

CSAIL is social

Christina Ji Willie Boag

Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, MA
{cji,wboag}@mit.edu

Abstract

Scientists have long been interested in studying human behavior, including how humans interact with each other as social creatures. The social activities within MIT CSAIL have been documented within the csail-social mailing list archives for many years, providing a rich dataset for research. In our work, we use word clouds as a way to visualize the dataset. We uncover several long-standing traditions and fascinating events in the recent history of CSAIL. We hope the reader will be inspired to recover these traditions and start new ones in the coming years.

1. Introduction

With the sudden rise in popularity of Zoom events, this past year has seen a revolution in how the people of CSAIL socialize. In this paper, we review the history of CSAIL socials, as documented in the csail-social mailing list archive. We hope this paper will inspire people to reminisce about long-lost memories from the pre-Zoom era and bring those events back to CSAIL in the not-too-distant future.

2. Methods

All emails on the csail-social mailing list were downloaded from the archives at <https://lists.csail.mit.edu/mailman/private/social/>. Data is available for the entire year from 2013 to 2020. Word clouds were created using the wordcloud package. In addition to the stop words included in the wordcloud package, the following stop words specific to the email archive format were added: from, date, at, mit, edu, https, subject, message, id, sent, to, url, lists, csail, mailman, private, social, attachment, html, reply, scrubbed, next, part, size, type, desc, text, non-text, email, ET, png, attachments, pm, am, byte, Å, and the years that were analyzed. As many words as possible were included in the word clouds, up to minimum font size 8.

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3. Results

The word clouds over the years are shown in Figure 1. In this section, we will analyze the words in the context of overall trends, recurring events, and spicy threads.

A word that stands out across all the years is “will”. This implies that most emails are about events that *will* happen in the future, rather than events that have already happened in the past. Other words that are common across all years are “join”, “see”, and “hi”, suggesting that the authors of emails to csail-social are indeed being social. “Now”, “tonight”, and “today” are also quite prevalent, yet so is “please”, signifying that the mailing list is quite demanding yet still polite. Finally, we see “free” as another prevalent word and hypothesize that “free” may be an enticing word to include in emails.

Now we will turn to two of the long-standing traditions of CSAIL: “Muffin” “Monday” and “Girl” “Scout” “Benefit” “GSB”. In the earlier years, the Muffin Monday emails were addressed to “CSAILors”. The standard body of later years from Guillaume Leclerc and Will Stephenson has become legendary, with “G9”, “lounge”, and “take” now enshrined in the word clouds:

Join us for the Muffin Monday at 5pm in the G9 lounge.
Please take only one piece at first to give everyone else a chance to have some. See you all then!

These instructions from the weekly GSB emails have also become renowned, with spotlights on “whereis”, “floor”, and “elevator” in the word clouds:

```
*G i R L   S C O U T   B E N E F i T*  
*5:30* pm – 32-G9 Lounge
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For those coming from elsewhere: Building 32 is here:
<http://whereis.mit.edu/map-jpg?selection=32>
Once you are in 32, just take the G-elevator to the 9th floor and you will be looking at us.
<http://projects.csail.mit.edu/gsb>

The mailing list also reflects some fashions through the years. Football appears to have been in fashion in 2017, though one of our authors would like to issue a correction that football may have been an unshared passion. Anyhow, the words “football”, “nfl”, “patriot”, “player”, “offseason”, “thursday”, “raffle”, and “ticket” now have their place in the csail-social hall of fame. The CSAIL “olympics” event was also prevalent in many years, despite taking place during a single month. Besides the obvious stand-out that shall not be named, 2020 also saw a rise in new initiatives: the “DEI” “petition” and “SPI”, where “science” and “government” are featured.

Some of the frequent words are names or kerberos IDs of some more vocal authors on the mailing list, including “Jessica” / “jray”, “Leilani”, “Sherman”, “Sara” / “Achour” / “sarachour”,

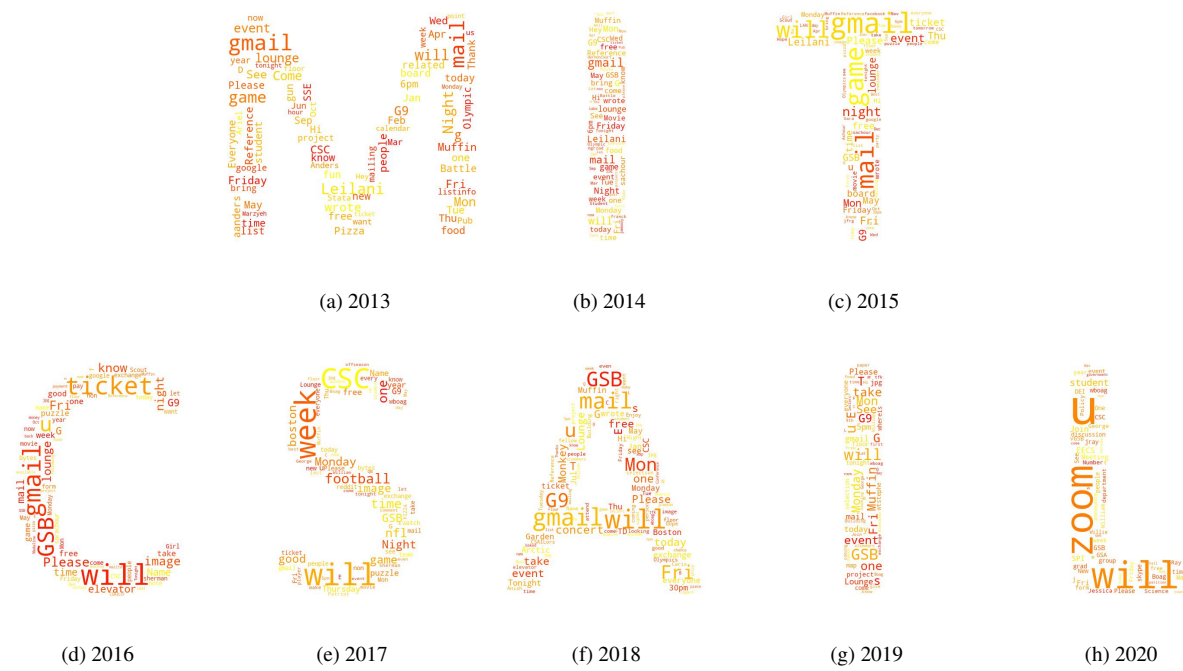


Figure 1: Word clouds from 2013 to 2020.

and “William” / “George” / “Boag” / “wboag”. Note that “Boston” does not refer to the city close to CSAIL, but rather the organizer of GSB. We hope the reader will aspire to become a csail-social celebrity as well.

Finally, the reader may wonder how an esteemed laboratory for computer science and artificial intelligence may have become engaged with monkeys in 2018. Unfortunately, no monkeys were involved in any research projects that we know of. Careful sleuthing through the archives turned up a lengthy thread regarding the transfer of concert tickets, where the “Arctic” “Monkey” band was performing at “TD” “Garden”.

3.1 Additional exploratory analysis

The word clouds do not capture some long-standing traditions in the emails that we would like to highlight here. For instance, many of the Muffin Monday emails from Ben Sherman contained weekly puzzles. A couple examples are shown below:

The new campus of Watermelon University is a perfect disk of radius 1km. The Moonshinebucks Co. plans to open 7 coffee shops. Where do they have to be placed in order to minimize the maximum (straight-line) distance that a person anywhere on the campus has to walk to get a regular dose of caffeine?

There are 7 prisoners. A warden gives each of them a hat in one of 7 known colors (potentially with duplicated colors). After observing each others’ hat colors, all the prisoners simultaneously guess their own hat color. The warden lets them all go free if at least one guesses correctly. Is it possible for the prisoners to choose a strategy such that they will go free, regardless of which hats are chosen?

The weekly GSB emails contain some humor often related to recent happenings in the world. An example from Brett Boston:

As the new European GDPR privacy law goes into effect today, many of you have likely noticed a bunch of emails from companies updating their privacy policies. As such, GSB will also be updating our privacy policy. I’ll admit, my first reaction was just to ban all European attendees, but I decided against this as it would make my life harder due to the fact that my co-host is European. Therefore, here is our new, GDPR compliant privacy policy.

* You have the right to know what information we have on you. If you ask, Thomas and I will tell you everything we know about you.

* You have the right to be forgotten. Upon request, we will try to forget who you are and everything we know about you. This is a challenging feat, so we ask that you are patient with us after you make your request, especially if you are particularly unforgettable.

* You may opt out of targeted ads. You may not realize it, but GSB is chock-full of targeted ads. They’re so good that they blend naturally into conversation. However, this tactic is no longer legal in the EU without the option to opt out, so you may request to not receive these ads. Note that this does not exempt you from ads in general! Instead of one of us telling you about some cool new product we know you’ll love, you will instead have to listen to us drone on about mops, or some other product that you may not be interested in.

Give us feedback on our new privacy policy (though we promise not to remember it) at this week’s [GSB]

And at times when there there are fewer happenings, the GSB emails contain whimsical humor, such as this message from Jessica Ray:

A GSB Mad Libs [1] for you.

How to play: fill in the <...> regions with a word of your choice matching the criteria and make it your own [...]

This past week has been <adjective>. I read <number> research papers about <subject>, watched <number> hours of <streaming website> videos about <subject>, and wrote <number> buggy lines of <adjective> <prog. language> code.

But, since it is Friday, I will take a(n) <adjective> break and come join the <adjective> people at this week's <adjective> GSB. See you there!

Another prevailing trend that has not been captured in the word clouds is the desperation for SIGTBD papers every year. (Disclosure: This analysis is essential to our paper, not incorporated merely to persuade the conference chair to accept our paper.) From the 2021 conference chair Quan Nguyen the day before the conference:

It's also not too late to present your own work! Just reply to this email (preferably before 4 PM tomorrow).

From the 2019 conference chair William Boag in a three-email thread titled "Prepare your SIG TBD papers!! (please)":

If you submit a paper (by Sunday March 31), you can request any type of ordinarily-deliverable food you want (e.g. something from a menu that is pizza, Chinese, Thai, etc) and I will order it for you for the event!!

Please please please work on a paper and submit something! Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good! This event works best when a lot of people contribute their own fun to it :D

And of course a joke conference cannot be complete without its own humor. From the 2017 conference chair Sara Achour:

Q. I noticed the response period is after the conference. What's the purpose of the rebuttal?

A. Do rebuttals usually have a purpose?

Q. Do I have to give a talk?

A. You don't have to do anything. Do be aware: if you submit a paper, it is highly likely a talk will be given by someone, somewhere in some format.

[...]

Q. When will you guys release conference proceedings?

A. When we find someone what wants to assemble conference proceedings.

Q. I am working with a non-MIT student / part-time car salesman / llama. Is that okay?

A. Yeah sure.

Q. How large of a gift is the travel voucher?

A. Last year we awarded 1.00\$ to accepted proposals (of which there were none). Adjusting for inflation this years voucher is 1.02\$. The proposal selection process is... incredibly selective, so please only apply if you have an extremely compelling or amusing reason.

There are many more interesting emails in the csail-social archive. Clearly, more in-depth analysis is necessary to do the community justice.

4. Conclusion

We hope the reader has enjoyed their trip through the csail-social archives. Our work is seminal to the future of emails and socialization. Future work includes sentiment analysis for sociability and humor, as well as the development of metrics for these facets. Our

analysis has highlighted many words that can help the reader write emails that increase socialization among their colleagues. More importantly, we hope the reader is now inspired to organize their own social events and send emails to the csail-social mailing list.

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