The Geopolitics of Digital Rights Discourse: Mapping Civil Society Representation at RightsCon

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Abstract

Civil society plays an important role in internet governance according to multistakeholderism, as enacted at the IGF and in other global institutions. Accordingly, scholars have studied civil society participation from the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society through to the most recent IGF, trying to better understand how civil society shapes the internet through multistakeholderism. This study addresses questions of representation in civil society by examining Access Now's annual RightsCon conference as a site of civil society convening and evaluating how institutional context shapes civil society discourse. In addition, it extends postcolonial critiques of the category of civil society in internet governance by adopting a critical geopolitical rubric in assessing representation. Through a meso-level discourse analysis of the organizations that lead in the RightsCon program, this study finds striking inequality among actors that shape discourse by hosting sessions. While the direction of inequality may be unsurprising—particularly over-representation of the US—the particular shape and depth of inequality offers new perspectives to evaluating civil society discourse and representation. Ultimately this study advances scholarship on civil society in internet governance and discursive processes in policymaking both through its empirical findings and methodological choices.

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 was sponsored by many tech companies and drew from the momentum of the Arab Spring, in part by incorporating many activists from the Middle East (Fruchterman, 2011; RightsCon, 2011; York, 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).

Much has changed about the summit since 2011. It evolved into an annual conference called RightsCon, which celebrated its tenth annual event in June 2021. Although the first iteration was both named after and located in Silicon Valley, today it articulates a global aspiration. 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). For three consecutive years, the UN OHCHR's Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council had attended and issued a joint statement authenticating the conference's significance.

This scale, global image, and focus on civil society grant credibility to RightsCon in the internet governance space. To some, it has even emerged as an action-oriented alternative to the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as it grows more performative or symbolic (Bharthur, 2019).

As RightsCon grows in prominence and importance, and its influence on policymaking grows more material, it's important to evaluate its basis for credibility. How well does the scale of participation match the scope of the conference's agenda? How well does its global image, often based on participation, accurately reflect the geopolitical diversity of its discourse? And precisely what mode or understanding of civil society does it center?

This study addresses these questions by evaluating the RightsCon annual conference as a site of institutional discourse. Civil society plays an important role—one that has been won over the contestation of national governments—in internet governance according to multistakeholderism, as enacted at the IGF and in other global institutions. Accordingly, scholars have studied civil society participation from the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society through to the most recent IGF, trying to better understand how civil society shapes the internet through multistakeholderism.

This study builds on such research by examining an exclusive site of civil society convening—the RightsCon conference—and evaluating the institutional context that shapes civil society discourse as embodied in the conference program. This approach builds on the work of Tjahja and colleagues (2021) who offer sharp empirical analysis of civil society representation at the IGF by analyzing attendance records, and several scholars (Epstein et al., 2014a; Epstein et al., 2014b; Gurumurthy & Chami, 2016; Milan & ten Oever, 2017; Pohle, 2016) who have articulated the analytic value of discourse in internet governance. In addition, it extends Chakravartty's (2007) postcolonial critique of the category of civil society in internet governance. Specifically, it offers an alternative measure to assess representation, departing from traditional notions of geographic diversity and adopting a critical geopolitical rubric that traces a continuous world order from colonialism to present day.

Through an analysis of the RightsCon conference programs from 2018–2020, this study finds striking inequality among actors that shape discourse by hosting sessions. While the

direction of inequality may be unsurprising—the US is over-represented, with Europe ranked second but no individual country approaching the prominence of US-based groups—the particular shape and depth of inequality offers new perspectives to evaluating civil society discourse and representation. Ultimately this study aims to advance scholarship on civil society in internet governance and discursive processes in policymaking both through its empirical findings and methodological choices.

Multistakeholderism, Internet Governance, and Civil Society

This study engages multistakeholderism as a "fiction" (Hofmann, 2016) whose theoretical ideal needs to be disentangled from actual reality. In a provocative article, Hofmann (2016) strategically interprets multistakeholderism as a "fiction"—not necessarily to doubt its reality, but rather to distinguish the coherent framework used by regulators and academics from a messy, ambiguous reality. For example, Saffer and colleagues' (2017) find that multistakeholderism is not an apolitical, egalitarian mode of governance; in fact, power manifests in status and resources as represented through communicative power. In addition, this study extends van Eeten and Mueller's (2012) call to study internet governance without inflating the role of the state. They argue that scholarly analysis has historically focused on a handful of formal global institutions—such as IGF, IETF, and ICANN—as dominant actors despite little actual impact on governance. Since states gravitate toward such institutions, this approach has inflated the role of the state in internet governance. Collectively, these texts point to a need for further scholarship that empirically evaluates how power manifests within internet governance by critically evaluating the rubric of multistakeholderism, especially in less formal or more heterogeneous environments. This study answers these calls by focusing on digital rights activism as a site of internet governance focused not on the state but rather entirely on civil society (CS).

A discussion of civil society (CS) must first begin with defining the term. Responding to the lack of a widespread definition of CS, Marena and Finn Heinrich (2007) define CS as "the arena, outside the family, the government, and the market, where people associate to advance their interests" (p. 340). This definition refines widely held notions of CS in a number of important ways. First, this definition conceptualizes CS as a political phenomenon, whereas an economic basis often conflates NGO's with CSO's. Second, this definition focuses on CS *organizations* as groups of citizens rather than nebulous notions of CS as a *category* that refers to a set of organizations. Third, while Marena and Finn Heinrich concede that the concept of civil society is rooted in Western political theory and history, they insist on the universality of the phenomenon of collective citizen action—and thus the category of civil society. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that methodologies for identifying and classifying civil society are problematized by a systematic bias to define CSOs according to formal registration and membership, which is more often found in Western societies.

The latter point is contested by postcolonial scholars in particular. For example, 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 representativeness of citizens and independence from the state, thus threatening the integrity of multistakeholderism by disrupting two of its foundational assumptions. Applying this critique of CS, Prasad (2018) examines the Save The Internet (STI) grassroots movement in India against Facebook's Free Basics program in 2015–16 and finds that the group constituted a "recursive public" that

reproduced dominant nationalist political dynamics. Like Prasad, I, too, follow Chakravartty's argument to question liberal assumptions about relationships among the nation, the state, and the people, and ultimately to question how organizations in the postcolonial global South are strategically included in the category of CS.

The question of how CS is defined carries implications for expectations about how CSOs contribute to multistakeholderism and other governance frameworks. 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. They therefore argue that expectations of CS should be articulated more clearly. Steffek and Ferretti (2009) compared two institutions that strategically included CS actors and found that CSOs can play different democratizing functions that need to be articulated more precisely, including either enhancing accountability or contributing to deliberation. They argue that institutions and academics should be wary of imposing multiple expectations of CS participation that may put organizations in situations in which they cannot succeed.

Given this pattern of discordant expectations of CSOs, how well are CSOs actually included in multistakeholderism as enacted by internet governance institutions? Previous research about CS representation in internet governance has focused on descriptive methods to better understand the perspectives afforded access to internet governance discourse. Morar (2018) examines three internet governance bodies—IGF, IETF, and ICANN—and finds that all three bodies share similar communities, especially specific groups of like-minded participants. Fang (2018) identifies two primary categories of stakeholders who benefit from the multistakeholder model: major corporations that produce internet infrastructure such as Amazon, Cisco, Ericsson, Google, Huawei, IBM, and VeriSign; and influential individuals, including internet pioneers (e.g. Vinton Cerf, Robert Kahn, Joseph Licklider) and innovators and entrepreneurs (e.g. John Perry Barlow, Tim Berners-Lee, Craig Newmark).

Cammaerts & Carpentier (2005) add a more critical evaluation of CS inclusion in internet governance. They evaluated the preparatory proceedings before the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and found that the participatory potential of the summit remained unfulfilled because of power imbalances among participants. While they found evidence of significant advancements over previous international summits, they argued that non-Western CSO's benefited from only three out of four forms of inclusion: access, consultation, and interaction—but not full participation. Thus they urge analytic distinction between these degrees of inclusion in characterizing multistakeholder fora. Scholte (2007), too, argues that the total potential contributions of CSO's are unfulfilled because they are not included in a competent, coordinated, engaged, and accountable manner—even though CSOs are strategically included to advance the legitimacy of governance institutions.

Tjahja and colleagues (2021) answer many of these calls to clarify the role and expectation of CS participation in internet governance. They demonstrate the heterogeneity of organizations included by studying participants at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and developing a typology of CS organizations based on factors such as purpose, representation strategies, and geography. Their study provides a significant empirical, conceptual, and methodological foundation for the present study.

Tjahja and colleagues' (2021) findings invite two open questions that this study seeks to address. The first gap is an extension of their object of analysis: who is included in CS in other arenas of internet governance? This study focuses on global digital rights activism, which has been the subject of few studies to date (see Maréchal, 2018). The second gap is a normative

evaluation: how well do the organizations included in CS uphold their expectations of representation? Hintz & Milan (2009) argue that grassroots technology organizations in particular offer unique perspectives to policy debates.

This study seeks to answer these calls by evaluating how CSO's are included in a key digital rights conference—with an eye toward postcolonial critiques of both how CSO's are defined and how they are 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 that are notable for being led by poor and marginalized groups. Access Now, the organization that organizes RightsCon, is often characterized as a global organization, especially given its regionally-focused staff and locations across the world, including in North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Using RightsCon as a site of analysis, to what extent does Access Now qualify as part of Batliwala's "global civil society"? How have global South organizations been included over time—and do their contributions indicate a purposive or legitimizing function to the conference—and to digital rights activism in general?

Methodology

This study locates the digital rights activism arena as an optimal site to apply a normative evaluation of representation by CS organizations in internet governance. Two potential research subject candidates are RightsCon and the Internet Freedom Festival. RightsCon is an annual conference organized by digital rights advocacy organization Access Now, while the Internet Freedom Festival is an annual conference hosted by global development firm IREX in partnership with foundations such as the Open Technology Fund (Maréchal, 2018). Between the two, RightsCon is an ideal subject because it attracts greater interest and attendance from institutional actors that participate in other internet governance domains whereas the Internet Freedom Festival focuses on individual front-line activists (Maréchal, 2018). In addition, RightsCon maintains digital archives of its conference programs, facilitating archival research.

In order to study RightsCon, this study engages in a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the conference through archives of its programmatic schedule. Fairclough (1995) describes how CDA integrates interpretation across three levels of discourse. The micro level, which reflects CDA's origin in linguistics, is based on detailed semiotic analysis that interprets texts as social processes of meaning-making. The meso level refers to discursive practices on the institutional level whose contexts produce such texts. Finally, the macro level is concerned with structural power in society beyond the individual context.

This study focuses on the meso level and interprets CDA not as a specific method but rather as an approach to studying power through discursive production. By focusing on the institutional level within the communicative event of RightsCon conferences, it interprets the conference schedule as a forum of speech events. This differs from some previous discursive research in the field of internet governance that has focused on textual analysis of meeting transcripts (e.g. Epstein et al., 2014b) or policy statements and comments (e.g. Gurumurthy & Chami, 2016; Wolff, 2016). Instead, it builds on Pohle's (2016) exploration of the "performative effects of multistakeholder deliberations and the conflictual co-production of discourse in policy debates" (p. 3), locating processes of "discursive production" as meaningful practices with material implications for policy.

This conceptual framework informs the specific methods employed in the study. First, it applies CDA by analyzing dimensions of power expressed in how civil society discourse is

shaped by the structure of the RightsCon conference. There are many levels of discourse that can be analyzed (e.g. session topics, descriptions, speakers, the schedule itself) and many dimensions of power (e.g. race, class, gender). Among them, this study focuses on organizations that serve as session hosts as its level of analysis and geopolitical power as its dimension. Host organizations

These two factors were selected for four reasons. First, this study is concerned with geopolitics from a postcolonial perspective that traces a continuous, rather than ruptured, world order from colonialism to the present. Second, it seeks to contribute to "opening the black box of multistakeholder policymaking" (Pohle, 2016) by evaluating assumptions about its inherent capacity for global representation and inclusion. Third, it is interested in evaluating how the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed the 2020 conference from Costa Rica to a digital platform for the first time, enabled more geopolitically diverse participation. Fourth, these features are among a limited number of characteristics that are easily traced across multiple years.

CDA was conducted using open and iterative coding. First, a number of RightSCon conference programs were sourced and read closely. Next, all discernible characteristics were scraped and processed into a usable format, and then analyzed using an open coding process that evaluated different ways in which geopolitical power may have shaped or may have been shaped by how the conference program facilitated 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.

Data sources

This study examines the RightsCon conference program from 2018–2020. These years were selected to include two in-person conferences and two remote conferences in order to observe how the conference changed after moving online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A secondary consideration was access to data. Although Access Now provides archived conference programs from 2014 onward, the conferences since 2018 provide the most complete and accessible data.

I accessed RightsCon program data by scraping the archived conference websites. This process was facilitated by highly structured data 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 include their name, title, affiliation, and the first 50 words of their description.

The 2020 and 2021 conference programs were hosted on new web applications that offer limited data for analysis (see Table 1). In 2020, the conference was meant to take place in San José, Costa Rica, but was moved online due to the 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. The 2021 conference, which was also held online, is hosted on another platform built by social enterprise company TechChange. The conference program lists session titles, tracks, and formats and speaker names and affiliations. Session descriptions are available on session-specific pages that would be onerous to retrieve, so they were omitted. Notably, session hosts are missing, and therefore had to be inferred from the list of speakers.

Table 1
Data Availability by RightsCon Conference Year

Year	Location	Session title, schedule, format, track	Session's host organization	Session description	Speaker names and affiliations	Speaker descriptions
2017	Brussels					
2018	Toronto	X	X	X	X	X
2019	Tunis	X	X	X	X	X
2020	San José/Online	X	X			
2021	Online	X			X	

I scraped the data from each conference program into R for analysis. This was a straightforward process for the 2018, 2019, and 2020 conferences using the rvest package. However, the 2021 program is hosted on a platform behind login that generates dynamic content using JavaScript. I retrieved the HTML from the API calls listed in the page's network requests. Finally, I hygiened and processed the data set for analysis.

One material decision during processing was to select up to two "host" organizations for each session. My research question called for classifying sessions according to primary "speakers". This question was complicated by sessions that listed multiple host organizations, which applied to 14% of sessions in 2018 and 29% in both 2019 and 2020. Since the organizations were not listed in alphabetical order, I assumed that the order of organizations was a symbolic decision that indicated which organizations played a primary role in organizing, running, and participating in the session. Therefore I only coded the first two organizations listed as hosts for each session.

This filtering process resulted in a data set of 902 sessions hosted by 504 distinct organizations, which were then coded for two geographic variables (home country and geographic scope) and one purpose-focused variable.

Coding session host organizations

The first variable is the home country or region in which the organization is based or registered. I discerned each organization's home country based on registration licenses, office headquarters, annual reports, and social media pages. These criteria align with Tjahja and colleagues' (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 "United Nations". 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 (i.e. "Europe" and "Oceania") because the specific "headquarters" country is not expected to be a meaningful characteristic for the purpose of this analysis. Four organizations that did not appear to be rooted 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; 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 explicit 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 entirely in the UK. With few exceptions, organizations' geographic scopes were either the same country (52%) or region (4%) as its home country or articulated a global (40%) scope. Among the 201 organizations that articulated a global scope, 99 (49%) are based in the US, 29 (14%) in the UK, 11 (5%) in Switzerland, and 11 (5%) are UN agencies.

Mapping geopolitics

Both geographic variables were coded at the country level when possible, but results are reported 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 (Bowker & Star, 1999) 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. Mexico was moved to a Latin America region. Canada, along with Australia and New Zealand, was assigned to a special CANZ "region", the only category that is unified entirely by geopolitics rather than geography. Next, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was pulled into a separate category, especially 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 refined to Sub-Saharan Africa, although in some cases it refers to organizations that claim continental 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 for this study. The Global North/Global South dichotomy is 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, and is therefore widely open to interpretation. In this study I recall racialized accounts of cultural difference to distinguish a West that certainly includes majority white countries such as most of Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and the US, and occasionally includes the hemispheric West, such as Africa and Latin America. Combining both dichotomies enables a more confident definition of the US, Europe, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand as the Global North West: rich, white, and European-origin. Meanwhile, the Global South East has a

complementary definition: potentially white, potentially rich, and potentially European-origin, but certainly racially and culturally marked.

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 my own positionality and experience as someone with ethnic, migratory, and sociocultural roots in the US, India, and Australia. They reflect my 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 geopolitical alliances (e.g. BRICS). Future iterations may account for such considerations, especially based on input from individuals or communities with direct lived experiences.

Findings

This section begins with a descriptive summary of the corpus. Table 2 shows the number of sessions in each conference. Collectively, there were 992 sessions at RightsCon between 2018–2020. Overall, 854 (86%) of sessions listed organizational hosts, among which 203 (20%) listed multiple hosts. As discussed earlier, 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 location. 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 no longer exist or referred to informal collectives without a digital presence.

Table 2
Sessions and Hosts Analyzed by RightsCon Conference Year

	2018	2019	2020	
	Toronto	Tunis	San José/Online	Total
Sessions	351	366	275	992
Sessions with 1+ Hosts	292 (83%)	287 (78%)	275 (100%)	854 (86%)
Sessions with 2+ Hosts	40 (14%)	82 (29%)	81 (29%)	203 (20%)
Total Hosts	332	369	356	504
Total Hosts Coded	322 (97%)	361 (98%)	350 (98%)	491 (97%)

Which regions are represented by session host organizations?

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

Within the GSE, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa account for half of host organizations. 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.

Table 3
Organizations' Home Regions and Scope by Geopolitical 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%)

One way to measure representation is to trace continuous participation over multiple conferences. Fifty-one (10%) organizations hosted at least one session each year between 2018 and 2020.

Among the recurring host organizations, 38 (75%) are based in the GNW. Most (28, 55%) are in the US, with 1–3 based in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK, and 1 pan-European organization.

The top 10 organizations, all of which hosted at least 9 sessions total, are listed in Table 4 below. Despite being based almost entirely in the US, six organizations claim global scope while

four focus primarily on the US. As expected, Access Now, which organizes RightsCon, hosted the most sessions.

Table 5 lists the 11 (22%) recurring organizations based in the GSW. Pakistan is home to three such organizations, and the remaining organizations are distributed across different regions.

Table 4
Top 10 Organizations by Sessions Hosted, 2018–20

Organization	Rank	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*	7	9	US	Same country

* Multiple hosts affiliated with the same university are combined into one organization. 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 5
Global South West (GSW) Organizational Hosts at RighsCon 2018, 2019, and 2020

Organization	Country	Rank	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

How has regional representation changed over the years?

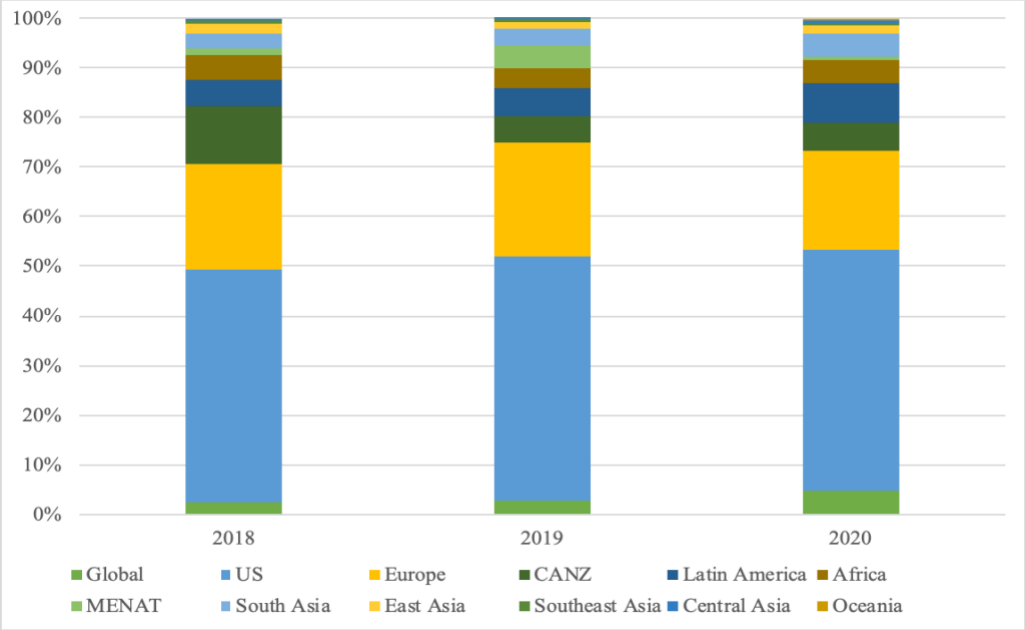
This section examines changes in regional representation from 2018 to 2020. Table 6 lists the home regions for hosts in each conference, along with a heat map that corresponds to the number of hosted sessions from each region. (Note that the counts refer to hosting instances, so an organization that hosted three sessions would count three times toward its region.)

Overall, regional distribution is fairly 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 over time: from 80% in 2018 to 78% and 75% in 2019 and 2020, respectively. Meanwhile, representation from all GSE regions has increased slightly—although the actual counts are between 1–6 additional sessions per region.

Table 6
Percent of Sessions Hosted by Geopolitical Region and RightsCon Conference Year

	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%

Figure 1
Distribution of Sessions Hosted by Geopolitical Region and RightsCon Conference Year



The most significant changes in representation among host organizations is related to the conference's location. In 2018, RightsCon was hosted in Toronto, Canada. Consequently, 29

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 long before the pandemic began, so the program still reflects the intended location. Similar to the Tunis conference in 2019, the location appears to have supported more organizational hosts from across the region. While the number of sessions hosted by Costa Rican organizations jumped from one in 2019 to three, the total number of sessions hosted by organizations based in Latin America and the Caribbean jumped from 17–20 in the previous two years to 28. This included 13 organizations that had not hosted sessions in the previous two years, including the first from Jamaica, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

Who speaks for the world?

Another way to measure representation is to evaluate the scope of organizational hosts. Which organizations claim their home country as their primary domain—and which claim the entire world? I analyzed this question by comparing the two geographic variables coded for each organization: the 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 7. Overall, 259 (53%) of organizations claim their home country as the scope of their work, while 202 (41%) claim a global scope. Very few organizations claim a regional focus (22, 4%) or a specific country or region other than their home country (8, 2%).

From where do countries claim a global scope of work? Among the 202, 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. The six exceptional GSE-based organizations that claim global scope are: CIVICUS (South Africa), Open Net Korea (South Korea), CYRILLA Collaborative (Kenya), JustLabs (Colombia), Magenta Consulting (Jordan), and Open Design (Kenya).

Table 7
Geographic Representational Scope by Geopolitical Region

	Same country	Same region	Global	Different country/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**

Shaping and Driving Discourse

A final way to measure representation is within specific issues on which the conferences have focused. Each year, RightsCon's sessions are classified into a number of tracks, such as "privacy and surveillance", "digital inclusion", or "the future of democracy". These tracks change each year, so tracing changes in tracks provides insight into how RightsCon has prioritized different issues over time. However, this complicates tracking representation within each track.

To facilitate tracking changes in representation *within* a track, I coded each track from the 2018–2020 conferences and ultimately associated them into themes. These themes and their annual tracks are listed in Table 8, along with the total number of sessions over three years. Five themes are common to all three conferences and therefore are suitable for further analysis. These are: Privacy, Misinformation, Citizenship and Democracy, Business, and Internet Shutdowns.

Below, Tables 9–13 show where the organizations that hosted sessions in each theme have been based. These results show the discourse on each theme has been driven by organizations from different geopolitical regions.

Table 8
Programmatic Tracks by RightsCon Conference Year

	2018	2019	2020	Total Sessions
Privacy	Privacy and Data Protection	Privacy and Surveillance and Individual Security Data Trust and Protection and User Control	Privacy and surveillance Data protection and design	137
Misinformation	Media | (Dis)information | Fake News	The Future of Media in the Age of Misinformation	Content governance, disinformation, and online hate	91
Citizenship and democracy	Civic Tech | Citizenship | Democracy	Democracy and Conflict and Shrinking Civic Spaces	The future of democracy	72
Business	Responsible Business | Transparency | Accountability	Forging Alternative Models for Business and Human Rights	Alternative models for business and labor	72
Civil society	The State of Civil Society and Digital Rights		Civil society resistance and resilience	63
Censorship	Freedom of Expression and Censorship	(un)Censored: The Future of Expression		57
Internet shutdowns	Network Disruptions and Discrimination	Turn It On and #KeepItOn: Connectivity and Shutdowns	Network connectivity and internet shutdowns	53
Hate speech	Stopping the Hate and Harassment Online	Countering Online Harassment and Hate Speech and Violent Extremism		50
Digital inclusion	Diversity and Digital Inclusion	Intersectionality on the Internet: Diversity and Representation		48
Demos	Demo Room	Show and Tell: Skill-building for Advocacy and Campaigning		41
Cybersecurity and encryption	Digital Security in Practice Hacking and the Future of Encryption	Lock and Key: Cybersecurity and Encryption		47
AI and algorithms	Artificial Intelligence | Automation | Algorithmic Accountability	Artificial Intelligence and Automation and Algorithmic Accountability		44
Development		The Impact of Technology on the Sustainable Development Goals	Peacebuilding and development	44

Health	Health | Environment | Land | Labour		Public health in the digital age	32
Borders and jurisdiction	Borders | Domains | Complex Governance	Justice and Jurisdiction and the Rule of Law		27
Philanthropy	Philanthropy | Operations | Shrinking Civic Space	The Digital Disruption of Philanthropy		18
Advocacy	Campaigns and Advocacy		Protest, participation, and political change	18
Trade	International Trade and the Commons			10
Wellness		Individual and Organizational Wellness and Resiliency		9
Open government		Tech for Public Good: Open Government and Smart Cities		7
Multiple topics			Cross-topics	32

Table 9
Sessions Hosted by Theme - Privacy

	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 10
Sessions Hosted by Theme - Misinformation

	RightsCon 2018	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 11
Sessions Hosted by Theme - Citizenship and Democracy

	RightsCon 2018	RightsCon 2019	RightsCon 2020
Global	0	1	0
US	3	19	10
Europe	1	12	5
CANZ	3	4	2
Latin America	0	0	3
Sub-Saharan Africa	1	1	1
MENAT	0	4	1
South Asia	0	1	0
East Asia	2	0	0
Southeast Asia	0	0	0
Central Asia	0	0	0

Oceania	0	0	0

Table 12
Sessions Hosted by Theme - Business

	RightsCon 2018	RightsCon 2019	RightsCon 2020
Global	1	1	3
US	10	16	12
Europe	8	7	7
CANZ	0	1	0
Latin America	0	4	0
Sub-Saharan Africa	0	1	0
MENAT	1	2	0
South Asia	0	1	3
East Asia	1	0	0
Southeast Asia	0	0	0
Central Asia	0	0	0
Oceania	0	0	0

Table 13
Sessions Hosted by Theme - Internet Shutdowns

	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

Discussion

This study pursued an empirical evaluation of RightsCon as "global civil society". It asked: how have global South organizations been included over time—and do their contributions indicate a purposive or legitimizing function to the conference—and to digital rights activism in general? To answer this question I examined RightsCon as a source of institutional discourse. Specifically, I coded and analyzed the organizations that hosted sessions offered at RightsCon in 2018–2020. My coding methodology was driven by a critical approach to geopolitics that acknowledged intersecting socioeconomic, political, and racial hegemonies in order to delineate between the Global North West and the Global South East as a crucial, material faultline. These codes enabled a series of analyses of representation over time, across geopolitical regions, and among common programmatic themes such as privacy, misinformation, and internet shutdowns.

The overall finding of these analyses is the stark prominence of Global North West organizations in shaping discourse at RightsCon. In particular, the US emerged as an over-represented source of actors driving discourse at the conference by hosting sessions. This was demonstrated in multiple ways, as the US accounts for 37% of host organizations, 55% of host organizations that participated in all three conferences, and 49% of host organizations that claim global scope.

While the over-representation of the US is perhaps less surprising, the particular shape of unequal representation at RightsConn is compelling because of what is and is not common with Tjahja and colleagues' (2021) findings about the IGF. For example, Tjahja and colleagues found that, after the US, the next most prominent countries represented by CSOs are Brazil, Germany, the UK, and India, with less pronounced gaps between them and particularly consistent representation for the US, Germany, and India across different models of CSOs, such as advocacy organizations and knowledge building groups. This study, on the other hand, finds a staggering gap between the US (184, 37% of 491 organizations) and the next most represented countries, Canada (40, 8%), whose count is supplemented by the 2018 conference which was hosted in Toronto, and the UK (38, 8%). Based on this comparison, then, a key difference between the IGF and RightsCon is that the US is highly represented at the former, but this over-representation amounts to a monopoly over discursive power at RightsCon. To the extent that RightsCon is a key site where CSOs prioritize policy agendas, frame issues, and build coalitions, this disparity is consequential for internet governance more broadly.

Finally, this study contributes a normative analysis that accounts for geopolitics in assessing geographic representation in institutional discourse. The geopolitical classification defined in this paper differs from traditional geographic assessments in order to enable a critical evaluation of representation grounded in historical political-economic systems of colonialism and imperialism. This facilitates interpreting differences among countries or regions not as simple disparities that can be rectified with more representation, but rather as both outcomes and expressions of geopolitical power. In addition, this study examines geopolitical power within discourse by examining organizations that play primary roles in shaping the RightsCon agenda by hosting sessions. This adds an alternate approach to discourse analysis, at the meso level of institutional contexts that produce texts, rather than the texts themselves.

At the same time, this study has limitations that leave open many questions. First, it assumed that organizational hosts play a key role in shaping discourse at RightsCon, and that this

role has not significantly changed from year to year. This assumption can be tested and refined with ethnographic research or interviews to better understand how different actors shape discourse at the conference. Second, it focuses on RightsCon as a key site of digital rights activism. The findings imply that RightsCon may be a US-centric, and secondarily Euro-centric, space that is complemented by alternate spaces or networks. For example, the Association for Progressive Communications, certain foundations, think tanks, or even the IGF itself may play a similar agenda-setting and coordination role for the Global South West. Third, while this study focused specifically on discourse at the level of institutional context, the actual text of RightsCon discourse provides a rich corpus for textual analysis. This is especially true for the 2020 and 2021 conferences held online, when many sessions were recorded and preserved on YouTube. Such studies that build on, refine, and qualify the findings of this paper will advance a normative evaluation of civil society, hopefully revealing obscured power dynamics in order to open up more democratic, representative, and inclusive policymaking processes in internet governance.

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