

The Future

of the

Internet

Freedom

Ecosystem



**Fostering
collaborative
growth for
practitioners**



Introduction

Exploratory Research: Goals and Approach

From 2022-2023, the Greater Internet Freedom Project conducted research into the digital rights and digital security ecosystem with the aim of identifying the needs and concerns of practitioners working across the internet freedom landscape.

In our approach we committed to listening to, learning from, and reflecting together with people who work directly in the field.

We see research as a tool that we can use to help create positive futures. This study used both traditional and co-creation research methods to understand the issues at stake and imagine opportunities for tackling them.

We hope that this report facilitates the following: 1) a deeper understanding of strategies that can help people thrive professionally, and 2) inspiration for new interventions to advance and sustain the work of individuals and organizations.

Research process and methods

Step 1: Explore concerns

Understand the internet freedom landscape, specifically the needs and challenges of people working in the field.

How: *Interviews*

Step 2: Frame the challenge

Select one challenge among all the issues surfaced during interviews to respond to in the next phase.

How: *Thematic analysis*

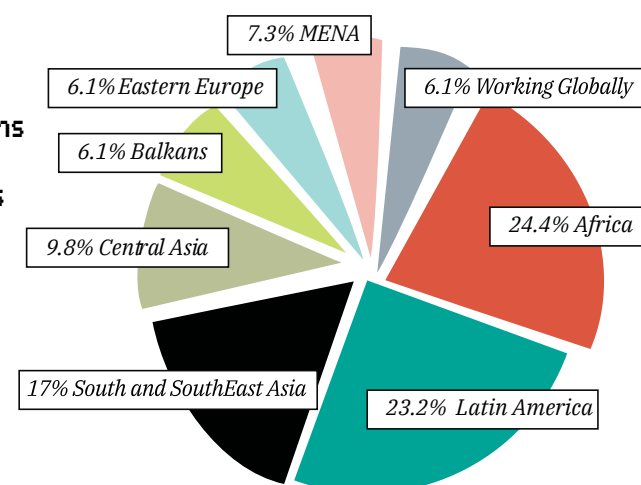
Step 3: Envision interventions

Co-create actionable interventions aimed at addressing the selected challenge.

How: *Co-creation workshop*

Who took part?

- 56 interviewees working in digital rights and security across 7 regions
- 20 co-creation workshop participants
- 11 advisory board members



The selected challenge

Continuous skill development and career growth for digital rights and digital security practitioners.

This challenge stems from three key themes that emerged from interviews:

Capacity	Community	Standard
In an ever-changing landscape, all roles call for continuous capacity building.	Practitioners recognize a need for expanded sharing of skills and knowledge within the global internet freedom community.	Interviewees called for a common framework that clarifies potential career paths and the skills needed to work and grow in the field.

A note on data analysis: To select the challenge, we used principles of participant validation,¹ asking GIF advisory board members to assess our analysis of the interviews and the framing of the challenge. From there, we applied thematic analysis² to data from the co-creation workshop (anonymized notes from participant conversations and materials produced during workshop activities). The themes that emerged from the workshop analysis were compared to the interview analysis. We have included feedback and anonymized quotes from both workshop and interview participants in this report.

[1] Lindheim, T. (2022). Participant Validation: A Strategy to Strengthen the Trustworthiness of Your Study and Address Ethical Concerns. In G. Espedal, B. J. Løvaas, S. Sirris & A. Wæraas (Eds.), *Researching Values* (pp. 225-239). Springer.

[2] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuro-psychological, and biological* (pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association.

PART 1

Careers in Internet Freedom:

Current state

Key insights and generative discussion pulled from the research

SHARED STRATEGIES

Your community is your career guide

Navigate options

- Get job recommendations and advice from peers.
- Follow professional influencers to watch for trends and opportunities.

Create credibility

- Strong relationships are essential to building trust with relevant stakeholders.

Build and nurture networks

- Sustain relationships built during projects.
- Join existing networks and communities.
- Create connections on professional platforms (e.g. LinkedIn).
- Participate in face-to-face conferences and meetups (international and regional).

Self-learning and a research attitude: must-have skills

“To keep up with knowledge, you must have a proactive attitude, constantly read research reports and newsletters, analyze the work of other organizations, and participate in courses.”

Share your work

Publish articles, join panels, participate in conferences and workshops.

Develop empathy alongside technical expertise

- “We can’t focus on technical competence alone because that can gaslight people into caring much less about the community they serve.”
- “IT professionals entering the civil society space have good technical knowledge, but often cannot communicate with some audiences.”

Careers in Internet Freedom

●●● SHARED CONCERNS

Continuous learning requires time and resources

- “People have a huge workload so it’s difficult to keep up and improve skills.”
- “Some of the best courses in digital security are from private sector providers.”
- “Good training programs cost an arm and a leg!”

Trust-building challenges in digital security

Hiring a trustworthy DS practitioner

- “There are no indicators of trustworthiness or legitimacy for a digital security person. You just have to go by recommendation. But if you’re not well-connected in this community, who do you reach out to?”
- “If someone comes up to you and says they are a digital security practitioner, how do you measure that? In the internet freedom space, we haven’t yet figured out how to hold people accountable.”

Pros and Cons of Certification

- “The lack of certified courses does not affect established professionals, as their beneficiaries know and trust them. However, building trust is difficult for someone new to the field.”
- “I think there needs to be some kind of standard before someone calls themselves a digital security trainer and starts working with communities at risk.”
- No clear consensus on whether certification would address the trust problem: “Is there a universal way to measure practitioner skills?” “Are we at risk of increasing exclusionary practices?” “Who has the authority to certify?”

Uncertainty in career growth

- “Our options are not clear. Your trajectory depends on how the funder shifts the project.”
- “Career progression hits a deadlock...options vanish.”
- “A lot of the opportunities are entry level. For a digital security professional who’s been in the field for ten years, it’s hard to keep growing.”

Network building can be expensive

- “To build your own network you need resources to travel, attend conferences, spend time with other organizations, participate in meetings and events...”
- “Networks built during projects must be sustained beyond the project lifetime.”

Disparity and imbalance

- “There’s a knowledge barrier that has an economic basis. We are training ourselves in parallel to producing, trying to find time to keep up-to-date. In the Global North, people are paid to study these subjects.”
- Many networking/educational opportunities presuppose that participants know English.

Remuneration

- “Salaries deter people from working in civil society.”
- “Once you start working in the civil society realm, it becomes difficult to move to the private sector, because working for CSOs is not considered prestigious.”
- “More respect is needed for the digital security profession from governments.”

Recognition from the global community

- “You have to work with major organizations to get credibility.”
- “To access funding you often need references from other organizations to even apply. Well-established organizations should help small organizations disseminate their work.”
- “It’s challenging to continue working without getting attention or acknowledgement from the wider community.”

Job instability

“Many jobs depend on project funds. This generates instability that makes it difficult for civil society organizations to develop their own staff.”



Imagined Futures

What does a thriving future look like for internet freedom practitioners?

Workshop participants imagined a hypothetical "newspaper of the future" containing stories of four initiatives that positively impacted the work of practitioners and the wider community.

Future 1 - Internet Freedom Funding Responds to Local Communities' Security Needs

The traditional funding structure has been dismantled. Local organizations are now applying directly for funding, allowing funding programs to respond to the needs of local communities, especially those related to security. Communities can now own their security processes without depending heavily on external assistance. *"Before, someone would come to our organization, fix everything and leave. Now we have the capacity to manage our own security,"* says a local organization.

Keys to success:

- A capacity-building program on finance and project management for local organizations
- A curriculum and a system administration guide to help local organizations understand and manage their security infrastructure and processes

Impact:

The number of requests for direct assistance from international organizations has considerably decreased. As a side effect, digital security practitioners are no longer targeted more than other IT specialists. *"I can't pay my rent, but I'm happy for the community,"* a former digital security INGO employer says, smiling.

Future 2 - Women Are Taking Over Cybersecurity

A new network is empowering women to take ownership of their digital security and increasing the number of women working in cybersecurity. The network was established by women trainers, existing tech communities, civil society organizations, universities, and funders. The work began with capacity-building courses that followed a curriculum aimed at strengthening the empathic communication skills of digital security practitioners. Women who participated in the course were invited to join a Signal group where they could be in touch with other like-minded women professionals. The group grew into a larger network that offers mentorships, networking events, and capacity-building resources.

Keys to success:

- Using social media to spread the word and share testimonials from women in the tech industry
- Networking events and webinars that allow women to strengthen connections and share experiences

Impact:

The network is building a diverse and empathetic tech world by protecting women's digital security and making women's voices and contributions more visible.

"In 2016 I was blackmailed by an unknown source who threatened to release my private pictures. Terrified and desperate, I came across an advertisement for a cybersecurity course meant to protect women from digital attacks like blackmailing. The course gave me the tools to solve my problem and empower myself and other women in my community," says Sonia, a digital security expert.

Future 3 - Unleashing Potential: Peer-to-Peer Learning & Community Empowerment

“Why do we need an actor that centralizes the knowledge and certifies the skills of practitioners if we can build on community legitimacy?” asks a member of the recently established Peer-to-Peer Internet Freedom Learning Network. The network is a learning space that brings together civil society organizations (CSOs) and digital rights practitioners to share best practices, experiences, and mentorships—leveraging the existing knowledge of its members. It also encourages a culture of sharing among donor actors, which supports the coordination of funding efforts, avoids redundancy, and fosters a long-term vision. The network organizes periodic encounters between donors, CSOs, and practitioners to explore how they can better match each other's expectations.

Keys to success:

- Legitimization of the knowledge owned by community members
- Structured peer-to-peer exchange flow
- Training for facilitators of peer learning spaces
- Transparent communication and willingness to support rather than compete

Impact:

The network provided practitioners with more opportunities to grow their careers, access to skills and knowledge, better exposure to funding, and new collaborations and partnerships. Meetings between donors and CSOs have led to funding for *“projects that matter to local communities rather than those that only please the donors,”* as described by one organization.

Future 4 - Global Cluster of Excellence In Digital Rights Established

“I had hit a deadlock in my digital rights career. The Cluster of Excellence kept me on track. I discovered a mentorship program that offered me an opportunity to find growth in the digital space. I entered a funded PhD program at a member university and now I’m an AI expert.” This is one of many testimonials from professionals who joined the Global Cluster of Excellence in Digital Rights. The Cluster is a group of actors from universities, civil society organizations, media, and the private sector who joined forces to work together on digital rights issues—enabling a holistic approach and bringing diversity and multisectoral collaboration to the field.

Keys to success:

- The development of new tools to promote learning and collaboration among members, such as training programs, mentorships, (in)formal sharing groups, and a community of practice
- Ad-hoc designed MA and Ph.D. programs, such as the Master of Jurisprudence in Digital Rights

Impact:

The Cluster provides digital rights practitioners with a comprehensive education to advance their individual careers, and member organizations with opportunities to strengthen their skills and strategies, build joint activities, and share research, training, and mentoring.



PART 3

Call to Action

Recommendations

We believe in the transformative power of research. The implications of this study led to five core recommendations for advancing practitioners' work and building a diverse, equitable, and inclusive internet freedom community. (The actions here are not exhaustive, and we encourage you to share your ideas for expanded possibilities with us.)

1. Advocate for a locally-led community

The skills a practitioner needs vary depending on the peculiarities of a given context (e.g. legislation, technologies, social needs). Consequently, a universal approach to defining, teaching, and assessing the capacities of practitioners is inadequate for the global internet freedom community. Similarly, top-down approaches to defining priorities and setting project agendas may not address the actual needs of local communities. Empowering local actors—grassroots communities, partner organizations and civil society—to take an active role can make a real impact on the ground.

Actions:

- Embrace a co-creation mindset. Involve local organizations during the conceptualization of the project; empower them to define the project agenda and priorities.
- Create content targeted to specific countries or audiences. Examples: do research in those countries or communities that have not received much attention (e.g. remote areas); adapt training materials in terms of language and contents; develop methodologies to work with people with special needs (e.g. older people).
- Promote the creation of local professional networks. Such networks can better respond to the needs of individuals and organizations working in specific regions. Facilitate connection between local networks and global communities to promote mutual learning.
- Rethink current models for funding allocation. Existing approaches often lead to local actors having limited access to financial resources.

2. Provide financial aid to guarantee professional development FOR ALL

Often the ability of practitioners to take advantage of learning and networking opportunities depends on the economic capacity of individuals and organizations. Inequitable access to crucial resources perpetuates existing Global North/South power dynamics. Providing broad economic support for professional development will build a more inclusive global community and ensure all beneficiaries receive high-quality support.

Actions:

- Provide full funding, discounted rates, and scholarships that allow more people to access training courses, obtain certification, and attend conferences.

3. Promote a culture of sharing that fosters community growth

Building connections between organizations and individuals working on similar causes (at regional, national, and international levels) is an important aspect of supporting the work of practitioners and the community at large. By promoting a culture that shares skills and knowledge widely, we can expand opportunities for solidifying best practices within the field.

Actions:

- Build networks devoted to sharing practices and skills among practitioners and organizations.
- Establish exchange programs (such as mentorships and fellowships) that promote cross-fertilization of ideas and allow practitioners to temporarily work in another country and learn from other contexts and organizations.
- Build facilitation capacities targeting peer learning and skills sharing (e.g. a network of trained facilitators).



4. Support individuals and smaller organizations in building credentials and gaining legitimacy

Building credibility is essential to everyone working in this ecosystem—especially digital security practitioners, who give advice that can protect or harm other people. Recommendations and existing relationships are often the primary way for practitioners to find job opportunities and for smaller organizations to access funding. This situation makes it hard for newcomers and smaller organizations to participate.

Actions:

- Develop certified courses for digital security practitioners. Evaluate factors influencing attitudes toward certifications across the internet freedom community, ensuring that any new certifications do not perpetuate exclusionary practices.
- Define mechanisms to assess the credentials of digital security practitioners without sharing sensitive information.
- Foster a network of champions (e.g. influencers in the field) who value and give visibility to the work of individuals and smaller organizations.
- Established organizations should take concrete actions to acknowledge contributions from local organizations and partners.

5. Provide structural support as part of a long-term investment in people and organizations

When a project ends, funding vanishes and the actions started during the project often cease, undermining any long-term impact. This affects the ability of local organizations to grow and build solid infrastructure and sustainable strategies. Partnerships and relationships built during projects—essential to the professional development of individuals and for establishing best practices—need to be sustained over time.

Actions:

- Provide multi-year grants that allow work to continue, both in terms of assessing impact and sustaining established networks.
- When financing technological development, account for resources needed for maintenance and sustainability.
- New initiatives should build on what is already available and/or developed in previous projects.

Be part of this journey!

We acknowledge that many perspectives have not yet been captured by this project, and that further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the issues faced by internet freedom practitioners.

We are committed to empowering others to contribute to and improve upon this study. Here are three ways you can join us on this research journey:

Share your ideas

Do you have an idea for an initiative that supports practitioners' career growth? Share it with us through [this form](#) or drop us a line at GTP-GIF-Admin@internews.org.

Replicate and improve upon this work

We open our research blueprint to any actors willing to give continuity to this study. You can help produce new knowledge on this topic by hosting a co-creation workshop. [Download the workshop kit](#) and learn how to engage other internet freedom practitioners in reflecting on, advancing, and sustaining their work. We will be happy to feature your contributions on our channels.

Help spread the word

The materials produced throughout this project (report, activities, workshop kit) are designed to be dynamic research tools that can be used and adapted for different communities. Please share any and all elements to foster further engagement and reflection.

Materials



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