VRU | **MAYOR OF LONDON**
VIOLENCE REDUCTION UNIT

London's VRU Research into Online Harms

Online Harms Steering Group
Meeting 1 Briefing Document

5th December 3-5pm
Committee Room 3, City Hall, Kamal Chunchie Way, E16 1ZE

Contents

Agenda

Item	Time	Detail
Welcomes	15:00-15:15	Ice-breaker activity
Intro to the VRU and Online Harms work	15:15-15:45	- Overview of VRU, including VRU priority areas, strategy, and partnerships. - Introduction to VRU's Online Harms work to date and focus for the future.
Reviewing purpose of the steering group	15:45-15:55	- Recapping objectives of the group, terms of reference, time commitment, expectations. - Opportunity for group to inform the terms of reference, communication plan, and ask questions.
Break	**15:55-16:00**	
Discussion	16:00-16:55	Small group discussion exploring questions: 1. Identifying the most critical aspect of online harm impacting young people today and understanding why it's a priority. 2. Exploring where the VRU should focus resources and initiatives to address these challenges. 3. Considering how the VRU can use its partnerships and influence to advocate for additional support and action externally.
Next session discussion	16:55-17:00	- Overview of next session agenda. - Outlining upcoming Task & Finish opportunities.
Close		

Arrival at City Hall

Please find information about visiting City Hall here: https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/city-halls-buildings-and-squares/how-find-city-hall

All visitors to the building are required to pass through airport style security, so **please arrive 15 minutes before** the meeting to allow sufficient time for this.

One in the building, please sign in at reception, who will be able to direct you to our meeting room – Committee Room 3.

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Attendees
VRU colleagues

Alison Kelly

Principal Monitoring and Evaluation Officer

Clara Akingbade

VRU Young Person's Action Group (YPAG) Member

Ella Burton

Research and Performance Analyst

Jerome Harvey-Agyei

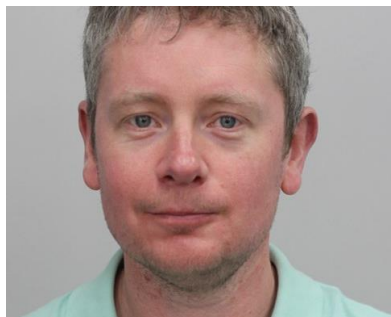VRU Youth Participation Lead

Nancy Hunt

VRU Principal Policy Officer

Rae Harrington

Research and Performance Analyst

Tom Davies

Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Lead

Steering Group Members

Akshi Kumar

Associate Professor- AI/ NLP , Director of Post-Graduate Research (PGR), Member of Research Ethics Committee, Research Strategy Committee & Athena SWANS Committee, Department of Computing, Goldsmiths, University of London

Dr. Akshi Kumar is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) and Director of Post-graduate Research in the Department of Computing at Goldsmiths, University of London. With over a decade of experience in academia and research, her expertise spans Natural Language Processing (NLP), AI ethics, and explainable AI. Recognized among the Top 2% Highly-Cited Scientists globally by Stanford University for four consecutive years (2021–2024), Dr. Kumar has an impressive portfolio of over 110 journal publications and 70 conference papers. Her research focuses on using AI and NLP to address societal challenges, such as online harm detection, mental and physical health interventions, and public trust in generative AI models. She has contributed written evidence to UK Parliament inquiries on AI's impact on public trust and digital media. A prolific author, she is working on two books—one on transformative NLP for high-stakes domains and another on the linguistic landscape, set for release in 2025. Dr. Kumar actively engages in collaborations with global institutions and is passionate about integrating AI technologies for social good while fostering diversity and ethical innovation in computing.

Emma Tilley

Principal Program Manager, Trust and Safety, Trust Lab

Trust and safety professional with 10+ years experience leading research, policy, operations, and compliance work in the online safety, law enforcement, and regulatory sectors. Currently Principal Program Manager at TrustLab, progressing trust and safety initiatives in partnership with major social media platforms, online marketplaces, and government regulators. Active member of the Trust and Safety Professional Association (TSPA). Completed BlueDot Impact's AI Governance course in November 2024. Currently a review team member of Arcadia Impact's AI Governance Taskforce. UK expert on missing persons and unidentified human remains. Achieved masters degree in Crime Science, Investigation, and Intelligence in 2018, and submitted PhD thesis in Criminology and Policing in April 2024.

Emma Short

Professor of cyberpsychology, teaching cyberpsychology and researching online harms, particularly online stalking and harassment, London Metropolitan University.

Emma is a Professor of Cyberpsychology at London Metropolitan University and a Chartered Health Psychologist. She teaches Cyberpsychology, Forensic psychology and Health Psychology. Emma has been a researcher in the field of cyber stalking and harassment since 2005, she has also trained in psycho-traumatology and has a good understanding of trauma informed practice and has been able to employ this when training practitioners and case workers. She has applied experience in conducting research within police forces, with advocates and victims of stalking to evaluate the effectiveness of current responses to harassment and the risk assessments used for stalking and harassment. Emma was the principal investigator projects which have identified the nature and severity of the impact and sustained online threat that is characteristic of cyberstalking. She has led a multidisciplinary team drawn from across university faculties, investigating the methods, motivation and impact of cyberstalking and online harassment and has continued to work in partnership with other agencies and third sector groups in the field of stalking, cyberstalking and harassment. She is Deputy Chair for the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and is currently on the Advisory Boards of the Cyberhelpline and The Centre for Online Safety, Safeguarding, Privacy and Identity.

Mohamed Abdallah

Inclusive Leadership Course Lead, The Difference

Mohamed, starting his career in youth work and pupil referral units, spent almost two decades leading inclusive practices at an 'Outstanding' mainstream school. Using Asset-Based Community Development and a multi-disciplinary approach, he successfully reduced exclusions. Now, at The Difference leading the Inclusive Leadership Course, Mohamed supports school leaders nationwide in Trauma-Informed practices, Student Voice, and Asset-Based approaches to leadership.

Robert Topinka

Senior Lecturer in Media & Cultural Studies, School of Creative Arts, Culture and Communication, Birkbeck, University of London

Robert Topinka is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. He researches how reactionary digital politics shape public culture. From 2018-2022, he was Co-Investigator on an AHRC-funded project on the rhetoric and ideology of the 'alt-right'. He was Principal Investigator on the British Academy-funded project 'Misinformation in Everyday Life: Portable Principles for Blending Qualitative and Quantitative Social Media Research' from 2023-2024. He has provided expert commentary for the New York Times, the Guardian, BBC Radio 4 and the BBC World Service. He co-hosted the Reactionary Digital Politics podcast, and he has published widely on social media, racism, conspiracy theories and disinformation. He is currently working with Ealing Alternative Provision to develop workshops on countering narratives from reactionary digital subcultures in the classroom.

Sandy Schuman

Lecturer, UKRN local network co-lead, University College London, Department of Security and Crime Science

Sandy Schumann (PhD) is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the Department of Security and Crime Science at University College London (UK) and the Director of the MSc Countering Extremist Crime and Terrorism. Her current research examines the interplay between (social) media/(information)technology and hate/extremism. Working in the borderlands of communication science, social psychology, and terrorism studies, Sandy employs (online) experiments and surveys, including cross-national surveys, as well as digital trace data. She is also passionate about conducting meta-research to improve methods and analytical procedures in (online) extremism and terrorism studies. An advocate for open science, she is the co-lead of UCL's chapter of the UK Reproducibility Network. Sandy's research has been published, among others, in the British Journal of Criminology, Information, Communication & Society, Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, and the European Journal of Social Psychology. She is keen to translate her research into policy and practice; she has advised governments (e.g., UK Commission on Countering Extremism; UAE Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development) and collaborates with civil society organisations (e.g., the Tony Blair Centre for Global Change; Soliya) to conduct impact evaluations.

Will Gardner OBE

CEO, Childnet International

Will Gardner is the CEO of Childnet International, a children's charity working with others to help make the internet a great and safe place for children.

Will has worked at Childnet since 2000 and has been the CEO since 2009 and has led numerous regional, national and international projects and programmes promoting child online safety, developing many award-winning resources. For example, he led Project deSHAME, partnering with NGOs in Denmark and Hungary to focus on tackling online sexual harassment among young people.

He is also a Director of the UK Safer Internet Centre, in which Childnet, working with partners the IWF and SWGfL, organises Safer Internet Day in the UK every year, a campaign that reaches 50% of children and a third of parents and carers. He is also an Executive Board member of the UK Council for Internet Safety and founded and chairs the Early Warning Working Group of helplines, hotlines, law enforcement and government departments that meets regularly to keep up to speed with online risk and harm. He is a member of Meta's Safety Advisory Council, Internet Matters' Expert Group and the Advisory Board of the Anti-Bullying Alliance.

Will was awarded an OBE in the 2018 Queen's New Year's Honour List for his work in the field of children's online safety.

VRU Online Harms Work to date

Background

The rapid proliferation of online platforms has led to significant concerns about online harms, particularly affecting vulnerable populations including children and young people. These harms range from illegal to harmful content.

The VRU is committed to keeping young people away from harm and connected to positive opportunities in the physical world as part of our broad commitment to prevention and early intervention. However, it is just as critical to provide this assurance in the online world.

Recognising the dual role of social media in contributing to and preventing harm, the VRU is seeking to deepen its understanding of these dynamics to enhance its violence and harm prevention efforts for young Londoners in the digital space.

VRU Online Harm Mission Statements

1. The VRU will empower young people with the skills to safely navigate the digital world and upskill parents, carers, teachers and trusted adults with the knowledge and tools needed to support and protect young people in the online environment.
2. Through our commissioned research, the VRU will seek to better understand the online world, how to effectively support young people, and address how the online environment contributes to and exacerbates the exploitation of young people.
3. The VRU will place a particular focus on disproportionalities including the impact of gender-based violence facilitated through online platforms.

Key VRU Activities
Scoping

- In 2021, the VRU published a report on Young People's perceptions of online harms. The report made recommendations which included:
    - Research: resources need to be dedicated to independent research that is fully participatory and includes transparent input from tech companies.
    - Rights: children's rights in the digital space, considering their right to learn, to play, and to be informed, are too often missing from online safety discussion.
    - Regulation: legislation in relation to social media platforms is needed but it is one aspect in an array of required measures, including education, the need to address social inequalities, the need for transparency by companies and partnership work.
    - Responsibilities: children and young people placed a lot of emphasis on the responsibilities of companies and felt that they should be held accountable for inaction.
    - Representation: children and young people want to be part of panels that tech companies, platforms, and gaming designers consult with when designing, developing and updating new products.
    - Responses: children and young people and their advocates want to see quick, appropriate, effective, and proportionate responses to online harms. They want swifter processing and better updates from law enforcement when phones are seized.

- o Resources: more resources are needed for those working in education and safeguarding and reforms to school education are needed to better reflect the online environment.
- From 2023-2024, internal scoping across current program provision has identified:
  - o Current program provision across VRU Online Harms mission statements
  - o Opportunities for further investment
  - o Opportunities for external advocacy.

Programmatic Interventions
- Social Switch Project (2023-2026)
  - o Following recommendations from the VRU's report on young People's perceptions of online harms, £3.9 million investment to train trusted adults and empower young people with digital literacy skills.

Research and Evidence Building
Throughout 2024, the VRU has:
- Conducted a literature review identifying gaps in understanding online-to-offline violence links and strategies for keeping young people safe online.
- Commissioned participatory research to evaluate the Social Switch Project's impact on youth and statutory professionals.
- Developed research specification to investigate the relationship and causal mechanisms between activity on social media and interpersonal violence affecting young people in London.

Youth and Stakeholder Engagement
Throughout 2024, the VRU has:
- Hosted an academic roundtable with the London Research & Policy Partnership to explore interdisciplinary insights.
- Convened a participatory event with young people and youth practitioners to co-design safe online environments and gather input on existing interventions.
- Supported initiatives like UCL's peer-led mentoring and RSHE research to address misogyny, VAWG, and harmful online norms.
- Partnering with City Hall teams, and organisations like Ofcom and the Met Police to influence policies and raise awareness.

The VRU's work underscores its commitment to keeping young Londoners safe both online and offline while addressing emerging threats in the digital landscape. However, we are aware of the fast-changing nature of this landscape, and we are eager to engage experts in this field to ensure we are responding to the risks online content poses for young Londoners with the levers we have available.