

Show me the numbers: Workshop on Analyzing IETF Data (AID), 2021

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Would feminists have built a better internet?

After the internet was already a couple of decades old, a global network of movement leaders in intersectional feminism identified and published a project called the Feminist Principles of the Internet (FPIs). Would it be possible to bring together expert engineers to visualise core internet protocols differently, from routing to security, through the lens of these principles?

At the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), our attempt to apply those principles to the internet's core design and implementation remains unanswered. Within the context of the IETF a proposed research project emerged as an "internet-draft (I-D)". The I-D states, "This document aims to describe how internet standards, protocols and its implementations may impact diverse groups and communities. The research on how some protocol can be enabler for specific human rights while possibly restricting others has been documented in RFC 8280. Similar to how RFC 8280 has taken a human rights lens through which to view engineering and design choices by internet standardisation, this document addresses the opportunities and vulnerabilities embedded within internet protocols for specific, traditionally marginalised groups."

Draft-feminism summarises intersectional feminism for an engineering audience and then takes each of the FPIs in turn for further analysis that is relevant to IETF protocol development and implementation.

We have to look at the history of many different internet governance institutions when we ask the question: would feminists have built a better internet? We must look at many institutions and we must take more than one approach, too. The _movement approach_ has yielded the FPIs, which are brilliant and visionary and intersectional in all the right ways. But a _participatory design approach_ may provide more insight.

Although there are many methodologies to achieve participatory design outcomes, a common step in the process is to develop or seek out public information. The use of Big Bang on the open data sources of the IETF may be a useful tool in the exploration and publication of relevant trends in internet governance, so as to better understand key research sub-questions, such as:

1. Diversity of participation in internet governance,
2. Influence and marginalization in internet governance,
3. Alignment between expressed governance values and feminist principles, and
4. potentially many more.