Social Platforms
Data Access
Taskforce

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Written evidence submitted by the Social Platforms Data Access Taskforce

About us: The Social Platforms Data Access Taskforce was established by UKRI's Smart Data Research UK to support responsible, ethical and secure access to data from online social platforms. The Taskforce brings together researchers, civil society representatives and other stakeholders working on social media data access for public-interest research. The Taskforce is co-chaired by Professor Katharine Dommett (University of Sheffield) and Professor Amy Orben (University of Cambridge).

Executive summary

1. Access to social media data for public-interest research currently depends on fragmented and largely platform-controlled mechanisms. This limits the ability of independent researchers, regulators and policymakers to assess how platforms operate in practice.

2. Key barriers include legal uncertainty, dependence on platform-controlled access, weak technical operability, and uneven institutional capacity.

3. No single solution will address these challenges. A combined approach is required, including clearer lawful pathways for research, more dependable access mechanisms, improved data portability and data-donation systems, and governance models that support secure and accountable access.

4. Public-interest data access should be recognised as part of the UK's evidence and R&D infrastructure, rather than treated as a voluntary or discretionary area of platform cooperation.

Introduction: Why does access to platform data matter?

Public authorities in the UK are increasingly required to make decisions about digital platforms across areas including online safety, misinformation, public health and democratic integrity. While recent legislation, including the Online Safety Act 2023 and the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025, has strengthened oversight, independent access to platform data remains limited in practice (Ofcom, 2025).

Parliamentary scrutiny has highlighted the need for greater transparency around platform operations, including around algorithmic systems and content moderation practices (Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, 2025).

Policymakers are also calling for an evidential basis to inform policy making on issues including social media access for under-16s. However, this evidence is difficult to generate under current access conditions, creating an evidence gap.

Governmental action to ensure access to social media data for public-interest research is vital to ensure the UK can generate an evidence base for effective digital governance.

Objectives of this submission

This submission outlines current barriers to accessing social media data for public-interest research, and highlights how these barriers affect the UK's ability to generate independent evidence for digital governance. It identifies practical, policy-relevant measures to support lawful, secure and effective data access, and aims to inform ongoing parliamentary and regulatory discussions on platform transparency and accountability.

Current barriers to data access

Fragmented and uneven access: Researchers rely on a patchwork of access routes, including APIs, archives, transparency reports, released datasets, portability tools, data-donation approaches and scraping methods. These routes rarely provide comprehensive, stable or independent access (Ofcom, 2025; Davidson et al., 2023). In some cases, researchers adapt or abandon projects due to lack of access.

Dependence on platform-controlled access: Access is often determined by platform decisions. Data may be partial, subject to restrictive conditions, altered without notice, or withdrawn entirely. This limits the ability to conduct long-term, systematic research (ESRC & Smart Data Research UK, 2025; Ofcom, 2025).

Legal uncertainty: Researchers face ambiguity around data protection law, platform terms of service and jurisdictional issues. Even where risks are limited, the potential for legal challenge can discourage research. Institutions often adopt cautious compliance approaches, creating delays and administrative barriers.

Weak technical operability: Data outputs are frequently incomplete, poorly structured or difficult to interpret. Portability and data-donation systems face challenges in usability, interoperability and standardisation (De Hert et al., 2018; van Driel et al., 2022; Ohme and Araujo, 2022).

Uneven institutional capacity: Smaller universities and civil-society organisations are less able to absorb legal risk or build technical infrastructure. This results in concentrating research capacity within a small number of well-resourced institutions and excluding others.

Skills and training gaps: Many research teams lack specialist expertise required to manage complex data access processes, including secure data handling and regulatory compliance.

Recommendations

Multi-faceted data access solutions are needed to open and maintain data access through different means:

Establish a secure institutional data repository: Create a trusted repository to host the most sensitive and socially urgent platform data for accredited research, especially in areas such as online harms. This would enable secure, privacy-protecting access to data that cannot be shared through other mechanisms.

Develop trusted intermediary governance models: Support independent intermediary organisations to manage researcher accreditation, coordinate access requests, and oversee secure data-sharing arrangements, reducing operational burdens on platforms while strengthening accountability and trust.

Introduce a statutory data access request mechanism: Enable accredited UK researchers to request social platforms data through a formal, regulated process, similar to provisions under the EU Digital Services Act, to reduce reliance on discretionary and platform-controlled access routes.

Improve and stabilise API access for researchers: Support the development of reliable, well-documented research APIs that provide consistent and proportionate access to social platform data, to enable more sustainable, concrete and reproducible research.

Clarify lawful pathways for data access: Provide authoritative guidance on the use of methods such as scraping and data donation for public-interest research. Additionally, address legal and institutional risks associated with data access methods, including potential conflicts with platform terms of service.

Investing in research capability and infrastructure: 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.

Improve data quality and standardisation across platforms: Encourage 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. At the same time, establish minimum cross-platform standards for data formats, metadata and transfer mechanisms to ensure consistency and interoperability, enabling datasets from different platforms to be reliably combined and analysed.

Extend data access frameworks to AI systems: ensure that emerging AI systems are included within data access frameworks for public-interest research, to facilitate independent scrutiny of their societal impacts and use within digital platforms.

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