

Ofcom's Making Sense of Media Establish Working Group (2)

Minutes of meeting, 18 January 2023, 10.00-11.45 hrs

Attendees:

Group attendees: Ben Bradley (Tik-Tok); Philippa Diedrichs (University of West England Bristol); Richard Earley (Meta); Gareth Finchett (Mencap); Laura Higgins (Roblox); Rosie Luff (Google); Niamh McDade (Twitter); Antonio Silva (BIT); Arietta Valmas (5Rights Foundation); Nejra van Zalk (Imperial College London)

Ofcom: Claire Levens; Alana Finn; David Swanson; Sundeep Shergill; Natalie Mawhinney; Taymar Houghton; Rupert Gill; Jonathon Porter; Jessica Rees

Apologies: Vicki Shotbolt (Parent Zone)

Item 1: Housekeeping

- Richard Earley, Rosie Luff, and Niamh McDade were formally welcomed as new members of the working group, replacing colleagues from each of their organisations.

Item 2: Progress update

- Claire Levens provided group members with an update on progress in this workstream post group's meeting in October 2022. She highlighted that Ofcom held one-to-one meetings with four of the five participating online platforms to discuss their approach and goals for in-scope on-platform interventions, progressed research into user attitudes towards on-platform interventions, and continued to provide input into the Video Sharing Platform regime and development of the Online Safety regime
- Claire also advised that Ofcom could offer a Microsoft SharePoint space to consolidate working group material in a single shared space if there was a consensus that this was useful. There was no consensus on this and it was concluded that the space would not be used.

Item 3: Items for discussion

Item 3.1: Platforms' overarching approach and goals for on-platform interventions

- Alana Finn reminded members of the interventions in scope of this work (on-platform interventions that are self-activating, timely and choice preserving (e.g., labels, overlays, prompts/pop-ups, notifications, and resources). She further reminded members that the first set of Ofcom and platform one-to-ones covered, the goals that platforms hoped these interventions would achieve, benefits and risks interventions might present, how interventions sit alongside other measures, the cost and time involved in their development and management, and the technologies that they rely upon.
- Alana then shared an aggregated summary of the key points made across platforms across each of these areas during Ofcom and platform one-to-ones, having highlighted that these key points represent what Ofcom heard from platforms and are not Ofcom's views. Key points shared with the group included:
 - Goals for the interventions include supporting users to make informed choices, educating users to encourage behaviour change, and supporting users to build resilience – in choice-preserving and agency enhancing ways.

- Benefits of the interventions include providing users with learning opportunities and supporting meaningful engagement that aligns with platforms' ethos.
- Risks of the interventions include overuse causing alert or message fatigue, creating interest in harmful content or conduct where there was none, and generating negative unintended consequences. Platforms mitigate these risks through careful deployment and testing.
- These interventions are most appropriate for issues (user needs in relation to hazards, harms, or safety tools) where a lack of user knowledge/understanding is a factor in them arising. Illegal content is removed when detected but in-scope interventions can be used alongside this treatment, but this is complex and requires careful consideration in severe harm areas.
- In-scope interventions form part of holistic approaches to civility, safety and privacy and can be used as a complement to, or to loosen, other measures used for these purposes.
- High confidence levels in underlying technology are important to ensure that the right users are receiving the interventions in the right moments.
- One member asked whether we were planning to get details on specific interventions, particularly regarding what they are, how effective they are, and what their impact is. Claire Levens said that Ofcom did plan to get more specific but that this first phase is about understanding how platforms think about and approach these interventions and developing best practice principles for them. This member also said that platforms hold evidence regarding real world impact of interventions, not researchers, and so it would be useful to get that from them.
- Another member agreed with the previous members' comments and asked about how a successful outcome for on-platform interventions can be defined and determined, and that it would be interesting to understand if those outcomes clash with the business model of platforms. Alana Finn advised that through this work we want to understand how platforms do and could determine if an in-scope intervention has been successful and will ask about this in future platform one-to-ones and working group meetings.
- Another member agreed with previous comments and enquired about the type of activity that on-platform interventions should be promoting among users. They also asked what the next step should be in ensuring that users are exposed to interventions and are aware of them.
- Another member also agreed with previous comments and asked about how platforms make trade-offs between the positive and negative aspects of on-platform interventions – fatiguing versus educating users. They added that it would be good to have more clarity on which of the in-scope intervention types heighten a sense of invasiveness and fatigue among users, noting that there is a likely to be a difference between notifications and other types.
- Note: forthcoming one-to-one meetings between Ofcom and platforms will cover decision drivers, design considerations, and testing and evaluation – and that Ofcom would consider building points raised by members in throughout.

Item 3.2: Research on user attitudes to on-platform interventions

- Natalie Mawhinney explained that this research aims to fill a gap regarding how users feel about in-scope on-platform interventions best practice principles.
- The research focuses upon the five types of in-scope interventions. Natalie also confirmed there is an iterative approach to the methodology, with learnings from each phase carried into the next.

- Natalie confirmed that the quantitative recruitment screener is now complete – which identified users who recall coming across these interventions. We have selected participants for the forthcoming diary phase from this cohort. The research will then conclude with a qualitative phase to provide rich data on determining participant attitudes to on-platform interventions.
- One member asked for more detail regarding how participants will record their interventions during the diary phase and suggested exploring the potential to remind users to complete the diary study via nudges. Natalie Mawhinney advised that they will be given a login to an online portal, and they will record their experiences of encountering interventions there. She also advised that the research agency will actively monitor and sense-check participant responses throughout the diary phase. These responses will then inform the qualitative phase.
- One member flagged that they were curious as to what can be done to close the gap between users being aware of what to do on platforms and doing and asked how online platforms are incorporating best practice principles of informed decision making when implementing tools that require action from users.

Item 3.3: Ofcom BI

- Jonathon Porter provided details of behavioural insights research that was completed in 2022. This included investigating the impact of overlays and prompts among adults, with the aim of identifying what works in encouraging adults to make more informed online choices.
- Jessica Rees provided details of serious game research published by Ofcom last year – a quiz used to convey online safety information to children in a ‘gamified’ manner.
- Jonathon Porter also provided details of potential BI trials involving adults in 2023. This included using the serious game approach to support adults in relation to online fraud and investigating the effect of boosts and micro-tutorials on adults.
- Jessica Rees also provided details of upcoming BI research involving children in 2023. This includes assessing the impact of age-gates, platform sign-up processes, and contact behaviours.
- One member advised that the serious games approach may not have a natural home on online platforms given technical feasibility. The member highlighted that such a solution would need to be situated off-platform, meaning directing users off-platform which impacts solution reach.
- A member also asked how research into user-empowerment tools related to the Online Safety regime. Jonathon Porter advised that Ofcom’s research remains flexible here but will be relevant to the VSP and Online Safety regimes.
- Another member asked whether BI research amongst adults had only focused upon interventions which displayed content warnings to users. Jonathon Porter advised that research has tested adult reactions to three types of alert message: those that advised a video had sensitive content, those that advised that other users had marked the content as sensitive, and those with a more specific message about video content.
- A member also advised that the serious game and gamification approach is not as effective amongst adults as for children as it can be seen by adults as infantilising and suggested it may not be valuable for Ofcom to invest time in this.
- One member suggested the efficacy of nudges for adolescents and children and embedding effective media literacy into onboarding as potential ideas for future research.

Item 3.4: Literature review of on-platform interventions

- Alana Finn highlighted that now Ofcom have narrowed down the current scope of this workstream of the MSOM programme and set up this working group, there is a desire to better understand the research into in-scope interventions. More specifically, Ofcom want to further understand evidence on effectiveness, issues the research looks at, methodologies used to design, test and evaluate on-platform interventions.
- She confirmed that Ofcom are in the process of hiring a contractor to complete this work and that we would welcome members thoughts on it.
- One member suggested that this literature review should place more focus on research that measures impact in the real world, as research of this type is often done in experimental settings.
- One member advised that this literature review should be cognisant of the different types of platforms. The member highlighted that studies of this nature often focus on text-based platforms rather than video-based platforms.
- One member advised that this literature review should be cognisant of lack of clear definitions of harm, and evidencing behaviour change and effects over a longer time period as studies can often neglect this.

Item 4: Next Steps

- Working group members should provide any additional thoughts on platform approach and goals for in-scope interventions by Wednesday COP 25th January 2023.
- Ofcom will reflect on points made by members as it continues to progress and develop its work in the areas discussed.
- Ofcom will arrange the next set of one-to-one meetings with participating online platforms by Friday 3rd February 2023, to be held by Friday 10th March 2023.
- Ofcom will arrange the next WG meeting to be held in April 2023.