

Using Research in Digital Rights Advocacy

Understanding the Research Needs of the Internet Freedom Community

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About the Internet Policy Observatory

The Internet Policy Observatory (IPO) is a project at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The overarching goal of the program is to deepen the reservoir of researchers and advocates in regions where Internet freedom is threatened or curtailed and to support the production of innovative, high-quality, and impactful internet policy research. The IPO facilitates collaboration between research and advocacy communities, builds research mentorships between emerging and established scholars, and engages in trainings to build capacity for more impactful digital rights research and advocacy.

Through the IPO’s three-pronged approach, the program seeks to educate a network of advocates and researchers, produce high-impact, locally-relevant research in furtherance of Internet freedom objectives, and help connect researchers and mentors to foster collaboration, mobilization, and increase research impact.



About the Annenberg School for Communication

The Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania produces research that advances the understanding of public and private communication. The school educates doctoral students in the theories, substance, and methods of communication research, and provides a first-class liberal arts education to undergraduates through the Communication major. With interdisciplinary research residing at the core of what goes on every day, Annenberg provides a vibrant, challenging, intellectual experience for students, training them to become leaders in their chosen fields by applying and adapting diverse theories and methods to the cutting-edge communication issues of the twenty-first century.



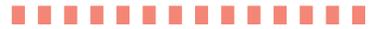


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“We have identified the pressing need for people engaged in the Internet policy space to be better equipped with more sophisticated research skills and deeper methodological understanding.”



Research: The Keystone for Effective Advocacy

The importance of research within digital rights advocacy cannot be understated. Whether your objective is to persuade policymakers, communicate with companies, educate journalists, convince funders, or influence public opinion, you need accurate and systematically collected information. All advocacy organizations engage in research even if they don't realize it—advocates are identifying a problem, strategically analyzing causes and effects, seeking potential solutions through information gathering, and communicating this information in a compelling way with core stakeholders. While most organizations have some capacity for research, many organizations do not have the time, funding, or expertise to understand how to deploy the best, most robust, and most convincing research methods to fuel data-driven advocacy. This is especially true for digital rights-related activism, where methods for studying the effects of internet policies, internet user behavior, and corporate decision-making online are often highly technical.

The [Internet Policy Observatory](#) is a project at the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania that has been working since 2014 to deepen the reservoir of researchers and advocates in regions where Internet freedom is threatened or curtailed and to support the production of innovative, high-quality, and impactful Internet policy research. Throughout our work on this project, we have identified the pressing need for people engaged in the Internet policy space to be better equipped with more sophisticated research skills and deeper methodological understanding. We have also facilitated collaborative possibilities between academic experts and activists through re-imagined models for funding applied research and interdisciplinary methods training programs.

This report, based on a 2017 survey of 79 organizations engaged in digital rights advocacy

from around the world, seeks to provide clarity on how the community understands and utilizes research within current advocacy efforts and to identify the needs for future research and collaboration efforts. Through the survey, we asked organizations to consider their capacities for conducting research and using it within their campaigns, perceptions of current research being produced on internet policy issues, and thoughts on barriers to and opportunities for collaboration between research and advocacy organizations.

The study seeks to address the following key questions:

- Which research methods do organizations use the most in internal research? What capacities for research exist within organizations and via existing collaborations with research institutions?
- What issue areas are perceived as the most researched and the least researched?
- What kinds of aggregated datasets would be most useful for organizations' advocacy?
- Who are the perceived audiences for digital rights organizations' research and advocacy?
- What are current barriers to collaboration between research and advocacy organizations?
- How can funding be directed to improve collaborations, increase research capacity, and produce research needed by and representative of the community?



Research Needs and Capacities: Our Key Findings

- Most organizations aim advocacy efforts at the general public, national governments, and international organizations. Corporations were reported as the least targeted for advocacy efforts.
- When asked which issues are the subject of most current research, organizations reported a great deal of literature focusing on cybersecurity issues, freedom of expression, privacy/surveillance, and open data and transparency. Many organizations reported that research in the field is driven by the priorities of Western countries.
- When asked to identify current gaps in the research landscape, respondents reported a dearth of research on market issues such as competition, internet adoption, and affordability. Relatedly, many organizations expressed interest in more research into the economic and social costs of policy, including net neutrality, trade deals, and intellectual property. The economic costs of internet shutdowns were of particular interest to many respondents from low and middle income countries.
- Respondents lamented the limited research about the role of ICT companies in setting policy through lobbying, building infrastructure, implementing user policies, and building algorithms. Many respondents noted a desire for research into the online experiences of users, particularly those from marginalized communities. Respondents noted that a focus on this kind of qualitative research would provide “human angle stories” about the effects of policy decisions on diverse populations online that organizations could leverage in advocacy efforts.
- Regarding their data needs, respondents reported the need for comprehensive databases aggregating legislation and case law across a variety of jurisdictions; respondents, especially from low and middle income countries, repeatedly noted the importance of network data for research on internet speed, access, and censorship. Many respondents expressed frustration about lack of access to companies’ internal data, especially pertaining to affordability debates and content regulation.
- Respondents, especially those from low and middle income countries, also reported trouble accessing existing research and datasets due to the barriers to access created by copyright and paywalls.
- Respondents noted several barriers to collaboration between academic and advocacy communities—including gaps in knowledge about research methods and applied research, differing incentives and metrics for success, poor coordination and mutual awareness across organizations, disparities in timelines between academic publishing and rapid response advocacy, and a failure by academics to communicate the relevance of research findings.
- Funding issues were the primary impediment to research collaborations cited by the surveyed organizations. The most common funding-related barriers cited included the lack of long-term stability in funding, competition for funding with potential partners, and funding structures that prioritize research areas driven by Western-funding priorities.
- Respondents cited a need for research training in newer, technical methods such as social network analysis and network measurement as well as in legal research. Organizations also need information about the potential uses of specific research methods so as to understand how they might be relevant to their work.



Methods

Data were collected for this study via a pair of web-based surveys of digital rights organizations deployed in two phases. The initial pilot survey, conducted in the summer of 2017 consisted of a 29-question survey which was sent to select digital rights organizations in a snowball sample, yielding 21 responses. These responses were analyzed and used to revise and draft a second survey questionnaire, which consisted of 27 of the same or similar questions but solicited additional, more specific responses based on information from the initial survey. This second survey, conducted in the fall of 2017 was sent to 167 persons at 141 digital rights organizations located in countries around the world. The second survey yielded responses from 58 additional organizations for a total of 79 responses from both surveys.

The surveys produced two categories of data. The first set of data, organization-specific data, included data about the respondent's organization, such as geographic base and regional focus, organization size (number of staff), primary and secondary languages used in work, the issues that they concentrate on, the advocacy strategies used, their target audiences, as well as information about their experiences conducting research, collaborating with research organizations, and their current internal capacities for deploying a variety of research methods. The second type, field-specific data, included questions related to the broader field of digital rights, such as the respondent's perceptions of funder's priorities, potential barriers to collaboration between activists and researchers, research topics that they perceive as the most produced and least produced, and the role of forums and conferences in connecting researchers and activists. Data types included both quantitative data as well as open-ended questions that sought to contextualize and expand on answers to quantitative questions. In the few cases (4) in which multiple persons from the same organization completed the survey, the responses were combined in the case of organization-level questions but kept as separate responses for questions about the state of the field.

Following data collection, categorical, interval, and scale variables were loaded into SPSS for analysis via frequency tables and crosstabs. Data produced via open-ended questions was analyzed using MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software. For each question, responses were coded for emergent codes by two-coders. These coded segments were tabulated and used to determine larger themes both within and across survey questions.

The Sample

The responding organizations were distributed across a range of geographic areas including the U.S. And Canada (10%), Europe (19 %), Sub-Saharan Africa (23 %), Middle East and North Africa (9 %), Asia (24 %), and Latin America (15 %) as shown in [Figure 1](#).

Within these regions, they were also distributed across a range of organization sizes. Globally, the sample represents single-person operations (18%), organizations with: 2 to 5 staff (24%), 6-10 staff (24%), 10-30 staff (22%), 30-99 staff (11%) and over 100 staff (1%). Among the respondents, 78% of organizations used English either regularly or as their primary language for producing work. Of the remaining organizations, only 14% reported occasionally using English and 6% never used English. 62 % of organizations reported using multiple languages regularly. Other common languages included: Arabic (12%), French (19%), Russian (9 %), and Spanish (19%). This sample, representing a diverse subset of organizations in the digital rights community, allows for greater understanding of the current topical areas on which the digital rights community is focused, the strategies its members use to reach particular audiences, and how they currently integrate research into those processes.

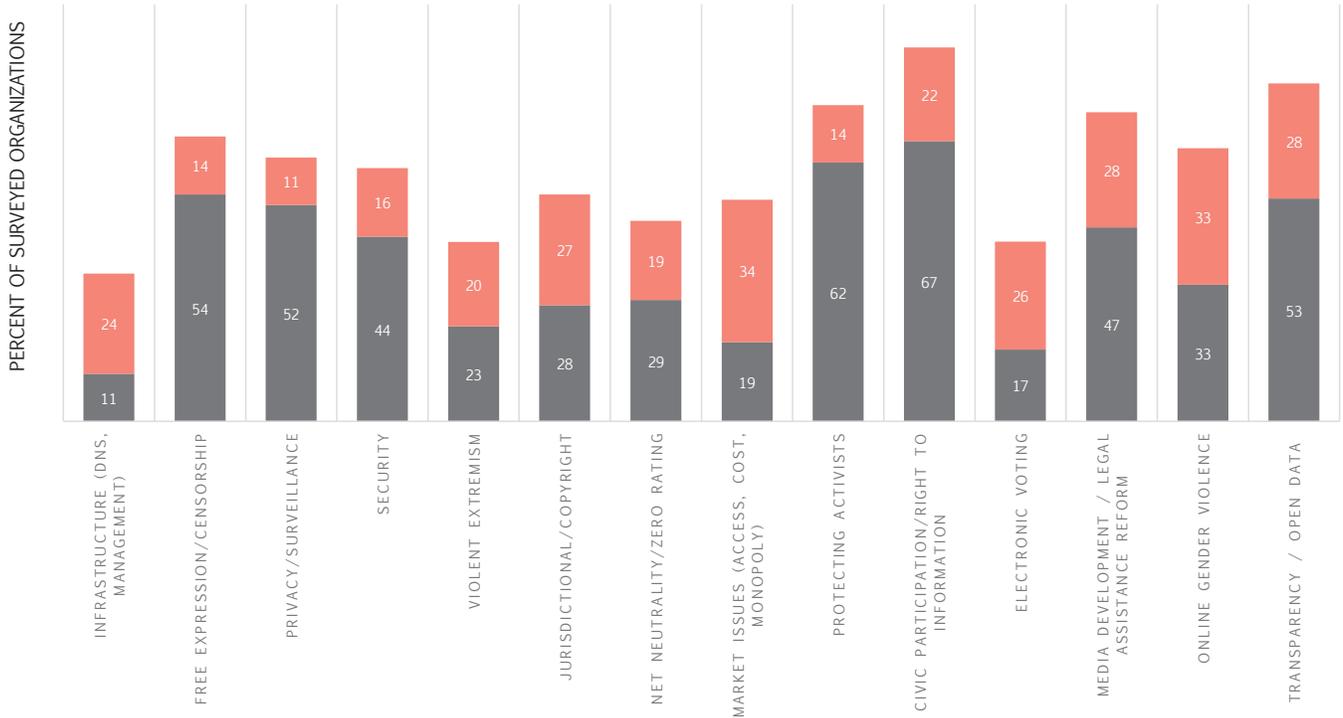


FIG. 1 PERCENTAGE OF SURVEY RESPONSES BY REGION



FIG. 2 AREAS OF ORGANIZATIONAL FOCUS

■ Major Focus ■ Minor Focus





Organizational Focus, Strategy, and Current Research Use

Of the organization's surveyed, the most common topical areas that organizations saw as their major focus for advocacy were civic participation (67%), protecting activists (62%), freedom of expression and censorship (54%), transparency and open data (53%), and privacy and surveillance (52%). Among these respondents, few saw a major focus on top-level internet infrastructure (11%), market issues (19%), and electronic voting (26%). However, as depicted in [Figure 2](#), many organizations saw these areas as secondary or minor foci of their work.

These organizations engaged in a variety of strategic activities in the course of their work, as shown in [Figure 3](#), with 93.67% engaged directly in advocacy and activism. Online campaigns were the most common tactic organizations used for advocacy and activism with 43% of respondents reporting via open-ended questions that their organization engaged in online campaigns. Respondents described using social media to mobilize supporters as well as to publicize research. Respondents also indicated that such campaigns are usually implemented in combination with other forms of public outreach. 94% of organizations indicated

that they utilize research as part of their digital rights work, which will be discussed at length in the next section. 74% of respondents engaged in some form of lobbying—meeting with and arranging events for politicians and regulatory officials as well as staging interventions via international governing bodies such as the United Nations—and 71% of organizations surveyed reported working on local capacity building, including organizing workshops and town halls at the grass roots level, training activists, linking professionals with the activist community, building coalitions, and youth outreach. 63% of organizations reported using litigation as a tactic to achieve their strategic ends, though it was only used regularly by 30% of organizations, suggesting that most organizations have the ability or understanding of how litigation can be used within advocacy efforts, but do so strategically as appropriate opportunities arise. In open-ended questions, few organizations described using traditional media to achieve their ends, and, despite the popularity of petitions in the U.S. context, they appear to be rarely used by the worldwide digital rights community.

FIG. 3 STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES UTILIZED BY DIGITAL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

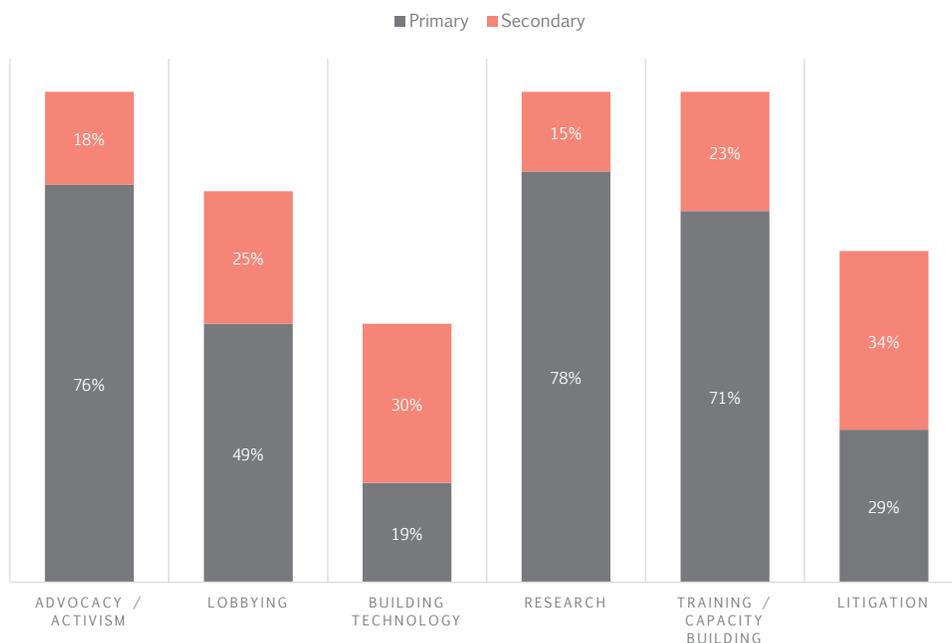




FIG. 4 TARGET AUDIENCES OF DIGITAL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

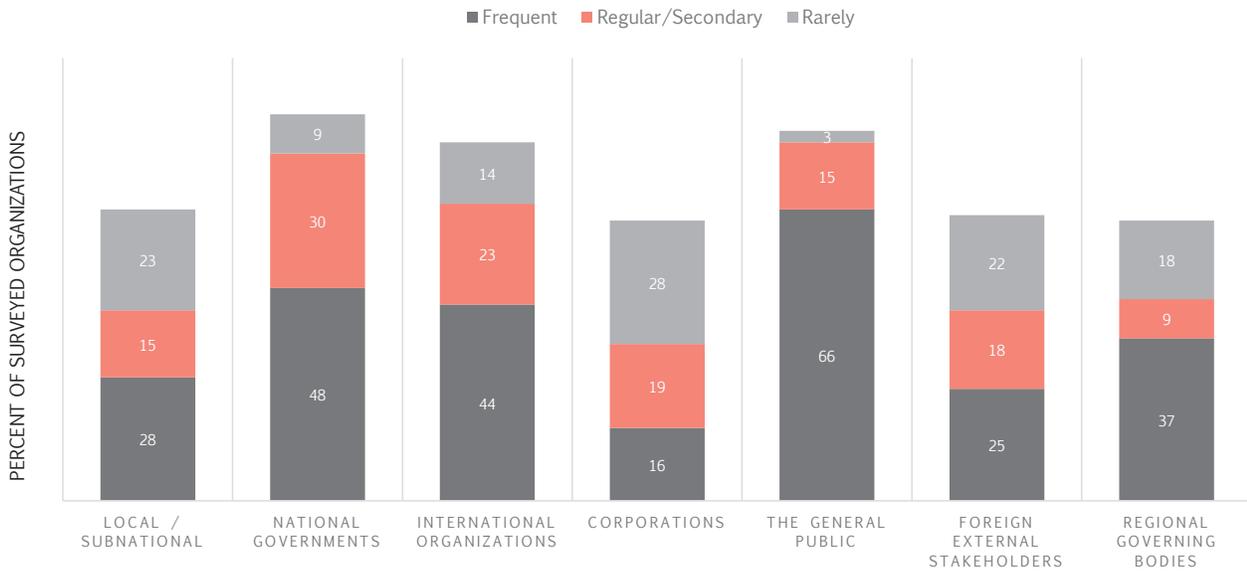
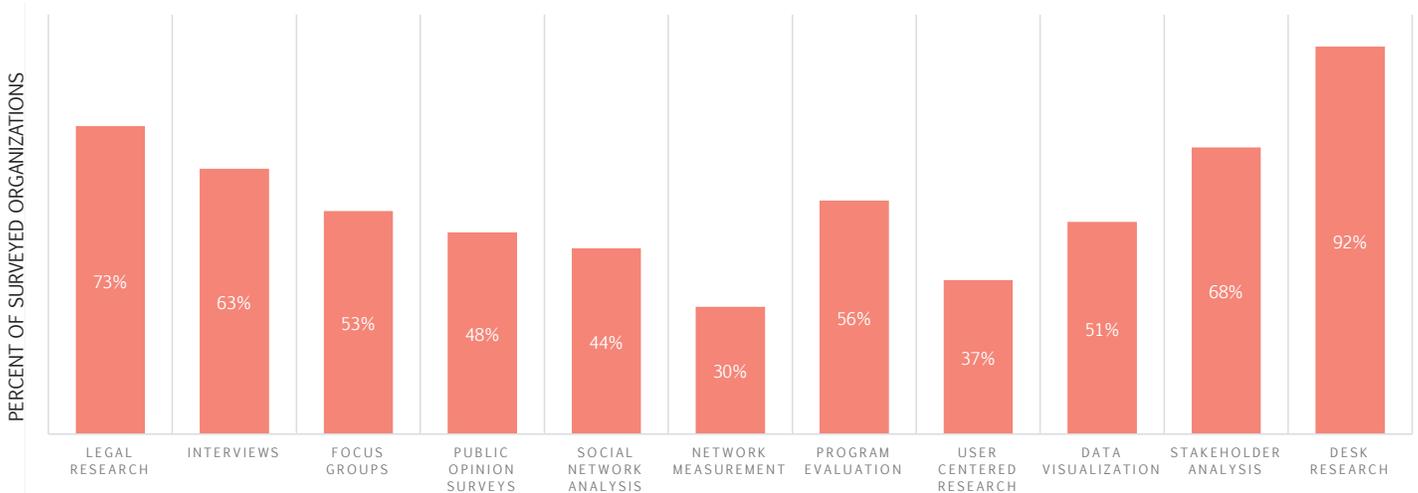


FIG. 5 METHODS USED





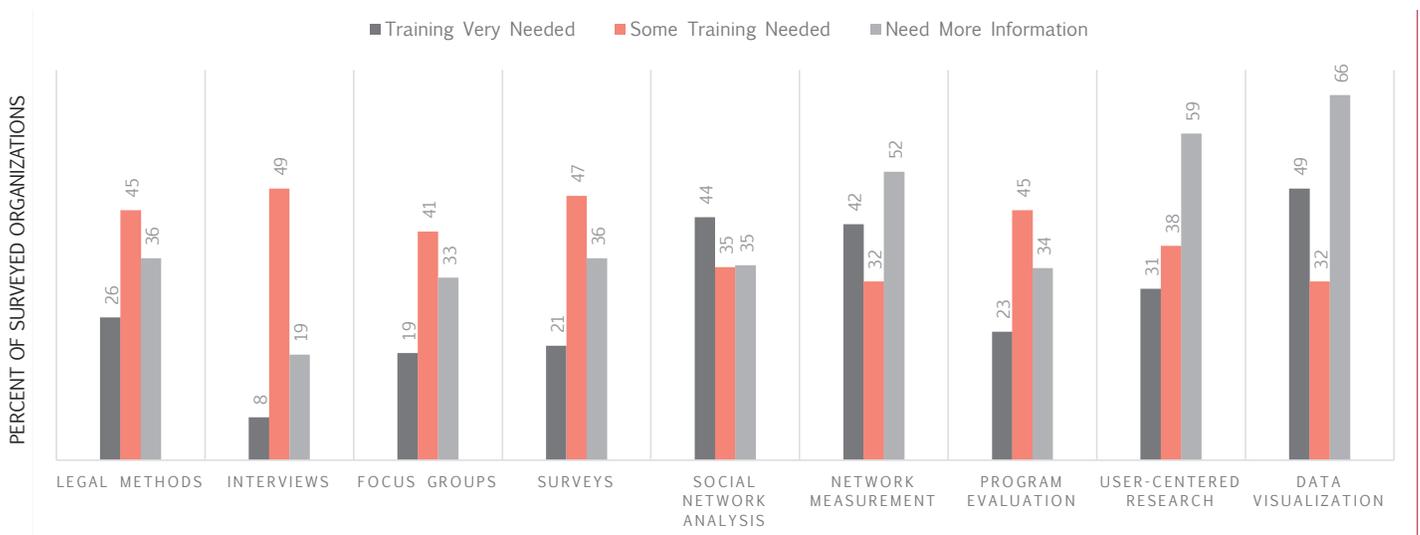
In terms of targets for strategic activism, depicted in Figure 4, the most common among surveyed organizations were the general public, targeted regularly or frequently by 80% of digital rights organizations, national governments (78%) and international organizations (67%). Many digital rights organizations did report targeting both local and subnational governments (43%) and corporations (35%), but did so much less frequently.

Most respondents reported using some kind of research methods to support their advocacy efforts, as shown in Figure 5. The most common methods, were desk research (used by 92% of organizations), legal research (73%) and stakeholder analysis (68%). The least utilized methods were network measurement (30%), user-centered research (37%), and social network analysis (48%).

Within the survey, organizations were asked to indicate what kinds of research methods trainings would be most useful to improve their research and advocacy. These results are shown in Figure 6. An option was presented to allow a respondent to indicate that he/she might not understand how or if a particular method could be used within his/

her organization's work. Despite the popularity of legal research as a method used by respondents (as indicated above), 70% of respondents reported that their organization required at least some training on legal methodologies, with 25% saying legal research training was very needed. 36% of respondents felt they needed more information about how legal methods could help them in their advocacy work. Similarly, many respondents reported a need for both more information about technically-intensive methods and also a need for training on them. For example, 48% of respondents indicated that their organizations utilized social network analysis in research, but when asked about training needs on that same method, 78% of respondents reported at least some need for training and 35% reported a need for more information about how the method could be used in advocacy research. This suggests some confusion about these methods and a need for education within the community so that practitioners can better understand how to define their current research activities and how new methods might be able to be implemented within their work.

FIG. 6 TRAINING AND KNOWLEDGE NEEDS





Research Content Issues

Respondents indicated research areas that they perceived as having received more attention than other issues from funders and researchers, as shown in [Figure 7](#). 53% of respondents felt that privacy and surveillance had at least a higher than average level of attention from the research and funding community. Other areas perceived as receiving higher than average levels of attention included freedom of expression (45%), and security (48%).

Some respondents felt these issues continue to be highly funded due to their compatibility with the internet policy concerns of Western governments and corporations. Other respondents indicated that much of the current research focuses on issues that are less relevant and pressing for certain contexts with low internet penetration and low levels of digital literacy.

“Most [of the topics that are researched] are issues common to developed nations where Internet access is more widespread and reliable. In [other places], connection can be difficult and many parts of the country do not even have access to basic levels of service. That makes many of the issues raised [by the policy community] somewhat moot, since most people are not able to access it in the first place.”

There was also a widespread view amongst respondents that Western countries are the subject of most digital rights research. 54% of respondents perceived North America as having an above average level of research compared to 3% who felt it was under researched. Similar results were shown

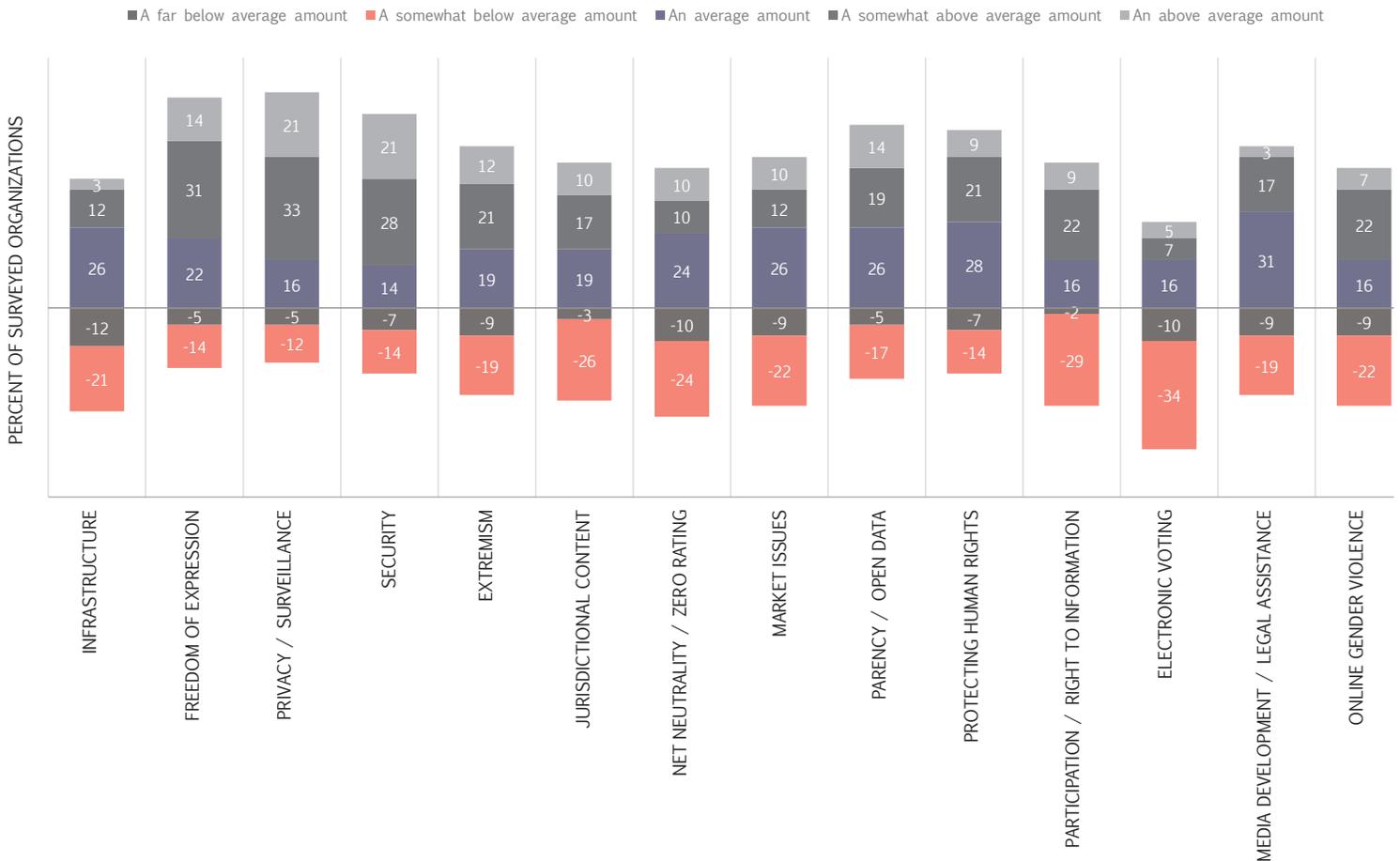
for Western Europe (+54%, -4%) and Northern Europe (35%, -1%).

Respondents felt there was a lack of research in the areas of high-level internet infrastructure (33%), electronic voting (45%), net neutrality and zero rating (34%), and market issues (31%). Some of these concerns were also reflected in the answers given by respondents to open-ended questions. 32% of respondents mentioned concern with the lack of research related to market issues, including examinations of levels of competition in telecommunications and critical infrastructures both within and across countries. They also wanted research that would better enable activists to understand issues of affordability and access across jurisdictions as they relate to demographics, particularly amongst marginalized communities. Relatedly, some respondents called for research exploring the economic and social costs of policy decisions, including trade deals and intellectual property, to provide tangible evidence to use in lobbying and other forms of advocacy. The economic costs of internet shutdowns were of particular interest to researchers focused on low and middle-income countries. The surveyed members of the digital rights community also lamented the limited research about the activities of ICT companies. 17% of respondents mentioned the need for research into the external practices — lobbying, building infrastructure — and internal practices, such as user policy, and algorithms.

“It would be extremely useful if more research were to be conducted into the economic costs of excessive government restrictions on the internet or violations of the right to internet access, such as internet shut downs.”



FIG. 7 ATTENTION TO RESEARCH AREAS BY FUNDERS AND RESEARCHERS



Research needs of respondents were not limited to specific topical areas. Many called for action-oriented research that would help activists link technology policies to the experiences of the general public, with one respondent arguing for the need to “bridge the gap between ground realities and policymaking.” For example, a respondent from a large digital rights organization in South Asia described problems with research around net neutrality: “Net neutrality related research is extensively missing from the aspect of user level cost. We have extensively done research on legal

and policy analysis, but user cost but user cost... is missing.”

Relatedly, respondents mentioned that both consumer rights and user-centric research were lacking, leaving activists with little research that uses ethnographic methods to provide “human angle stories” with which to mobilize the general public or to persuade legislators. One respondent explained that, “these in-depth stories mined from unstructured interviews or focus groups are very useful for advocacy.”

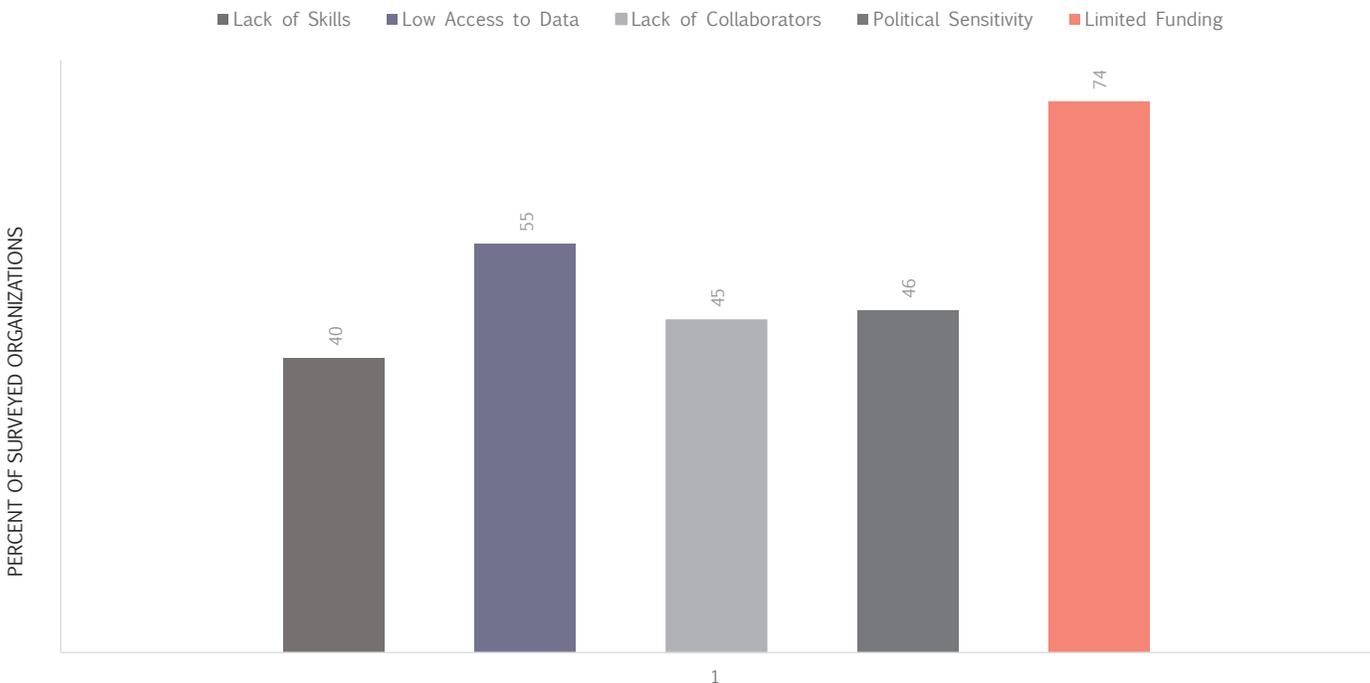


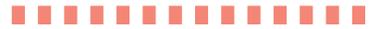
Barriers to Research in the Digital Rights Community

Despite the clear enthusiasm from respondents for the integration of more and better research into their current advocacy, respondents reported several barriers standing in the way of producing the research necessary for their work, as shown in Figure 8. 46% of respondents cited political sensitivity as an obstacle to producing new research. One respondent explained how civil society organizations in states with repressive governments, particularly those organizations with external international funding, struggle to balance their own goals while simultaneously seeking from the state topic-by-topic approval

for research and advocacy projects. Another respondent explained how controlled and monitored internet environments limit interaction between researchers and outside collaborators. In some cases, researchers do not produce work for fear it will be politicized. Other respondents cited a lack of research skills (40%) in the digital rights community and limited resources for garnering them. Beyond these issues, issues of funding, the unavailability of datasets, and collaboration issues also limited the research capacity of the digital rights community.

FIG. 8 BARRIERS TO RESEARCH





Funding

Funding was by far the largest obstacle cited by respondents to producing the research they saw as necessary for the field and missing from the existing literature. However, distilling the problem to simply limited funds is an oversimplification of the experience of these respondents. 18% of respondents cited funders' priorities as leading to disparities in which research areas get chosen for development. A few respondents went as far as to argue that funding instability forced activist organizations to focus on short-term projects rather than the broad, long-term commitments necessary for ongoing research partnerships.

“Without [stable funding], the research orgs and universities drive the bus, because it all becomes projects, with project funding - advocacy requires ongoing work, sudden reactions to events, formal legal work, lobbying, etc., that projects do not fund.”

Some also felt that funding for research was too driven by Western priorities and trends, citing the upsurge in funding of privacy and surveillance research following Edward Snowden's leaks of information about U.S. International and domestic spying practices in 2013 and the increased “fake news” research following the 2016 U.S. Presidential election as an example of how projects that support Western political, corporate, and security interests and concerns are more successful in the ongoing competition for research funding. Others lamented

how issues related to both intellectual property and the impact of international trade deals on digital rights have seen previous funds reduced as funders priorities have changed.

Datasets

Respondents were asked if there were specific datasets that would assist them in their work. While specific data needs can be niche and vary by subfield, our survey identified broad types of data—legal data (mentioned by 33% of participants), network data (34%), online user data (35%), and market data (18%). According to respondents, the digital rights community lacks comprehensive, accessible databases of case law and policy related to digital rights. Respondents cited problems accessing legal data, including limited access to comprehensive resources for case law and policy documents covering the geographic areas in which their work was focused. Respondents from certain jurisdictions, including those in Africa and Central Asia, report that such datasets simply do not exist. Even in countries and locales with comprehensive databases like LexisNexis, Justis, and Westlaw, respondents reported that the data remains inaccessible to advocacy organizations that lack the means to pay for subscriptions to these large, private databases. Respondents also pointed out the need for comprehensive libraries of relevant laws and policies from beyond the jurisdictions that their work focused on. Legal data from many jurisdictions, they argued, is necessary for international advocacy as well as domestic advocacy, as in the latter case it allows activists to present arguments to policymakers using comparative legal data.



Respondents, especially those from organizations researching issues in low and middle-income countries, expressed a desire for comprehensive sets of data garnered via network measurements. In particular, they wanted to be able to compare network latency, speed, and penetration both within jurisdictions and across jurisdictions as well as across network operators. Organizations interested in the social, economic, and speech implications of internet shutdowns were interested in combining such network data covering shutdown periods with online user data from those same periods. Respondents expressed the need for access to user data across demographics to examine the adoption and online practices of users, particularly those from marginalized communities. Respondents also noted that this quantitative user data should be supplemented with narrative data about users' experiences online in order to compile rich, human-interest stories to make arguments that are salient with both lawmakers and the public. The last type of data requested by respondents, market

data, includes responses that called for economic and structural data of telecommunications and internet markets within and across different jurisdictions, as well as data, often housed internally by ICT companies, about the actual costs of and processes associated with the provision of their services.

Respondents cited a need for "supply side" datasets which ranged from simple lists of national level stakeholders, network ownership data, spectrum licensing, and ISP market share to "user side" data sets breaking internet use down by sub-national and granular demographic variables to allow for conducting research with an eye toward marginalized communities related to categories such as gender and income. Other ICT-related datasets mentioned by respondents include those related to the internal governance of online platforms such as counts and resolutions of abuse complaints, and statistical data related to online surveillance tools and algorithms.

“ [We need] [d]ata that is usually internal to companies, such as how much it really costs for an Internet service provider to provide 1 GB or 1 MB of data over a broadband connection or over a mobile wireless connection. [This] would be invaluable in advocacy on market-related issues such as data caps, zero-rating, structural separation, competition, and affordability. ”

Lack of Collaborators

A key finding emerging from this survey is that activists may not know whether the research they need to support their efforts exists or not. Respondents reported lack of access to or knowledge of research previously published in academic journals, market research publications, or even in white papers by fellow advocacy organizations. As with the legal data discussed above, respondents reported that many academic articles were inaccessible or cost-prohibitive without a research partner based at an academic institution.

Beyond issues accessing research resources outside of academic partnerships, respondents also cited many challenges to effective resource collaborations with academics. While several respondents mentioned successful partnerships between academics and the digital rights community, others said that the potential for increased collaboration is limited by organizational factors specific to the differing makeup and practices of digital rights organizations and academic institutions. 34% of respondents cited a lack of understanding of one another, referred to by some of them as a “knowledge gap,” between activist organizations and academics, resulting in inconsistent languages, metrics, and definitions that prevent them from working on projects that meet the conflicting incentives for work that exist across these communities. 17% of respondents pointed out that capacity issues limit activist organizations from taking on researching partnerships and pursuing collaboration. One respondent described the situation: “Everyone is too busy keeping their heads above water on their own matters, to consider reaching out and taking on new projects above and beyond.”

Similarly, 22% of respondents argued that academics have different restrictions and incentives on their time, forcing individualized approaches to research and limited capacity for collaboration. Several individuals mentioned the difference between publishing in academic

journals, which often have lengthy review and publishing timelines, and the rapid-paced policy processes that digital rights organizations look to influence. A few respondents articulated their frustration with the dissonance between academia’s focus on theoretical and descriptive outcomes and the activist community’s need for action-oriented outcomes, specifically the failure of academics to “translat[e] research results into effective advocacy.” By contrast, another respondent was concerned that advocacy organizations are potentially entering into advocacy campaigns without doing the research necessary to achieve success.

“Time for both areas is a different concept. Activists work on a very tight schedule whereas academics have a more relaxed understanding on time. Objectives are different, and to align them can be problematic.”

As with the barriers to research production described above, many respondents (38%) also mentioned funding-related issues as the largest barrier to research collaborations between academia and the digital rights community. These issues included a lack of long-term stability in funding, competition for funding with potential partners, and the complicated funding structures that prioritize specific research areas. One of the most mentioned problems was what one respondent called the “scramble for funding opportunities,” making it more likely that potential partners position themselves as opponents rather than collaborators. This problem was especially prevalent in small organizations, who reported turning down collaborative requests due to lack of funding and capacity to extend beyond their primary projects.



“ I think that funding creates very unfortunate competition between organizations that also serves as a barrier to collaboration. ”

Issues of coordination and communication also limit collaborations between activists and researchers. Many organizations said they lack resources and mutual awareness with which to identify potential partners and projects. Specifically, that the community lacks a database of organizations within both academia, activism, and civil society that could make clear the topics on which those organizations focus. Organizations and researchers said they do not know what potential partners are working on and only find out about shared interests after campaigns, white papers, or research is already completed. Some felt the problem was more general—a lack of willingness by researchers and activists to step outside of their own silos and territorial areas or a limited understanding of how research and advocacy can complement one another.

In theory, potential collaborators would meet at the many conferences and fora available to community members. Despite the availability of these national and regional conferences on digital rights and internet governance, many respondents cited a lack of forums or collaborative spaces specifically designed for digital rights activists and academics to interact. While large, international conferences were popular with some organizations, the high costs associated with attending these international events also were criticized as only being accessible to higher level organizational executives and staff. Organizations based or focused on areas outside of North America and Western Europe also found the international conferences to be “too-western focused.”

Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to provide empirical evidence to allow major stakeholders in the field, including activists working on the ground, academics at research institutions, and funders to have a better understanding of the research needs of the community in order to strategically fund research that is more impactful and driven by the demands and lived-realities of activists working on these issues around the world. The report describes the current research practices of the digital rights community, including the methods currently used and those that the community wants to learn more about. The community identified specific research areas that require attention from researchers and funders, as well as perceived barriers to the production of such research. The report also outlines many of the potential challenges to collaborative research between academia and researchers and some of the shortcomings of current forums. In the section below, the authors outline potential solutions to these issues, many of which were garnered from open-ended answers to various questions in the survey.

“ [The problem is] the lack of a united platform for the advocates and digital rights defenders to be in touch and share materials. ”



Going Forward: Recommendations & Key Takeaways

Funding of Research

Organizations that fund digital rights research need to push for collaborative research that is driven by local needs and the on-the-ground knowledge of activists while simultaneously taking advantage of the research skills of academics. Research plans should incorporate the needs and expertise of both communities by aiming to produce practical deliverables immediately after data analysis followed by academic papers further down the line. Funders can encourage activists and research to propose larger, complex, and more strategic research and advocacy collaborative projects by offering longer-term, renewable funding for action-oriented research.

In terms of research areas, funders interested in supporting the digital rights community should prioritize research that directly supports that advocacy by providing the evidence that activists feel is most compelling to policymakers and other important stakeholders. Market research outlining the economic and social costs of policy decisions can provide activists with data to use in lobbying efforts and to mobilize the public. While the normative and democratic frames with which net neutrality and internet shutdowns are often presented are not without merit, supplementary data is needed to help policymakers and the public truly understand the tangible impacts of policy in these and related areas. Similarly, funding is needed for qualitative research into the experiences of internet users across contexts in order to provide rich human-angle stories for activists to use in their efforts.

A particular challenge for the research community is related to the study of the “policymaking” activities of ICT companies, the internal decision-making processes that determine how users access the internet and communicate online. Many of these challenges are related to proprietary data and opaque corporate policies and algorithms. Efforts should be made to fund research of this kind despite these methodological challenges and to build spaces for collaboration, dialogue, and investigation with these private stakeholders.

Beyond supporting specific research areas, funders also have the unique opportunity to influence how research is distributed. Funders can require researchers to facilitate open access to their reports either via publishing in open access academic journals or by arranging open access when publishing in private journals. A further step would be for a funder to establish or partner with an existing publisher to fund an applied research journal that focuses on digital rights and commits to a faster peer review process. Given that many of the academics who would likely act as reviewers for such a journal also support digital rights issues, it is not unreasonable to think they would be willing to prioritize a faster turnaround of reviews without a threat to the quality of the review process.



Needed Datasets

The digital rights community needs more accessible repositories for data. Comprehensive datasets of case law and other policy documents will help both activists and researchers to understand policy processes within and across jurisdictions. Network measurement datasets can allow them to be examine existing internet access issues and understand the role of censorship in scenarios such as internet shutdowns. Aggregated user experience data can help activists and researchers explore the role platforms play in shaping the online user experience. Lastly, economic data and market research can help researchers understand issues of cost and access. All of these data are necessary so activists can work with researchers to produce strong empirical research to help inform advocacy, craft policy, and support lobbying efforts.

Proprietary ICT Company Data Issues

It is clear from the sections above that digital rights advocacy would benefit from research utilizing data housed inside ICTs. Bridges between the digital rights community, academia, and ICT companies could potentially lead to the sharing of data for specific, pre-determined research projects as mentioned above. Academia and the digital rights community must also continue to lobby for greater access and transparency from ICTs. Specifically, the digital rights community must take advantage of political opportunities, such as the recent critiques that online social networks proliferate fake news, to mobilize the public and other stakeholders around issues of open data and transparency. Some economists argue that network effects lead to the consolidation of online platforms like Google and Facebook as natural monopolies or utilities. As such, it is not unreasonable for the public to demand greater concessions from companies that occupy such privileged positions within society.

Training

While the digital rights community does indeed need to have functioning partnerships with academics to share research infrastructure and work toward shared goals, the activist community also needs to be trained in many of these methods themselves. That is not to say that activists must become researchers, but they need skills to complete relevant work without academics and to know when to seek a partnership or contract with researchers. Regarding increasing skills for activists, trainings need to be manageable for those with limited time and whose primary vocation is not research. One respondent who was enthusiastic about training articulated this need for activists to be able to learn research methods without pausing their career to pursue an advanced degree:

“Training resource[s] that a non-academic person with a full-time advocacy job could access, such as a tutorial or continuing studies / professional development course that could be done alongside their job.”

Based on the stated needs of respondents in the digital rights community, the highest priority subjects for training should be on network measurement and other technical methods like data visualization and user-centered research. Again, all activists may not become experts in these highly complex methods, but at minimum they need to understand the role they can play in producing relevant research for advocacy. The digital rights community also needs to offer trainings in legal methods both to improve targeted advocacy efforts but also to shrink the knowledge gap between activists and those in the policy community. Given the concerns raised by activists about the costs of attending international meetings and trainings, trainings should ideally be offered at the regional level.

Trainings also have the opportunity to serve dual purposes for the digital rights community—training activists and developing the foundation



for partnerships with academic researchers. Such events would provide the opportunity for activists and academics to overcome some of the barriers to collaboration—differing languages, incentives, and timelines—discussed in this report. Researchers would have the opportunity to learn how to better communicate strategically and to understand the activist communities whose activities are often the subject of their own work. Activists can similarly learn about the priorities and concerns of researchers while gaining skills about the methods themselves.

Information Sharing, Strategic Community Building, and Online Platforms

The digital rights community needs to better leverage the internet as a platform to increase skills, allow for information sharing, and encourage collaborative opportunities amongst its own members and with research communities. Online events like webinars, while potentially lacking the personal touch of in-person trainings, can be used to meet some of the same training goals discussed above without the large cost of in-person events.

“I think an annual or bi-annual international conference that is designed primarily for remote participation, but still is as high quality as other major digital rights events would allow for broader collaboration opportunities.”

“We need funding opportunities to build a bridge between activities and research, [including] training for NGOs [and] forums where NGOs can meet with the research community.”

Online and offline events also need not be seen as separate entities. For example, a series of online methods trainings offered in advance of an in-person conference could allow attendees — researchers and practitioners — to enter an event having already overcome some of the knowledge-related barriers to collaboration.

An online platform for the digital rights community could also be invaluable for the digital rights community to overcome many of the barriers to research production discussed above. At minimum, the community should have a platform that indexes existing research so activists know what already exists and can leverage it without re-inventing the wheel or entering into campaigns from a weaker position than they would had they known about the research available to them. Such a platform could also provide a message board or forum for researchers and activists to share information about their current projects and to identify collaborative opportunities.



As a concluding recommendation, many respondents expressed frustration that organizations in this space are less aware of others' activities, operating without coordination or larger strategic action and even with the impediments created by the competition for limited funding. Beyond research-related issues, the digital rights community should come together—funders, activists, technologists, researchers, and other stakeholders—to think through some of these structural challenges and come up with longer-term collective strategies that acknowledge both the individual needs of specific communities and global internet freedom objectives.

“The main barriers include a lack of networking and constant communication between organizations. There must be a consistent alliance among certain groups that constantly share information. It will also help if different organizations have one common goal over a timeline.”

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