Visualizing Email Archives
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While having a conversation with an acquaintance and entrepreneur a while ago, I happened to ask, “So where is your office?” His reply was simple but stark: “On Gmail”

This article explores the transformation of email from a utilitarian service: a tool used to send and receive email; to a personal habitat where one keeps record of past interactions and uses email as a “sociable space”, a “virtual home” or, as in the case of the entrepreneur, an office!

The article throws light on the problems with email, despite email being seemingly perfect in today’s world. Filing and ‘foldering’ being one such difficulty with users of email and the lack of an efficient email design to support the needs of different users and their interactions with email. The author makes clear that though our computer-mediated interactions have evolved, email interfaces and visualizations have not. For example, she says that the option of having files and folders were meant to organize a growing number of emails, but insightfully declares that many users find filing to be cognitively difficult and do not practice filing at all.

Considering this and understanding the ways in which people interact with email today, the article gives an interesting overview of experimental email visualizations, namely, Timestore, PostHistory, Personal Map and Social Network Fragments; among others.

This article encourages studying and researching email in this day and age. Email has surpassed the concept of functionality and had entered into a realm of being a personal habitat rich in information that is yet to be demystified and understood. Using user-annotations to file emails on attributes or keywords, indirect data sources (such as the Cc, Bcc, Read/Unread emails, drafting, editing, forwarding practices), number of times one checks email, the promptness of reply, formal/informal language used etc. provide unexplored vistas of email interactions that can be key in transforming email as we know it.

This article touches upon the relevant issues in email today. It is about time that email was visualized differently from the conventional rows-and-columns approach, that is, of arranging emails in a tabular format. On another note, observing the growing success of social networking resulting from a fondness and desire of sharing and accessing personal information online; email should remain personal so that the sanctity of private interaction is not given up for the sake of technological progress. Therefore, visualizations of email should be steps taken towards personalization and not towards public display.