This paper is on visualizing chat room and forum conversations. These two social interactions are persistent, the data outlives the context. Chat Circles visualizes chat rooms and Loom visualizes USENET posts.

Chat Circles works by assigning each user to a uniquely colored circle. The user then has the ability to move their circle around the chat room. The Chat Circles program allows a user to see which conversations within a chat room are more popular than others. The most useful feature of Chat Circles is the informative logs it is able to generate. These logs are effective in displaying which participants in a chat room were most active, and which participants were grouped together.

One concern I have with this program is how a person knows which conversation within a chat room to join. Since each user only views the chat messages near to them, they may not realize that across the chat room is a more interesting conversation. Since there does not appear to be a way to get at this information, users may be prone to just stick with a conversation based more on the number of participants and less on the content of the conversation.

I do not fully understand the usefulness of implementing the “auditory metaphor”. Within a chat room, multiple conversations may exist, but some users may wish to participate in more than one conversation. At the very least, they may wish to chat about one conversation topic, and listen in on another conversation. Creating multiple chat rooms could be a useful way of preserving the auditory metaphor and still allowing users to know where to position their circle. I think removing the auditory metaphor would make Chat Circles more useful. Users will probably still group together near the people with which they wish to associate. In this way, the program is more accessible and still keeps the same useful statistics and user interface as before.

Loom is a visualization tool for use in Usenet forums. In its most basic form, it tracks individuals’ posts over time in a given forum topic. This visualization easily allows an outside observer to determine which users are the most active, and at what times people are most actively posting. My only concern with this view is the very narrow height each user is represented on the Y axis. When there are many people posting, each user is represented by a very narrow band on the Y axis. Perhaps allowing the user of Loom to set the height of each user would remedy this.

The connected thread form of Loom seems a bit cluttered for discerning small details. Over the aggregate, it does show which forums are more active with new and continued thread posts. The content patterns work is a unique way of viewing information about an entire Usenet forum topic and comparing different forums.
This paper describes research on segmenting conversations into different pieces. These pieces include turns, utterances, floors, back-end, repairs, and other pieces. Also the paper describes MUDs. The paper also describes the ways in which the aforementioned research can and cannot be applied to MUDs.

This paper brings up many useful points about the limitations of chatting in MUDs. Certain characteristics of normal everyday (face-to-face) conversations are almost impossible to mimic in the virtual world. Interruptions cannot occur in a chatting setting, because a participant’s messages are sent all at once. This led me to think that a system could be created which showed a user’s text as they typed it. This would take up considerable more bandwidth, but could allow more dynamic conversations.

The various charts in the article show some strange phenomenon. The median number of words sent per minute in a MUD actually peaks at 6 people. I would have expected the number of words to increase with the number of users without limit.

Overall, the paper seemed a bit disorganized and unclear to follow at points. Many terms are used well before they are defined in the paper. Perhaps the intended audience of the paper is people with a certain amount of background knowledge in linguistics. Two instances of this are the terms “back-channel” and “repair”. Entire sections of the paper are devoted to these topics, but are used before these sections of the paper.

This chapter assumes the reader is familiar with MUDs and how they work. I do not know if they are described more fully in earlier chapters, but many terms were completely foreign to me as I was reading. I still do not know the difference between MUD, MOO, EM, and LM. The extent of my knowledge about MUDs is that they are chat rooms which are used for role-playing and for social interactions.

One topic that was not discussed in much depth was the effect of setting and culture on conversations. In some settings, utterances may be used extensively, while in other settings they may not be used at all. I wonder if a similar analogy can be applied to MUDs. There may be situations when chatting on a MUD where utterances are rare and a single user has the floor for long periods of time. Do long-winded speeches occur in MUDs, and how do they play out? This was just a simple thought I had while reading the article.

The examples were difficult to parse. They all had numerous misspelling and used abbreviations I was not familiar with. Many of the examples were also very context sensitive, but the snippets did not contain the context. The descriptions of the examples usually helped clarify what was being said.
Nigel Ray  
Title: Managing the Virtual Commons: Cooperation and Conflict in Computer Communities  
Authors: Peter Kollock and Marc Smith

This paper attempts to apply the sociology work of Ostrom to the realm of Usenet forums. The initial description of Usenet was informative as were the descriptions of the potential social collaboration issues. The free-rider problem is defined in a consistent manner throughout the paper. I was initially confused as to the paper’s definition of a “free-rider”. I assumed it was someone who used the system without contributing to it, but the paper uses this term to refer to anyone who inappropriately uses the system. Perhaps if a different term was chosen, I could have avoided this confusion.

The paper does an effective job of explaining the sociological reasoning behind improper behavior in social settings. There is a lot of insight into the effect of large groups and large existing bandwidth on an individual’s decision to free-ride. Rather than just simply condemning this behavior, the paper attempts to explain why in large group settings an individual may reason that their own free-riding has a negligible impact on the overall system.

The link between Ostrom’s work and Usenet seems forced. The analogy just does not hold up properly. There are too many significant differences between a real shared resource, like a lake, and a virtual shared resource, like Usenet. Many of the imperfections in the analogy are pointed out in the paper. For instance, in the real world, a larger social group decreases the accountability of an individual, but in Usenet the accountability can increase. This is because of the openness and notoriety of the internet. Every action a person takes is easily visible to everyone in the group, unlike in the real world. Another difference not mentioned in the paper is how the resource is used. Communal grazing lands for cattle are taken for an individual’s livestock. Usenet forums are used to share information. In the real world, each person takes from the shared resource, while in Usenet each user contributes to the resource. People are unable to abuse Usenet discretely, whereas a cattle farmer can do so with communal grazing lands.

The next section talks about rules and punishment. In the real world, established rules and punishment are mentioned as required for community. Usenet has some rules which compare to Ostrom’s work, but the lack of punishment in Usenet breaks down the analogy. Rules without punishment are unenforceable. Since Usenet has very limited capacity to regulate its users, the rules can be easily discounted. Furthermore, since many topics in Usenet have no established leaders or a consensus on what constitutes proper usage, the rules analogy also does not properly apply.