

All CCS and Cross-sectoral Video Games & Multi-media Organisations and initiatives Spotlight All Europe Countries Creative Europe Community Inclusion

Ethical Shift: European Culture Demands Digital Independence

CREATIVESUNITE

Co-funded by the European Union

22 European cultural networks urge the EU to combat tech giants' digital dominance by introducing ethical criteria in Creative Europe funding, promoting independent, European-based digital platforms.

In a bold challenge to digital authoritarianism, a coalition of 22 European cultural and media networks has drafted an urgent open letter calling on the European Commission to redefine digital engagement by introducing ethical criteria in Creative Europe funding applications. The letter, drafted by the Reset Network, demands a strategic shift away from tech giants' monopolistic and increasingly biased digital platforms, proposing a model similar to environmental sustainability criteria that would reward projects prioritizing independent, European-based digital tools.

The letter references specific recent events, such as the deterioration of content moderation on X (formerly Twitter) under Elon Musk, changes to Meta's moderation policies, and concerns about editorial independence at the Washington Post under Jeff Bezos, to illustrate the growing risks posed by digital capitalism and the unchecked power of tech giants. It calls for a shift toward digital independence in the European cultural and media context, encouraging the use of alternatives such as the Fediverse (e.g., Mastodon), the NL Net Foundation, and the European Alternatives platform. Coinciding with the full implementation of significant EU legislation such as the Media Freedom Act and the AI Act the signatories frame this as an urgent opportunity for European institutions to take a leadership role in shaping a fairer, more independent digital environment for culture and media. The letter follows:

Dear European Commission and Creative Europe representatives,

The ethics of social media platforms and corporate-owned digital tools have become a serious matter of concern, as the owners of these technologies neglect public interest by scaling down moderation and fact-checking, by ending DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) programmes, and more generally by running these technologies as their individual property. Also, the sheer fact of their quasi-monopolistic global market position poses an ongoing issue, especially in the context of independence and healthy pluralism.

We, cultural and media players who benefit from EU funds, thereby ask the European Commission and its Creative Europe funding programme, to take these threats into consideration and to take a leading role in tackling them. We think that encouraging the Creative Europe-funded cultural and media projects to prioritise independent, open-source, and European digital tools and to diversify their digital portfolio (for communication, workflow automations, etc.), thus decreasing the influence of tech giants, is an absolute necessity. To do so and as a first step, we suggest to put in place a new ethical digital alternatives criteria in the Creative Europe upcoming call for applications.

Digital capitalism, represented by tech giants, has progressively shown its chosen path: the one of authoritarianism and a so-called freedom of expression made of racist and discriminatory speech. The progressive deterioration of X under Elon Musk's governance, recent announcements on Mark Zuckerberg's Meta's moderation policies, the editorial takeover of Jeff Bezos, owner of the Washington Post and of Amazon, are the most striking recent examples. Defending human and cultural rights requires an evolution in our common digital presence, and with conscious guidance and a novel action plan from the European Commission, we can work towards a change that could be salutary for the day-to-day actions of the culture and media sectors.

As cultural and media players, how independent can we be when we are highly dependent on such platforms and their biased algorithms, as well as on digital tools whose approach to privacy and data protection is at least questionable? Also, we think it is an important responsibility of the European Commission to continuously monitor developments in digital technologies, and engage in conversation about their ethical implications.

Seizing digital transformations as a compass and as a contemporary issue that needs consideration and political answers is more than ever unavoidable for European institutions. For this reason, we demand that programmes financing cultural and media projects, like Creative Europe, shall encourage and recognise the efforts in project proposals that are actively trying to adjust their digital practices towards the adoption of fairer, more independent, and Europe-based and led digital platforms.

Similar to the model of the green criteria within various European funding streams––giving extra points to projects with a virtuous environmental approach––, projects prioritising independent digital tools, and that move away from tech giants' influence, shall be awarded (e.g. via extra points) throughout the evaluation process.

By recognising their efforts and commitment to establishing more ethical digital spaces, European institutions could lead a change in the cultural and media sphere, spurring its players to act with respect to this critical contemporary matter.

Rethinking the digital practices of European culture and media actors and spaces needs to occur by involving existing tools and efforts available in the European landscape. Ongoing EU-funded networks, platforms, cooperation projects, and many other projects and movements, are already working towards digital solutions respecting pluralism, controlled freedom of expression, and data protection.

Some examples are the NL Net Foundation, the European Alternatives platform, or the Fediverse of alternative social networking platforms (such as Mastodon). Means to change and offer digital alternatives to technologies provided by biased tech giants exist, now it is the time to seize them and encourage

European-funded projects to act and adopt them.

It is urgent to take digital practices into more conscious consideration. Digital capitalism is now not only threatening, as it has been since its inception, but is concretely and shamelessly putting its vision of an authoritarian, unregulated, and dangerous society, both online and offline, into action. Collective action, innovative new practices, and taking a firm position is the only answer we, cultural and media players, can pursue and ask from European institutions, in this crucial year of full implementation of the Media Freedom Act and the AI Act.

In this context, we, European cultural and media actors, networks, cooperation projects, and platforms are asking European institutions to consider this important moment as a shift, and to take the due action to promote digital independence in the European cultural and media context.

Let's not miss this opportunity to break out of a digital space that no longer welcomes the values of independence, pluralism, diversity, and sustainability.

February 25th, 2025

First endorsements:

- Reset! network (Creative Europe network)

- ENCC European Network of Cultural Centres, (Creative Europe network)

- ECHN European Creative Hubs Network, (Creative Europe network)

- Trans Europe Halles (Creative Europe network)

- Culture Action Europe (Creative Europe network)

- Live DMA (Creative Europe network)

- IETM International network for contemporary performing arts (Creative Europe network)

- Better Live (Creative Europe cooperation project)

- IN SITU (Creative Europe platform)

- EM Guide (Creative Europe cooperation project)

- Europavox (Creative Europe cooperation project)

- EJN Europe Jazz Network (Creative Europe network)

- Michael Culture Association (Creative Europe network)

- TMLAB (Creative Europe cooperation project)

- AEC European Association of Conservatoires (Creative Europe network)

- Sphera Network (Independent media network, co-funded by the DG Connect)

- REMA European Early Music Network (Creative Europe network)

- Circostrada, European network for contemporary circus and outdoor arts (Creative Europe network)

- EDN European Dance Development Network (Creative Europe network)

- Sustainable-EEEMERGING (Creative Europe cooperation project)

- Slash Transition (Creative Europe cooperation project)

If you, as an individual or an organisation from the cultural and media sphere, want to endorse this open letter, please click here (https://arty-farty.typeform.com/to/WFogS9dc).

Co-funded by
the European Union