Screenshot of a visualization of connections between Twitter users using the hashtag #envhist, made by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg on TAGSExplorer, 2012.

#envhist: Social media and community-building in environmental history

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Social media represents a great opportunity to create communities that go beyond traditional circles of acquaintances. This is more so important in a field such as environmental history which openly aims at transdisciplinarity and transnationality. In fact, social media give the opportunity to be heard by and interact with an audience that goes way beyond, both geographically and conceptually, the limits of academia and includes not only amateur historians and practitioners of other disciplines (e.g., the natural sciences), but aims also to involve the general public.

But how far is environmental history actually present on social networks?

A simple search of "environmental history" on Facebook gives an undetermined amount of results: its "interest page" has 213 "likes," while the ASEH is followed by 376 people and the European society ESEH by 166. GooglePlus similarly gives an unknown quantity of results. As regards professional networks, on LinkedIn the same search gives 1,100 results, while on academia.edu there are 631 people following environmental history as a research interest (and 371 papers, 10 questions and 3 journals). In all these cases however, in particular as a newcomer, it is difficult to filter out noise and nonrelevant information.

Here are some screenshots of the search results:[1]

Results of Facebook search for "environmental history."
Screenshot by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, 2012.
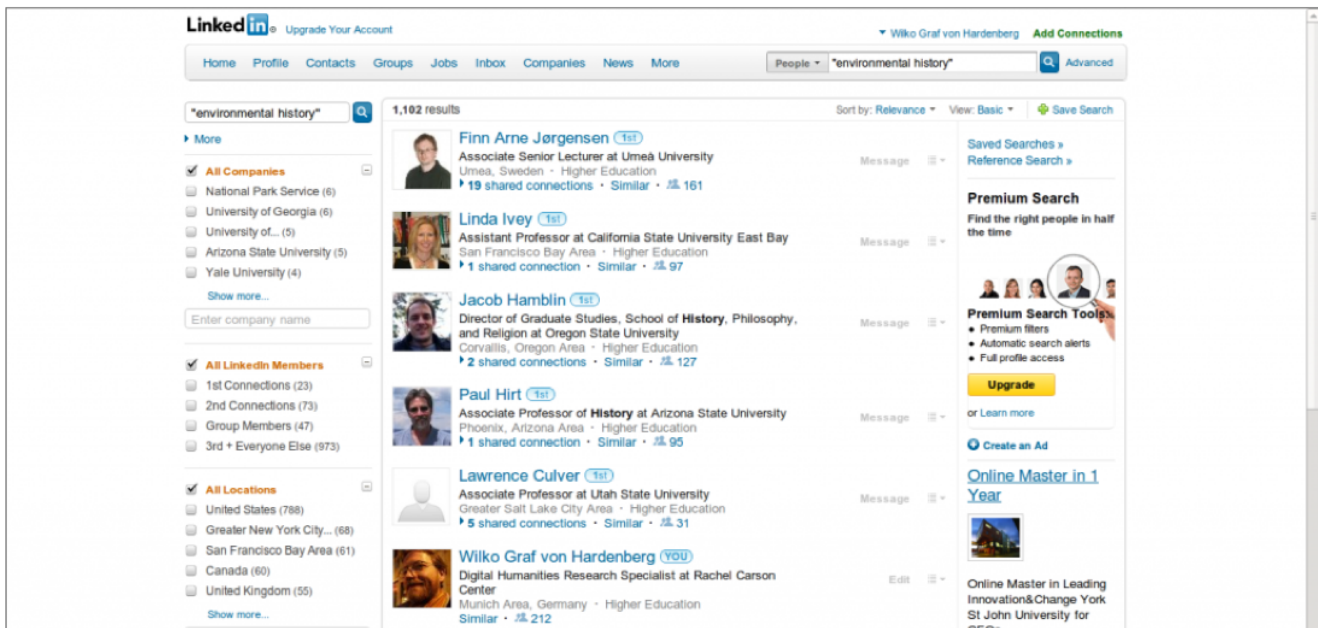
Results of LinkedIn search for "environmental history."
Screenshot by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, 2012.

1 To access these links, you need to be logged into the respective services.

Even if in GooglePlus it is easy to save searches for future reference, the main way to find relevant content in most social media is to add people to your friends/circles/acquaintances/followees. In other words there is no straightforward way to follow environmental history as a theme. The creation of dedicated groups on LinkedIn and Facebook could be a way to overcome, at least in part, this problem.
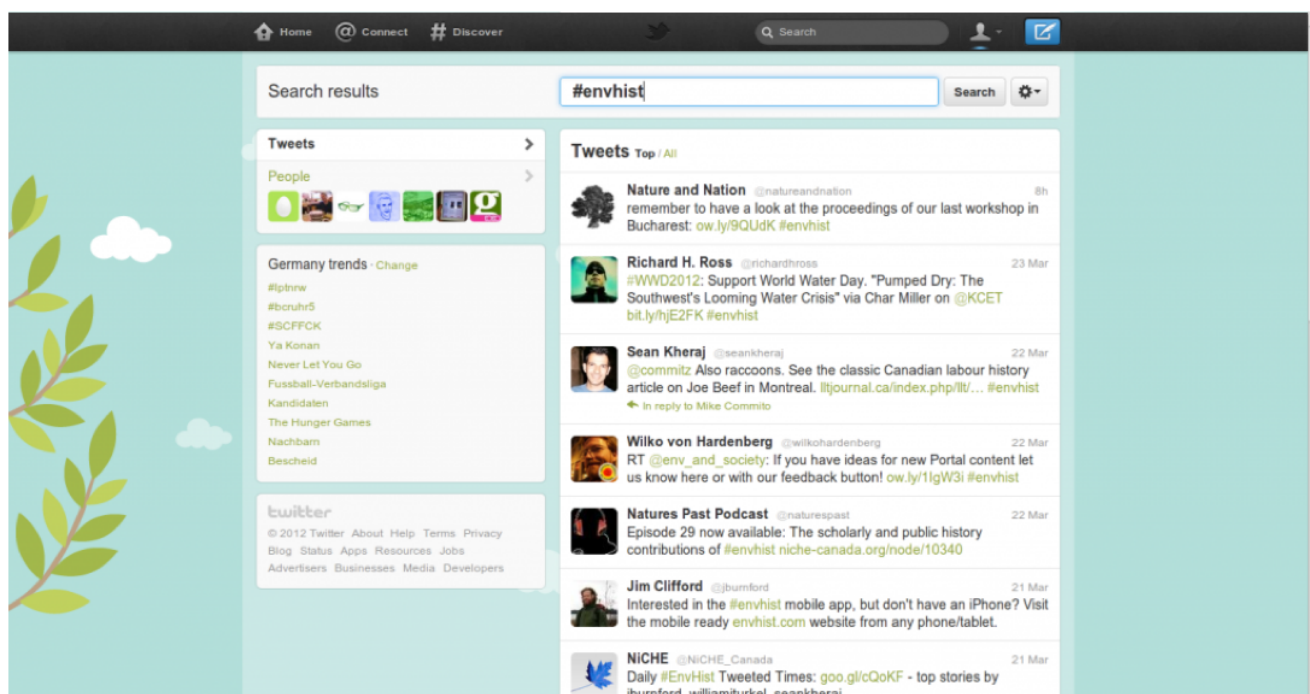
Results of a Twitter search for #envhist.
Screenshot by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, 2012.

On Twitter the situation is slightly different, thanks to the widespread use of hashtags, which let you join "conversations" about specific topics. Conference hashtags, like #aseh2012, help to livestream and follow topical issues, allowing also people who are not able to attend to have a feel of what is going on. Moreover, conference hashtags may be used to do a sort of joint note-taking effort. In fact, taking notes directly on Twitter gives you the opportunity to discuss them immediately with other people interested in that topic, as well as to have a feed of notes about parallel sessions you are not able to be at. The hashtag #envhist is instead helping to build a community that virtually meets beyond conferences, a transnational community able to bring on the debate (even with the intrinsic length limits of the medium). But maybe the length limits are an asset: just recently at a conference about academic blogging @melissaterras (UCL-DH) has briefly summarized a history of blogging, stressing how by now Twitter, together with other microblogging tools, in part thanks just to its 140 characters limit, has taken over the original role of blogs: helping people to find interesting content

through linking. Sites like The Broadside aggregate links to information relevant to historians by tracking certain hashtags: obviously #envhist is the tag of choice for anything related to environmental history.

The possibility to post links to further content (75% of #envhist tweets contain a link), accompanied just by a description and maybe a short comment, is crucial in the creation of what is by now the fastest and most proactive source of information about environmental history relevant events. Even with a relatively small community of active users references to call for papers, research opportunities, interesting articles, conference live-streams and any other possible useful piece of information in environmental history spread almost instantly. And the potential community that may be affected by a #envhist post is much wider than its active users' group, reaching to all the followers of people who retweet a message.

The main problem of Twitter being its short memory (in this sense it definitely isn't an historian's friend) to find anything older than a week is a pretty tough endeavor that requires to delve into various online tools that promise, with various degrees of trustworthiness, to perform full searches of past tweets. The only possibility to overcome this flaw of the medium is to become also an archivist, and save interesting hashtags on our own (and this is crucial if you plan to use Twitter for the abovementioned crowdsourced note-taking effort). Therefore, in occasion of last year's conference of the ESEH, I've started to archive #envhist (thanks to @mhawksey's Twitter Analytics Google Spreadsheet). As to avoid to miss any #ASEH2012 tweet, as has happened unfortunately with the early #envhist tweets, the archiving of this hashtag has been ongoing already for a couple of weeks.

The first recorded #envhist tweet dates back to about two years ago, but it seems that the hashtag made only sparse appearances during its first year of existence. The moment in which it has started to be used somehow consistently dates to a year ago: 99.9% of the 2300 archived tweets (of which more than 700 are retweets) have been posted after April 2011.

In any case, on the basis of the available data more than 200 people have used #envhist at least once (and this obviously includes many people who have used it inadvertently by retweeting) and ca. 100 have used it at least twice. At the moment only a group of about 35 people/organizations is however using it somehow regularly (>10 tweets). An idea of how the users' group clusters is given by this visualization. The arrows indicate either a mention, a retweet or a response, while the wide nebula of unlinked dots represents the occasional users.
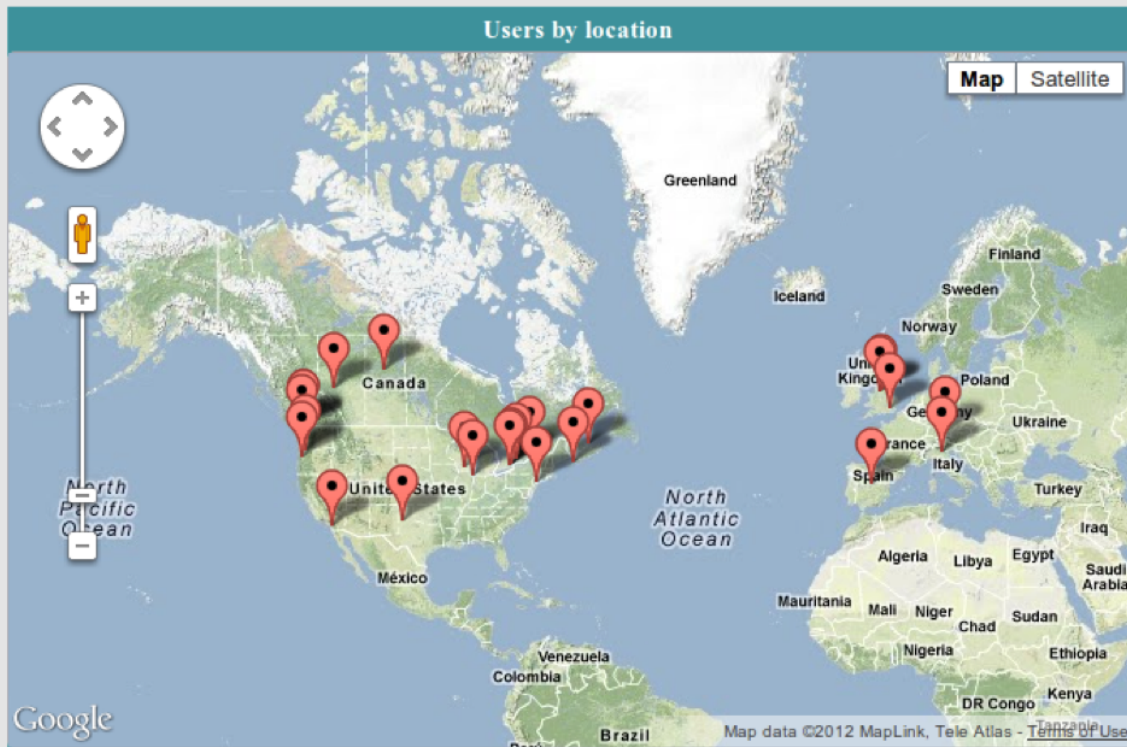
Distribution of users using #envhist by location as shown on Google Maps.
Screenshot taken by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, 2012.

The geographic distribution of the users' group seems to be concentrated in Europe and North America, with a quite important presence of the Canadian community, thanks to the efforts of our friends at NiCHE. It must be kept in mind that these specific data are limited to the latest tweets and to those users who have activated Twitter's geolocation feature. They may however be somehow indicative of a trend, as are the available data about linguistic distribution which show a total predominance of English.
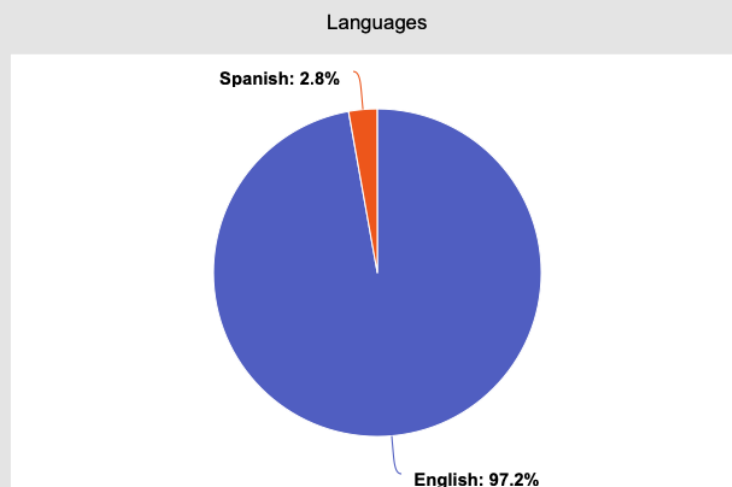
Distribution of #envhist tweets by language in 2012, recreated based on a 2012 visualization from SocialBro.com.

What the #envhist community should try to do now, with the aim to divulge an even greater amount of information to an ever increasing audience, is definitely to enlarge its core users group and widen its geographic distribution to non-English-speaking areas.

Links:

http://www.facebook.com/pages/Environmental-history/106415826062343

http://www.aseh.net/

http://www.eseh.org/

https://plus.google.com/s/%22environmental%20history%22

http://www.linkedin.com/search/fpsearch?type=people&keywords=%22environmental%20history%22

http://www.academia.edu/People/Environmental__History

https://twitter.com/#!/search/#aseh2012

https://twitter.com/#!/search/#envhist

https://twitter.com/#!/melissaterras

http://thebroadside.org/category/bulletins/histscimedtech/

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AuF-P4tEJAB-dFBJZnVQLXlSaF8temZoOHhsWHlZM1E#gid=75

https://twitter.com/#!/mhawksey

http://mashe.hawksey.info/2012/01/twitter-archive-tagsv3/

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AuF-P4tEJAB-dDkyQm13LXMwYUVlS3IyX211Vndnd2c#gid=36

https://twitter.com/#!/SmithMillCreek/statuses/13437653793

https://twitter.com/#!/NiCHE__Canada/status/55613055542886400

http://hawksey.info/tagsexplorer/?key=0AuF-P4tEJAB-dFBJZnVQLXlSaF8temZoOHhsWHlZM1E&sheet=ob5

http://www.niche-canada.org/

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

http://www.antspiderbee.net/2012/03/29/envhist-social-media-and-community-building-in-environmental-history/