facts, or stating theories. I was not convinced until the last few sections of the paper that email visualizations were worthwhile.
Book: Social Network Fragments  
Author: danah boyd and Jeff Potter

When reading this paper, I was very confused by the section on using weak ties as bridges between social networks. boyd and Potter mention what others think about weak ties in this case. Granovetter thinks that bridges should only be weak ties. Burt claims that it does not matter what kind of strength (or weakness) the tie is, as long as that person is a bridge, the same advantages remain. However, I would think that it would be better to have a strong tie as a bridge to a different social network. The reason is because if I wanted to communicate somehow with this other social network, I would feel much more comfortable going through someone who knows me well. With a strong tie, there would be less suspicion as to why I wanted to connect with this other social network. Also, the strong tie would be able to vouch for me if need be with this other social network. A weak tie may be wondering why I am trying to “use” them to get to this other network. I cannot think of any weak tie I would use from Facebook to try and access another network. I would think the weak tie would think it is rude.

Burt also says that being a bridge is purely advantageous. However boyd and Potter do not let the readers know why. They do explain why Krackhardt disagrees (and I agree with Krackhardt), but from the way it is written, it seems like Burt is pulling that statement out of the sky. It seems like there is nothing to back that idea up.

I found it very interesting, the two completely different uses for the BCC function. I have always used BCC to hide recipients from one another. The times I do use BCC, I have done so to keep recipients from finding out whom else I had sent the email too. The most recent time I have done this was when I got a new phone number and needed to let my contacts know about the new number. I have never been in a situation where I BCC’ed someone because I secretly wanted them to know about the email conversation I was having. If I wanted someone to know something, I have never kept it a secret; I just used the normal CC function. After having read this paper though, I wonder if anyone has done this to me. Has anyone sent me an email and secretly BCC’ed another?

While boyd an Potter talk about the visualization itself, they do not seem to mention much about how they dealt with words appearing over each other. Since the system is gravity based, it is not easy to move names around. In this case, what happens? Is the user just at a loss, and has to try to decipher what is written? I imagine that zooming in can only do so much to help this issue.

boyd and Potter, when talking about how a trail could be placed on the screen to watch as people start to move from one social network to another. I think this would be an awesome addition to the visualization. If one could watch and see one’s contacts slowly move about the networks on the screen and also see where contacts once were – I bet that would make one awesome visualization. I would definitely be interested in seeing it.

At the end of the paper, the authors explain how CC did not form well with their definition of awareness. They found that many people did not even know an email even went to other recipients. With this in mind, that user may not actually be aware of the other users. I wonder what client users were using at this point, how did they not know the email may have gone to multiple recipients?

On one last note, I felt that there were lots of typos in this paper. It would be nice if the authors proofread this (unless this was a draft like the first paper, then it should have been stated on the paper somewhere).
In this paper, the first thing I noticed was that there was not citation to sixdegrees.com. I feel that there should have been a citation here. It is possible that no one else had ever written it down, but if that was the case, then how would I know that the authors are not making this up? I have never heard of this website before, for all I know is that it is not real.

One interesting aspect that this paper brought up about social networking websites is that there is no distinction between close friends and acquaintances. Anyone on the outside, viewing my profile might know an acquaintance of mine, but might think that we are good friends, and then send me a friend request because we have a “friend” in common. However, it is very possible that I may have completely forgotten that person is even on my friends list. When I get this friend request I could be completely confused. However, these websites still work, they are extremely popular. Even with this oddity built in, people are able to work around it.

In the section where Donath and boyd give the example about Paul, who uses someone’s social network to become someone else, I was really surprised. While I knew of cases where people pretended to be someone else online, because online CMC generally affords such interaction, I did not know of many examples where it was used outside of the internet. I wonder if anyone has ever tried to use my social networking profile to do something about this. Before reading this week’s readings, my Facebook profile was open to my networks, however, now I think I am going to restrict it even further now. Who knows who is out there or what they may do with information they learn about me.

When Donath and boyd talking about people trying to find mutual acquaintances, I found it interesting that people do this. It seems a little silly. The example in the paper is that one person meets someone from Colorado and asks if they know person X who also happens to be from Colorado. However, Colorado is a large state, what makes one think that they may actually know one another? I do the same thing, when I meet people from other places who may know someone I know, I ask, even if it is silly. I wonder why people do this.

Near the end of the paper, I have to disagree with the authors when they say that email is becoming an unusable form of communication because people’s inboxes are filling with spam. I find this extremely untrue. I have almost no issues with spam because my spam filter works great. In the few cases that it does not work well, all I have to do is train my filter to catch those emails, and all of a sudden I am back to not worrying. Using social networking sites to replace email communication does not seem to be as near in the future as the authors make it sound. While I am completely open to the idea of using social networking sites to help fight spam (like Alex Lambert’s Waterhouse project), I do not think these sites are in a position to completely replace email, at least not yet.

Overall, I felt that this paper was more of a report than a study. It seems like the authors have already made their decisions, the authors did not seem to offer anything new to the table. I guess what I am wondering is what was the contribution of this work?
At the beginning of this reading, I had a hard time trying to figure out why this paper was assigned. What did city design have to do with the visualization of data. However, on a side note, it was fun to read about the layout of Boston, seeing as we will be traveling there in April.

In chapter 1, the author spends time describing three cities, Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles. While describing Boston, the author talks about how the layout of the streets does not really make sense. They seem to wind in different ways, even Bostonians find some of the streets confusing to navigate. However, Lynch never goes into reasons of why the streets were laid out this way. I am not claiming to be an expert in city planning, but it is my understanding that many older cities/towns have this quality. It is like this all around the world. While the purpose of this chapter seemed to be to describe the way things currently are, the author did not have to make it sound like Boston just magically appeared and when it did, it did not have a grid like structure to it.

One part that I had a hard time with was the description of Jersey City. It seems that the author does not like Jersey City. He seems to have strong dislike for that city and I feel that the author should try to keep his own points of view out of the way if writing a non-fiction book. I want facts, not opinions (unless they are from the users in the study).

Another question I had was to why the author chose two cities on the east coast. There are cities that can be described in the south, the Midwest, in the Pacific Northwest, I wonder if any of the results would be different if the author included more areas of the US instead of two. Also, if the author was going to talk about other cities around the world in later chapters anyway, why restrict chapter 2 to cities only in the US?

It is very possible that it could just be the copy of the book we were reading, but I feel that the maps of Los Angeles and Jersey City were not legible at all. Boston’s map was just fine, but the text on the other two maps were ridiculously tiny.

Finally, in chapter 4, I understood the purpose of this reading. The author talks about building blocks to create a well designed city. There are paths, edges, landmarks, nodes and regions. This idea can be abstracted from the use of city planning to the use of visualization in general. The landmarks in a visualization are the parts that the user may focus on, or remember in the future. Nodes and regions are the areas in a visualization that may contain meaningful information. And paths and edges can represent how that meaningful information is connected or where the information comes from. To create a good visualization, it would make sense to have all of these parts.

Overall, I thought this reading was good. I was not amazingly excited about it, it seemed very mundane at times, but chapter 4 seemed to pull the ideas from chapters 1 and 2 together very well. I liked that the author seemed to do ample research about the layout of the cities before writing about them, he seemed to be knowledgeable about the areas he was writing about.