

# SMMA Academic Advisory Group Meeting Minutes

Meeting 1 | 27 May 2025 | 7:00 – 9:00am (AEST)

## Attendees

Affiliation	Name
eSafety	Commissioner Julie Inman Grant Kathryn King, General Manager, Technology and Strategy (Chair) Deborah Welsh, Executive Manager, Strategy, Engagement and Research Members of the eSafety Research and Evaluation Team
Social Media Lab, Stanford University	Professor Jeff Hancock Dr Sunny Xun Liu Members of the SML team
Macquarie University	Distinguished Professor Bronwyn Carlson
Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University	Professor Katherine Keyes
MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, University of Cambridge	Dr Amy Orben
Winston Center for Technology and the Developing Mind, University of North Carolina	Distinguished Professor Mitch Prinstein
School of Education, Deakin University	Professor Julian Sefton-Green
Black Dog Institute, University of New South Wales	Associate Professor Aliza Werner-Seidler
Social Dynamics and Well-Being Laboratory, Georgia Institute of Technology	Associate Professor Munmun De Choudhury
Young and Resilient Research Centre, Western Sydney University	Professor Amanda Third

## Apologies

Professor Peter Etchells

Professor Jo Robinson

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## High Level Outcomes

- The advisory agreed to meet quarterly, with the proposed meeting schedule for 2025 as follows:
  - Advisory Group Meeting #2 26th August 2025
  - Advisory Group Meeting #3 11th November 2025
- eSafety provided updates on:
  - Proposed approach for managing collaboration and inputs from the Advisory, via quarterly meetings, more regular special interest groups into which members will self-nominate
  - Timelines and key milestones for the evaluation.
- The draft Terms of Reference (ToR) were discussed, and some amendments and points for further clarification were proposed by the attendees.
- Stanford Social Media Lab (SML) facilitated a dialogue on preliminary thinking regarding the design of the evaluation.

## Action Items

### Academic Advisory Group Member Action Items

- Those members with outstanding MOUs to kindly follow-up with their respective institutions so these can be finalised as soon as possible.
- Advisory Group members to review the revised ToR and supporting guidance and indicate their agreement with these via email.
- Advisory Group members to consider drafting a public statement in response to eSafety's media release announcing the Advisory, outlining their commitment to transparency, neutrality, and following the evidence. SML will lead and coordinate the development of this statement.
- Advisory Group members to complete the Special Interest Group survey to indicate their evaluation interests.

### Academic Advisory Secretariat Action Items

- eSafety to redraft ToR based on feedback from members and recirculate for agreement.
- eSafety to circulate responses to a number of questions that were raised during the meeting and in subsequent correspondence.

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- eSafety to prepare a media release announcing the establishment of the Academic Advisory Group, outlining its function and how it fits with other advisory committees and consultation processes eSafety is leveraging to inform the implementation of SMAR.
- eSafety to share additional guidance expanding on the Terms of Reference, offering further clarification and examples of what we would consider acceptable and not acceptable behaviour related to public commentary and professional conduct. This will include a Conflict of Interest declaration form.
- eSafety to book in the Evaluation Design SIG meeting for early June.
  - Once the SIG has met, circulate draft research questions and primary and secondary outcome variables for input from the wider Advisory Group.
- eSafety to revise evaluation objective 5 to reflect member feedback.
- eSafety to circulate calendar invitations for upcoming meetings.

## Detailed Minutes

### Welcome and introductions

- eSafety opened the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country and thanked the Academic Advisory Group for their generosity in sharing their time and expertise in support of eSafety's evaluation.
- The eSafety Commissioner then gave some remarks.
  - She began by extending her gratitude to the group for their support of eSafety and sharing her belief that this approach will stand as best practice for evaluating complex and novel legislative schemes, noting that the world is watching and asking questions about the evaluation already.
  - She noted the importance of respecting children's digital rights, and that eSafety are conceptualising the restrictions as a delay rather than a strict ban.
  - She expressed eSafety's strong commitment to collaboration at all stages of implementing this evaluation.
  - She noted that the policy department who has carriage over the legislation, the Department of Communications, will conduct an independent review of the legislation. She noted:
    - This must occur within 2 years of effective commencement, which means within two years of the minimum age obligation taking effect.
    - She stressed the need for a rigorous, unbiased evaluation given the polarised nature of youth social media access.

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- She noted that the Age Restrictions are just one of a suite of regulatory and preventative measures being led by eSafety. This includes efforts to put more responsibility on service providers up and down the stack, as well as educational materials and support to empower parents and children to be safe online.
- She noted that there is still a fair degree of uncertainty regarding how the policy will be implemented, but that with a new Minister in place we expect things to progress quickly. She committed to eSafety keeping the group updated as implementation planning for the SMMA progresses, inasmuch as this relates to the evaluation.
- Stanford Social Media Lab (SML), who are the Lead Academic Partner for the evaluation, then gave some remarks:
  - SML expressed their enthusiasm to work with this group of esteemed scholars whose work they greatly admire. They emphasised the significance of this opportunity, noting Academics have an important role to play in shaping policy but don't often get this direct pipeline to policymakers.
  - SML provided some background on their research program and their own empirical interest in this topic dating back to 2010. They have a strong interest in activating knowledge in a public environment to support evidence-based change.
  - SML noted that they are building up a great team at Stanford to support the evaluation.
  - SML acknowledged that social media, young people and wellbeing is the conversation of the moment, and that we have an unprecedented opportunity for scientific investigation at a whole population level to further the evidence base and help frame the debate.
  - SML echoed the Commissioner's emphasis on clear communication, noting the importance of helping the public understand the policy's intent and measures of success. SML stressed the need to consider diverse stakeholder perspectives in the evaluation.
  - SML affirmed their commitment to producing evidence that benefits families, children, and young people.
- Members of the Advisory Group in attendance then introduced themselves and their areas of research interest as they relate to the evaluation.
- All Advisory members expressed their enthusiasm to be supporting this evaluation, citing an unparalleled opportunity to investigate the impact of social media withdrawal on the health and wellbeing of a whole population of young people.

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- There is considerable breadth and depth of expertise across the members of the Advisory, and the interests they expressed in the evaluation were numerous and complementary.

### **Discussion of Terms of Reference**

- eSafety outlined the purpose of the ToR as being to clearly outline the scope, expectations, and guiding principles for this Advisory Group. It serves as a foundational document to support transparency, accountability, and shared understanding.
- eSafety noted that there is a tricky balance to achieve to preserve academic freedom, whilst navigating the tension between independence and the public scrutiny this work is under. eSafety is operating in a highly divided and closely watched environment. Public trust in the evaluation—and in the data itself—will be essential to progressing the policy, building consensus, and ensuring the evidence base is respected and used to inform decision-making.
- eSafety acknowledged that the work of everyone on the Advisory Group is rigorous and grounded in evidence, and the strong commitment that has been espoused by all members in being led by the data and working together with integrity and transparency, evidenced in their respective EOIs and communications with eSafety to date.
- The floor was opened for questions and discussion around the draft ToR, and in particular the clauses relating to public statements and activities that could impact the perceived objectivity of the group and/or the evaluation.
- Some members interpreted the ToR as being prohibitive of giving interviews to media, however others felt it would be important for members, representing some of the foremost experts in this space, to be able to inform the public debate and discourse as other jurisdictions contemplate similar regulatory approaches.
- Members agreed that public commentary should be grounded in data, not personal opinion.
- A conflict of interest register was proposed, with a Member suggesting the IICMJE form as a template.
- Members noted that we are engaged in a collective endeavour of organised scepticism, and part of our role will be challenging each other based on the evidence and our understandings of it.
- There was agreement amongst members that laying out what we are doing as transparently and forthrightly as possible from the outset of the evaluation would help to mitigate against any potential challenges regarding the objectiveness of the evaluation.
- It was suggested that the Advisory Group put out a public statement affirming their commitment to being driven by and open to the evidence. The statement would serve as

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a transparent overview of the Advisory Group's process, the expertise of its members, and the values guiding their work. It could be released following eSafety's formal announcement of the Advisory Group to help build public understanding and trust.

- A Member asked how parent and child voices would be incorporated. It was noted that:
  - The Department has conducted preliminary consultations with parent groups and youth around the Draft Legislative Rules.
  - eSafety is planning broad and deep consultation around the regulatory guidance.
  - eSafety's Youth Council is actively advising on both implementation and evaluation.
  - eSafety's announcement could clarify how these various advisory processes align and complement one another.
- There was agreement amongst members that further guidance from eSafety would be beneficial in clarifying expectations of members, particularly some situation-specific advice regarding public commentary, and how they should speak about their role on the Advisory Group.
- It was agreed that following the meeting, the final ToR will be circulated with the minutes and additional guidance materials, and each member will be asked to confirm their acceptance of these.

### **Discussion of Evaluation Objectives and Methodology**

- SML led a discussion on the evaluation's guiding objectives and methodological approach.
  - SML emphasised the need for clear, shared goals to guide methodological decisions, with a focus on generating robust, objective evidence.
  - They gave an overview of some of the emerging themes from the burning questions and preparatory work that members submitted to eSafety regarding evaluation methods, sampling considerations and risks.
  - They noted that a mixed methods approach is likely most appropriate to help address the evaluation objectives, and that a number of methods are currently being considered.
  - Members offered some feedback on sampling considerations for the evaluation, specifically:
    - Include younger age groups (10-12 year olds)
    - Enriching the sample for the cohorts who are about to enter the age restriction, and those who ageing out

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- Settings-based, community focused sampling for the qualitative research (e.g., peer groups, football clubs, schools, etc.) to explore change in social and cultural dynamics.
- Members also provided some feedback on methodological approaches that could support the achievement of the evaluation objectives, specifically:
  - longitudinal research
  - intense qualitative work in communities
  - objective assessment of screen time and app use
  - analysis of population-level datasets and data linkage
  - assessment of real-time administrative data from telecommunications providers.
- Members also provided some feedback on the measurement/conceptualisation of outcomes for the evaluation, specifically the need to:
  - define some primary outcomes, as well as secondary outcomes for the evaluation
  - define which mental health outcomes will be captured – and to ensure we capture both internalising and externalising symptoms and disorders, etc.
  - include broader wellbeing outcomes in addition to mental health e.g., civic engagement, educational engagement and learning, academic and social outcomes (as per [National Academies Consensus Report](#))
  - consider teacher stress in addition to parent stress
  - consider the impact of the policy on social-emotional wellbeing e.g., friendship intimacy, loneliness, social anxiety, social connectedness
  - consider how to evaluate the impact of the policy on children’s digital rights
  - consider substitution effects in addition to displacement activities e.g., outdoor activities, physical activities
  - measure normative changes that will make difference
  - adopt a cross-platform approach
  - measure the presence and impact of siblings
  - consider the digital literacy of parents and carers.
- Members also provided high-level feedback on the youth survey instrument shared ahead of the meeting, specifically that it would be too long for younger adolescents. Members noted that to help prioritise, refine and reduce the items for inclusion in the evaluation, it

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would be good to have consensus around the primary and secondary research questions and outcome variables.

- It was suggested that there could be value in adoption of similar measures across studies and jurisdictions. This would help to ensure a coherent evidence base is accruing, and enable multiple points of comparison.
  - eSafety and SML expressed a willingness to facilitate this where possible.
  - A Member suggested there may be potential to include some items within the Monitoring the Future survey in the States, which is nationally representative.
- eSafety noted that there is much more discussion and work to follow on this and confirmed that the next steps for refining the methodology will be convening a Special Interest Group to review methods in early June.

### **Discussion around identifying special interest groups**

- eSafety outlined plans to establish smaller, time-limited sub-working groups to support evaluation planning between quarterly meetings. These groups will provide targeted technical advice on specific aspects of the evaluation.
- eSafety noted that certain aspects of the evaluation may be more relevant to specific members, and the aim is to involve the right expertise at the right time to ensure efficient progress.
- Special Interest Groups will be formed when at least two members express interest and will include representatives from SML and eSafety. Membership will be based on expertise and availability.
- Initially, these groups will focus on evaluation design and methodology, with scope to evolve over time (e.g., subject matter expertise, dissemination, knowledge translation).
- The first group, focused on evaluation design, will be convened in the coming weeks.
- Following the meeting, eSafety will circulate a survey for members to self-nominate into sub-working groups and suggest additional areas of interest relevant to the evaluation.

### **Overview of Timeline and Next Steps**

- eSafety acknowledged that the evaluation team are constrained by very tight timelines to progress this evaluation and establish a baseline prior to the implementation of the Minimum Age on December 11.
- eSafety reiterated that, as per the ToR, every effort will be made to incorporate feedback received within the designated consultation period. However, due to time constraints and the need to maintain project momentum, it may not be possible to follow up individually.

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- In view of this, members were alerted to some key upcoming dates:
  - **Evaluation Design Special Interest Group (SIG):** We're planning to meet with interested members in early June to refine and finalise the evaluation methodology and protocol.
  - **Review of Evaluation Materials:** Once the methodology is finalised, we'll begin drafting the evaluation materials and instruments. We anticipate sharing these with the Advisory Group for review between 23–27 June.
  - **Ethics Application and Review:** The ethics application is due on 21 July. We aim to circulate the draft application to the Advisory Group for review between 1–11 July. Members who are unable to review the ethics application before submission, we can still include them as investigators at a later stage.

### Other business

- eSafety mentioned that they are hoping to finalise MOUs as soon as possible, with a public announcement of the Group to follow shortly thereafter. Members were encouraged to reach out to the secretariat if we can assist in this process in any way.
- eSafety welcomed any other business or items for discussion.
  - A Member noted that many ideas has been discussed and cautioned against trying to do too much with the evaluation. A concern was raised that this may lead to an evaluation that produces mixed/disparate findings, which in turn gives rise to the potential for advocates of a particular position to cherry-pick insights that support their position or viewpoint.
  - SML and eSafety noted this concern and confirmed that while the purpose of this meeting was to canvas a broad range of interdisciplinary perspectives and opportunities for the evaluation, but that in the coming weeks we will need to prioritise and streamline the design:
    - eSafety, SML, and the design SIG will work to prepare a series of options for consideration by the advisory group. This will include more and less resource-intensive options.
    - The focus in the short-term will necessarily be on what needs to be fielded prior to December.
- eSafety noted that the secretariat will circulate minutes and action items from this meeting, and the additional guidance materials discussed in the meeting.
- The next meeting will be scheduled for 26th August 2025, and calendar invitations will be sent out shortly.

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- eSafety thanked everyone for their attendance and closed the meeting at 9.00am.

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