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Human rights are still in demand



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By Geoff Dancy & Christopher J. Fariss



As human rights passe? Over the last decade many commentators, including some in Open Global Rights, have speculated that the human rights discourse has lost salience, that the human rights movement is in a crisis of legitimacy, and that the human rights regime no longer empowers those it aims to protect, especially in the Global South.

If these accounts are true, it means that human rights are quite literally unpopular: they are no longer of the people, nor for the people. If you are a purveyor of human rights, you are selling an old product that no one wants anymore. Instead of wasting your time, you should consider new languages of advocacy and resistance.

There is one problem. Most claims about waning demand for human rights are based on impressions, not systematic evidence. As social scientists, we were curious whether human rights are actually becoming less resonant. And if so, how would we know?

In new research, we answer these questions using a relatively new resource: worldwide Google Trends data. After collecting and analyzing recent search data from 109 countries in five different language groups, we found little to no evidence that people are becoming less interested in human rights. The language is just as popular as it was a decade ago. In fact, today people search for information on human rights far more than they search for other political concepts like social justice, inequality, or national security.

Even further, we found something that no one expected: human rights interest is far more pronounced in the Global South than in the Global North. For instance, we ranked countries by how much their populations search for human rights on the internet, per capita. In the English-speaking world, Zimbabweans, Zambians, and Ugandans search the most for human rights. The British rank 17th, and people in the US rank 28th. To put this in perspective, the average Ugandan searches for human rights on Google 7.3 times more than the average person in the US does.

The Spanish-speaking world shows a similar pattern. Interest in human rights is most concentrated in the three Northern Triangle countries of Central America—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—not in wealthier states like Spain, Argentina, or Chile.

These findings do not fit well with recent critiques of human rights, which have argued that the global movement is more “top-roots” than grassroots—or that it has been captured by professionalized, neoliberal elites who are obsessed with law but disconnected from the needs of the subaltern. Search data show, to the contrary, that people in under-privileged areas around the world are thirsty for information about human rights law and institutions.

The reason for this is simple. People become concerned about rights when they face regular state violence and oppression. We discovered that violations to physical integrity drive Google searches for human rights—more so than many other possible factors like Western foreign aid



One common response to our work is that Google Trends data do not reflect real social processes on the ground. We disagree for a variety of reasons. Our assumptions are simple: (1) individuals in a population receive cues that spark their interest in human rights; (2) they turn to the internet to privately seek information; and (3) when they do, they decide to use Google as a search tool. These same assumptions are used in other studies that use search data to detect oncoming influenza epidemics or stock market fluctuations based on internet activity. The fact is that Google search data is a useful new tool for observing societal trends.

A second response is that our research is obvious. On a recent Reddit thread, users mocked us for publishing self-evident and unimpressive results. “You mean people are more interested in human rights in areas where there are likely to be fewer [human rights]? Why is that surprising?”

Maybe it is not surprising. But in academic circles, critical accounts have come to dominate thinking. We often hear that human rights are losing ground, that they are imposed by the neocolonial West, and, ultimately, that they are “past their sell-by date.” This bundle of narratives is so pervasive that it shapes common expectations and, perhaps, blinds us to the fact that the human rights program maintains an expansive global reach.

We think that critics have gone too far and that they are missing the mark. But why?

There are many reasons, but one is privilege. In their back and forth over the resonance of the global human rights movement, Western scholars adopt the posture of “self-appointed representatives.” From their university positions, they speak on behalf of communities to whom they do not belong and, in the absence of valid data, they use selective interviews and anecdotes to offer far-reaching conclusions.

We too are sometimes guilty of relying too heavily on our theoretical intuitions. However, our experience doing field research in countries like Haiti, Kenya, and Sri Lanka supports the inferences we draw using big data. People facing state violence or living in conflict zones are quick to appeal to human rights. And they are not, as Mattias Mahlman writes, “particularly impressed by the human rights criticism that has been recently formulated in academic debates.”

Furthermore, thinking of human rights as a Western, neoliberal movement that attempts to persuade or missionize “over there” ignores the fact that people in the Global South are the hidden authors and active participants in the creation of the human rights imaginary. Human rights critique might be more thoroughly Western than the human rights discourse itself.

Evidence suggests that the world is not collectively moving on from human rights. And even if one wanted human rights to be replaced by other repertoires of resistance, this is not a change that would be made easily. The language of human rights is far more popular than the alternatives.



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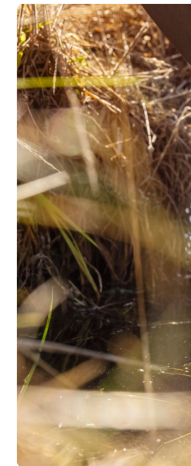


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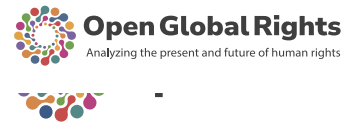


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