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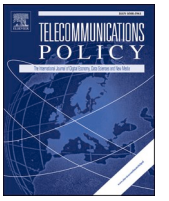

The geopolitics of digital rights activism: Evaluating civil society's role in the promises of multistakeholder internet governance

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ABSTRACT

Multistakeholderism is thought to play an important role in democratizing internet governance institutions and processes by including civil society. Therefore, scholars have studied the participation of civil society organizations, from the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society through to the most recent Internet Governance Forum, to understand how they engage in and shape internet governance. However, this category is not well defined; therefore, it is not always clear whose interests are being advanced by civil society organizations. This study evaluates representation in civil society by examining the annual RightsCon conference as an ideal site of civil society engagement in internet governance in order to evaluate the potential of multistakeholderism to achieve the goals of democratization, representation, and inclusion. Through a meso-level analysis of discursive production at RightsCon that operationalizes a critical geopolitical rubric, this study finds that organizations that represent interests from the Global North and West are highly over-represented in three ways: in leading overall discourse, in claiming authority over global issues, and in driving specific topics such as misinformation, privacy, and internet shutdowns. These findings offer an empirical evaluation of global representation in internet governance, raising the stakes for further study about why and how the category of civil society meets expectations. Finally, conceptual implications are discussed, including evaluating earlier critiques of multistakeholderism as less democratizing in reality than in theory, affirming the analytic value of civil society discourse to policy research, and opening up questions about how a more precise understanding of civil society can contribute to multistakeholderism in internet governance.

1. Introduction

In October 2011, 498 participants convened at the first-ever Silicon Valley Human Rights Conference "to create something different: a civil society-led space where all stakeholders – from tech companies to government representatives to human rights defenders – could come together to build a rights-respecting digital future" (RightsCon, n.d.). The conference, which was sponsored by several tech companies, drew from the momentum of the Arab Spring, in part by incorporating activists from the Middle East (Fruchterman, 2011; RightsCon, 2011). It culminated in publishing the Silicon Valley Standard (Access, 2011), a set of 15 principles for protecting human rights in the information technology industry (RightsCon, 2021).

Since 2011, the summit has grown into an annual conference called RightsCon, which celebrated its tenth annual event in June 2021. Although the first iteration incorporated its Silicon Valley location into its name, today RightsCon articulates a global aspiration.

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In executive director Brett Solomon's (2021) reflection on the conference's tenth anniversary, he refers to the "global community" that convenes in response to "global convulsions". Indeed, over ten years the conference has seen 23,381 participants from nearly every country in the world (Solomon, 2021), and for three consecutive years the UN OHCHR's Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council has attended and issued a joint statement authenticating the conference's significance.

This combination of scale, global renown, and focus on civil society gives RightsCon credibility in the field of internet governance. Indeed, to some, it is considered a more action-oriented alternative to the relatively performative and symbolic Internet Governance Forum (IGF) (Bharthur, 2019). Thus, as RightsCon has grown in prominence and its influence on policymaking has grown more material, it has emerged as an important forum for civil society discourse about digital rights activism. In other words, it can serve as an ideal empirical site to evaluate civil society's contribution to the promises of multistakeholderism.

Therefore, this study measures representation in RightsCon's annual conference program to evaluate the promises of multistakeholderism. According to multistakeholderism, civil society plays an important role in democratizing internet governance institutions and processes by including civil society. However, the category of civil society is not well defined; therefore, it is not always clear whose interests are being advanced by civil society organizations. An *inclusive* civil society sphere, measured by diverse geopolitical representation, is necessary to achieve this goal. Thus, this study asks the following research questions: to what extent is "civil society" globally inclusive? And how might discursive production in civil society affect its expected contribution to multistakeholderism?

This approach—demystifying the category of civil society by analyzing discursive production—builds on previous research that has examined the participation of civil society organizations, from the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society through to the most recent IGF, to understand how they engage in and shape internet governance. Specifically, this study operationalizes postcolonial critiques of civil society (Chakravartty, 2007; Ferguson, 2006; Wickramasinghe, 2005) through a geopolitical analysis of organizational representation in policy discourse. This provides an alternative measure to assess representation, departing from traditional notions of geographic diversity and adopting a critical geopolitical rubric.

The analysis reveals striking inequality among actors that shape discourse by hosting conference sessions. In particular, the US, and to a lesser extent Europe, is over-represented in three ways: in leading overall discourse, in claiming authority over global issues, and in driving specific topics such as misinformation, privacy, and internet shutdowns. These findings offer an empirical evaluation of global representation in a key internet governance institution, revealing a disjuncture between theoretical expectations of civil society and how it actually operates in the field. Moreover, the particular shape and depth of inequality in representation offer new perspectives to unpacking the "fiction" of multistakeholderism (Hofmann, 2016). These findings open up questions about *why* and *how* multistakeholderism in internet governance fails to meet expectations, thus raising the stakes for further study about the category of civil society.

2. Related literature

2.1. Multistakeholderism in internet governance

Previous research has called for a critical examination of multistakeholderism in the field. Despite its prominence as an "unavoidable point of reference" in internet governance, multistakeholderism remains under-theorized and disconnected from field-based accounts of how it operates in reality (Palladino & Santaniello, 2021). Raymond and DeNardis (2015) therefore characterize multistakeholderism as an "inchoate" institution that is rhetorically evoked as a definite concept despite diverse implementations in reality. These instances, they claim, therefore often "fail to live up to its multistakeholder rhetoric" (p. 572). Hofmann (2016) also engages multistakeholderism as a theoretical ideal that needs to be disentangled from actual reality. She considers multistakeholderism to be a "fiction"—not necessarily to doubt its existence, but rather to distinguish the coherent framework used by policymakers and academics from its messy, ambiguous reality. For example, Saffer et al. (2018) argue that multistakeholderism is not an apolitical, egalitarian mode of governance; in fact, power manifests in status and resources as represented through communicative power. DeNardis and Hackl (2016) illustrate the potential stakes of unpacking these assumptions for revealing the political implications of the architecture of internet governance institutions (see also DeNardis, 2012). These findings point to a need for further scholarship that continues to empirically evaluate how power manifests within internet governance by critically evaluating the promises of multistakeholderism, especially in less formal or more heterogeneous environments.

Therefore, this study extends previous research that clarifies the gap between multistakeholderism in internet governance as a rhetorical device on one hand, and an inchoate, uncertain reality on the other. In particular, it identifies digital rights activism as an ideal site of civil society engagement in internet governance. This means that activist organizations dedicated to core principles such as freedom of expression and privacy can contribute a valuable site. One of the chief goals of multistakeholder governance is to broaden the diversity of actors and perspectives given voice within an institution—especially by including civil society organizations and representatives. Indeed, multistakeholderism is often understood as a proxy for socioeconomic and geopolitical diversity. It is important to test this assumption empirically, and a key civil society forum is an ideal site for such an assessment. After all, if the diverse perspectives that multistakeholder institutions hope to include are not actually represented in the category of civil society, then new questions emerge about the ideal of multistakeholderism itself—and which systems and interests are actually being upheld.

2.2. Defining civil society

The term "civil society" (CS) is conventionally defined as "the arena, outside the family, the government, and the market, where

people associate to advance their interests" (Malena & Heinrich, 2007, p. 340). This definition refines widely held notions of CS in many important ways. First, it conceptualizes CS as a political phenomenon, whereas an economic basis often conflates NGOs with CS organizations. Second, this definition focuses on specific CS *organizations* as groups of citizens rather than nebulous notions of CS as a general *category*. Third, while the concept of civil society is rooted in Western political theory and history, its generalizability is based on the universality of the phenomenon of collective citizen action (Malena & Heinrich, 2007). Nevertheless, methodologies for identifying and classifying civil society are problematized by a systematic bias to define CS organizations according to formal registration and membership, which is more often found in Western societies (Malena & Heinrich, 2007).

The latter point is contested by postcolonial scholars. For example, Wickramasinghe (2005) traces the genealogy of the conceptual category of CS to a European construction applied normatively to the Global South, where it functions as a "means to an end—democratization, economic growth, or sustainable development—rather than an end itself" (p. 458). Similarly, Chakravartty (2007) argues that CS must be seen "not as 'below' the state, but as integral parts of a new, transnational apparatus of governmentality" (Ferguson, 2006, as cited in Chakravartty, 2007, p. 310). This conceptualization of CS rejects normative expectations of both representativeness of citizens and independence from the state, thus threatening the integrity of its contributions to multistakeholderism by questioning two of its foundational assumptions. For example, Prasad (2018) applies this critique of CS by examining the Save The Internet (STI) grassroots movement in India against Facebook's Free Basics program in 2015–16 and finds that the group reproduced dominant nationalist political dynamics.

The question of how CS is defined affects expectations about how CS organizations contribute to multistakeholderism. For example, Kohler-Koch and Quittkat (2009) surveyed academics in the EU and found two competing expectations of CS—either as representatives of particular constituencies or as fora for social interaction. Steffek and Ferretti (2009) compare two international governance institutions and found divergent expectations of democratizing from CS organizations—either contributing as deliberators or enhancing accountability as watchdogs. Both findings suggest that expectations of CS should be articulated more precisely and that institutions and academics should be wary of imposing multiple expectations on CS organizations.

Given this pattern of discordant expectations of CS organizations, how well are they actually included in multistakeholderism as enacted by internet governance institutions? Morar (2018) examines three internet governance bodies—IGF, IETF, and ICANN—and finds that all three share similar communities, especially specific groups of like-minded participants. Cammaerts and Carpentier (2005), providing a critical perspective on CS inclusion, evaluate the preparatory proceedings before the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and find that its participatory potential is unfulfilled because of power imbalances. While they find evidence of improvements over previous international summits, they argue that non-Western CS organizations benefit from only three out of four forms of inclusion: access, consultation, and interaction—but not full participation. Thus, they urge for greater analytic distinction between these degrees of inclusion in characterizing multistakeholder institutions. Saffer et al. (2018), too, argue that the total potential contribution of CS organizations is unfulfilled because they are not included in a competent, coordinated, engaged, and accountable manner despite being strategically included to advance the legitimacy of governance institutions.

Tjahja et al. (2021) offer a substantial clarification about the role and expectations of CS participation in internet governance. They demonstrate the heterogeneity of organizations included by studying participants at the IGF and developing a typology of CS organizations based on factors such as purpose, representation strategies, and geography. Their findings provide a conceptual and methodological foundation for the present study, opening up two questions that this study seeks to address.

The first is an extension of their object of analysis: to what extent is "civil society" globally inclusive? In other words, who is included in CS in other arenas of internet governance—especially in the arena of global digital rights activism, which has been the subject of few studies to date (see Maréchal, 2018). The second question is a normative evaluation: how might discursive production in civil society affect its expected contribution to multistakeholderism? This study answers these questions by evaluating how CS organizations are included in RightsCon—while being grounded in postcolonial critiques of how they are both defined and included. In particular, it evaluates how well the global digital rights sphere satisfies Batliwala's (2002) characterization of "global civil society." Batliwala uses this term to refer to transnational grassroots movements led by poor and marginalized groups. According to this characterization, a globally inclusive civil society sphere should be led by organizations that represent diverse peoples from around the globe—not just in terms of geographic diversity measured by national representation, but in terms of geopolitical inclusion by accounting for global power dynamics in deciding who gets to drive strategy. If this prediction does not match reality, what are the implications for multistakeholderism, given its expectation that the category of civil society promises to expand inclusion and representation?

3. Methodology

This study shifts the empirical study of policy discourse analysis from events such as ICANN and the IGF to the digital rights activism arena as an ideal site to apply a critical evaluation of representation in civil society. In particular, RightsCon attracts greater interest and attendance from institutional actors that participate in other internet governance domains, whereas other digital rights events such as the Internet Freedom Festival focus on individual front-line activists (Maréchal, 2018). RightsCon is also compelling for its value in the professionalized field of digital rights activism as a key forum for networking, job seeking, and engaging with major funders. Some of these organizations, such as Meta, Google, the Ford Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations (Access Now, n. d.), maintain a prominent presence at the conference, not only as funders but as brokers through closed-door sessions. This level of engagement signals the value of discursive power at RightsCon to the broader field of digital rights activism, especially considering the stability of particular funders against the precarity of activist labor. Finally, in addition to its analytic value, this study is more feasible with RightsCon because Access Now maintains digital archives of its conference programs.

3.1. Analyzing discursive production

This study contributes to unpacking the "fiction" of multistakeholderism (Hofmann, 2016) through a critical analysis of the promise that including civil society automatically democratizes internet governance institutions and processes. It tests this assumption by evaluating global inclusion at RightsCon as an ideal example of global civil society in internet governance. Specifically, it operationalizes inclusion by assessing national representation. In an inclusive space for global civil society, it is expected that marginalized communities will not only be present but also drive the conversation.

Therefore, this study evaluates representation by critically examining discursive production at the conference. This approach builds on Pohle's (2016) approach to "opening the black box of multistakeholder policymaking" by "framing the discursive struggles in internet governance policy processes as vying for power and influence" (p. 2). Pohle draws on actor-network theory to assert that organizational arrangements and settings are inscriptions of power, and thus she considers a broad array of actants, including texts and documents.

This article operationalizes this approach as a form of meso-level critical discourse analysis (CDA) in that it unpacks processes of competing values, interests, and ideas. Unlike micro-level CDA, which is based on detailed semiotic analysis of specific texts, or macro-level, which is concerned with grand narratives and ideologies, meso-level CDA refers to discursive practices on the institutional level that coordinate across contexts (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). This represents a departure from previous internet governance scholarship that employs discourse analysis. For example, scholars have applied discourse analysis on the textual level by studying meeting transcripts (Epstein et al., 2014a, 2014b) or policy statements and comments (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2016; Wolff, 2016). In contrast, this study examines processes of discursive *production* as meaningful practices with material implications for policy. Thus, this study applies CDA as an orientation to studying power through discursive production given its implications for setting an institutional agenda.

Specifically, this study examines the conference program as an empirical site. There are many features of discourse (e.g., session topics, descriptions, individual speakers, host organizations, timings) and many dimensions of power (e.g., race, class, gender, nation) that can be analyzed in a conference program. Among them, this study focuses on organizations that serve as session hosts as its feature of analysis and those organizations' national affiliations as its dimension of power. These two factors were selected for two reasons. First, this study recognizes the continuity of colonial and imperial geopolitics that manifests in disparities in national representation (among other ways). Second, these features are among a limited number of characteristics that are easily traced across multiple years.

Analysis was conducted using open and iterative coding. First, several RightsCon conference programs were sourced and read closely. Next, all discernible features were scraped and processed into a useable format, and then analyzed using an open coding process that evaluated different ways in which geopolitical power may have shaped discursive production. After that, Access Now's annual RightsCon outcomes reports were reviewed, and the open coding process was compared with an analytic memo prepared based on observations from the reports. Finally, data was analyzed, visualized, and contextualized to produce the results presented below.

3.2. Data sources

This study examines the RightsCon conference program from 2018 to 2020. These years were selected because they provide the most complete and accessible data. Conference program data was accessed by scraping the archived conference websites and then analyzed in R using the rvest package. This process was possible because structured data was available on each conference program. In 2018 and 2019, when the conference was hosted in Toronto and Tunis, respectively, Access Now used a web application called Sched to host its program online. Sched's "detailed" view lists each session title, track or theme, description, keywords, tags, host organization, and speakers. The data available for each speaker includes their name, title, affiliation, and the first 50 words of their description.

The 2020 conference program was hosted on a new web application with more limited data. The conference was meant to take place in San José, Costa Rica, but was moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The list of sessions is available on a static web page without the full conference program. This web page only lists session titles, tracks, formats (e.g., panel, demo, lightning talk), and host organizations; it does not list descriptions or speaker information.

While processing data, up to two "host" organizations for each session were included. This is because the study focuses on organizations as primary speakers in civil society discourse, which was complicated by sessions listing multiple host organizations. Since the organizations were not listed in alphabetical order, the order was assumed to be meaningful indications of which organizations played a primary role in organizing, running, and participating in the session. Thus, only the first two organizations listed as hosts were coded for each session. This constraint was reasonable because only 4% of all sessions were hosted by more than two organizations, and including third and fourth host organizations for those sessions would have allowed these sessions to be over-represented in the data.

This filtering process resulted in a corpus of 902 sessions hosted by 504 distinct organizations, which were then coded for two variables to capture national affiliations according to where each organization is based and its geographic scope.

3.3. Coding session host organizations

The first variable is the home country or region in which the organization is based or registered ("home country" or "home region"). Each organization's home country was determined based on registration licenses, office headquarters, annual reports, and social media pages. These criteria were derived from Tjahja et al.'s (2021) geographic classification by headquarters. UN agencies, such as UNICEF

or the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), were coded as "Global". Organizations with an explicit and authentic regional basis, such as the European Commission or the Pacific Islands Chapter of the Internet Society (PICISOC) were coded according to the region ("Europe" and "Oceania", respectively) because the specific "headquarters" country is not necessarily indicative. Four global organizations that did not appear to be based in one specific country, including the multilateral Online Coalition and the Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA), were coded as "Global".

The second variable is the geographic scope of the organization's work ("scope country" or "scope region"); in other words, what part of the world does the organization seek to impact? Specifically, this variable distinguishes among organizations with national, regional, and global aspirations. This variable required an evaluation based on detecting at least one of three criteria: material outputs such as research reports and campaigns; staff and office locations; and branding. For example, Red Previos is based in Costa Rica but describes itself as a platform for youth from "Centroamérica y República Dominicana", while the Global Center for the Digital Commons explicitly articulates a global scope despite being based in the UK.

3.4. Mapping geopolitics

Both geographic variables were coded at the country level when possible, and then secondly by regions that were defined through an iterative process. Since this study is focused on mapping geopolitical power, the process of assigning countries to regions is seen as both a classification process and a discursive process with political implications. Countries were initially classified by continent (Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, Oceania, South America, or Global), but new regions emerged according to individual countries that appeared in the coding process. In particular, regions needed to be defined in such a way that they could be categorically assigned along the axis of the Global North and South. The United States was a clear outlier, accounting for half of all organizations, and was therefore assigned its own category. However, the North America category became less meaningful with only Canada and Mexico. Thus, Mexico was moved to a Latin America region; Canada, along with Australia and New Zealand, was assigned to a CANZ "region"—the only non-contiguous region defined instead by shared geopolitics. Next, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were pulled into a separate region, given the number of organizations in the area with regional scope. Turkey was eventually added to this region, which was renamed MENAT. Thus, the Africa region was truncated to Sub-Saharan Africa, although in some cases it refers to organizations that claim pan-African scope. Finally, Asia was divided into Central Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. The ASEAN network was used to define the Southeast Asia region and also, therefore, to distinguish East and South Asia.

Regions are also classified according to a global world order that distinguishes between the Global North-West and the Global South/East. This distinction draws from two cartographic orientations that are both instrumental yet individually incomplete. The Global North/South dichotomy is largely a rearticulation of the First World and Third World from the Cold War era. These terms are primarily useful for distinguishing between different economic circumstances, especially on a continental level. Thus the Global North often includes the US, Europe (including Russia), Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. The East/West dichotomy refers largely to perceived cultural differences. This study recalls racialized accounts of cultural difference to distinguish a West that certainly includes majority white countries such as most of Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US, and occasionally includes the hemispheric West, such as Africa and Latin America. Combining both dichotomies enables an instructive definition of the US, Europe, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand as the Global North-West, and the Global South/East as its complement.

These questions of geopolitical considerations in classifying countries and their organizations are inherently imperfect, incomplete, and contestable. The regional definitions proposed in this study are based on previous definitions as interpreted through the author's positionality and experience. They reflect the author's intention to account for specific fault lines that attend to historical and present colonial dynamics—in particular, by moving beyond global classification systems that are based entirely on physical geography. Nevertheless, these delineations collapse many important dimensions and foreclose other forms of geopolitics (e.g., BRICS). Future iterations may account for such considerations, especially based on input from individuals or communities with direct lived experiences.

3.5. Comparing individuals and organizations

One weakness of the coding system described above is that organizations do not necessarily employ only individuals from the same country or region. Thus, organizations with diverse teams cannot be accurately collapsed to representing merely a single perspective from the region in which it is based. This is especially true for organizations with global teams—including Access Now, the organization that organizes RightsCon.

Therefore, it is valuable to compare the national affiliations of both the *organizations* that host sessions and the specific *individuals* that represented them—but three challenges stood in the way. First, individual names were not publicly available for all session organizers—potentially due to security concerns, which would bias the data because it would disproportionately affect people from countries with repressive governments. Second, it would be impossible to confidently discern the primary national identity of more than 1,000 individuals. Third, individual names were not listed on the 2020 program.

These challenges were overcome using data provided by Access Now. The RightsCon planning team provided anonymized data that consisted of three characteristics for each session: individual hosts' self-reported national affiliations (which were mapped to geopolitical regions, as described in Section 3.4), session format, and session track. Individual names and session titles had been withheld to uphold Access Now's privacy agreements with individual session organizers. Although individual hosts could not be mapped to specific sessions, this data allowed for aggregated analysis across all three conference years and within specific tracks.

Therefore, this data was used to compare individual and organizational representation, as discussed in Section 4.5.

4. Findings

This section begins with a descriptive summary of the data. Table 1 shows the number of sessions in each conference program. Collectively, there were 992 sessions and 504 unique host organizations at RightsCon between 2018 and 2020. Overall, 854 (86%) of sessions listed organizational hosts, among which 203 (24%) listed multiple hosts. As discussed in Section 3.2, only the first two organizational hosts for each session were included in the analysis. Thirteen (3%) of the 504 hosts could not be coded for home countries or regions. In some cases, the organizations could not be traced; this mostly applied to hosts from the 2018 conference, so it's possible that some organizations are informal collectives or no longer exist.

4.1. Which regions are represented by session host organizations?

Table 2 shows the regional distribution of all host organizations according to the two geographic variables discussed in Section 3.3. The majority of host organizations coded (354, 72%) are based in the Global North-West (GNW), and the United States accounts for more than half of such organizations. The Global South/East (GSE) is home to 121 (25%) host organizations, while global organizations, most of which are United Nations agencies, account for 3%.

Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa account for half of the host organizations based in the GSE. On a regional level, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Oceania are least represented, although this level of analysis obscures more pronounced differences between individual countries.

Another way to measure representation is to trace recurring participation across multiple conference years. Fifty-one (10%) organizations hosted at least one session in all three years from 2018 to 2020. Among the recurring host organizations, 38 (75%) are based in the GNW, with most (28, 55%) in the US and between 1 and 3 based in each of Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK, and 1 pan-European organization.

The top 10 organizations by session count, all of which hosted at least 9 sessions total, are listed in Table 3. Each organization was assigned a rank according to the number of sessions on which it was listed as a host. The highest ranked organization is Access Now, which was listed as a host on the most sessions (48). The lowest ranked organizations include any organization listed as a host on only a single session. If multiple organizations have the same number of sessions, they were given the same rank and the corresponding number of ranks was skipped. For example, there are two organizations whose rank is 3, so the next organization was given a rank of 5. Even though nine out of the top 10 organizations are based in the US, six organizations claim global scope while four focus primarily on the US.

Table 4 lists all 11 (22%) GSE-based organizations that hosted sessions across all three conference years Pakistan is home to three such organizations, and the remaining organizations are distributed across different countries.

4.2. How has regional representation changed over the years?

This section examines changes in regional representation from 2018 to 2020. Table 5 identifies the distribution of hosted sessions from each region across all three years. The counts refer to session host positions, not unique session hosts, so an organization that hosted three sessions would count three times toward its region in a given year.

Overall, regional distribution is remarkably consistent, with organizations based in the US accounting for nearly half of all session hosts each year, followed by Europe and the CANZ region. The GNW regions collectively account for three-quarters of all session hosts. This figure has decreased slightly over time: from 80% in 2018 to 78% and 75% in 2019 and 2020, respectively. Meanwhile, representation from each GSE region has increased slightly—although the actual counts are between 1 and 6 additional sessions per region per year.

Table 1
Sessions and hosts by RightsCon conference year.

	2018	2019	2020	Total
	Toronto	Tunis	San José/Online	
Sessions	351	366	275	992
Sessions with 0 Hosts	59 (17%)	79 (22%)	0 (0%)	138 (14%)
Sessions with 1 Host	252 (72%)	205 (56%)	194 (71%)	651 (66%)
Sessions with 2 Hosts	30 (9%)	74 (20%)	62 (23%)	166 (17%)
Sessions with 3+ Hosts	10 (3%)	8 (2%)	19 (7%)	37 (4%)
Total Session Hosts[a]	350	377	389	1116
Unique Host Organizations	213	244	262	504
Unique Hosts Coded[b]	205 (96%)	236 (97%)	258 (98%)	491 (97%)

[a] The number of Total Session Hosts refers to the total number of host positions. Organizations that hosted more than one session are counted once per session.

[b] Some session hosts were not coded because they could not be traced to a home country. In most cases, the session host was identified as "independent", "freelance", or a name that could not be traced to a specific organization.

Table 2
Organizational home regions and scope by region, 2018–20.

Region	Home Region	Scope
Global	16	207
US	184	80
Europe	120	49
CANZ	50	34
Latin America	40	41
Sub-Saharan Africa	23	20
MENAT	19	20
South Asia	17	17
East Asia	11	10
Southeast Asia	5	5
Central Asia	4	5
Oceania	2	3
Total	**491**	**491**
Global	16 (3%)	207 (42%)
Global North-West	354 (72%)	163 (33%)
Global South/East	121 (25%)	121 (25%)

Table 3
Top 10 organizations by sessions hosted, 2018–20.

Organization	Rank[a]	Host Count	Home Country	Scope
Access Now	1	48	US	Global
ARTICLE 19	2	21	UK	Global
Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)	3	18	US	Same country
Mozilla Foundation	3	18	US	Global
Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society	5	14	US	Same country
Internews	6	11	US	Global
Association for Progressive Communications (APC)	7	9	US	Global
Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC)	7	9	US	Global
Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT)	7	9	US	Same country
New York University[b]	7	9	US	Same country

[a] Rank refers to the organization's relative number of sessions hosted among all organizations.
[b] Multiple hosts affiliated with the same university are combined into one organization. For example, the NYU organization includes affiliations with the Brennan Center for Justice, Center on International Cooperation, Global Justice Clinic, and Center for Business and Human Rights. The Berkman Klein Center is listed on its own because all hosts affiliated with Harvard University listed the research center explicitly.

Table 4
Global South/East (GSE) organizational hosts at RightsCon, 2018–2020.

Organization	Country	Rank[a]	Count
Derechos Digitales	Chile	15	7
Paradigm Initiative	Nigeria	20	6
Strathmore University	Kenya	20	6
Bolo Bhi	Pakistan	30	4
CIVICUS	South Africa	30	4
Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF)	India	30	4
Digital Rights Foundation	Pakistan	30	4
InternetLab	Brazil	30	4
Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD)	Pakistan	30	4
Institute for Technology and Society of Rio de Janeiro (ITS Rio)	Brazil	46	3
Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR)	Taiwan	46	3

[a] Rank refers to the organization's relative number of sessions hosted among all organizations.

The most significant changes in representation among host organizations are related to the conference's location. In 2018, RightsCon was hosted in Toronto, Canada. Consequently, 29 Canada-based organizations hosted 40 sessions that year, whereas only 9–10 Canadian organizations hosted sessions in the following two years. In 2019, the conference was located in Tunis, Tunisia. Although only one Tunisian organization hosted a session, 13 additional organizations from the MENAT region hosted 17 sessions in all. These include groups from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Yemen. Twelve of those organizations did not participate in 2018 or 2020. Finally, in 2020 the conference was originally scheduled to take place in San José, Costa Rica. Although it was ultimately moved online, the call for proposals closed before the pandemic began, so the program still reflects the intended location to an extent. Similar to the Tunis conference in 2019, the location appears to have promoted participation from more

Table 5
Percentage of session hosts by home region and RightsCon conference year.

Home region	2018	2019	2020
Global	2%	3%	5%
US	47%	49%	49%
Europe	21%	23%	20%
CANZ	12%	5%	5%
Latin America	5%	6%	8%
Sub-Saharan Africa	5%	4%	5%
MENAT	1%	5%	1%
South Asia	3%	3%	5%
East Asia	2%	1%	2%
Southeast Asia	1%	1%	0%
Central Asia	0%	0%	1%
Oceania	0%	0%	1%

organizational hosts from the region. While the number of sessions hosted by Costa Rican organizations jumped from one in 2019 to three in 2020, the total number of sessions hosted by organizations based in Latin America and the Caribbean also jumped from 17 to 20 in the previous two years to 28. This included 13 organizations that had not hosted sessions in the previous two years, including organizations from Jamaica, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

4.3. Who speaks for the world?

Another way to measure representation is to evaluate the geographic scope articulated by organizational hosts. Which organizations claim their home country as their primary domain or region—and which claim the entire world? This study analyzes this question by comparing the two geographic variables coded for each organization: the home country or region in which it is based and the country or region it claims as its scope.

A summary of the results is shown in Table 6. Overall, 259 (53%) coded organizations claim their home country as the scope of their work, while 202 (41%) claim global scope. Very few organizations claim a regional focus (22, 4%) or a specific country or region other than their home country (8, 2%).

What are the home countries of the 202 organizations that claim a global scope of work? The vast majority (185, 92%) are from the GNW and just six (3%) are from the GSE, with the remainder coming from global organizations such as UN agencies. Meanwhile, organizations based in the GSE are far more likely to focus their work exclusively on their home country and not to claim a regional or global impact.

4.4. Who drives discourse on key topics?

A final way to measure representation is within the conference's focus issues. Each year, RightsCon's sessions are classified into tracks such as "privacy and surveillance", "digital inclusion", or "the future of democracy". The exact track names change each year, but several themes are similar across multiple years. Thus, measuring changes across time within each theme can reveal how representation is constituted in particular issue areas.

Each track from the 2018–2020 conferences was coded with a *track theme* according to the dominant issue area. Three track themes were found to be common to all three conference programs and therefore are eligible for further analysis: privacy and surveillance, misinformation and content governance, and internet shutdowns and network connectivity.

Tables 7–9 show the home regions for organizations that hosted sessions in these three track themes. These results show that US-

Table 6
Geographic representational scope by home region.

Home region	Same country	Same region, different country	Global	Different country and region
Global	5	0	11	0
US	80	1	99	4
Europe	44	3	72	1
CANZ	34	0	14	2
Latin America	33	6	1	0
Africa	13	7	3	0
MENAT	13	4	1	1
Central Asia	4	0	0	0
South Asia	17	0	0	0
East Asia	9	1	1	0
Southeast Asia	5	0	0	0
Oceania	2	0	0	0
Total	**259**	**22**	**202**	**8**

based organizations have increasingly dominated each issue area, comprising a greater proportion of session hosts each year between 2018 and 2020. These exploratory findings open up opportunities for future research about the geopolitics of agenda-setting within civil society discourse. For example, what are the implications of privacy regulation around the world when civil society discourse is driven by US- or European-based organizations? Does it lead to homogenous advocacy strategies based on common frameworks? Do these spaces lead to certain types of misinformation and content moderation interventions based on concerns from the GNW? Do foreign-led spaces threaten the credibility of local resistance efforts to internet shutdowns? These are all empirical questions that deserve further attention.

4.5. Comparing individuals' self-reported regions with organizations' coded regions

One weakness of the coding system employed in this analysis is that organizational regions do not necessarily reflect the identities of the specific individuals that led sessions at RightsCon. Therefore, anonymized individual-level data from Access Now was used to compare the distribution in geopolitical representation between individuals' self-reported national affiliations (mapped to regions) and organizational home regions. These results are presented as an aggregate across all three conference years.

Fig. 1 shows that individuals' self-reported regions follow a similar trend as organizational home regions: the United States is over-represented, comprising 48% of organizational hosts' home regions and 35% of individual hosts' national affiliations. Meanwhile, every other region is better represented among individual hosts than organizational hosts. (The Global region is an exception, as expected, since individuals are unlikely to declare their national affiliation as "global", even if they represent a UN agency.)

Fig. 1 also shows that each non-US region's representation is, on average, 35% higher among individual hosts than organizational hosts. Europe has the least difference, with only 17% more representation among individual hosts, while Central Asia and Southeast Asia have the most difference, with more than twice the representation among individual hosts compared to organizational hosts.

This comparison offers three key insights. First, it refines this article's analysis by measuring the imprecision of assessing organizations by their home regions. Organizations cannot be reduced to single national interests, especially if they employ global teams, as is common in large, international nonprofit organizations that invest in global diversity. At the same time, this comparison also validates the directional conclusions of the organizational analysis: the US dominates both individual and organizational dimensions of representation, even if the degree is not equivalent.

Finally, the comparison exposes another, more complex level of representation: since countries in the GSE are better represented by individuals than by organizations by an average of 35%—while the US is more over-represented among organizations—US-based organizations appear to represent a key vehicle for individuals in the GSE to host sessions at the conference. This raises important questions about how individuals gain access to global civil society spaces. If one-third of individuals from the GSE at the conference have been essentially screened by the hiring practices of US-based organizations, those organizations can shape discursive production even while promoting individuals from diverse geopolitical contexts.

5. Discussion

This study is concerned with unpacking the promise of multistakeholderism for democratizing internet governance. To achieve this expectation, multistakeholderism must bring an inclusive civil society sphere into internet governance institutions and processes—-which can be assessed by measuring geopolitical representation. Therefore, this study pursued an empirical evaluation of RightsCon as an ideal site of global civil society to explore ask: to what extent is "civil society" globally inclusive? How might discursive production in civil society affect its expected contribution to multistakeholderism?

The analysis quantified geopolitical over- and under-representation in terms of which organizations lead sessions, claim a global domain, and drive specific topics, which then led to discussing potential implications for the global digital rights policy agenda. First, it found that the Global North-West in general, and the United States in particular, is over-represented in terms of host organizations overall. Second, it found that unequal representation among host organizations is remarkably consistent despite hosting the conference in different regions. Third, it found that US- and European-based organizations are more likely to express broad scopes of work, beyond

Table 7
Sessions hosted by theme: Privacy and surveillance.

Home region	RightsCon 2018	RightsCon 2019	RightsCon 2020
Global	1	0	4
US	11	25	38
Europe	8	12	11
CANZ	7	2	5
Latin America	0	5	7
Sub-Saharan Africa	1	2	2
MENAT	0	2	1
South Asia	0	0	3
East Asia	0	2	2
Southeast Asia	1	0	0
Central Asia	0	0	1
Oceania	0	0	0

Table 8
Sessions hosted by theme: Misinformation and content governance.

Home region	RightsCon2018	RightsCon 2019	RightsCon 2020
Global	0	0	2
US	8	17	24
Europe	5	8	9
CANZ	3	1	3
Latin America	1	2	3
Sub-Saharan Africa	0	1	2
MENAT	1	2	0
South Asia	1	0	3
East Asia	0	1	1
Southeast Asia	0	1	1
Central Asia	0	1	0
Oceania	0	0	0

Table 9
Sessions hosted by theme: Internet shutdowns and network connectivity.

Home region	RightsCon 2018	RightsCon 2019	RightsCon 2020
Global	1	1	2
US	7	9	10
Europe	3	1	7
CANZ	1	0	0
Latin America	0	1	1
Sub-Saharan Africa	4	2	1
MENAT	1	1	0
South Asia	0	4	1
East Asia	0	0	0
Southeast Asia	0	0	0
Central Asia	0	0	0
Oceania	0	0	0

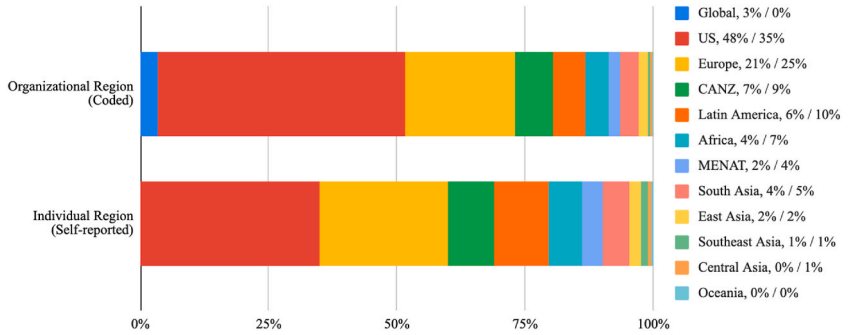

Fig. 1. Organizational (coded) vs. individual (self-reported) regions, 2018–20.
Note. The percentage figures in the legend denote the percent of organizational and individual affiliations, respectively, for each region. For example, 48% of organizations were coded with a home country of US, and 35% of individual hosts self-reported the US as their national affiliation.

their national and regional borders. Fourth, it found that organizations based in the Global North-West increasingly dominate in driving discourse in key areas such as misinformation, privacy, and internet shutdowns. Finally, this study found that individual session hosts are geopolitically more diverse than the organizations they represent, suggesting that US-based organizations offer a key vehicle for individuals from the Global South/East to drive discourse in global digital rights civil society.

5.1. Contributions to understanding multistakeholderism

Conceptually, this article makes three contributions by bringing critical theoretical models in conversation with internet governance scholarship and offering an empirical operationalization. First, it adds evidence to earlier critiques of multistakeholderism as lacking for perpetuating global inequalities despite including civil society. In line with Hofmann's (2016) characterization of multistakeholder governance as a "fiction", these insights illustrate how global digital rights discursive production can reinforce geopolitical power imbalances.

Second, this study applies a critical perspective of civil society. Operationalizing postcolonial critiques through coding extends the

legibility of the underlying argument that civil society is not *inherently* representative, and instead must be carefully scrutinized. Therefore, even though some of the findings about over-representation are expected, there is both empirical and analytic value to studying civil society within internet governance, and also in defining new methods to assess representation in the field.

Third, this study builds on previous scholarship by demonstrating what can be learned by analyzing participation at civil society-oriented conferences as sites of policy discourse. Conferences are rich sources of empirical data because they represent significant investments of resources and because they retrace and reinforce power dynamics by structuring discursive production. Which topics and speakers are given priority over others? How are different actors placed in relation to each other, either together on panels or separately in simultaneous sessions that compete for attention? The more resources and attention that get channeled into such spaces, the more valuable they are for understanding what is happening in the field.

5.2. Limitations

This study has several limitations that qualify its findings. First, it is important to clarify that this study is not a critique of RightsCon itself, but rather an analysis of the category of civil society and the promises of multistakeholderism. RightsCon was selected as an ideal forum—because of its global and inclusive reputation—to critically examine the assumptions of multistakeholderism. While it is an important site for global digital rights activism, RightsCon is not the only one. It is possible, for example, that Global South/East organizations favor alternative forums such as the IGF, the Internet Society, or the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). After all, multistakeholderism is not a single model but rather an institutional framework that is operationalized differently across different policy spaces. Further analysis should explore how GSE-based organizations navigate participation in different digital rights spaces.

In terms of methods, this study applied a relatively blunt instrument to measure global inclusion by classifying organizations by national affiliations. However, nations cannot be reduced to monolithic interests, and individual organizations cannot be assumed to automatically represent their geopolitical contexts. Future research should examine the representation strategies of specific digital rights organizations that are prominent in global civil society spaces (e.g., Fraussen & Halpin, 2018; Grover, 2021; Hall, 2019). In addition, field-based studies would reveal how geopolitical dominance manifests in dynamics among organizations both in-person and in virtual spaces.

5.3. Directions for future research

This study opens up several questions for future research. First, how is funding implicated in representation and driving policy discourse globally? What role do institutional funders or major donors play in shaping the conference? Do they lobby for grantees to be featured more prominently, effectively gatekeeping access to driving the global digital rights agenda—both in terms of the specific conference program and for broader agenda-setting? One hypothesis based on this study is that agendas are shaped not only by dominant actors' national affiliations but also by who their funders are—especially because funders operate across borders more easily than civil society organizations. These questions will complement this article by potentially explaining why certain interests and policy priorities are over-represented in digital rights activism.

Another hypothesis is that there are implicit or explicit biases in the selection processes for civil society forums. Selection bias can be tested empirically by comparing the sessions proposed and sessions accepted by the organizing committee—if access to such data can be obtained. Further research into backstage decision-making processes can uncover specific mechanisms at work.

Finally, a closer discourse analysis of conference sessions can clarify, refine, and strengthen the findings from this study. In particular, video recordings from the 2020 and 2021 conferences are available online and can be used to conduct textual discourse analysis by, for example, measuring who spoke and about what topics. This is particularly valuable for overcoming one of this study's key limitations: analyzing only the host organizations for each session without accounting for the full roster of speakers.

Overall, the motivation for this study was to empirically evaluate the promise of multistakeholderism by measuring geopolitical representation in a key civil society space. It is situated in the larger project of refining our understanding of how multistakeholderism actually operates in the field. While this article opens up many questions about *why* and *how* representation in digital rights activism is not closer to expectations, it also raises the stakes for pursuing such questions with further study. Ultimately, further analysis that builds on, refines, and qualifies the findings of this article will advance a more precise evaluation of civil society and its contributions to multistakeholderism. Hopefully, revealing power dynamics through critical analysis will also enable more inclusive internet governance institutions and processes.

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