

Your response

Question	Your response
Question 1: How, and to what extent, are persons carrying out independent research into online safety related issues currently able to obtain information from providers of regulated services to inform their research?	Confidential – N In 2024, the British Academy convened three workshop events that were aimed at generating dialogue around, and to provide a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to SHAPE researchers' (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People, the Environment and the Economy) access to online data from digital media companies. Our summary brief based on this series of workshops highlighted that researchers from SHAPE disciplines carrying out research into online safety related issues may be accessing data through the following avenues (this list is non-exhaustive): - Web Scraping/Web Crawling: Web scraping as a collection method involves the researcher extracting data from a website. Some platforms allow researchers to scrape their data only for non-commercial purposes without a need for an application. Web Crawling involves using a type of bot to index links on the web, continuously discovering new potentially relevant links. - Research Application Programming Interfaces (API's): Research API's that are tied to online platforms such as Google, TikTok, Meta, where researchers can work with large data holders to access data sets e.g., Youtube Research and TikTok Research. - Data Donations: A data collection method where researchers partner with individuals who are interested in donating their digital traces for research purposes. - Purchasing data sets: Researchers access online data by purchasing specific data sets online. - Data Repositories: Data repositories that specialise in collecting sensitive data. These include UK Data Archive and ICPSR. - Data Sharing Programmes: UKRI funded programmes such as Smart Data Research UK aim to streamline the process of access to data from online spaces.
Question 1a: What kinds of online safety research does the current level of access to information enable? • What type of independent researchers are carrying out	Confidential – N The British Academy's recent summary brief highlighted that researchers and expertise from the Social Sciences and the Arts are highly valuable in providing insights on topics related to online safety such as online misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, threatening communications, as well as understanding wider

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research into online safety matters? • What topics/issues they are researching?	aspects of engagement with online services such as device addiction, online bullying and trolling. The British Academy commissioned a large piece of work to explore and analyse impact case studies in the SHAPE disciplines from the most recent research excellence framework (REF2021), the United Kingdom's research assessment exercise. The report – and this accompanying online dashboard – aims to serve as a starting point for the SHAPE community to explore the scope and reach of the evidence base. The full report provides more information about the project and its results. The dashboard can also be used to browse the impact of SHAPE research in other topics relevant to online safety. For example, one case study that appears in the dashboard is research by the University of Liverpool, which has been utilised by Good Things Foundation to directly support projects, interventions, and advocacy – including in supporting the development of online safety skills and awareness as outcomes of national programmes.
Question 1b: Are there types of information that independent researchers are currently unable to access that may be relevant to the study of online safety matters? If so, what are they and what kind of research would they facilitate?	N/a
Question 1c: What data governance models are currently used to allow access to online services' information for researchers? • This might include: open-access forms of information-sharing, such as publicly-accessible information libraries or databases; information-sharing models that rely on vetting or accreditation of individuals or organisations; and/or models that rely on the accreditation of the specific use cases for the information. • Please provide relevant examples of these governance	Confidential – N See response to Question 1 for further details. Data governance models that are currently used include: - Research Application Programming interfaces (APIs) - Data Donations - Purchasing data sets - Data repositories - Data sharing programmes (e.g. Smart Data Research UK) Our workshop summary brief also emphasised the importance of a holistic approach to online data access for research, moving away from a 'one size fits all' approach that assigns responsibility for enabling access to a single group of stakeholders, and towards a more trustworthy and open data ecosystem. This would ensure that there are avenues for data access that allow a range of topics to be examined (not restricted to just those related to online safety,

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models used in the online services industry.	for instance) and create a wider range of opportunities for societal benefit.
Question 1d: What technologies are typically used by providers of online services to facilitate existing information access?	Confidential – N As noted in the Academy’s summary brief (p7), the access and sharing of data has been central to a range of actions being led by the UK government. For example, the Integrated Data Service (IDS), is a cross-sector government initiative that provides a platform for accredited researchers to access data from across government departments in a more streamlined way as well as access to analytical and visualisation tools, using a secure multi-cloud infrastructure. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the delivery partner for this initiative. As discussed further in the response to Q1 and Q1c, other examples include: - Research Application Programming Interfaces (API’s) - Data Repositories - Data Sharing Programmes
Question 1e: Have services and/or researchers made use of privacy-enhancing technologies to enable access?	n/a

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Question 2: What are the challenges that currently constrain the sharing of information for the purpose of research into online safety related issues?	Confidential – N The British Academy’s summary brief on online data access for SHAPE research identified a range of challenges that constrain access and sharing of information for research purposes (p8). These include: Legal risks Methods such as data scraping can lead academics to violate the terms of service of some platforms, placing them at legal risk. E.g., in 2021, Meta took legal action against a US-based research group for engaging in data scraping, claiming privacy concerns.¹

¹ Edelman, G. (2021), [Facebook’s Reason for Banning Researcher’s Doesn’t Hold Up](#), Wired.

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	Adhoc and unreliable processes Current pathways for access and sharing are unreliable and subject to change. APIs provided by some online companies are not guaranteed and in recent years some companies have moved to either close APIs or introduce use charges. Outdated, partial and fragmented data sets Datasets can be outdated, partial, fragmented, or unverifiable, e.g. in one publicised case, a dataset made available by Meta was shown to be inaccurate.² Undermining research integrity, innovation and creativity Initiatives to improve data can also run the risk of undermining broader values of research independence and can raise concerns about equity. For example, initiatives in which researchers are placed in private companies, and are therefore granted access to datasets, often require researchers to develop strong relationships with large data holders. These initiatives are certainly a positive opportunity for building cross-sectoral relationships and sharing knowledge and data, but they can also create challenges for researchers by potentially undermining the independence and legitimacy of research projects. Moreover, such partnerships are often most accessible to more senior academics, particularly those based in the USA, raising questions about the equity of access to data. Some initiatives compel researchers to work according to strict parameters, requiring them to have a fully formulated project before accessing data rather than allowing them to develop their research questions in a more organic and open fashion. This can limit the exploratory analysis that uncovers truly novel insights and unexpected trends from online data.
Question 2a: What are the legal challenges/risks to sharing information from online services with independent researchers?	Confidential – N Businesses that own data from online services and hold large shares of personalised and sensitive data often have concerns relating to: maintaining the privacy of users; security implications; the risk of compromising their legal compliance, and the potential to undermine their commercial interests and competitiveness by disclosing information, ideas, or strategies. Large companies refer data access requests to legal and compliance teams, who tend to be conservative and risk averse,

² The Washington Post (2021), [Facebook made big mistake in data provided it provided to researchers, undermining academic work.](#)

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	and this can result in restrictive arrangements. Some businesses may be cautious of data sharing due to the potential for reputational damage if data is misused (p8).
Question 2b: What are the technical challenges relating to sharing information from online services with independent researchers? What are the challenges relating to the scale and complexity of the information involved?	Confidential – N The British Academy’s brief highlighted that digital infrastructure, capacity, and resourcing are essential to safely and more effectively enable data access and sharing. This might include hosting online platforms for data access, providing large-scale compute facilities, cloud and data storage repositories, permission-based access, accreditation, vetting researchers, and carrying out the appropriate auditing processes to track who is accessing data. Maintaining this infrastructure so that it is implemented effectively requires significant resource, so creating ways that enable services to do this is important (p11).
Question 2c: What are the security challenges relating to sharing information from online services with independent researchers? • What are the security challenges relating to the potential sensitivity of information? • What are the security protocols required to protect information from misuse? • To what extent do you view security as a governance issue compared to a technical infrastructure issue?	n/a
Question 2d: What are the information quality challenges relating to online services sharing information with independent researchers?	Confidential – N Our workshop brief noted that quality of information can be impacted by online services providing, outdated, partial and fragmented data sets, which can lead to inaccuracies in evidence and research (p8).
Question 2e: What are the financial costs to online services relating to	n/a

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online services sharing information with independent researchers?	
Question 2f: What are the financial costs to researcher trying to make use of information shared by online services?	n/a

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Question 3: How might greater access to information for the purpose of research into online safety issues be achieved?	Confidential – N The workshops convened by the British Academy revealed the need to approach the challenge of access to information for research in a more holistic way. Our summary brief suggests moving away from a ‘one size fits all’ approach that assigns responsibility for enabling access to a single group of stakeholders, as workshop participants instead called for attempts to build a more trustworthy and open data ecosystem – one that can provide incentives for businesses, improve research, and generate valuable evidence for policymakers. The brief points to the following mechanisms to do so: Legislating on data access for research To effectively strengthen sharing agreements and access protocols for researchers, making actions such as reforming data sharing and standards, improving data laws, and implementing corresponding protections for personal data and privacy more explicit in legislation such as the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill will be crucial. Addressing conflicting messaging and shifting narratives on the value of data (e.g. for online safety) Participants at our workshops noted that narratives around the opportunity for data to help post-Brexit Britain achieve a status as an innovation superpower contrasts with narratives around Britain taking a more community-oriented approach to data and being a leader in online safety. These contradictions in messaging can undermine trust in decision makers and those working to facilitate greater access to information for research. Careful consideration of how to communicate the value of information is vital to help shift these narratives. Demonstrating

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	how data can provide socially beneficial insight into human behaviour and lead to better policy analysis and decision-making can incentivise data sharing. This is of particular importance when articulating to the wider public whose data has been collected and what its value could be in research contexts. Supporting and enhancing the role of trusted data institutions Data institutions such as Smart Data Research UK, Health Data Research UK, Research Data Scotland, Administrative Data Research UK, subsidiary organisations such as Smart Data Foundry, and software based platforms such as OpenSAFELY have an explicit focus on ensuring that data is available in ways that do not cause harm to people, promoting approaches that steward data in a responsible and safe manner, and often work with or on behalf of private companies. These trusted data institutions: • Have the capacity and resources to be more proactive in setting best practice and are equipped with the knowledge on how to support safe and secure access for researchers, working directly with policymakers, industry and the public. • Provide the necessary digital infrastructure that is required to unlock the power of data. This might include hosting online platforms for access, providing large-scale compute facilities, cloud and data storage repositories, permission-based access, accreditation, vetting researchers, and carrying out the appropriate auditing processes to track who is accessing data. • Help to build trust in relationships between researchers and data owners alongside facilitating dialogue on challenges and solutions around data access and sharing Enabling cross-sector engagement Cross-sector engagement is vital to a holistic approach to online data sharing. This includes creating incentives and processes that reassure stakeholders across sectors that sharing can be done safely. This could entail establishing online data forums, networks or committees to help share information between policymakers, industry and the research community on the challenges and opportunities of online data. Such mechanisms can move the agenda on data access forward in the UK in ways that encompass a broader diversity of voices on the challenge, rather than leaving engagement to occur in a siloed way or exclusively in industry circles. It is particularly important that engagement is sustained over time rather than undertaken as a short-term activity, as

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	addressing complex issues of access may take time and will require ongoing attention.
Question 3a: What models, arrangements or frameworks exist for allowing researchers access to sensitive information beyond the online services industry? What are the benefits and risks of those models, and how might they apply to the online services context?	Confidential – N The British Academy’s workshop series gathered insights on existing models that can provide researchers access to sensitive information. These include research based models such as Smart Data Research UK, Health Data Research UK, Research Data Scotland, Administrative Data Research UK, Consumer Data Research Centre. Subsidiary organisations such as Smart Data Foundry, and software-based platforms such as OpenSAFELY have an explicit focus on ensuring that data is available in ways that do not cause harm to people, promoting approaches that steward data in a responsible and safe manner, and often work with or on behalf of private companies. Although these institutions work with a range of datasets and across various sectors, they represent examples of best practice and have a targeted capacity to address a range of challenges that exist in this space.
Question 3b: Are there any models or arrangements that exist in the online services industry already that might provide increased access to information for research purposes if applied more generally across the industry? If so, what are these and what are the benefits and disadvantages of these models/arrangements?	n/a
Question 3c: What are some possible models for providing researchers with access to relevant information that may not exist or be widely used yet, but which might be implemented by industry?	n/a
Question 3d: What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach? • These may include elements pertaining to financial, legal,	n/a

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security, technical or feasibility issues	
Question 3e: What role could third party organisations, such as regulatory bodies, civil society or public sector organisations have in facilitating researcher access to online safety information?	Confidential – N The British Academy’s summary brief noted that organisations and networks with functions at the intersection of research and policy can play a role in advancing access by engaging in discourse and facilitating the creation of policy networks. NGOs such as Data for Policy foster dialogue on the impact and potential of data, AI and related technologies in government, governance, and policy. The Open Data Institute work to cement trust in data and data sharing practices to further strengthen engagement. The UK’s national academies can also play an informal role in the space by harnessing their convening power to encourage more exploratory and creative avenues of engagement, such as hosting workshops that can enable industry professionals, researchers and policymakers to work more collaboratively and identify a range of innovative solutions to data access. Research councils such as UKRI can help push this agenda forward through cross-sector engagement, creating the infrastructure for academics to be able to access data in a safe and secure way, removing risks from individual academics and helping to build processes that assuage companies’ concerns.
Question 3f: What could these third-party models look like, and what are some of the benefits and challenges associated with this approach?	n/a
Question 3g: What categories of information should online service providers give researchers access for the study of online safety matters? Why would this information be valuable for the study of online safety matters?	n/a