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Opinion **UK business & economy**

## An artists' levy on tech would solve the UK's copyright issue

The creative industries are badly remunerated, but a small percentage on gadgets can make things fairer

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Artist Rachel Whiteread poses with her sculpture 'Nissen Hut' in Dalby Forest, York, England © Ian Forsyth/Getty

**Margaret Heffernan** JULY 4 2021

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*The writer is the chair of DACS, the Design and Artists Copyright Society*

Every day, the works of thousands of artists — writers, designers, musicians, painters and performers — are copied. This breaches their copyright. They own rights to their works, but their rights are not enforced and the creators are not remunerated. The cost of this is high, but even higher now that Covid has removed many of their sources of income: live performance, gallery openings and the many precarious jobs on which they've relied. So it is harder for artists to survive.

Many countries have already solved this problem by [introducing a levy](#) that remunerates artists for the work that other people use. A small percentage of the purchase price of digital storage devices such as smartphones and personal computers goes to the creative workers for the digital content that makes the internet so compelling. Germany, France, Belgium and Italy have some of the most established levies, indeed every European country bar Monaco has some such mechanism. So too do Israel and Japan and even, more recently, Malawi, Morocco and Tunisia. In all of these places, artists are compensated for their copyright.

But not in the United Kingdom. No such mechanism exists here.

That may change. The Smart Fund, a collaboration between creators and performers, technology companies and the government, is being billed as a direct way to invest in the economic, social and cultural wealth of the UK. The fund would invest the money provided by a proposed levy on devices in artists of all ages and backgrounds as a means of contributing to the economic and cultural

renewal of the UK.

Much of the money collected would be paid as royalties directly to artists, through existing collection societies such as the one I chair. A proportion would go to support cultural projects around the country, encouraging young and emerging artists and supporting the levelling-up agenda. All of this would be administered and decided in collaboration with the government, the technology companies and the collecting societies that already exist to distribute copyright income.

The levy is not a tax. Makers of technology have already agreed to support the creative industries in this way in 44 countries around the world and they do so with transparency and accountability. In countries like Germany and France, the levy generates hundreds of millions of euros for artists, making their work sustainable. The Smart Fund is not a “gadget tax”; it is an opportunity for technology companies to collaborate with government and the creative industries in the renewal of Britain’s cultural life.

Privately, many tech leaders tell me that they are tired of being portrayed as the bad guys, castigated for seeming aloof and antagonistic to the societies they serve. They readily acknowledge that, historically, they owe much of their own explosive success to the early adoption of technology by artists and creators around the world. A few say that they do their bit by supporting artistic charities. But artists don’t want philanthropy. They just want what everyone wants: to be paid for their work.

After the tragedy of the pandemic, it’s time to move on from polarised stand-offs and to find ways to make the tech sector a good citizen, involved with the creative community which it both depends on and serves. The Smart Fund offers a transparent, collaborative and sustainable means for government, tech and the creative community to work together, inspiring and strengthening the expressive work of the artists who make the UK world famous.

Prior to the pandemic, the UK’s creative industries contributed over £111bn to the economy and were growing at [five times the rate of the economy as a whole](#). The Smart Fund isn’t charity. It’s a regenerative economic development plan that can make and keep a vital part of British industry and society more productive, diverse and robust for years to come.

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