

SMMA Academic Advisory Group Meeting Minutes

Meeting 2 | 26 August 2025 | 7:00 – 9:00am (AEST)

Attendees

Affiliation	Name
eSafety	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
University of Melbourne; Royal Children's Hospital; Murdoch Children's Research Institute	Professor Susan Sawyer
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
School of Psychology, Bath Spa University	Professor Peter Etchells
Orygen; Centre for Youth Mental Health, Melbourne University	Professor Jo Robinson

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Apologies

Dr Amy Orben

High Level Outcomes

- The Advisory Group endorsed the overall evaluation design and measurement, with recommendations for targeted refinements to improve clarity and completeness, reduce burden, and strengthen alignment with existing research.
- Members were reminded to finalise and submit outstanding governance documentation, including MOUs, Terms of Reference, and Conflict of Interest declarations, ahead of the public announcement.
- The group collaboratively identified high-level key messages for a joint response statement to accompany the public announcement, emphasising independence, transparency, and the evidence-based nature 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.
- Those members who have not yet returned their Conflict-of-Interest form or formally accepted the ToR, please do so as soon as possible.
- SML to draft a public statement in response to eSafety's media release announcing the Advisory, incorporating the input from members during the meeting.
- Members to review draft public statement and endorse prior to its publication.

Academic Advisory Secretariat Action Items

- eSafety to revise the evaluation design, specifically timing of data collection waves that are scheduled for December.
- eSafety to revise the survey instrument based on member feedback.
- eSafety to submit revised tools to HREC.

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Detailed Minutes

Welcome and opening remarks

- eSafety opened the meeting with an Acknowledgement of Country.
- eSafety noted that there have been a number of important developments in the implementation of the Social Media Minimum Age initiative including substantial progress in refining the evaluation design.
- eSafety thanked the Academic Advisory Group for their generosity in sharing their time and expertise through out-of-session working groups and for providing ad hoc feedback on materials in support of eSafety's evaluation.

Situational updates and recent developments

- eSafety then provided a **situational update**, including the following notable recent developments:
 - eSafety explained that under the Online Safety Act, the Minister for Communications was required to seek independent advice from the eSafety Commissioner before making legislative rules. eSafety noted that this request was made on 12 June, and the Commissioner provided her advice on 19 June.
 - eSafety reported that, following this advice, the Minister made legislative rules on 29 July to exclude certain types of online services based on their sole, primary, or significant purpose.
 - eSafety noted that the excluded services include online gaming platforms, standalone messaging applications, and online services that support users' health and education.
 - eSafety highlighted that the Government chose not to name YouTube as an excluded service under the SMMA obligation. eSafety explained that this decision aligns with eSafety's advice, which recommended that no specific platform or service be excluded by name due to the rapidly evolving nature of online platforms and their changing risk profiles.
 - eSafety further explained that eSafety's advice included two key recommendations:
 - That the Rules should consider the risk of harm in addition to the purpose of a service, particularly in relation to the presence or absence

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of safety measures designed to mitigate risks associated with specific design choices, features, and functionalities.

- That the implementation of the SMMA should be monitored for continuous improvement, with a view to identifying emerging challenges that may require further rules or reforms.
- eSafety also noted that the legislative rules are supported by an explanatory statement, which outlines how eSafety should assess whether a platform's purpose is sole, primary, or significant. eSafety explained that this assessment should consider:
 - The features and functions of the platform.
 - How these features are deployed and influence user engagement and experience.
 - The actual use of the platform, beyond its stated purpose.
- Finally, eSafety noted that the explanatory statement acknowledges that a platform's purpose may evolve over time, and that this should be taken into account in ongoing assessments.
- eSafety provided an overview of recent **public and media reception and** an update on the **Consultation Process and Reasonable Steps:**
 - eSafety noted that the SMMA has bipartisan political support and has polling that consistently shows strong public support in Australia for greater regulation of social media, including age assurance.
 - eSafety noted that since June 2025, eSafety has been actively consulting with a broad range of experts and online service providers regarding the implementation of age restrictions under the SMMA legislation.
 - eSafety explained that these consultations have involved over 335 individuals representing more than 160 organisations. Stakeholders included academics, technical experts, industry representatives, civil society organisations, parenting groups, and children and young people from both Australia and the international community.
 - For further details, see eSafety's media release [Key steps on the Journey to a social media minimum age](#) and the summaries from the [Social media age restrictions consultation](#).

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- eSafety reported that the consultation process concluded last week, and that eSafety is now reviewing the insights and feedback received to inform the development of industry guidelines. These guidelines will outline what constitutes reasonable steps to prevent under-16s from creating accounts on age-restricted social media platforms.
- eSafety emphasised the importance of providing guidance that is both timely and evidence-based and noted that eSafety is aiming to finalise the guidelines by September.
- eSafety clarified that the regulatory guidance will be principles-based, rather than prescribing specific age assurance technologies. The goal is to support industry in taking reasonable steps while allowing flexibility in how these steps are implemented.
- eSafety explained that once the requirements come into effect later this year, eSafety may request information from service providers regarding their compliance with the age restrictions and may take enforcement action where appropriate.
- Finally, eSafety noted that the assessment framework is to be released shortly to assist industry to self-assess whether their services are included.
- The Assessment framework has now been published and is available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions/assessment>

Question from Member: How is eSafety narrating the fact that many platforms target their safety features through accounts? She expressed concern that elements of the legislation will expose children to risk of harm.

Response from eSafety: eSafety is very concerned about this and is engaging with industry about this. eSafety noted that it is their position that key safety features, including user reporting, should be available in logged out states and that the absence of such features is problematic, particularly given how many young people presently engage with platforms without an account. eSafety noted it will be important for the evaluation to monitor this as a potential unintended consequence. eSafety also highlighted the distinction between government as holding responsibility for policy design and development, whilst eSafety holds responsibility for regulatory execution and evaluation.

Project updates

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- eSafety welcomed the AAG and provided an update on the project focussing on ethical review, procurement, and emerging collaboration opportunities:
 - eSafety noted that the team has been exceptionally busy over the past few months progressing the evaluation design and supporting materials.
 - eSafety explained that this work has been undertaken in close collaboration with the Social Media Lab (SML), and members of the Evaluation Design SIG, Qualitative SIG, and the Data Linkage SIG.
 - eSafety extended sincere thanks to all those involved, acknowledging that their expertise, time, and thoughtful input have been critical to developing a robust and meaningful evaluation approach within tight timeframes.
- eSafety provided an update on ethical review,
 - eSafety explained that AIFS had agreed to hold an extraordinary meeting to review the ethics application, following some challenges with HREC committee availability. The ethics application would be submitted later that day. A decision is expected around 29 September.
 - eSafety noted the survey instrument would be shared with the committee later this week for final refinements.
 - eSafety added that a separate ethics application had been submitted to Bellberry to enable a qualitative sub-study before the legislation's effective commencement.
 - This sub-study will explore baseline knowledge and attitudes toward the SMMA legislation among children aged 10–16 and their caregivers, with potential for follow-up research.
 - eSafety confirmed the Bellberry review is scheduled for later this week.
- eSafety then provided an update on procurement:
 - eSafety noted that the team had developed a detailed Statement of Work and Request for Quote (RFQ) to procure a data collection provider for the evaluation.
 - eSafety explained that the team had met with potential providers to assess their capability and ensure alignment with the evaluation's methodological and operational needs.

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- eSafety noted that four providers were invited to respond, with submissions due by 10 September and appointment expected by month-end.
- eSafety added that discussions are ongoing with AIFS to support data linkage, and a proposal has been submitted to Telstra to access telecommunications data, with thanks to a Member for their support.
- Finally, eSafety provided an update on emerging collaboration opportunities:
 - eSafety explained that the team had been approached by colleagues from the UK Home Office and the Australian Department of Home Affairs to explore the impact of the SMMA legislation on exposure to countering violent extremism (CVE) content online.
 - eSafety noted that, after careful consideration, the team had agreed to proceed with the collaboration.
 - eSafety outlined two key reasons for this decision: to avoid duplication of a separate large cohort study, and to generate internationally comparative data that would support difference-in-differences (DiD) analysis and strengthen the evaluation design.
 - eSafety noted that CVE-related questions will be included in the baseline and wave 5 surveys and have been peer reviewed for methodological soundness.
 - eSafety explained that the CVE component would be managed collaboratively, with input from both the UK Home Office and the Australian Department of Home Affairs.
 - eSafety noted that this collaboration would contribute to a broader understanding of the legislation's impact across national contexts and inform future policy development in both jurisdictions.
 - eSafety provided an overview of the UK's Online Safety Act 2023, which places new duties on social media companies and search services to ensure user safety. Under the Act, services likely to be accessed by children were required to complete children's risk assessments by 24 July 2025, with the child safety regime fully in effect by Summer 2025.
- A Member expressed concern about scope creep regarding the inclusion of CVE questions but was gratified to hear they are only to be included at baseline and wave 5.

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Overview of Final Study Design

- SML provided an overview of the final study design, including the proposed timeline and wave structure:
 - SML confirmed that baseline and Wave 1 would be conducted while participants are still in school to ensure consistency.
 - The design includes monitoring for unintended consequences throughout the study.
- Several members of the AAG raised concerns of data collection in December.
 - In response, SML and eSafety agreed that follow-up waves originally scheduled for December will be moved to November to avoid holiday-related attrition and changes in screen time patterns.
- Other key points raised by members of the AAG included:
 - A Member raised concerns about participant burden due to the number of waves in a relatively short period. They suggested reducing the scope of Wave 3 to focus on a limited set of themes, and prioritising Waves 4 and 5 for change evaluation. They emphasised the importance of being protective of participants and transparent at baseline about what young people and parents are signing up for (e.g., number of waves and when these will occur).
 - A Member asked whether conducting a wave during or around school holidays might help capture changes in social media use across different periods of the school year. eSafety noted there is potential to undertake some qualitative work in the holiday period.

Review of Measures

- Lead by SML, the group reviewed the proposed survey measures, with several members providing feedback and suggestions for refinement.
- The group reviewed proposed child survey measures, with broad support for the inclusion of items related to digital stress, online hate, and social comparison.
 - Members provided feedback on refining the balance between internalising and externalising measures, improving alignment with other studies, and ensuring relevance to emerging issues such as school phone bans and generative AI.

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- Timeframes for recall were discussed, with agreement to limit most items to a four-week period and to consider variations between school nights and weekends.
- Recommendations were made to streamline modules and reassess certain scales to reduce participant burden and improve validity.
- The group reviewed proposed measures for the parent survey, focusing on parental wellbeing, attitudes toward the ban, and family dynamics, with some suggestions for refinement:
 - There was strong support for including indicators such as parental stress, household chaos, and preparedness to support children as the legislation comes into effect.
 - Members recommended refining digital self-efficacy items, improving clarity around child age reporting, and ensuring parents respond about a single target child throughout the survey.
 - Suggestions were made to include bespoke items on offline activity displacement, ease of implementing the ban, and frequency of discussions with other parents.
- Where possible, alignment with existing national surveys was encouraged. eSafety noted in the selection of wellbeing measures, they had prioritised those scales that were included in Australia’s Young Minds: Our Future Study, a large nationally representative survey investigating the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people aged 4-17 years in Australia.

Public Announcement of AAG Members

- eSafety provided an update on the upcoming public announcement of AAG members, scheduled for early September. eSafety expressed enthusiasm about sharing the news more broadly and emphasised the importance of finalising all required documentation to stay on track.
- Members were reminded to submit the following documents as soon as possible:
 - Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)
 - Formal email agreement to the Terms of Reference
 - Conflict of Interest (CoI) form

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- eSafety noted that the announcement cannot proceed until all documentation is received. eSafety thanked those who had already submitted their forms and urged remaining members to prioritise completion.
- eSafety advised that media interest in the group is growing, with several outlets already requesting names of Advisory Group members. While the names are not yet public and should not be shared, members were reminded that journalists may reach out directly. If contacted, members are encouraged to email the Secretariat for support, who will connect them with the Strategic Communications team.
- Communications guidelines have been circulated to assist members in responding to media or public inquiries. These resources may be helpful as external interest continues to build.
- Additional points raised during discussion:
 - eSafety noted that the AAG is not yet public and should not be shared. eSafety confirmed there is a strong desire to proceed with the announcement but reiterated that all documentation must be finalised first.
 - In a discussion around media engagement, a Member cautioned her fellow AAG members to be mindful of media, noting that journalists may seek to provoke less considered or measured responses.
 - In response to a question, eSafety advised that the preference is for members to decline media engagement related to the SMMA evaluation until the announcement is public. Once released, media responses should be guided by the key messages in the official statement, and the public communication guidelines.

Key messages for AGG statement in response to announcement

- As agreed in the previous meeting, the AAG will develop a joint response statement to accompany the upcoming public announcement of the group, tentatively scheduled for mid-September. SML led a discussion on the key messages to be included, with the aim of ensuring clarity, consistency, and protection for members.
- Key points raised during the discussion included:
 - The group agreed it is important to clearly state that AAG members do not represent the government, and that the group operates independently.

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- SML emphasised the group’s role in collecting the best possible evidence to inform both government and the public.
- There was discussion around whether to highlight the diversity of viewpoints within the group. While this diversity is a strength, members noted that drawing attention to it may expose individuals to risk. It was agreed that this should be acknowledged carefully, without being a focal point.
 - A Member recommended framing the group’s work as evidence-based, rather than opinion-driven, to avoid misrepresentation and safeguard members.
 - A Member advised that while internal differences should not be hidden, they need not be publicised. They recommended preparing for media scrutiny and working with communications colleagues on counterpoints.
- A Member suggested including the term transparency, noting it is often a public concern and a useful framing device.
- A Member noted that the evaluation cannot fully address the risks associated with specific features or functions of social media, as distinct from the content served by algorithms. They emphasised the need to clearly define the scope and limitations of the evaluation.
 - SML reiterated that this is the first society-wide intervention of its kind, and the evaluation will not answer every question. The statement should clarify what the evaluation will and won’t address.
- eSafety clarified the group’s independence, noting that eSafety is separate from government, and the AAG is further removed again. She suggested this independence be highlighted as a core strength of the group.
- The group discussed additional transparency measures, including the possibility of publicly registering the study on the Open Science Framework (OSF) to support full transparency.
- There was broad agreement that the statement should:
 - Emphasise the group’s **independence and evidence-based approach**.
 - Clearly **outline the scope and limitations** of the evaluation.

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- Reinforce the group's **commitment to a robust, transparent, and high-quality evaluation**.
- Avoid implying either endorsement of, or opposition to, the legislation itself.
- Be mindful of protecting members from undue scrutiny or misrepresentation.

Any other business and close

- Before closing the meeting, eSafety thanked members for their time, insights, and thoughtful contributions. eSafety acknowledged the group's ongoing engagement and its critical role in shaping the direction and impact of the evaluation.
- A few final updates were provided:
 - Qualitative Special Interest Group: The Secretariat will be in touch shortly to schedule a meeting. Members were asked to keep an eye out for the invitation.
 - Academic Publications: The team is receiving media requests for comment on academic papers and commentaries. Members were asked to notify the Secretariat of any upcoming publications to help manage responses proactively.
 - Conflict of Interest Declarations: eSafety will review submitted declarations over the next fortnight and follow up with members if needed. Members were reminded to keep their declarations up to date and to notify the Secretariat of any changes. A standing agenda item will be included in future meetings as a reminder.
- The meeting was formally close

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