Social Platforms Data Access Taskforce

Social Media Data Access to Reduce Online Harms: A Call for Action

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Smart Data Research UK established the Social Platforms Data Access Taskforce to champion responsible, ethical, and secure access to data from a wide range of online social platforms. The Taskforce brings together independent experts to provide evidence-based analysis of challenges and opportunities in this area. The views, conclusions and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the Social Platforms Data Access Taskforce and do not represent the positions of Smart Data Research UK (SDR UK) or UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

This report represents the view of Taskforce members only, and not those of any external advisors or third parties.

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Executive Summary

- Meaningful evidence on online harms is prevented by a lack of social media researcher data access. This exacerbates a long-standing power imbalance between technology companies and independent researchers.
- Lack of social media data access for vetted researchers is currently preventing critical research across the UK. This includes projects exploring the effects of social media on adolescent mental health and wellbeing, and the consequences of social media on democratic and electoral integrity.
- Researchers make a range of recommendations, including: the introduction of a secure institutional data repository for accredited research into platform data, statutory data access request mechanisms for researchers, authoritative guidance on the use of scientific methods, such as scraping, for public-interest research, and a mandate for platforms to provide well-documented data outputs.
- With governments around the world recognising the importance of social media data access for the prevention of online harms and legislating accordingly, the UK risks falling behind international benchmarks on online safety.

Foreword

Children are not an afterthought; how we treat them is a reflection of a society's values. Over the last two decades, we have seen a gradual shift in language with regards to children, from rights and flourishing to prevention of harm.

Even in that narrower task we have failed.

The technology sector has avoided meaningful accountability for the role its products play in shaping harms for children. A compromised and fragmented policy approach has left companies to make their own internal assessments of risk and impact, even while legal disclosures and whistleblowers reveal that company leaders repeatedly choose commercial interest over child safety.

We do not allow other industries to mark their own homework when safety is at stake; we should not allow it here.

This report points to a critical gap. Good policy depends on good evidence. Yet, independent UK researchers are denied access to the data needed to do that work. Parliamentary committees across both Houses have repeatedly highlighted this imbalance: companies hold vast quantities of data, while public-interest researchers are left to work in the dark.

I have stood for stronger regulation of the technology sector, and alongside researchers calling for better data access, for more than a decade. Successive governments have acknowledged the problem. But acknowledgement is not action.

It is no longer enough to make commitments in principle. Government must demonstrate its intent in practice by setting clear expectations, resisting industry pressure, and ensuring that independent scrutiny is possible. Data access is not just technical, it reveals how harm is engineered.

The current system moves too slowly to protect people. It moves too slowly to protect them, neglects their right to flourish and to freedom of thought, and largely ignores the opportunity costs of compulsive technology use. It prefers, instead, to look at direct harm - and yet moves quickly to defend the sector's claims of 'no evidence'. It is shocking that even on something as basic as enabling research access, it is failing again.

I welcome this report and its recommendations. The government must now act and set out a clear pathway for data access. Independent researchers serve the public interest and help society meet its obligation to children.

Baroness Beeban Kidron

Peer, House of Lords

Introduction

Access to social media data is essential for timely and high-quality research on issues of significant public and policy concern, ranging from child health to national security. Understanding the nuances of online harms depends on researchers being able to analyse platform data at scale. Without such access, risks to online safety cannot be robustly measured or effectively mitigated.

At present, independent researchers are significantly hindered in their ability to access the data required to conduct this work. This severely constrains their ability to assess platform impacts, generate robust evidence, and inform policymaking. The lack of meaningful data access has been repeatedly identified as a critical barrier by researchers, parliamentary committees and civil society stakeholders. In particular, inquiries by the UK Parliament's Science, Innovation and Technology Select Committee in 2019 (*House of Commons Science and Technology Committee*, 2019) and 2025 (*House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee,* 2025) and the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill (*points 414 – 419*; Department for Digital, Culture and Media and Sport, 2025) highlighted the structural imbalance between platforms and independent scrutiny, noting that researchers are dependent on limited, discretionary access granted by companies.

Under the Online Safety Act (2023), Ofcom has powers to require information from regulated services for oversight and enforcement. However, these powers are not designed to enable systematic or scalable access for independent research.

In summer 2025, Ofcom published a report commissioned under the Online Safety Act outlining three potential models for enabling researcher access to platform data (Ofcom, 2025). In parallel, the Government introduced legislative changes through the Data (Use and Access) Act of 2025 (*Data (Use and Access) Act*, 2025), creating a pathway for government to act in this space.

Together, these developments represent important achievements. The UK is now in a stronger legislative position to establish a robust framework for researcher access. Despite this, there has been little visible progress since. While the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has consistently stated that improving researcher access is a priority, an implementation plan in response to Ofcom's recommendations, which were published almost a year ago, is yet to be published. As the one-year anniversary of the report approaches, there is an urgent need to secure implementation.

This lack of action sits in tension with the government's stated commitment to tackling online harms and improving platform accountability. Without access to high-quality data, however, efforts to understand and address these harms remain fundamentally constrained.

Recent legal cases and regulatory investigations into major technology companies have further underscored the urgency of this issue. Evidence disclosed through litigation has shown that platforms are often aware of harms associated with their products, including risks to children and wider societal impacts (Sippel et al., 2026; *State of Arizona et al. V. Meta Platforms, Inc., et al.*, 2023), yet key internal data and research findings are not routinely made available to independent researchers or the public. This asymmetry of information reinforces the dependence on company-controlled narratives and limits external scrutiny. Strengthening independent access to platform data is therefore not only a matter of improving research capacity, but a necessary step towards ensuring transparency, accountability and public trust.

In a socio-political context characterised by rising population ill-health, increasing exposure to harmful online content, and growing political instability, enabling rigorous public-interest research on digital platforms is more urgent than ever. Continued delays will allow these harms to persist and evolve without adequate scrutiny.

Case Study 1: Population Health and Wellbeing

Dr Megan Wood

Senior Research Fellow, Bradford Centre for Health Data Science

Born in Bradford is an internationally recognised research programme that aims to find the answers to critical questions that could improve our future health, well-being and prosperity. Our research is currently being limited by our inability to access vital social media data.

*When it comes to social media use, children are asked: '*how much time do you spend online each day?'. *Such questions reveal nothing about what young people are seeing and engaging with online.*

Under GDPR, individuals have the right to move their data from one company to another. If we could work with young people to enable easy data donation, we could carry out critical research, including understanding real usage patterns, and identifying which children may be most at risk for online harms.

Although platforms could facilitate this, currently such access is opaque and discretionary. Without meaningful cooperation from platforms, the evidence we need to protect young people's wellbeing remains frustratingly out of reach.

"A compromised and fragmented policy approach has left companies to make their own internal assessments of risk and impact, even while legal disclosure and whistleblowers reveal that company leaders repeatedly choose commercial interest over child safety.

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Recommendations

We call for the rapid consideration of Ofcom's recommendations, and a clear timeline for establishing a functional, proportionate and secure system of social media data access for independent research.

This should include, at the very least:

1. **Establishing a secure institutional data repository** to host the most socially urgent platform data for accredited research, especially in areas such as online harms.

2. **Develop trusted intermediary governance models** to manage researcher accreditation, coordinate access requests, and oversee secure data-sharing arrangements. This would reduce operational burdens on platforms while strengthening accountability and trust.

3. **Introduce a statutory data access request mechanism** enabling accredited UK researchers to request social media platforms' data through a formal, regulated process, aligned to provisions under the EU Digital Services Act.

4. **Support the development of more reliable, well-documented research Application Programming Interfaces (APIs)** that provide consistent and proportionate access to social media platform data.

5. **Provide authoritative guidance from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) on the use of methods such as scraping and data donation for public-interest research,** addressing legal and institutional risks associated with these data access methods.

6. **Strengthen UK research capacity** through targeted funding for technical skills, secure data environments, and institutional support, to ensure access mechanisms can be used effectively in practice.

7. **Mandate platforms to provide complete, well-structured and well-documented data outputs,** including clear metadata, consistent variable definitions and sufficient contextual information to support accurate interpretation.

Case Study 2: Mental Health and Wellbeing in Young People

Professor Amy Orben

Digital Mental Health Group,
University of Cambridge

The lack of available evidence on the relationship between social media and mental health is primarily driven by social media companies not sharing necessary data with researchers. Indeed, as our concerns about the online world grow, data access has been worsening.

In 2025, digital regulator Ofcom recommended that government creates social media data repositories for research. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has agreed to facilitate this, but progress is currently unacceptably slow.

Third-party researchers contort themselves to access basic social media data to answer questions of utmost national importance. Ensuring secure data access for researchers should be a priority for population health and wellbeing.

Falling Behind on the Global Scale

Governments around the world are recognising the importance of social media data access for the prevention of online harms. Although challenges with implementation have been well documented, the European Union's (EU) Digital Services Act (DSA), which came into force in November 2022, has now been fully applicable across the EU since February 2024.

The DSA mandates a safer and more transparent online environment by regulating the responsibilities of social media platforms. It establishes tiered obligations depending on platform size, with the strictest rules applying to major social networks.

The main mechanism via which the DSA enables social media data access is Article 40, which details the types of data available under the DSA, and the steps towards enabling data access. "Vetted researchers" can obtain i) publicly accessible platform data and ii) non-internal data for public-interest research. If approved, the platform must provide relevant data while ensuring GDPR compliance, and the security of platform systems. To operationalise Article 40, the EU has introduced mechanisms supporting infrastructure for researcher access, including the 2025 Delegated Act on Data Access, the DSA Data Access Portal, and mandatory transparency reporting.

With such regulatory frameworks being implemented abroad, the UK faces falling behind international standards on online safety. This only serves to further allow the propagation of online harms, to the detriment of the public and their security.

Case study 3: Democratic Integrity

Professor Katharine Dommett

Professor of Digital Politics,
University of Sheffield

During electoral campaigns, companies and political groups can mislead and influence voters in ways that are increasingly hard to trace. Since social media platforms aren't obliged to give us their data, we are reliant on what they choose to share, hindering our ability to identify online harms and hold campaigners and social media platforms to account.

Currently, researchers in academia, the media and civil society are prevented from answering basic questions like who is active in election campaigns, and whether campaign material is authentic or deep-fake.

Researchers currently rely on a method called web-scraping (extracting data from websites using bots). However, scraping lies in a legal grey area, leaving researchers and their institutions open to litigation by platforms. This presents a huge barrier to vital, public-interest research.

Strong action by Government could address such challenges and to help keep our elections safe and fair.

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