

## Introduction

As an open standards organisation, the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) brings over 1000 participants from different sectors and nationalities to discuss, deliberate, and develop internet standards that shape the infrastructure of the internet. Given the breadth of its mandate, participants contribute in varying degrees to different IETF discussions. The politics and culture behind the engineering decisions made within the IETF can have a global impact as these protocols control the flow of information. Academics have argued that the IETF's technical protocols function similar to real-world protocols<sup>1</sup> and that the culture within the IETF has a close and complex connection to the outputs and technical standards produced.<sup>2</sup> RFC 3935 pointed out that the internet is not neutral, and neither is the IETF.<sup>3</sup> The Workshop on Analysing IETF Data can build evidence to understand how power-holders influence and shape the IETF and its protocols. While this position paper is specific to the IETF, research from this workshop can be further expanded to other internet governance bodies such as Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers and the World Wide Web Consortium as a comparative case study. Academics and internet governance stakeholders can gain insight into the political economy and influences that shape these decision making processes. Civil society can also use this research to ensure that standards organisations reflect a more inclusive breadth of experiences and uses of the technologies being standardized. This position paper outlines possible avenues and the impact of exploring the culture and power influences within the IETF by analysing IETF data. The paper also discusses related ethics and privacy issues pertaining to future research.

### **Question 1. Have IETF diversity initiatives resulted in greater diversity among IETF standards authorship?**

The IETF has set up several initiatives to foster an environment that promotes diverse participation and collaboration to make increasingly important decisions with regards to internet protocols. A member of the IETF community outlined, both the need to have participant diversity and participation diversity as groups with greater diversity can generate new ideas, bring different styles of analyses, and contribute to better decisions.<sup>4</sup> Internet Society's Fellowship and the IETF's Education, Mentoring and Outreach Directorate (emodir) have been established to increase participant diversity from different regions and support newcomers to participate at the IETF. This question aims to address whether diversity initiatives have influenced the diversity in internet draft authorship.

In order to conduct this research, the diversity of I-D authors can be collated and analysed. Diversity can be defined by categories provided by IETF participants including gender,

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<sup>1</sup> DeNardis, Laura. *Protocol politics: The globalization of Internet governance*. Mit Press, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Cath, Corinne. "The technology we choose to create: Human rights advocacy in the Internet Engineering Task Force." *Telecommunications Policy* 45, no. 6 (2021): 102144.

<sup>3</sup> <https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/html/rfc3935>

<sup>4</sup> <https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/html/rfc7704>

nationality, and affiliation. Nationalities and affiliations are currently disclosed in IETF attendee lists and affiliations are also disclosed in the IETF Datatracker. As of current, the gender of IETF attendees is not disclosed but may be deduced based on the pronoun used in IETF Datatracker profiles.

Participation data through I-D Working Group and Research Group minutes, attendance blue sheets, and mailing list archives would also be required to determine the level of participation among attendees leading up to a RFC.

The results of these findings can better inform IETF stakeholders as to whether efforts to increase diversity within the IETF community have been reflected within the decision making processes that develop internet standards. By understanding the diversity within Working Groups and active participation in mailing lists that produce RFCs, this research can add to an evidence base as to whether a diverse range of voices and perspectives are included in the development of internet standards. These results can provide evidence as to whether diversity initiatives need to be broadened to focus on standards development and outcomes, beyond IETF participation.

## **Question 2. Which firms and industry sub-sectors have the strongest influence on IETF standards development?**

While the IETF is made up of thousands of individuals who voluntarily participate to build standards, IETF standardisation is often leveraged by firms to advantage the development and deployment of their products and services. Companies may support employees' participation in the IETF to directly engage in the development of internet protocols. By understanding where different companies or industries are prioritising their area of work at the IETF, internet governance stakeholders can better understand the political economy that influences internet standards development.

In order to conduct this research, data with regards to the participant's organisation or company would be required. This data can be accessed through the IETF attendee lists. Data of I-D authorship broken down by organisation would provide further insight into sectors and companies leading I-Ds. Participation data through I-D Working Group and Research Group minutes, attendance blue sheets, and mailing list archives would also be required to determine the level of participation among attendees leading up to a RFC.

Investigations that seek to answer this question can provide a better understanding of organisations that hold the greatest influence and decision making power in the IETF. This research can be supplemented with other research including interviews, process tracing to generate further insight. Based on the observations of this research, internet governance stakeholders can explore how they can become more effective in engaging with companies designing and deploying technology where there are public interest implications.

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## ARTICLE 19

### **Ethical Concerns**

Researchers conducting this research need to consider and mitigate issues of privacy and personally identifiable information given this research will be collecting IETF attendee data pertaining to their gender, nationality, and affiliation. The ethics of using publicly available data without the attendees' prior consent should also be considered.