In *Social Translucence*, Erickson and Kellogg seek to address the social blindness that permeates most digital spaces by promoting social translucence – design elements or methods that expose social elements within systems while maintaining some level of privacy. They postulate that visibility, awareness and accountability are foundational to any socially translucent system.

The authors are spot on when they observe that current digital systems are great for trivial or routine tasks, but that the first sign of trouble sends users scurrying for their telephone or their neighbor’s cubicle. The interactive and immediate nature of conversation is much more visceral, interactive and satisfying than the search-and-retrieve nature of finding information online. Even if one were to seek help or information from another person online, the asynchronous nature of most digital communication and the lack of back channels and additional cues reduces the social energy of digital conversations.

Erickson and Kellogg propose a system that provides activity support, conversation visualization and restructuring, and organizational knowledge spaces. Capturing all of the necessary data to enable all of this functionality for “meatspace” conversations would likely require either 1984-level surveillance or individuals to wear or carry recording devices at all times. It would be difficult even under these conditions to render all conversations searchable, visualizable, etc. Digital-space conversations would be, in principle, much easier to collect, given that they are already flowing through some electronic medium and could be archived almost as easily as transmitted.

The Babble prototype was a bit underwhelming given the grand scope of the changes to digital communication the authors hope for. Adding a timestamp to an IM conversation, while an improvement in contextualization, is a step backwards in message readability, screen space usage and requires a far amount of mental parsing by the user to glean any useful information from – e.g. a user might glance at the timestamp and see that one
message was sent at 11:45 and the next at 12:50, but might only notice the minutes had incremented by 5 and not notice the additional hour (or 13 hours, given that no AM/PM is given). The authors winsomely acknowledged that Babble tended to produce unwieldy walls of text later in the paper.

The social proxy within Babble was more engaging, and conveyed more information that was not already available to users by showing the recent use level of all users, and many of the benefits that it provides – such as the ability to waylay contacts and see the recent activity level – are now available on most IM clients, if in a slightly less detailed form. IM clients present information (visibility) through buddy lists, awareness through status levels and away/idle messages and accountability through logging and persistent identities (usernames). While in general IM clients are not thoroughly translucent, they do embrace some of the principles advocated by the authors.

The second, related article on Babble, gave more illustrations of its use as well as prototypes for other social proxies. In particular, the auction proxy seemed useful, with potential applications well outside of auction spaces. The activity and attention metrics seem as though they would be helpful in managing large group projects – a coordinator could view the activity level of members with minimal effort, and could identify team members to reach out to and bring back to the fold if necessary. The online queue also seems as though it would be effective in conveying useful information – but would be ideal for use in some next-generation phone devices that could estimate wait time in customer service/hold situations and relay that information to users – providing a more meaningful metric than “answering calls in the order they were received.” The same system could also provide average and current time measures for those customers actively speaking with representatives, thereby providing a reminder of other users’ needs and some small level of accountability to them.