"We are more like an ecosystem-building, system-orchestrating, collaborative funding vehicle": Marija Manojlovic and Natalie Shoup of Safe Online on rethinking global collaboration to prevent online harms to children and youth.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard
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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Could you talk about your specific approach to youth mental health, especially in relation to the many others in the Co-Lab who are also doing work in the digital space?

Marija Manojlovic: We are the only global fund focused on child online safety. We have existed for nearly 10 years. We're feeling a little bit lonely in this ecosystem, given that we don't have any other big collaborative funding initiatives stepping up to focus specifically on this issue. There are some geographically specific initiatives focused on the US or the European Union, more Global North, but nobody else is really taking this very global look into the issue and bridging all these divides across geographies, issues, context, cultures, and so on.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: There are a few other funders in the Co-Lab, right? When you say you're lonely, you mean specifically about the digital space?

Marija Manojlovic: Yes. It's more that globally we are the only collaborative funding vehicle looking into child online safety as an issue for the past 10 years. Throughout that learning journey of what digital safety means for children—for development, participation, education skills, emotional well-being, specifically focusing on prevention of child sexual exploitation and abuse as one of the worst forms of those harms online—we have realized that we find ourselves working downstream a lot of the time.

We are trying to play whack-a-mole. We are trying to solve the explosion of child abuse material online. We are trying to enable frontline workers with better capacity to speak to victims of child sexual abuse online. We are working with governments to legislate, to criminalize certain activities online. This is all crucial, but somehow that all stands at the level of content moderation.

We are looking into the content that is being put online, specific texts or images or behaviors, but we need to think more radically about prevention. What does prevention in radical terms mean? While the downstream layer is really important, our effectiveness will depend on our ability to engage with the issues at a much more upstream level.

This means, in many ways, thinking about technology companies' design choices, policies that enable the use of digital technologies for good, policies that are looking into well-being and thriving and empowerment of kids in the digital age rather than just prevention of harms, thinking about pro-social design versus the attention economy, which is currently being sold as the main business model. That is causing a lot of the distress and the issues that are negatively impacting young people.

Hearing from the survivors, our grantees, young people, policymakers, people close to tech, we started realizing that Safe Online has an amazing opportunity to think about kids and well-being and mental health as a step change in our ability to impact for children as the age of AI is upon us, and the age of quantum is probably here in the next five years or so. We really want to shift that dial, open our aperture, and start thinking more broadly, and not only about specific harms.

Natalie Shoup: What is different about Safe Online is that, as Marija was saying, we're the only fund focusing globally and looking at synergies across geographies, across sectors, across different types of partners. Another unique piece that is needed in the mental health space is the ecosystem building that we do.

Every organization in the Co-Lab brings their own value-add. Hopelab does incredible work with young people and fostering young people as leaders. EMpower does incredible work capacity building at the grassroots level.

One thing that we bring to our work with child safety is this infrastructure building for the whole ecosystem. Thinking about how we build that connective tissue, that scaffolding for the ecosystem, and taking a bird's-eye view and seeing what are the trends across the world, and where can we leverage alignments with other global digital agendas.

That ecosystem-building, field-building view is unique in child online safety, and we see a gap in that for the mental health work. That's where we think we can bring a lot of value, in complementarity with other organizations.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you identify as an intermediary funder?

Marija Manojlovic: Yes. You can group us that way, depending on how you define "intermediary." Sometimes when you say "intermediary," you just think about the flow of money, like a pass-through. I don't think we see ourselves as pass-through funding. We

are more like an ecosystem-building, system-orchestrating, collaborative funding vehicle, and we are trying to bring the intelligence, the knowledge, the evidence, the policy with the funding.

Natalie Shoup: Intermediary is often driven from funders wanting to put money in a certain place and needing the infrastructure or the credible vehicle to orchestrate that operationally. We highlight a collaborative funding model because we try to take insights from the community level and feed that knowledge up to drive priorities for more strategic investment. It's driven more by grantees and communities than by donors. That flip in model is why a collaborative funding model is really valuable.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You were talking about working upstream versus downstream, which is something that's come up a lot with this Co-Lab. What does that mean to you?

Marija Manojlovic: For example, if you focus only on child sexual exploitation and abuse as one form of harm to kids, you will start specifically looking what the wisdom has been so far for the removal, detection, and prevention of spread of child sexual abuse material online. That leads you to make a set of investments to improve classifying systems and detection systems for finding this material online on platforms.

These tools are very sophisticated and expensive. Not everybody can implement them. They're difficult to build, but those tools are essential for making sure that we are removing that material online, because we are victim-focused, victim-centric. You want to prevent normalization of this material and you want to make sure that victims are being taken care of. That's one of the tools. The problem with this, especially in the age of generative AI, is that the flood of this material is so big that it just keeps coming in. The law enforcement capacities are not able to cope with that.

If you look at the problem at an upstream level, you're looking into the design choices on platforms that make the spread of this material possible. How can you prevent it at the point of the first surfacing of that material? Is it in the age-gating policy? Do companies allow contact between kids and adults in their chat and interactive tools? Those choices are normally driven by the need to increase engagement. The more kids you have, the more adults you have, the more conversations you have, that increases your engagement. That's an upstream policy choice of a tech company.

If you can work with them to surface how these decisions downstream impact different negative manifestations for kids, including mental health problems and so on, you can then tackle multiple issues like violent extremism or pathways to victimization or offending.

Downstream is content moderation and the removal of material, like whack-a-mole. Upstream is if you tweak what age group can be on your platform, or if you don't algorithmically serve kids to adults. You solve many issues much faster.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How much of your work would define as upstream versus downstream?

Marija Manojlovic: Both are needed, but we are now being purposeful about flipping our model further upstream in radical ways. Downstream work is very important from a victim-centric perspective because you don't want victims to be left by themselves. You still want to do that work, but you want to make sure that at some point, that workload is reducing because you're being much more successful at the upstream level. That's where we want to be.

Natalie Shoup: Upstream is root cause. You're getting to the root cause of all these different manifestations of harm. If you really want to end something, you can't just keep mitigating who it happens to or how bad the outcome is. You have to stop it from happening in the first place. That has a lot to do with norms change, behavior change, and technology design.

We do invest in a lot of prevention work, and many organizations in the child online safety ecosystem are doing that work and have solutions, good lessons, and good practices upstream in the prevention space.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Most members of the Co-Lab are implementers, and then there's a handful of folks who are funding partners. I'm curious how that works. Do other people in the Co-Lab ask you for funds?

Marija Manojlovic: One of the wonderful things about ICONIQ and their funders is that they've recognized the need to work at all levels, coming from specific projects and implementing services to really build the ecosystem. There's a huge gap in the ecosystem of mental health of children, adolescents, and young people in intersection with digital technologies, especially when you think about collaborative funding vehicles.

There's currently nothing with an ambition to become a global driving force that exists, and I think their investment in Safe Online is to build that arm up. We want to make a step change in the availability of resources, but also make a step change in the understanding of the evidence, the science, and the knowledge that we currently have, and see how we as a funder can fill in those gaps over the years and then feed that back into the ecosystem. Our model is focused on understanding where the system currently is, what type of evidence and data will be needed, and what technology tools we can invest in that space to make sure that we are future proof, that we can leverage technologies for well-being, but also see how we can gear technology and online spaces and digital spaces and tools towards well-being themselves.

In that sense, it's really important for us to be in touch with the implementers and people who work on the field, to learn from them, keep them as part of our collective, but then try to use that knowledge to generate resources and funnel them back into the field. If we are successful, we can become an engine for the generation of knowledge, evidence, science, learning, and funding that can then be funneled back to the field at scale over the years, as we have been in the child online safety space.

Currently, we are targeting mostly philanthropy as the initial capital for catalyzing, taking the risk at the beginning to underwrite initial stages of the fund. My hope is that we're

going to be able to blend public and private funding and also use industry funding to grow the fund over the years and make it an ongoing engine for bringing the considerations around kids' well-being and digital technologies to the fore.

I like the theory of change that ICONIQ has put out there in terms of the ecosystem-building grantees and those that are working on specific solutions. We are the ecosystem-building ones, to reach the global interventions that can be the step change in how we do the work.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's interesting, what you're saying about ecosystem-building organizations and then ones with solutions, because they don't mention that on their site. If you weren't a funder, you would still be an ecosystem builder. I think there are a lot of ecosystem builders who are not funders, and then there are funders who are also ecosystem builders. I'd love for you to talk a little bit about that relationship between being an ecosystem builder and being a funder.

Natalie Shoup: Being in these types of groups, it's incredibly beneficial to be able to form relationships with people who are doing solutions building or other ecosystem builders, to find alignments and to be able to build our relationships and knowledge base. This kind of space is super useful to our work in terms of forming those relationships and understanding more deeply other people's work that's complementary.

We've already started to collaborate really closely with especially some of the other ecosystem builders and funders that are in this space, to make sure that we're aligning, because there's not enough resources for this space at all. We don't see it as competing priorities. It's about how we best align with what we have.

Marija Manojlovic: There are a lot of amazing solutions happening on the ground. The amount of effort that we put in raising the resources for getting to a place where you can actually implement is just disproportionate to the actual need for working on those solutions. If all of us are small entities struggling for resources, we are losing so much potential for innovation, knowledge sharing, implementation, and focusing on things each organisation does best.

A dedicated fund that understands the field, understands the people, understands the issue is a really important role in any ecosystem. A fund that is specialized to understand the issue and move the field will be much more useful than having all of us struggle and speak to individual funders and explain why this specific project is important.

When we were just at the G20, speaking about financing for child online safety as a global shared priority and well-being of kids in the digital age, a couple of organizations that we have funded were at the table, who were presenting solutions that are cost-effective, that have evidence, and can prove return on investment. They were sitting in front of governments and saying, "If you adopt this tool, you will be able to reach this many kids, and the cost per child or family is exactly this much."

Governments' response was "This is wonderful. Why don't we have more of this?" The answer: because the expense of communicating exactly the cost per child, with six RCTs behind it, is enormous. Who is underwriting that cost? Who is investing in the proof that certain things work?

A very specialized funding vehicle and mechanism that understands those needs, is able to make those investments and take that initial cost for the field, and then is able to scale those solutions with the public sector, is critical for any field, but especially this one, which is so nascent.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you think all ecosystem builders need to also be funders? How do you play those both out?

Marija Manojlovic: It's a good question, because it doesn't come as one thing or the other. It certainly does help to have that distinct role for the fundraising efforts. Why I say this is that there are multiple field-building or partnership-based organizations that are focused in certain areas of the digital agenda specifically but also more broadly, like the End Violence partnership, which were working as field builders, brokers of knowledge, of connections, of partnerships, of agreed-upon strategies.

To fundraise for those is so hard, even though they're essential. Those efforts are essential because they are like a mycelial network that enables connections. However the challenge comes when quantifying the work. It's really hard to prove why activities such as convenings matter unless you have underneath it the ability to prove what you are doing and how you're doing it through the funding that you enable. I want to see more field builders funded, but it's really hard for them to exist without having some control over the funding and the reporting and the feedback.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: This is the whole problem. We all know that systems orchestrators and connectors are the ones who are making the magic happen, but their stories are the hardest to tell.

Marija Manojlovic: There's also something to be said about the governance frameworks around these vehicles. The way that you structure the governance around these is so hard. You want to have the right people, but if they don't have skin in the game, then there's no accountability over any decisions. Then we're trying to do everything, but there's just no resources. So it's important for us to be rational, practical, opportunist at times, and really see how we can use catalytic ways to build the field but also enable the function that you would have in a partnership, which is that connective tissue between the organizations and the funders and the intelligence in the public sector.

The big challenge that I can anticipate will be how we meaningfully include industry in our work as potential conflict of interest or reputational risk for Safe Online for Mental Health going forward. We are really taking this seriously because we don't want to be seen as an extended arm of industry. That's not our role. At the same time, we are so painfully aware from the child online safety work and from knowing how technology

works that unless you are working with the tech sector, you will not be able to make an impact.

You can have the best evidence, best knowledge, best relationship with governments, a lot of funding. If the tech sector has no incentive framework under which they can make the change, we're not going to be successful. No amount of regulation will ever be able to surpass industry's capacity to do compliance. They can do compliance in so many ways which will not actually ever change anything, or we will end up in a space where everything is restricted. We have age gating, content gating, all these things, which nobody wants to see as the end state.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What have you seen not work in terms of your system orchestration? Where have you hit walls or dead ends?

Marija Manojlovic: At the beginning it was very hard to enable the flow of information and influence and exchange between public sector, frontline workers, academia, researchers, and technology sector and companies. Around six years ago we launched the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund, where we had this brilliant idea together with Tech Coalition that we were going to get the researchers to do actionable research that could inform policy and product design at the tech companies. Then we found ourselves in a place where researchers don't know what the needs of the tech companies are, and tech companies don't know what kind of questions they are allowed to ask researchers. Nobody knew how to talk to each other.

Natalie's leadership led us to a place where we could actually start having conversations: What can I ask you? What kind of data can I give you? What can we meaningfully move as a collective? That knowledge gives us really good grounding to continue building those relationships between science and research, which is independent from tech companies, because now we know how to build these spaces, and we know how to use translation tools, because that was a complete mismatch. It was like the worst matchmaking in the world, but we somehow made it work over the years.

Similar barriers continue to exist between the public sector and the tech sector, because the tech sector keeps saying to the public sector, "You have no understanding of what we're working on." The public sector says, "Well, tell us." Their response is, "Well, we can't tell you because it's all proprietary."

We love these types of challenges. It's the most important work. But it is hard, and there are roadblocks on the way all the time.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What have you found to be most useful?

Marija Manojlovic: Most useful is human connection, actually building these communities. You can build the best technology tool, you can have the best policy, but you need communities of people who are moving in the same direction, actually collaborating. We found tremendous support in the tech companies who really want to make the change in trust and safety. Sometimes they don't have the resources.

The same goes for the public sector. There are tons of people who really want to move the needle, but sometimes governments are not receptive to regulating certain areas of technology activity because of the fear of competition and innovation, ecosystem stifling, etc. There are always barriers at each side, but building human connection and trust is really important.

Natalie Shoup: I 100% agree. That's crucial to all of this work, and also the hardest thing to make a case for sometimes.

Going back to challenges: Making a case for why it's so important to have convenings and bring people together or to foster relationships individually or be in certain spaces where you're forming that understanding of how different people approach and speak about topics. Having a foundation of respect or esteem for other people doing this work, and aligning safe spaces not only for knowledge-sharing but just for developing authentic relationships, is really crucial. It's the hardest thing to show the value of, but we know intuitively and we've seen how impactful that has been in any of this work.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you talk more about those safe spaces for creating authentic relationships? I feel like that's a lot of what our role is in this project as well. We're trying to create that and help people cross-pollinate not just within the Co-Lab but within the larger ecosystem. Do the members of the Co-Lab pair off? What have you seen working in terms of curating?

Natalie Shoup: That's definitely one thing actually a lot of our partners come to us for, because I think we've shown a lot of success. I'll go back to the example Marija shared of the Research Fund as a huge area of learning where we've developed a lot of good practice but also lessons learned around designing those spaces.

We do it with other communities of practice that we've developed as part of our capacity building for the ecosystem, and we continue to use those lessons, and we see that it has a big impact. It often comes down to very small things in the design of a space, but also the process leading up to it that a lot of people maybe don't think about when bringing these spaces together. For the Research Fund, for example, if we were to go immediately into grouping tech and researchers, there's a lot of potential conflict, a lot of potential mismatch, and a risk of loss of trust where people lose credibility or esteem for each other because they're not aligning in how they're speaking, or they're coming into a space with pre-existing assumptions that make it difficult to get to anything productive.

Part of how we got to successful design of these spaces was needing to do capacity building individually and create community between researchers and the tech industry. In that preparation, having smaller ways to bring them together around shared vision, shared objectives, starting with the things that we know might have buy-in from both sides.

This is really small, but this kind of thing can make a difference: when we design these collaborative spaces, from the attendee list to the way we have people do introductions, we try to avoid saying "Here's tech industry, and here's researchers." We say, "Here's

everybody who's in this room, and we all care about this issue." Then we set the community agreements for this space.

Things like: come into this with curiosity. Everyone is going to use different language. If it doesn't rub you the right way, let's have openness about how we talk about that. Really setting that intentionally, but doing the pre-work individually with our own relationship building so people trust us, and they can come into that space knowing we have a good understanding of what they do. We care and we do want to facilitate their work, and then they can trust that who we're bringing together will do the same.

We've had incidents where someone said something that may come off as criticizing another person or their work, but because of the way we've designed those spaces and formed relationships, we can navigate that really well to not lose trust and move backwards. We're always really happy to share that with people, to help design more spaces to be able to facilitate some of that.

Marija Manojlovic: Having a concrete thing to tackle really matters. Some of the defaults we find are that researchers ask for data and the tech industry's reply is that what they are asking for doesn't even exist in that way. When you start drilling deeper down into what you actually need and how you need it, then there is always room for finding a solution. Being very specific about the issues we're trying to tackle and how we want to tackle them always helps get people who by nature care to really work on it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are you doing any of these types of engagements with other Co-Lab members?

Marija Manojlovic: We've been members of the Co-Lab for a year. What we have done in the last year was drilling deep into understanding the new ecosystem we are embarking on, so we commissioned a big landscaping ecosystem mapping of the intersections of digital technologies and mental health of children and adolescents and young people.

We have set up a living systematic review of the scientific knowledge in this field. We are working to convene the partners. We are working to get the new branding in place and also develop the theory of change and MEL framework. This year has been foundational for us. What we expect in the next year is a sprint towards fundraising for the first phase of the fund and trying to further build that ecosystem convening muscle. For us, 2026 is going to be a year of building bridges with other grantees and then stepping up that work around these spaces that we want to curate.

One of the biggest successes so far is a community that we are building called Friends of the Initiative Group. This informal group of partners is just generously giving us their time. These are scientists, funders, frontline workers, young people themselves, industry members who come and give us their feedback on the foundational pieces of the initiative.

Before we gathered them, they helped us fully conceptualize the main programmatic document for the initiative. I know it's funny, but that document took eight months to

reconcile every word so that everybody can see themselves as part of it. We are so proud of it. It's probably a boring piece of paper for many people, but it enables us to bring in industry, to bring in survivors at the same time, and that everybody sees how they can be part of the future.

What we're doing now is going back to them with the landscaping report that has just been completed. We are presenting the findings together with the recommendations we received from the organization that we have worked with in commissioning this report. We're going to discuss with the Friends group what this means for the fund's theory of change and MEL framework next year.

That group has been wonderful. I'm so thankful for every person who has given us time and effort to be part of it. Once we are launched fully, these people become ambassadors for it and potential applicants, potential funders, potential friends who can connect to the impact. I think that group is going to be critical for our future.

There are real opportunities for us to engage more meaningfully with the Co-Lab as a collective, and I think we need to leverage that right now, because the power of the cohort can be much more than if we are working in isolation. We're participatory in every way we can be, and this is definitely going to be the next level for us.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Over the years that you've been working on youth mental health, how have you seen it change as a priority?

Marija Manojlovic: Unfortunately, I will say that the change has been for the worse when it comes to mental health and well-being of kids in relation to digital technologies. We don't have the evidence and data on the causal relationships, but surely there is something happening with young people in the last decade or so that is pointing to a vector. Maybe technology is a vector that plays a role in how kids and young people perceive themselves, and how they are going through the stages of development that normally would look differently without technology as a mediating factor.

We are seeing a rise in the suicide rates of 15- to 29-year-olds. Now it's the third leading cause of death globally. We are seeing that kids are spending much more time online. We are seeing the transition between passive and active use of digital technologies, and social media and devices are coming into the child's life earlier and earlier. We are also seeing that not a lot of focus is being put on kids younger than the age of 12 when it comes to the interaction with technologies, even though we know that their relationship begins way earlier. It's really picking up around the age of 9, 10, 11.

There's a bunch of things that are coalescing that we need to be carefully looking at as AI picks up. Technologies that mimic human behavior, human attachment, and AI companionship will be very critical for their future. We can't just throw technology at them and hope that we will learn along the way. We need to think thoroughly about safety and impacts on mental health on kids before we allow them to build relationships with these systems.

Recently I read that kids emotionally and cognitively don't see the difference between losing a real friend and an AI companion, because the emotional connections that they have established internally are exactly the same. That is something we need to think about deeply as we move ahead.

We've worked for the past 10 years in the child safety space, and what we have learned is that anticipating the impacts and having frameworks in place is critical for the impacts on humans, and particularly kids. We need to think about how we enable thriving and well-being and leverage the opportunity of AI's technology. At the same time, if something comes out clearly from our message, it is that if the AI era continues to be built on the attention economy model, we are all going to be in a place that is not great. We are seeing that that's exactly what's happening. The AI platforms are adopting the attention economy model and monetization of people's time and souls, and we don't want that.

Natalie, anything to add? I went into a very dark space. Brighten it up.

Natalie Shoup: I worry I wouldn't brighten it. I have had some interesting conversations lately too about the attention economy model, and about the move to the attachment economy. The attachment model in many ways is even more problematic.

But on the other end of things, it's equally important to highlight that there is movement around a lot of positives like reducing stigmas and more services for people seeking help.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thanks so much.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.