

Who is the Average IETF Participant?

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Abstract—This paper proposes that it would be useful for data analysis activities to agree on a shared definition of active IETF participation, and then attempt to identify classes of participants that share common participation patterns. One step towards identifying such classes could be a characterization of the average active IETF participant, which by itself might generate valuable insights for the IETF operations and management teams.

I. WHO IS THE COMMUNITY?

By some definitions, the IETF is a huge organization. A recent survey of the community went to around 56 000 unique email addresses subscribed to at least one of the IETF's mailing lists [1] — a surprisingly large number. A subscription to an IETF mailing list may be an adequate criterion for whether an individual is part of the IETF community. But it is otherwise not very useful, because as a contribution-focused organization, the IETF critically depends on *active* participation.

Passive participants that obtain information from IETF mailing lists but otherwise do not interact in some form with the rest of the community are of course not unimportant — they extend the reach of the IETF into the broader technical community, including into open source. But because this part of the community does not actively contribute to the discourse in the IETF, their support to the viability of the IETF's contribution-driven standardization approach is limited.

II. WHO IS ACTIVE?

When thinking about data-driven approaches to improving the work of the IETF, a focus should therefore be placed on the *active* fraction of its overall community, i.e., those individuals that contribute to the technical and organizational discourse in the IETF in some form or other.

Given that several individuals and projects have already been analyzing IETF data with various goals in mind [2, 3], and hoping that this workshop and hackathon will lead to the creation of some others, it seems important to establish a shared definition of an active IETF participant. This will allow easier comparison and discussion of the results of such projects, and might improve compatibility of derived data sets.

One attempt to define active participation is part of the IETF NomCom eligibility rules [4], and require a participant to having been registered as a participant in a number of recent IETF meetings. A currently active experiment [5] modifies this criterion by augmenting it with document authorship and working group leadership.

NomCom eligibility is likely too high a bar for identifying the actively participating subset of the overall community, even considering the criteria extension in [5], because the aim is to limit eligibility to individuals with IETF experience of a certain breadth and depth.

A more inclusive definition might be based on whether an individual has made any type of IETF contribution in some time. The concept of an IETF contribution is reasonably well-defined [6], leaving question open on what time period would be considered reasonable.

Other definitions are certainly possible. This paper does not intend to propose the definition above as anything other than an example. The main point is that a *shared* definition would be useful to establish.

III. WHO IS THE AVERAGE?

Once a shared definition of active IETF participation exists, additional questions can be asked about that subset of the overall community. Of particular interest might be to determine whether certain classes of active participants exist that share similar participation behaviors and patterns. This might enable the operational side of the IETF to better cater to and support such classes of participants.

A first step towards identifying classes of participants could be to characterize who the *average* IETF participant is; or rather, who the *median* IETF participant is, given that several of our participation statistics are heavy-tailed.

Given how little analysis has gone into the available IETF data, it is not surprising that the organization has little statistically sound insight into how the prototypical IETF participant engages with the organization. It is natural to assume that oneself must (obviously!) be close to typical; it is also obvious that cannot possibly be true in many cases. Anecdotally, assuming that oneself is somehow average seems to be a common bias among the more vocal participants on some IETF mailing lists.

Characterizing a hypothetical average member of a population is a technique employed to some effect by advertising agencies [7] to better understand their target audiences. It might be similarly helpful in informing the IETF community and its leadership and management functions.

When describing the average or any other class of participant, a large number of characteristics are of potential interest. They include demographics, participation footprint and activity, participation focus (e.g., technical, organizational, social), and many more. Of interest are both insights into the current state of things and if and how various characteristics might have changed over time.

IV. CONCLUSION

The hope is that insight into and understanding of the commonalities and differences of the main classes of IETF participants will allow the organization to take decisions based on data rather than assumptions. This, in turn, will hopefully lead to better support for these different participant classes, improve their engagement with the IETF, and further grow and strengthen the community.

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