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The Use of the Internet as a Source for Environmental History

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Abstract

Environmental historians have been using the Internet -- the global electronic network -- for exchanging scholarly information and for teaching purposes. Although the presence of environmental issues on the Internet is significant, environmental history researchers have avoided using the multiple Internet tools-websites, gopher, conferences-as primary sources. Focusing particularly on newsgroups, this paper outlines the relevance of the Internet as a source for the study of contemporary environmental history, particularly the history of the environmental movement. It also proposes some guidelines for environmental historians to use when exploring the potential and limits of this resource.

Introduction

For the last five years, computer networks have been highly praised as useful tools for scholars, students, teachers, businesspeople, and anyone who uses information. Like many other Internet users, environmental historians have learned to "surf" on the Internet. Contributions to peer reviewed journals and anonymous peer reviews may now be done through electronic mail. Moreover, researching in university library on-line catalogs may be an exciting pastime, as well as a necessity for modern scholarship. The gathering of already processed information (from a site, or FTP) is part of the daily routine of a number of scholars. In addition, distance learning courses use the Internet as a classroom. Specifically, environmental history teachers guide their students through myriad environmental hypersites, or direct the students to write e-mails on environmental issues to public representatives (Kneeshaw, 1996, p. 10). Indeed, the potential uses of the Internet seem almost limitless. Environmental historians have explored some of them-but have not tailored their use of the Internet to their specific, particular needs.

Environmental historians in general see the Internet only as a medium, not as an object worthy in itself of research. While communication researchers (Newhagen, 1996, p. 6) explore the implications of the Internet for world communication, historians seem to ignore the fact that the Internet now has a history that is worth studying. Moreover,

environmental historians neglect to notice that green parties and activists (as well as environmentalism's opponents) have turned the Internet into a strategic forum for their conflicts and debates. In other words, a full chapter of contemporary environmental history was written on the Internet. .

In this article, I argue that the Internet is a unique and useful source to understand the place of the environmental debate in a globalized culture, an important task for environmental history. I then point out the methodological challenges that this new source poses to historians in general and environmental historians in particular. A new interdisciplinary approach should be developed to appropriately use this source. For this goal, we should build on the scholarship about the Internet that communication researchers have already created.

The Internet and the Environment

Environmental issues on the Internet have quite a significant presence. In January 1997, a simple search for the word "ecology" using finder Alta Vista on the World Wide Web resulted in a total of more than 6,000,000 sites-and new environmental sites are created every day. In the newsgroups-the less sophisticated text interface of the Internet-issues like the protests against the Narmada Dam in India or the defense of tropical rainforests have elicited thousands of electronic contributions from every place where it is possible to plug in a computer and a modem.

The global availability of the Internet raises possibilities for intercultural conflict and cooperation that should not be ignored. Different concepts of the environment and different reactions to environmental issues cross hyperspace every time that one trigger event takes place in any part of the planet. The Gulf War, the Valdez oil spill and the Mururoa nuclear testing are but some examples of such events. Southern and Northern voices from developed and developing countries can find virtually the same public forum by contributing to electronic newsgroups-where there is no newspaper editor to define what is acceptable or not. As environmental problems know no geographical boundaries, neither do environmental ideas on the Internet.

If environmental history intends to understand how the relationship between mankind and nature is forged, it should recognize that, in this era of rampant globalization, modern concepts of the man-nature relationship are also reflected on the Internet. This should be, by itself, enough reason to make the Internet a significant source for environmental historians.

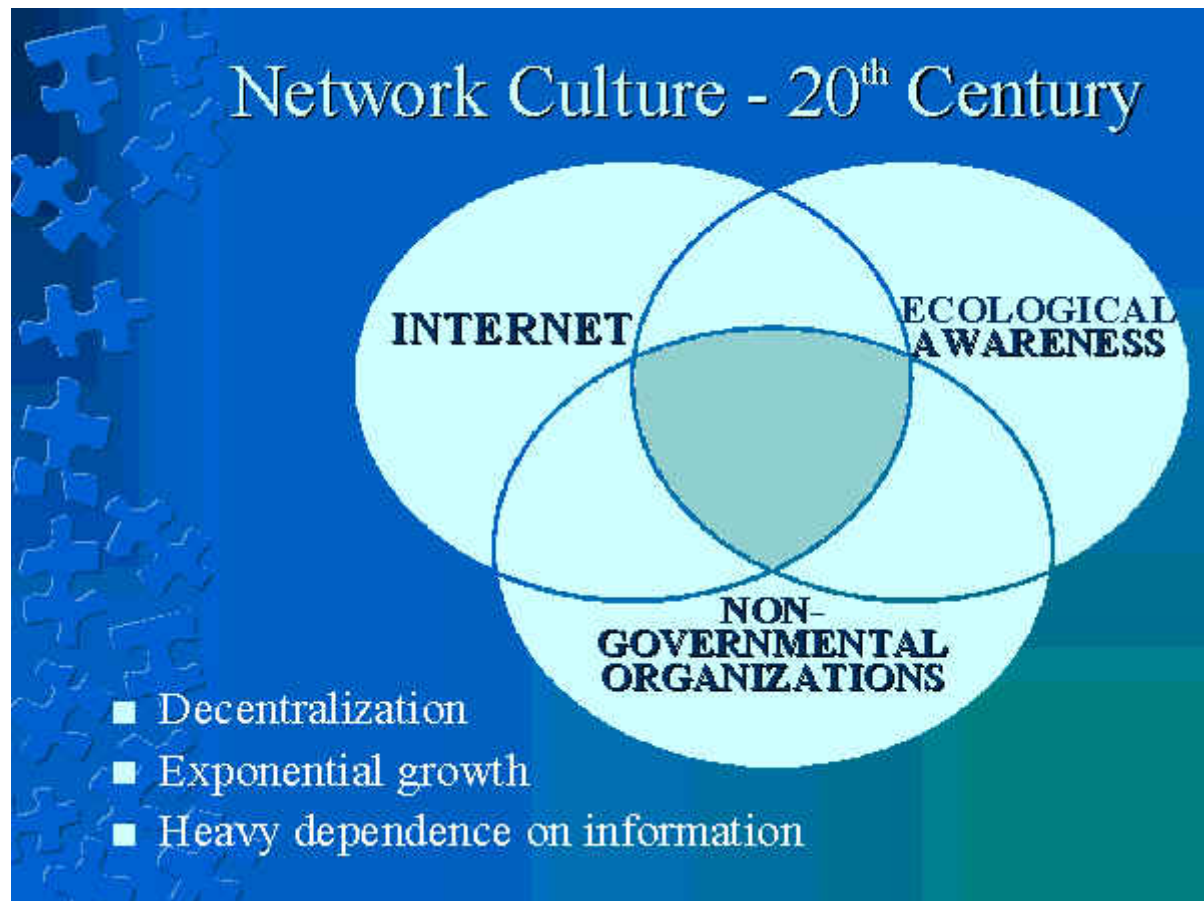
The Network Culture Looking at the last thirty years, we can identify three trends that have highly affected the end of this century and will probably affect the next century even more intensely: the emergence of an ecological awareness, the empowering of grassroots and non-governmental organizations, and the growth of the Internet. At first sight unrelated, these three trends will find themselves linked by the common characteristics of decentralization, exponential growth, and strong dependence on information.

The Internet was created in 1969 by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) by connecting the four major computers of universities in the southwestern United States (UCLA, Stanford, UC Santa Barbara, and the University of Utah). More university and government computers were interconnected in the following years. The goal was to provide a "communications network that would work even if some of the sites were destroyed by nuclear attack. If the most direct route was not available, traffic would be routed around the network via alternate routes" (Howe, 1995, par. 9).

Whatever its initial Cold War purpose, the final decentralized shape of the Internet has been used as a metaphor for a "network culture," which is seen by some as taking the place of a hierarchic social order. According to Bolter (1991, p. 233), this change is evident in the way people organize themselves in groups, and how these groups create relationships to others with different backgrounds, cultures and assumptions. The "network culture" is also a reality among environmental activist non-governmental organization (NGOs). At the 1992 United Nations Conference in Stockholm, these organizations were first officially acknowledged as pertinent players in the environmental decision-making process. From then on, environmental NGOs have grown and multiplied in every corner of the world. Far from being atomized, environmental organizations have developed multiple relationships through which they exchange information, support each other, and debate ideas.

The Internet was active in this process. Low costs and immediate communication throughout the world made the Internet the favorite medium for Northern and Southern NGOs. University-based servers, in the BITNET, hosted the first environmental newsgroups. Transnational environmental organizations relied heavily on the Internet to provoke reactions to global environmental problems. Greenpeace, for instance, developed its own network-the Greenlink-to integrate the action of its offices throughout the world.

The Internet, the recent environmental awareness and the non-governmental organization (each of them expanding) are all aspects of the "network culture" created at the end of this century. The intersection of these three trends constitutes an important and juicy source for environmental historians.



The Institute for Global Communications (IGC) is a good example of this symbiosis between the environmental activist network and the Internet. IGC's declared objective is "to bring Internet tools to organizations and people working on peace, justice, human rights, environmental protection, labor issues, and conflict resolution" (IGC, 1996, par. 5). IGC was founded as PeaceNet, in 1986, in Palo Alto, California. In 1987, the Institute "was officially formed to manage PeaceNet and the newly acquired EcoNet. EcoNet was the world's first computer network dedicated to environmental preservation and sustainability" (IGC, 1996, par. 8). Since 1988 IGC has expanded to foreign users and servers, and created its gateway to the Internet in 1989. Finally, in 1990, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) was founded (IGC was among the founders). APC is an international coalition of social-minded computer networks, and to date includes eighteen wholly autonomous but

affiliated members in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, England, Germany, Mexico, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Russia, Slovenja, Sweden, South Africa, United States, Ukraine and Uruguay. It "provides effective and efficient communications and information-sharing tools to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen activists working for social change in more than 130 countries" (IGC, 1996, par. 9).

Moreover, a particularly relevant role of APC within the environmental electronic network is as the primary information and communications service provider at the UN world conferences since 1992. These include the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, the 1993 United Nations Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing. The environmental electronic network at the 1992 Earth Summit provided by the Brazilian IGC partner, Alternex, was decisive in opening a path to the Internet in Brazil. In fact, although some Brazilian University computers were connected to BITNET, and therefore the Internet, the environmental-minded Alternex was the first active electronic network in Brazil.

Methodological Challenges

Electronic mail, newsgroups and the World Wide Web (WWW) are the Internet's most popular resources, and they offer different methodological challenges for environmental historians, depending on the specific attributes of each of these resources. E-mail and newsgroups were developed for the earlier text format, while the Internet graphic interface, the World Wide Web, was created only in 1992. Electronic mail communication has been studied by communication researchers since its diffusion among the universities in the early 70s (December, 1996, p.15). Communications scholars have debated over e-mail language, formality/informality, elements of orality and other unique characteristics of the medium.

For historians, however, e-mail documents present problems that the traditional epistolary historiography has never faced. Let's for now ignore the obstacle of a password (we can ask for some help from "cryptography historians") and the historian's fetish for yellowish paper (not to be underestimated). The historian will find out that e-mail is much more ephemeral than the paper letter. For instance, we can, in the future, be delightfully surprised by the discovery of some long lost letters from Thoreau, Darwin or Humboldt, hidden in a dirty closet for more than one

hundred years. In contrast, more recent documents in e-mail format, such as messages written by David McTaggart (Greenpeace), Ralph Nader (American Green Party) or Petra Kelly (German Green Party), can be destroyed forever by pressing a "delete" key.

However, there are "dirty closets" in the Internet, too. A number of servers-Internet providers-keep copies of messages from e-mail and newsgroups. Unfortunately for historians, and fortunately for the privacy of e-mail users, it is quite problematic to obtain access to these "dirty closets," and it requires some expertise in computer science not always included among historians' skills. Unless we can justify the creation of a "history hacker," a cyber-archeologist to invade neglected and personal hard disks, e-mails as a historical source will require a complicated negotiation such as the planning in advance of the storage of e-mails.

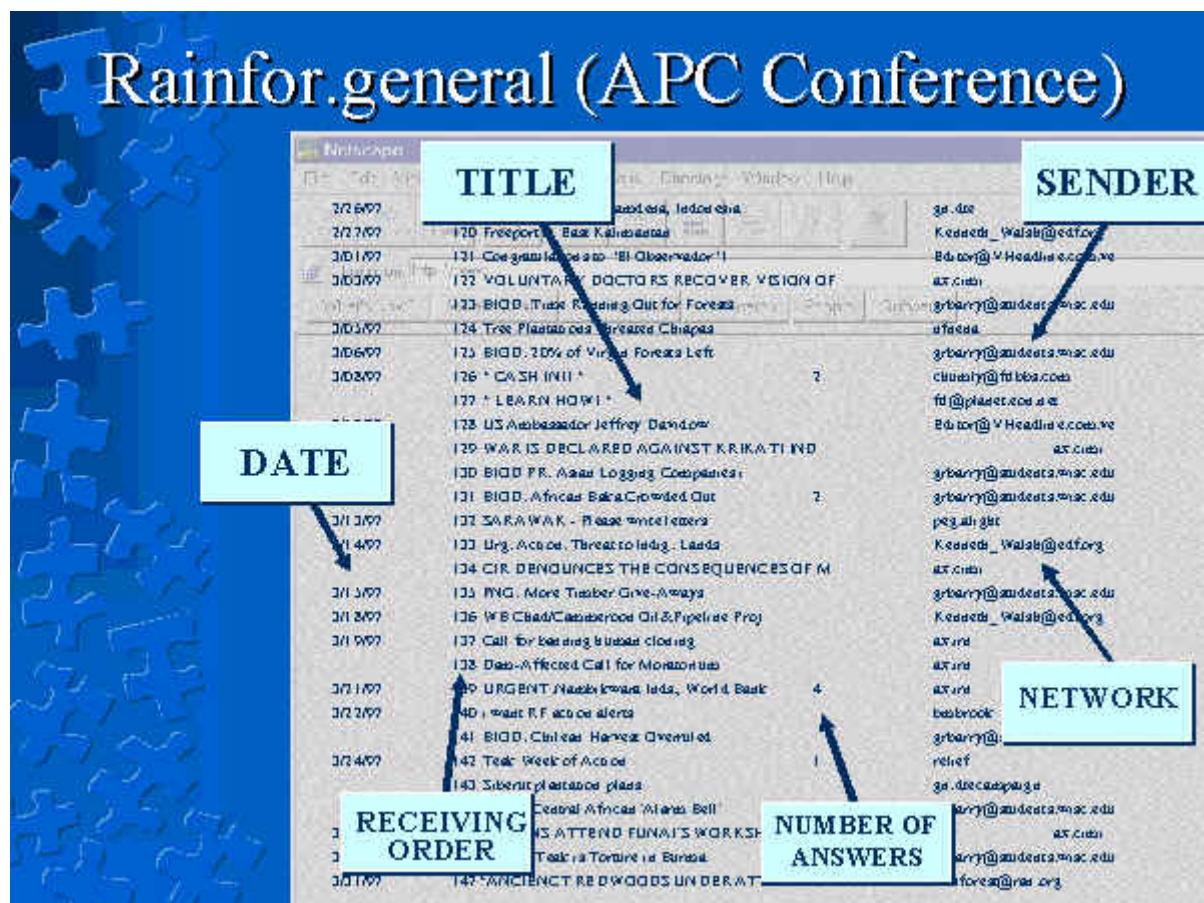
In contrast, another Internet resource, the home pages on the WWW are public and much easier to access. Home pages can be compared to institutional documents such as pamphlets. There is a whole methodology in history--institutional speech study--that can be adapted to this new kind of document. One of the new and most singular characteristics of the home page is the link, the possibility of being redirected to another site. It is tempting to investigate the explicit alliances revealed through the links. In traditional institutional documents such alliances are less explicit. It is necessary to identify similar patterns of language, similar quotations and similar agendas to demonstrate affinity between two environmental organizations. On the Web, however, one organization will probably create a link to several allies and ideological siblings.

Nevertheless, home pages have a serious flaw for historians: they do not have a past. When a home page is updated, it usually overwrites the older version that may disappear forever without a trace. Home pages are virtual palimpsests.

Newsgroup discussions, on the other hand, are singularly rich historical sources. Newsgroups-or electronic conferences-have a detailed chronology. They allow immediate answers. They are grouped by interest (rainforest, jokes, hazardous waste, etc.). They identify the message sender. They allow diversity of expression in the same media. All within the framework of a single newsgroup, it is possible to find cultural tales, passionate arguments, questions, answers, personal letters, political manifestos, newspaper transcriptions. The possibilities for historical analysis are numerous.

For instance, we can look at the APC conference [rainfor.general](#). The first

message, on June 4 1992, states the purpose of the conference-- to discuss environmental problems related to the rainforests in the world. It is one of the conferences created during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Although it is an English-language conference, some messages in German and Portuguese can be found there. In this small conference (only 600 messages in five years), there are invitations for green party gatherings, academic analysis of the world green movement in the rainforests, a popular version of Agenda 21 (the blueprint document that resulted from the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992), press releases, calls for campaign support, book reviews, and so on. It is possible to notice which issues have raised more polemical debate within the conference (in this case, sustainable use of the rainforests). Historians can develop either a more statistical analysis (how many messages, which are the most popular issues, who are the most frequent contributors) or a qualitative analysis (what are the different meanings of key concepts such as sustainability or wilderness, whether these meanings have changed or not over time, from the first message posted to the conference until the last message).



This diversity of discourse that characterizes the newsgroups on the

Internet is precious for the historian, not only for what was said or how it was said, but also and mainly for who said it. "History is written by winners" is almost a cliché, nowadays. Yet the Internet allows in its newsgroups a sometimes cacophonous plurality of voices that cannot be dismissed as "winner voices" nor can they be silenced by a central control. Anybody with a computer and a modem can enter the Internet. Once inside, his/her voice is documented and can reach any place in the world. Therefore a small non-governmental organization from Acre, Brazil, with two or three dedicated activists and few resources might be more present at the newsgroups than a traditional structured governmental agency.

However, it is exactly this diversity of discourse that requires from the historian a careful scrutiny. For instance, a newsgroup cannot be studied like a regular newspaper. There is no such thing as an editorial line—sometimes a moderator, sometimes not even this. A newsgroup is an immense "Letters to Editor" section, with no limit of space, and with no publisher to edit the letters. It is not even a dialogue, because it may happen that people ignore the previous message. It is not oral history (although much less formal than written speech); it is not epistolary history. A successful historical methodology of the electronic newsgroup is still to be defined.

Despite the research opportunity they present, newsgroups can also be as ephemeral as e-mails and home pages. To save space in their hard disks, servers periodically delete thousands and thousands of used gigabytes. In doing so, they mutilate the web of voices that newsgroups created. In some newsgroups, it is only possible to read messages posted up to two weeks before; in others, fewer but blessed, we can access up to five-year-old messages. We may really need "history hackers" in the future. Despite newsgroups' singular worth as historical sources, there is no current effort by environmental historians to store these messages in electronic archives. Historians complain about forever lost oral sources, silent voices of illiterates and women in the past, yet they ignore such accessible electronic sources such as the newsgroups, active subjects of the recent environmental fights and debates in the last decade.

Concluding Remarks

Environmental historians examining the Internet may benefit from communication researchers who have regularly studied the parameters of this new kind of communication in which a large number of people, usually unknown to each other, argue more or less politely about a number of issues (Bolter, 1991; Shank, 1993; December, 1996). Bolter

(1991, p. 32) underlines how reader and writer have mixed roles in the newsgroups; December (1996, p. 14) tries to reach an agreement for units of analysis of the new speech. Shank argues "that communication in these on-line discussion lists is neither oral nor written, but semiotic" (Shank, 1993, par. 12).

A whole methodology needs to be built for Internet historical analysis. The historian should keep in mind, however, an important-and old-reminder: what is the question that he/she asks of the sources? Electronic, paper, oral or architectural sources may be reliable for some questions, but not for others. A newspaper's trustworthiness is defined by its reliability and the loyalty of its readers. Trustworthiness has a much less defined profile on the Internet. A message can be no more than pure fiction, yet appear in the format of a real article. Journalists are quite concerned with what they call "parallel universes" in the Internet. "Fake facts" in the Internet look exactly like "real facts." "Thanks to the Web, amateurism and spuriousness no longer need look amateurish or spurious. (.) With a computer and a phone line, anyone can become its own publisher/commentator/reporter/ anchor, dispatching to everyone everywhere credible-looking opinions, facts, and `facts' via the Internet" (Andersen, 1997, p. 40).

For the historian, however, "fake facts" can be as valuable as historical data as "real facts." Historians must but be aware of the limits of you're their source-in this case, the Internet-and of which questions the source can answer. For instance, by analyzing a denunciation by an environmental NGO about the destruction of the forests of an African country, in a newsgroup, I have no means of assuring the authenticity of this information by itself. However, I can be sure that the issue "forest" was discussed by that NGO on that date, and that its message has generated a particular answer.

A good parallel to this new/old dilemma (which question my source can answer) is provided by Jacques Le Goff's analysis of the life of St. Michele, bishop of Paris in the 5th Century (Le Goff, 1980, p.168). As was usual in the tales about the lives of the saints, the contemporaries described how St. Michelle saved Paris from a terrible dragon. Le Goff makes clear that it is not important whether there was or there was not a bishop called St. Michelle or any animal similar to a dragon in the fifth century in Paris. What is important is that people in the following centuries repeated this story and that they prayed for St. Michelle and for protection against the dragon. The question for the historian, thus, is not the existence of the dragon: it is the existence of the story.

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