Terms of Reference

SDR UK Social Platforms Data Access Taskforce

Purpose

Researchers currently face significant barriers accessing data from online social platforms – such as social media, video-sharing services, messaging apps, online forums, and livestreaming platforms. The SDR UK Social Platforms Data Access Taskforce will **champion and advocate for improved access and utilisation of data** held by social platforms for research that benefits the public.

It will support SDR UK in developing clear policy positions on data acquisition approaches and inform government (including Ofcom and DSIT) to develop policy around the regulation of researcher access to information from online platforms. The Taskforce will convene key stakeholders to provide crucial thought leadership and strategic recommendations to shape a transparent, secure, and ethical data-sharing environment.

The objectives of the taskforce are to:

- Champion and advocate for improved access to social platforms data for independent research.
- Gather evidence and recommend enhanced ethical frameworks and responsible data sharing policies.
- Collect and share knowledge, learning, and best practices in data access and use.
- Make recommendations to expand the scope of research insights and evidence on priority themes like Online Safety and Health and Wellbeing.

Membership

The Taskforce comprises two co-chairs and a core team, and will draw wider membership from academia, public and private sectors, and civil society. Founding roles include:

Co-chairs:
- **Dr. Amy Orben:** A UKRI Future Leaders Fellow at the University of Cambridge, leading internationally recognised research on mental health and digital technology use in adolescence.
- **Professor Kate Dommett:** Professor of Digital Politics at the University of Sheffield, focusing on digital technology's impact in electoral politics and advising policymakers.

Core Members:
- **Professor David Zendle:** Expertise in data donation and infrastructure, developing ethical frameworks for data donation and exploring alternative data access mechanisms.

    ○ **Mark Scott:** Senior resident fellow at the Digital Forensic Research Lab's Democracy + Tech Initiative, focusing on comparative digital policy and governance, and advising Ofcom.

Workstreams

The Taskforce's work comprises four integrated workstreams:

- **Data access models and methodologies:** Evaluating and comparing diverse data access models (e.g., data donation, web scraping, APIs) to develop best practices and explore new tools for ethical and efficient data access.
- **Legal and policy frameworks:** Contributing evidence and expertise to policy development, and shaping supportive legal and regulatory environments, including researcher data access for online safety research following the Data Use and Access Act 2025.
- **International landscape and best practices:** Analysing international approaches to data access, identifying best practices, and drawing actionable lessons for the UK context.
- **Stakeholder engagement and solutions:** Establishing constructive dialogues with social platforms and other stakeholders to foster collaboration and develop solutions for data sharing.

Deliverables

The Taskforce will produce a range of deliverables, including:

- **Reports and analyses:** The Taskforce will deliver reports and analyses, including comparative studies, policy briefs or white papers, and a final comprehensive report.
- **Recommendations and guidelines:** This includes developing recommendations for best practices and guidelines for responsible data collection and analysis.
- **Engagement activities:** The Taskforce will organise engagement activities, such as roundtable discussions, bilateral meetings, and workshops, and will develop collaborative projects or initiatives to facilitate data sharing.

Timeline

The Taskforce will operate for a **12-month period**, with specific milestones and deliverables outlined in a detailed work plan. Key milestones include:

- **Kick-off (July 2025):** Recruitment of Taskforce members, finalising financials and workplan, and initiating regular meetings with Ofcom and DSIT.
- **August-December 2025:** Investigating and evaluating data access mechanisms and international best practice; submitting consultation responses to draft legislation; convening workshops with stakeholders, Ofcom, and UKRI.
- **January-June (2026):** Finalising comparative analysis of data access mechanisms; Planning and drafting the final comprehensive report on data access, culminating in its finalisation in June, alongside a final Taskforce meeting.