CoSTAR
THE UK R&D NETWORK FOR CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY

ForesightLAB

Arts and Humanities Research Council

Scenarios in creative convergence

Media production and its role in future resilience

A Foresight Lab report

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The CoSTAR Foresight Lab

Driven by the UK's leading Creative Industries experts, the CoSTAR Foresight Lab is researching the adoption, use and impact of new, emergent and convergent technologies in gaming, TV, film, performance and digital entertainment.

Our findings will inform research, development and innovation across the Creative Industries, including the R&D taking place through the convergent screen technologies and performance in real time (CoSTAR) programme, the UK R&D network for creative technology.

CoSTAR is a £75.6 million national R&D network of laboratories that are developing new technology to maintain the UK's world-leading position in gaming, TV, film, performance, and digital entertainment. Delivered by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council, the programme is supporting new innovations and experiences that will enrich the UK's creative industries, economy, and culture. The network comprises the National Lab, the Realtime Lab, the Live Lab, the Screen Lab and the Foresight Lab. CoSTAR is funded through UK Research and Innovation's Infrastructure Fund, which supports the facilities, equipment and resources that are essential for researchers, businesses, and innovators to do groundbreaking work. You can find out more by visiting www.costarnetwork.co.uk.

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The Lab is administrated by Petra Lindnerova; Dan McCarthy; Tom Steer.

Research Context
This report is an outcome of the *Moments* workstream at the Foresight Lab, led by the first author at Goldsmiths, University of London. *Moments* focuses on sector and technology foresight from a systems lens, drawing from strategic foresight, investment awareness, technical expertise, and speculative design to make sense of complex change in the creative sector.

Moments works in partnership with *Humans*, a workstream led by the second author at i2 media research. *Humans* explores inquiries through an empirical investigation, providing an experiential lens for workers and audiences, using foresight, UX research, psychology, and design. Both workstreams co-evolve through dialogue with the Foresight Board, our industry advisory group, and are supervised by the Director and Principal Investigator of the CoSTAR Foresight Lab, Professor Jonny Freeman.

Recognition
Thank you to: Xiyao (Miranda) Shou, interdisciplinary scientist and designer, for reviewing our section on complex stress of the environment; Graham Hitchen and Vicki Williams, our policy lead and manager at the lab, for thoughtful reflections on the policy implications raised in this report.

Definition
In this report, the term *creative sector* (or 'the sector') refers to CoSTAR's remit, including activity in screen, games, performance, and digital entertainment.

Foreword by Professor Jonny Freeman

This report explores how the creative sector can help us respond to some of the most complex challenges we face today: challenges around health, the environment, and national identity. It builds on Foresight Lab's earlier work, but shifts focus to areas that are often overlooked or harder to define.

Rather than treating the creative industries as fixed or separate from wider society, we look at them as a flexible system — made up of people, technologies, and ideas — that can adapt and contribute in unexpected ways. The scenarios in this report are not predictions. They are tools to help us think differently, ask better questions, and imagine new possibilities.

We believe creativity has a unique role in helping people make sense of change. Whether through media, design, or storytelling, it can support wellbeing, foster connection, and offer new ways of seeing the world. That's why we encourage collaboration across sectors — between artists, researchers, technologists, and policymakers — to unlock the full potential of creative work.

This report is an invitation to explore what the creative sector might become, and how it can help shape a more resilient and responsive future.

Scenarios in creative convergence

This report is an extension to our first foresight report, Introduction to *Moments* (December 2024), which examined plausible futures for the creative industries with a focus on three thematic complexities: machine learning, platforms and creative work. While the first report leaned towards a techno-economic lens on change, this report acts as a provocation for themes raised at the fringes in social, environmental, and political issues. Surfacing possibility within these tangential issues, we reflect on the true scope of 'convergence' and how the creative sector could act as a vehicle for resilience. We encourage government, investors, researchers, and entrepreneurs to consider the phrase 'form follows fellowship,' to highlight how new kinds of collaboration could transmit the creative sector's capabilities. We call for an embrace of creative approaches to address challenges in wellbeing, ecological resilience, and national cohesion.

Our approach was inductive and exploratory, starting from observations arising from horizon scanning in the second half of 2024. We recognised potential blind spots in wider creative sector foresight, identifying issues raised at the fringes of the first Delphi wave with our industry advisory board (Foresight Board). Issues around wellbeing, existential ecological change, and protectionism had an implied yet opaque relevance to the sector. A volume of scenarios were generated based on tensions observed in signals of change at these underexplored intersections. In this context, speculative scenarios are used to provoke further questioning around creativity, media production, and its relationship to public health, the environment, and national identity.

— ***Personal wellness, making sense of an embodied experience***
The first section explores the overlap between the creative industries and the emphasis on preventative care. We advise reflection on how this shift redefines media, requires new kinds of industry collaboration, and places unique demands on the growth of interdisciplinary ventures. Scenarios such as the Chord experiments, Data trauma, UK Creative Health (UKCH), seek to pull out tensions around the role of technical artists in healthcare, the rise of social gathering centring the nervous system, and other emerging phenomena at the intersection of health and creative media.

— ***Complex stress, deriving meaning from ecological uncertainty***
The second section surfaces connections between the creative industries and concern around ecological interdependencies. We propose a locally-led paradigm shift in how we narrate climate change, an audit of underlying beliefs informing conservation efforts, and considering how public information needs may evolve. Scenarios like Creative biology, Synthetic nature, Bioregion building raise questions in emerging signals of change, such as how computer graphics could be used to model nature, or immersive experiences that enable visioning around our role in ecological change.

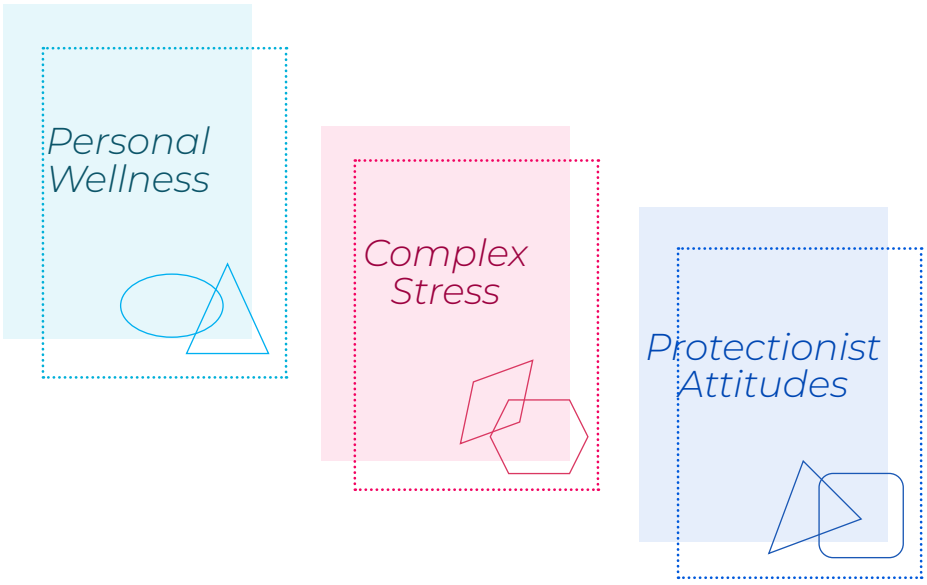
— ***Protectionist attitudes, an impulse in response to fragmentation***
The last section addresses the relationship between the creative industries and the wave of political protectionism. We consider revisiting the UK's media ecosystem aims, exploring the role of media in national identity, and reflecting on indicators of identity distress that call for a new language around national identity. The UK Identity Fund, the Commonwealth Cultural Agreement, British Bricolage reflect a snapshot of scenarios given evolving narrative power and supply chain uncertainties.

Navigation

START HERE. P.4

Orientation

The report starts with framing the work as an inquiry into ***less-explored relationships with the creative sector, and the freestyle methods informing the research process****. Taking a systems perspective, the creative sector is deconstructed to surface its various traits and capabilities. This reveals it as a living organism capable of transforming in ways that are hard to perceive in the present.*



EXPLORE HERE. P.8

Each section starts with an ***introduction to the inquiry area and its relationship with the creative sector****. Signals of change pull out emerging tensions and uncertainties.*

We then expose ***a series of plausible scenarios, fictions based on coherence surfaced in signals of change****. They are designed to probe further questioning and critique around each thematic section.*

Following scenarios, each section ends with ***probes to challenge thinking across research, policy, and investment directions****. We expect everyone to take away something unique, framing progress as distributed, adaptive, and incremental.*

END HERE. P.32

Designing for resilience

The report ends with concluding remarks on what it means to cultivate resilience as a sector, ***proposing 'form follows fellowship' to reflect the need for new collaborations*** *that address the complex challenges of this century.*

Orientation

What catalysed this work

Our first foresight report published December 2024, Introduction to *Moments*, examined three emerging areas of complexity in the creative sector covering machine learning, platforms, and creative work. Drawing on a Delphi survey with our industry advisory group (Foresight Board) selected to reflect creative convergence, one-to-one conversations with members, and horizon scanning, our synthesis leaned toward a techno-economic lens. Themes around power, ownership, and work became central.

This second report is the 'B-sides' of that process, addressing more uncertain themes that emerged at the edges of our earlier work but weren't explored further. We observed a social, environmental, and political perspective on change was less prominent through consensus. Still, off-the-cuff stories and connections hinted at importance in these areas with board members and in lab conversations. This reflects a common tension in foresight between valid issues surfaced through consensus, and the true emergent, nonlinear dynamics that underpin change, where mere details can carry significant strategic weight. Our role as applied researchers is to not only surface priorities, but to explore these uncertain pockets that go unexamined. This report is a provocation for how we conceptualise the creative sector's convergent nature, and acts as a first draft for further discourse.

Research and synthesis process

Unlike positivist research that tests hypotheses or measures confidence, foresight is an acumen and set of practices used to surface uncertainty.[1] Foresight's role in generating questions reflects a clarification from the early 20th century notion it could be a science.[2] We propose it is more clearly positioned as a form of applied philosophy that weaves together interdisciplinary thought embedded in complex organisations. Its intent is to help people of varying positions make wise decisions to safeguard the organisation's survival, rather than flatten complexity through prescribed answers. In this sense, our work can be understood as a series of probes that supports adaptive processes. This report reflects a more freestyle form, focused on surfacing meaning in tangential issues.

(i) Our research process for this work began through ongoing horizon scanning in the second half of 2024. Following our first Delphi wave with the Foresight Board, we recognised blind spots emerging in creative sector foresight through a synthesis of conversations and survey data.

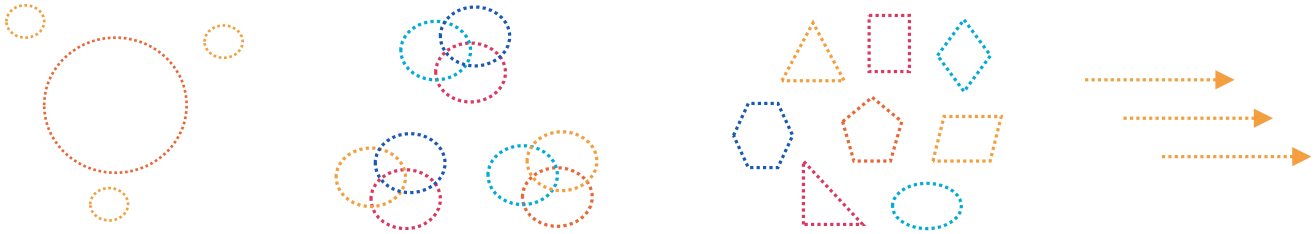
(ii) We referenced our *Certain Uncertainties* work, a mental map for making sense of the wider context of change in the creative sector. We used this work to deductively contextualise the blind spots we noticed. We found alignment in the following forces of change, with their respective themes bracketed: personal wellness (fragmented culture and care systems), complex stress (confronting environmental entanglements), and protectionist attitudes (a political status quo in question).[3] We recommend readers to review these three forces of change, as they act as foundations for this report.

(iii) Then the research team held an inductive scenarios workshop, developing a wide range of plausible scenarios from discrete signals of change[4] at the intersection of the creative sector and the three blind spots indicated above. The scenario process was guided to notice tensions and connections in the signals. Researchers were encouraged to openly speculate, foregoing a rigid scenario structure to emphasise lateral thinking.

(iv) Following the workshop, there was an extended period of co-evolving scanning, sensemaking, and referencing previous board interactions to develop the scenarios. Much of this period focused on cross-disciplinary synthesis and constructing meaning at these intersections to develop the three thematic areas into provocations.

(v) Questions were synthesised based on their potential as constructive, systemic probes for each thematic area,[5] and reviewed by our policy team.

We describe this as a freestyle approach, as the process evolves by noticing what's at the periphery of discourse, interpreting subtle connections, and surfacing what exactly is uncertain. Underlying this work is an ongoing effort to deconstruct the creative sector's foundational traits and capabilities when interacting with wider change. This is presented as a first draft that invites further adaptation and collaboration. We ask researchers, policymakers, and investors to reflect on how the probes surfaced in this work could act as starting points for discrete experimentation.



Notice blind spots *Workshop possibilities* *Refine scenarios* *Synthesise probes*

Understanding the creative sector

In this report, the term *creative sector* (including activity in screen, games, performance, and digital entertainment) refers to an ecosystem of technologies, spaces, ways of working, cultural norms, funding models, artefacts, and speculations that organise it over time. While most people hold a mental image of what the sector means to them, it is a multi-faceted, living system evolving in a wider context of social, technological, economic, environmental, and political change. As observed historically, emerging media formats will both reflect and redefine what people need, prioritise, and gain from the creative sector.[6] Creative mediums in this sense is a highly unstable concept, constantly shifting in response to, and consequently shaping, deeper societal needs.[7]

Surfacing the sector's traits and capabilities

Deconstructing the creative sector allows us to see it as a dynamic system of traits and capabilities. This is reflective of a broader shift in commerce over recent decades, away from integrated industrial silos towards fragmented and loosely organised networks of trade.[8] At the same time, there has been growing recognition of social, natural, and human capital beyond just financial capital in industries.[9] Taken together, modern commercial practice seems to be increasingly likened to an organism seeking symbiosis, constantly adapting based on its unique configuration of capital. This adaptive behaviour echoes the familiar term 'convergence' that has often been used to describe industrial innovation that bleeds across sectors, in the form of biotech, healthtech, createch, and forming the basis of CoSTAR. The prevalence of these terms has suggested industries are systems of capabilities constantly breaking the industrial mould. Though this is well-understood within industries, it still comes up against vague assumptions that they will continue to behave predictably into the future.

This calls for reframing industries as systems of value, embodying people and infrastructure with certain capabilities. We believe this foundational understanding is essential to anticipate how the sector will evolve, challenging the static image of industries that continue to haunt norms around institutional funding, language, and organisation. By recalibrating to this reality, we can better understand how innovation in media technologies may converge in response to wider change. The following defines the sector as a system, with an internal logic that offers multiple forms of value. It is informed by practical observation and engagement with the creative sector, surfaced here to make sense of it as an evolving organism before engaging with plausible trajectories.

Common creative sector descriptors

- *Creative capacity.* Generally, refers to lateral thinking that generates value, allowing us to improvise, form meaning, adapt dynamically for survival, and find new direction. It is associated with the personality trait *openness*, indicating a receptiveness to aesthetics, emotional depth, subversion, and novelty. It is related to liberalism[10] as well as innovation and entrepreneurial drive,[11] serving as a transformative yet destructive[12] force — from addressing critical issues to catalysing new modes of experience.

- *Media production*. Involves the development of communication and distribution formats to achieve various aims, whether educational, political, psychological, behavioural, social-cultural, or other. This includes virtual systems, developing software, hardware, networks, standards, and multi-sensory experiences. It also includes managing material construction, craftspeople, and other talent adept at navigating multidisciplinary environments, from concept to distribution in highly variable projects.

Constituent parts of the system

- *Interdisciplinary expertise*. An ecosystem of craftspeople expert at applied practices like art, design, and narrative; technicians in software, hardware, and networks; and hybrid professionals bridging these domains, often labelled around the term *createch*,[13] or otherwise known as technical artists.

- *Vast and distributed infrastructure*. Comprised of physical venues as well as flowing data, tech stacks, workstations, standards, and computing. Physical and virtual demands evolve uniquely with projects, with particular focus on how data is captured, stored, and exploited in productive ways across the process.

- *Cultural vessel*. The creative sector serves as a container and amplifier for expression, reflecting moments in time that later become part of archives and cultural memory. It often employs worldbuilding, stimulating new imaginaries and innovation in other industries. It can reflect and reinforce dominant stories[14] or present subversive perspectives that challenge popular assumptions.

- *Liminal structures*. Aside from established businesses, the sector tends to take the form of discrete projects, with many workers in fixed-term contracts or operating as sole traders and limited companies in the pursuit of economic resilience.[15]

- *Designed for experience*. Outputs aim to deliver an experience to audiences — to rouse affect, induce behavioural change, and help people transcend the moment.[16] In doing so, the sector plays a role in the understanding, sensemaking, and regulation of our own experience. Over time, it influences identity, personality, and the wider political context of one's life.

- *Risk-sensitive funding*. The sector is a channel for various political, cultural, and financial authorities to fund experiences, with strategic funding by government given the risky nature of creative work. Many productions are typically funded in fractured and subsidised ways to facilitate the uncertain trajectory and high cost. It's likely the known scale of microbusinesses[17] in the sector has a relationship with the ambiguity of the work, often a symptom of emergence.

- *Multidisciplinary structure*. In large projects, success often relies on producers and project managers who understand how diverse disciplines integrate for an outcome. While disciplines are highly variable in the sector, there is growing understanding of a convergent skillset enabling creative workers to contribute across industries.

- *Generative and entrepreneurial nature*. Creative work yields intellectual property that can be monetised over extended periods. Prototyping within projects can lead to the development of new technologies, materials, and companies, making the sector a fertile incubator for solutions and artefacts with long-term trade potential. However, equitable access to these opportunities remains an ongoing challenge.[18]

- *Adaptive workflows*. The sector is characterised by intensely heterogeneous, multidisciplinary, and time-bound workflows. Sector workers are accustomed to operate in an environment of constant change, intellectual property and reputational sensitivities, as well as deadlines. This implies a shared capacity for adaptability, facilitating steep, systematic set-up and wrap-down phases for each project.

- *Applied sciences*. The creative industries often lead to scientific advances in visuals and acoustics in an applied setting. This makes technologists working in the sector 'experience translators,' changing how we interface with culture. Estimates of spillover effects are high, with UKIE suggesting it could sit at £1.3 billion in video games alone, equal to about 20% of the industry's value.[19]

- *A web of engagement*. The creative industries exist part and parcel with media distribution channels. These channels shape how audiences access content (from game consoles and streaming platforms to social media) and influence the economics of creative work.

- *Social layer*. The sector creates substrates for social organising, shared narratives, relatedness, and third spaces. Uniquely, outcomes tend to embody intellectual engagement and affective resonance in lived experience. For many, the creative sector is a touchpoint for understanding the social groups they're part of.

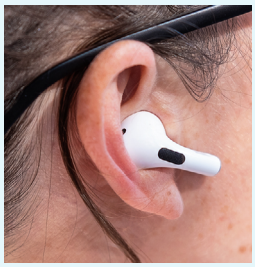
As a system, the creative industries are highly plural, nimble, generative, oriented around the sensory, psychological and meaning-making needs of people. This is what ties together film, TV, gaming, performance, and digital entertainment. Making sense of the system (its traits, capabilities, interdependencies) is a starting point for imagining the creative sector's alternative paths of growth and transformation.

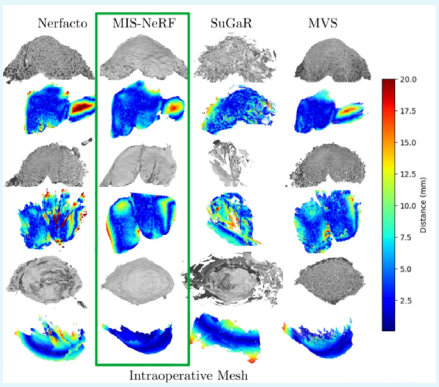
Personal wellness

Making sense of an embodied experience

A chronic illness burden, existential anxiety among young people, ageing one's own way, and recognition of integrated healthcare has become increasingly central over the last decade. We have recognised all our bodies are unique, as are perspectives on how they change, and there is a range of toolkits that shape how well we feel, even in the throes of suffering. Views are softening on what healthcare should look like.

Evidence is growing on the impact of culture on health,[20] including the everyday role of aesthetics and its effect on wellbeing.[21] Jameel Arts & Health, a global research lab launched in recent years, is tasked with integrating the arts into healthcare, including a range of Healing Arts activations deployed over the last year in the UK. Other organisations, like the National Centre for Creative Health, are working in parallel. In hospitals, immersive experiences have been used for pain and distress, especially in cases to support children or where drug use can carry individual risk.[22] Health is increasingly recognised as cultural and idiosyncratic, exposing a space where creative methods could transform care.[23]





Images left to right: Apple gets FDA authorisation for developing hearing aid features into AirPods, suggesting another medical iteration in media accessories (Chris Welch, 2024); early experimentation of applying Neural Radiance Fields (NeRFs) to minimally invasive surgery, suggesting greater development into hospital media pipelines (Samad Barri Khojasteh; 2025); House of Commons Value of UK Arts & Health Roundtable, where they described the intersection of arts and health as British soft power (Jameel Arts & Health Lab, 2025).

Media and aesthetics have always affected psychological functioning, though the extent of their role in overall wellbeing has been limited in application. Barriers affecting the reach of creative approaches may be more about historic assumptions around disciplinary boundaries, even if healthcare was never really limited to clinic walls.[24] Assumptions are coming apart in the face of wider cultural forces.

Sound has always been present in medical innovation,[25] but the scope of its use cases reflect a generative ecosystem. Simply listening to music in post-operative settings has shown, for at least a decade, reduced patient pain, anxiety, cortisol, and heart rate, aiding in recovery.[26] Outside acute settings, long-term therapies are also testing the scope of audio culture as an intervention. BPM Rehab has embedded creative practice in long-term neurological recovery, using DJing to support rehabilitation from changes in the brain, observed in traumatic brain injuries (TBI) as well as aiding cognitive and motor skills development. Even audio technologies like AirPods are making progress as clinical hearing aids,[27] suggesting media devices could play more of a persistent and individualised role in delivering healthcare. The term 'music medicine' pushes historic meanings of sound therapy, as audio shows potential in chronic, idiosyncratic, and sensitive mental health issues, like post-traumatic stress disorders.[28]

These intersections highlight how multimedia researchers and engineers can bring valued perspectives in healthcare, as they are often leading the vanguard in various sensory technologies. Their experiential perspective also offers insight the medical community needs, but lacks capacity to prioritise. At the same time, the creative sector is more familiar with data sensitivity and governance than is often acknowledged, especially as machine learning raises complex questions around data ethics. There is potential for greater symbiosis between sectors given shared interests in emerging technologies. For example, Neural Radiance Fields (NeRFs), a machine learning technique that generates 3D models from 2D images, is also emerging as an area of research to produce 3D medical models from ultrasound images,[29] with Gaussian Splatting plausibly used for rendering surgical footage.[30] While clinical imaging serves diagnostic goals, how we illuminate and narrate the body — from clinician training to health journeys, through to public discourse in the pandemic — is cultural, shaped by meaning we rarely interrogate.

Still, creative-healthcare R&D is only one dimension of a much wider cultural force shaping how we navigate topics of care and wellbeing.

Korean healing fiction is growing in popularity among British youth for its calming effect.[31] Cosiness, an emotional aim reflected in internet movements like the 'cosy web', as well as cosy gaming communities[32] reflect the same shift in needs, as games like Gris attract gamers through slower themes like love and loss. The same observations are made in performance adjacent areas. Live Action Role Play (LARPing) is breaking through in family constellation therapy and the immersive experience about life transitions, Within Touching Distance, with a recent Broadway playwright describing LARPing as cathartic.[33] But of course, the *Dungeons & Dragons* community have always known this to be true.[34] Meanwhile, wellness festivals are taking the place of music festivals,[35] suggesting a reordering of experiential values, an observation validated by our investment partner Station12. Possibly it's inaccurate that cultural relics like nightlife are dying but shapeshifting in response to new needs for social organising, with a vacuum of funding and energy to fill.

Signals of change

— **The underlying basis for gathering is shifting, where escapism should offer care, regulation, and healing.** Call it a wellness-shaped alternative to socialising: the nervous system is being centred in other ways, from reimagining churches as venues of psychedelic creative healing[36] to insulated sleep zones at raves.[37] Sauna culture is proliferating in the form of creative studios[38] and alternatives to nightclubs,[39] with immersive soundscapes and different mood-enhancing experiences like cold plunge, with a performative feel.[40] Meanwhile, in Glasgow, a spatial audio experiment runs, just as the Barbican launches an exhibit exploring the body as a listening interface. The rise of health rituals, embodiment, and sensory experimentation connect all these emergent behaviours, where third spaces are centring the body in new ways.

— **Artists are exposing healing processes, with insights for healthcare and wider creative participation.** FKA Twigs has discussed somatic healing,[41] how music and movement helped her break out of distress, in body and mind, to then generate new forms of dance styles. On the other hand, Raphael Saadiq, a musician for the film *Sinners*, described how making a blues song unearthed layers of connectedness with his ancestry. What was unique is how he connected this experience to the Afrofuturist concept 'rhythm travel' resulting in a piece that composed different black American genres.[42] In both cases, artists are explicitly recognising healing and creative innovation as intrinsic to each other, creating inroads for reimagining the relationship between creativity and therapeutics.

— **Neurological interventions involving media technologies could shape how we discuss ability.** Brain-computer interfaces could enable people to control media interfaces with their thoughts, with a Neuralink recipient supposedly designing software and playing video games as well. In contrast to invasive procedures, neuromodulation also holds potential in treating mental health and neurological disorders through stimulus to the nervous system. Recent studies on the role of rhythmic patterns in rehabilitating movement disorders open a world of questions for neurological professionals and people working in acoustics.[43] This shift expands the scope of embodied devices and how healthcare could be delivered.

— **Technologies prioritising accessibility are bringing the arts and its therapeutic benefits within reach.** Orchid, an instrument made by Telepathic Instruments, decreases the gap between expression and musical play with a user-friendly synthesiser. Portable, with no need for musical theory and technical expertise, everyday instrument use is positioned as an easy medium for reflection. Advances in computing and somatic approaches to audio are prompting new questions around how music is produced. The release of *The Way of Code*, Rick Rubin's spiritual manifesto on vibe coding, suggests a new kind of technical accessibility to enable expression.

— **XR is increasingly used for social health, meeting needs in areas the public sector struggles with.** Cyberdelic Labs is deploying virtual reality in ways that simulate psychedelic states for the sake of probing self-insight, appearing like an iteration from the original Dreamachine. Prisons are also adopting immersive experiences to shift the purpose of solitary confinement toward emotional regulation.[44] And, addiction researchers in the UK are exploring exposure treatment, simulating tempting environments to curb cocaine addiction and prevent

drug overdoses.[45] In all these cases, immersive media is stepping in to facilitate psychological processes in safer ways.

— **The rise of digital media in healthcare could instigate a more complete paradigm shift in work.** Plymouth Marjon University is opening a virtual reality training hub, indicating an expansion in healthcare media pipelines. As governments struggle to navigate public health demands, it's worth exploring how creative technologists — those skilled in story, aesthetics, and meaning making, beyond just UX and digital skills — could meet this challenge from a unique cultural dimension. Audio, moving image, simulation, and machine learning skillsets from this talent base may fill a gap in imaging, diagnostics, treatment, and care. Underlying this is also a provocation for how these high-level skillsets are utilised beyond project-based creative work, offering growth in technical artists' craft.

— **Specialised platforms designed for wellbeing are emerging, reflecting new kinds of support.** Director Louie Schwartzberg has progressed his streaming platform into a participatory convening of artists to contribute 'visual healing' content, reflecting what's been learned to date about nature-themed media and relieving distress. Interest in neuroaesthetics, targeted media, and advances in real-time imaging raises possibilities in how we think about the relationship between health and media ecosystems. The growing curiosity around smaller, specialised, and creative social media networks also suggests potential around how platform design could address wellbeing challenges.

— **Relationship simulations could facilitate breakthroughs in more safety-led, meaningful ways.** MIT Media Lab's *Future You* simulation has proven to cultivate a stronger connection between users and their future selves.[46] And while AI girlfriends are already a cliché, it's worth asking if this phenomenon reveals a need around healthy relationship modelling when it's not available in other ways. Imbuing the narrative capacities of the creative sector in these products — drawing on skillsets from game writers to playwrights — could lead to more accessible, engaging, and believable therapies outside the counselling paradigm.[47]

— **Game environments may open our understanding of where healthcare lives and interacts with us.** A children's hospital has hired a resident gamer for symptom distraction,[48] men's therapy initiatives are offering British gamers free counselling,[49] and overseas, Deepwell has received FDA clearance for using interactive media to treat mental health issues.[50] Alongside a proposal to make mental health games reimbursable as a physician service, the market for these games could expand rapidly. Serious games — gaming experiences with a specific purpose — have become more relevant over the last decade and could become central to health journeys. From preventative to palliative care, game environments could open care possibilities given how accessible and approachable they are.[51]

Scenarios

Media technologies promised health restoration based on pseudo-scientific knowledge. Now the victims speak out. Tara was prescribed a virtual reality experience by a private doctor after recovering from post-viral psychosis, struggling to get adequate support from the NHS. She later discovered the data used for this media prescription, containing intimate patient records, were sold onto AI companies in the health sector. Her experience is one of many that has led to a flurry of court cases around inflicting ***data trauma***.

Simulating medical decisions helped people through abrupt health crises, where patients struggled with life-changing decisions. The technology found its footing in palliative care and in contexts with high stakes treatment decisions. Over time, it was adopted in chronic illness settings where flare ups had a mysterious relationship that was hard to track, with design principles centring meaning making through interactions. Plausible health trajectories were visualised across time horizons, generated through an analysis of a private ID bank of a person's health-relevant data, empowering decisions in the present.

The government incentivised private healthcare activity to fill gaps in care. Increasing competition bred the halo effect, where aesthetic look, feel, and comfort of enhancing facilities were linked to people getting better faster. Studies built the foundation for experience questionnaires, later becoming portable medical fingerprints for care planning, informing desired sensory stimulus to minimise distress. Production studios became continuous service providers to these clinics, with cinematographers, environment designers, hygiene specialists, audio engineers, and experience designers working collaboratively. Over time, these collaborations formed the basis for the ***Chord experiments***, studies using quantum sensors to detect forms of 'music' the body produced, resulting in new biomarkers for diagnostics.

As caution around painkillers, sleeping pills, and other downers grew on the backdrop of ongoing addiction challenges, the old *Walkman* arose as a nostalgic comfort, instead dubbed the ***Sleepman***. With headphones responding to nervous system biomarkers, listeners would receive personalised forms of hypnosis, facilitating desired experiences of sleep, ease, or regulation more safely than pharmaceuticals.

Humanoid robots progressively gained adoption in nursing homes. From labour force pressures, immigration restrictions, and receptiveness to robots, they became a necessary tool for carers. Outfitted to take up localised cultural norms across regions, creatives played a significant role in the design of these characters, their capacity to entertain, and the narrative arcs they facilitated. A Dundee playwright, London robotics academic, and Manchester-based machine learning expert formed the studio ***Care Machine***, where they partnered with foreign governments and health companies to programme robotics for social adoption, remaining a private company out of concern for sustainability.

The Creative Health Act passed to implement large-scale integration of the creative and healthcare sectors, creating requirement for interdisciplinary training. Arts schools mandated a foundation of medical training, with medical schools mandating training in media, narrative, creative decision-making, and the role of sensory experience with the nervous system. Dovetailing with urgent needs in healthcare sectors across the globe, as well as growing phenomena like climate grief, ***UK Creative Health (UKCH)*** became an interdisciplinary model for countries seeking new funding models for health challenges.

[START]
AlphaOmega (AO) removes the barrier between body and psyche, medical and sacred. Sensing chemical, psychic, and neurological needs, AO shells deliver an immersive experience, all processed in the safety of your home or back garden. We're not a sauna, or a simulated therapy session. AO is private, energy conscious, a full body check-in that you shape over time, bringing healing patterns to your nervous system.
[END]

Therapy artists, bio-art, creative-health technologists, and neuroaesthetic advisors rose as influencers, spilling out into franchise models, with studios surfacing across the nation. Studio members were clustered through a survey on history, intent, needs, strengths, and boundaries, assigned to small group projects that wove together creative practice, self development, LARPing, and peak experiences, with members anonymous to each other. Longitudinal studies eventually validated the system as a legitimate form of prescribing, and ***the Labyrinthus field***, bridging medicine, experience, and media, was born.

Criminal networks around GLP-1 variants sprouted to target specific enhancements, becoming a testbed for experimentation across entertainment workers, driven by omnipresent, ubiquitous visibility into their appearance, and ever-present deepfakes. Decades later, it's unclear to what extent atypical metabolic disorders are rooted in this shift. A new therapy specialism was first prototyped for creators and media workers called ***body reels***. Self-led and guided by a body reel therapist in group meetings, patients would express themselves through gamified video simulations, prompting narratives that processed their experience as a collective.

A sudden rise in cancers led to draconian research clearances to draw cause and effect. Over time, theories centred the nervous system and probed questions around the role of the media ecosystem, part of a map of systemic changes which correlated with the rise. Uncertain of the cause but pressured to act, new campaigns sought to shape healthy behaviours. The ***National Broadcasting and Internet Health (NBIH)*** merger reformed the web and social media access, bringing creative health designers together to reconsider what 'healthy mediums' were. Some were disillusioned and pushed back against a citizen web, and rural, craft communities formed offline, rejecting modern media altogether.

Probes

Is our definition of media up to date?

Media is broadly understood as a vehicle that informs and entertains the population. Though, **our increasing understanding of how mediums affect population wellbeing, and the role of design, warrants a refined definition** to support experimentation. This could be the basis for reassessing the scope of creative media technologies and where valued use cases may live.

Are the right collaborations in place?

While testbeds for digital innovation in healthcare are firmly established in the UK, they tend to focus on certain technological frames. **Collaborations between creatives and health professionals suggest an ecological lens on how these fields come together** and share capabilities, expanding on sensory technologies, worldbuilding, and new forms of gathering. Ensuring the right incentives and language would facilitate integrative problem-solving.

Does early experimentation have support?

There is a known issue around scaling up productive ventures in the UK. It's worth auditing how early-stage concepts in complex, nascent areas can be supported through quick recognition of resource gaps. Iterative prototyping will surface opportunities, though it's essential to consider the special supports viable concepts need in later stages. **Interdisciplinary ventures need to draw on know-how across specialities as they grow**, and it's worth exploring if experts are sourced efficiently.

Researchers may consider how we're challenging next-generation definitions of media within public health, how we conceptualise creative media in a society in need of care, and what principles would create the conditions for scaling such concepts.

Progress in sound engineering, graphics research, and sensory technologies for diagnostics and treatments, including early ideas around quantum.

The role of digital artists, worldbuilders, game developers, and other creative simulators in shaping therapeutic interfaces.

Collaboration between machine learning experts, health practitioners, and artists in applications like therapy and relationship modelling.

Evidence-based media possibilities in neuromodulation for health outcomes.

Policymakers should ask if incentives reflect the evolving need for creative innovation in wellbeing, if knowledge sharing *as is* can catalyse new solutions, and if areas of innovation, such as ARIA and UKRI, are supported with the right resources.

Ethical guardrails relating to data ownership and manipulation, for example in technologies affecting senses, perception, cognition (especially neurotech).

Ongoing accessibility challenges in extended reality within health contexts.

Strengthening relationships between creative and health industries to enhance industrial resilience.

The relationship between media and population health issues, including the role of creativity in subverting harmful themes around optimising the body.

Investors could reflect if they are missing early concepts because of their definition-bending nature, evaluate potential by adaptability to foreign markets with unique cultural customs around wellbeing, or assess capability diversity in founders' teams.

Rendering and creative machine learning techniques that speed up production of diagnostics, alternative treatments, and patient understanding in healthcare.

Third spaces weaving together new kinds of arts, culture, wellness, sensory and embodied experiences, characterised by latent self-discovery.

Ventures enabling self reflection and simulation, especially for underserved groups with vulnerabilities in particular health, wellness, and care ecosystems.

Experiences enabling agency in self-care, outside the therapy paradigm.

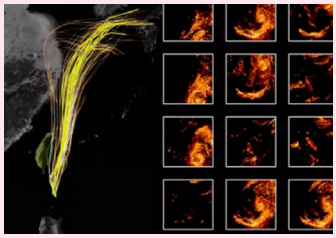
Media technologies designed for privacy, anonymity, and introspection.

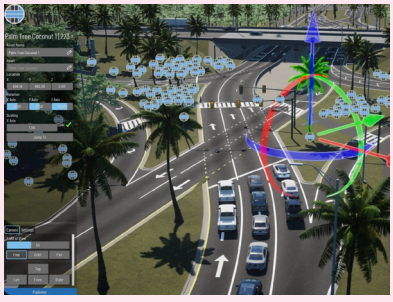
Complex stress

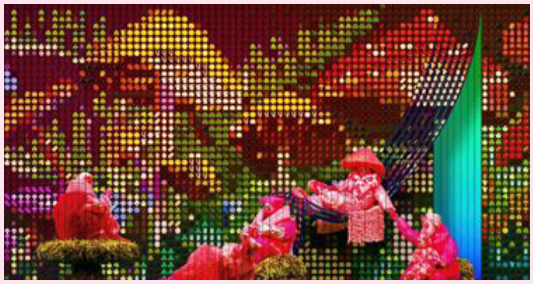
Deriving meaning from ecological uncertainty

While global climate issues are front of mind, the plural ways our ecology is evolving presents a separate issue. Changing weather patterns, abrupt natural crises, as well as species extinction and ecosystem emergence[52] all shape our everyday experience. The Anthropocene is widely known, but what it means for our relationship to local environments is opaque. This widening gap between knowing, understanding, and feeling like a participant of ecological change is alienating, and people are checking out of the conversation entirely.

Simulations are trying to bring clarity to complexity, as observed with UKRI funding a range of digital twin projects[53] also observed in industrial projects like Nvidia's EARTH-2 and Google X's Bellwether. Even game engines like Unreal are being used to simulate civil design in more collaborative ways, suggesting greater participation around environmental issues.[54] Access to new tools for collective decision-making could be critical in the face of multi-faceted dysfunction, occurring at a systemic level that is too novel and abstract for people to metabolise.[55] It also implies the possibility of a devolved, locally-led process of making sense — and making meaning[56] — of complex stress beyond a planetary view.







Images left to right: EARTH-2 using diffusion models for forecasting plausible typhoon pathways in Taiwan (Atwell, 2024); Beyond CAD visualising traffic using Civil Engine, a public urban planning application developed in a game engine (Unreal Engine, 2025); a snapshot of the Mycelia panel in the Fables for our Futures triptych, about symbiosis and communication networks (The Design Museum; 2025).

The creative industries are a system of media interfaces, data exchange, and worldbuilding, connecting the local with the international. It's worth considering how the sector's capacities can act as a substrate to environmental efforts, infusing imagination and social capital where we need to adapt. At present, sustainability conversations in the sector seem limited to curb carbon,[57] produce ESG-friendly outputs, demonstrate stewardship of production locations, and mitigate environmental risks to media infrastructure. Yet, the scope of the issue demands more than this.

Creative technologists tend to think in context- and culture-first ways, and this lens could be missing from directions in environmental simulation. Some technical artists and climate modellers are already using the same technologies. Nvidia Omniverse, where EARTH-2 was developed, is also being used as a real-time, collaborative software in filmmaking. Diffusion, a class of machine learning techniques drawn upon to develop plausible weather scenarios down to the street level, is equally being used for image simulation in creative production. While they adopt different architectures, the underlying aim of surfacing patterns in data to expedite imaging is the same. But media intersections don't end there, with social media algorithms used to surface local knowledge around wildfires and hurricanes for disaster response.[58] Innovation in these kinds of real-time tools could go further to better equip first responders and those at-risk in uncertain environments, including marginalised and remote communities. There is a distinct sense of media convergence and spillover, for example, even observing how game developers are employing autonomous agents at incredible scale raises questions for alternative use cases in digital twins.[59]

This kind of lateral thinking could also lead to new ways of simulating leading indicators of environmental change, considering the creative use of data across sensors, satellite imaging, metagenomic studies and possibly local narratives. Plant[60] and animal behaviour[61] are valued indicators, and culturally-attuned, community-partnered research practices could reflect another kind of worldbuilding, revealing the inner logic of our own local environment in a way not easily known.

Beyond digital simulation, cultural currents suggest alternative ways of relating to nature and subverting the status quo, with implications to genres, gathering, and experiences. Interest in Paganism is on the rise,[62] as is guerilla gardening, what one Hackney gardener describes as botarnarchy,[63] reflected in a drive toward urban rewilding emerging across the globe but noticeably in London.[64] On the surface, these shifts may seem unrelated to the creative industries, however underlying them are emerging frameworks in social organising and aesthetic preference, just like neoliberal nihilism presented the foundations for grunge.[65]

There is a wider debate on environmental policy too. Conservationists may need support as environments pattern themselves less predictably, and the foundations of practice evolve. Perspectives on community-driven ecological renewal and climate adaptation will also need narratives for it to feel real. More speculatively, other study areas like synthetic biology present contentious ethics bridging creativity, design, biology, and ecosystem complexity.[66] Humans crafting species to support ecosystems would create new questions around design software needs and simulating scenarios in changing environments.[67] The creative sector should be part of this nascent conversation as a lens on creative technology, and what stories it could tell.

Signals of change

— **Technical artists are surfacing new ways to study the local evolving weather patterns.** The study of climatology is progressing among computer graphics experts, where natural disasters, such as hurricanes, can be simulated to improve preparedness.[68] A focus on modelling complexity in the atmosphere through physics techniques seems to bring a new lens to understanding weather dynamics, with the design process exposing a reflection into the aesthetics of extreme weather too. Natural crises behave uniquely by location, and this research is fuelling new approaches to studying and making meaning from weather patterns, while also centring the role of digital artists in an environmental field.

— **Experiences exploring natural change are enabling the public to reflect on their interests and choices.** Planetary change is too abstract for people to absorb, so artist collectives are bridging this gap through experience. Tellart, a design studio specialising in this intersection, introduced an installation called Dinner in 2050 at COP28,[69] using machine learning and local ecological data to reflect how ingredients in favourite meals may be swapped for resilient local alternatives. Meanwhile, Nature Manifesto, produced by Björk and Aleph, envelopes listeners in soundscape and stochastic image simulation around biodiversity collapse.[70] Cultural spaces are helping people process change by provoking different sensations through advanced media, framing public areas as venues for dreaming, grieving, and changing.

— **Narratives centring the body may help us process and plan for changes outside our control.** The speculative climate change series *Extrapolations* highlighted how chronic illness may evolve. *Summer heart*, caused by recurring heatwaves, is a speculative condition. Though exploring our body's relationship to evolving environments is a valued narrative thread, as is understanding the toll on other species, given our immune system and gut microbiome have evolved through historically stable conditions. Ambient shifts in environment demand reflection, even as science catches up in studies on the resilience of prehistoric DNA and its plausible role in future adaptation strategies,[71] for both people (somaforming) and environment (terraforming).[72] In tandem with efforts in modelling climate change, it's worth simulating health and ecosystem challenges at the local level to uncover a targeted understanding of the risks populations must plan for. How this shapes what it means to be human through planetary shifts is an open, rich inquiry.

— **Monitoring soundscapes could offer new ways of measuring and engaging with local environments.** The study of bioacoustics has taken root in Costa Rica, where monitoring soundscapes over time can provide a non-invasive way to track changes in biodiversity, migration patterns, and animal welfare, which steer environment management strategies.[73] Even the most subtle changes, like birdsong, wind gusts, or waves crashing, narrate the wider system. Media indicators like acoustics, coupled with growing accessibility of sensors and advances in pattern recognition within machine learning, could bring new ways of interfacing with complex systems. It also may open wider, routine opportunities for public engagement.

— **Development of interspecies media could have implications on public notions of interdependency.** While drones have been in development for a few years to monitor leading indicators of plant

health,[74] animal prototypes are widening in ambition. University of the West of England Bristol and Scotland's Rural College are analysing the facial expressions of pigs to notice distress, with Earth Species Project raising $17 million in grants to develop language models that can translate animal communication.[75] Closer to the household, Baidu is researching how to translate cat sounds.[76] While strange, these movements reflect a wider philosophical shift toward interdependency and even alternative forms of social media.

— **Digital twins and advancing simulation techniques may shape our relationship to certain environments.** Remote sensing and simulation has been creating new maps to see the world in real-time, but how the public navigates these sources of insight is an open question. Japan's simulation of Mount Fuji erupting[77] through to Peter Whidden's MOTE, which brings together game elements with computational biology, machine learning and physics to model emergent natural phenomena, ignite our imagination around the environment. For example, how might highly detailed simulations of ocean[78] behaviour shape what the sea means to us in stories? If we can immerse ourselves in a storm across the world as it happens, would this be more effective than any crisis documentary? What about as simple as getting a snapshot of plausible futures for a budding forest garden in your backyard? Modelling our environment at the macro, meso, and micro level has unique implications, where media has a range of roles to play.

— **While early, soundscapes could serve ecological conservation, renewal, and more than human needs.** In tandem with traditional rewilding efforts, audio is being used to stimulate organism growth. Studies have reflected promise over the past decade, but more recently white noise has been shown to support fungi for plant growth, which is reviving conversation around the potential of customised soundscapes, outfitted for a wide range of local ecological needs.[79] Alongside theories around environmental personhood, areas at risk could become valid forms of audiences for some sound engineers.

— **Design principles underpinning media could be challenged as interest in ecological resilience grows.** Design software, real-time engines, motion capture, and other media technologies are being used in education to reignite curiosities and rehabilitate students' relationship to the natural world.[80] Meanwhile, Opteran, a software company based in northern England, takes inspiration from the neurological structure of living organisms to inform energy conscious, real-time behaviour in robotics. As we become increasingly focused on resilience and limitation, the underlying principles for how technologies are used and designed could evolve, especially as the effects of compute become measurably clear.[81] Remote communities may serve as essential wisdom for considering durable media in blackout periods, while virtual production volumes could iterate as local environmental planners. Even breakthroughs in understanding how other organisms communicate could trickle down into media R&D testbeds. What is certain is a new set of environmental constraints will shape the next set of mediums.

Scenarios

With advances in synthetic biology, new kinds of flora and fauna were released into the environment. Designing adaptive traits into synthetic species for emergent conditions, this next-nature lens on manipulating biology began to redefine ideas around 'artificial,' and how this is reflected in art. Artists progressively moved away from grey plastic and chrome aesthetics to more natural shades and organic forms, shaping aesthetic choices in creative media, with one convergent production designer celebrated for inventing ***Synthetic Nature***, a stylistic genre.

Creative biology rose and further established itself as a distinct field, with some digital artists taking government assistance to leave conventional media workflows to focus on critical areas of climate research, including around developing models depicting necessary transitions in fungi and critical ecosystems. This cross-pollination expanded the role of creativity in environment sciences, where imaginative exploration of social solutions and technological development were not just of deep public and scientific interest, but sources of artistic expression and inspiration too.

As weather patterns grew random, insurance policies for industry rose and became spotty, while worker protection kicked in. After a series of deaths in extreme events and concerns around the prevalence of climate grief, a new law allowed employees to walk off sets, or sign off with income protection, if they felt their environment was affecting their wellbeing. Production workflows became increasingly modular to be resilient to disruption. ***Rest Mode***, a feature of modern media pipelines, enabled agents to resume in the background through a few directions to minimise work disruptions and reduce premiums.

Welcoming more climate refugees and reflecting agreements with burgeoning creative industry countries like Ghana, norms in production began to shift. The need for higher fidelity colour reproduction of people's real skin colours in content capture, creation, distribution and display became pressing. ***TsCF (TrueskinColourFilm)*** became the new world standard for image colour grading. This shift also expanded the notion that just seven types of stories exist. Cultural theorists brought a corrective lens to the current entertainment landscape, extending the theory to 14.

Dissatisfied with genres and platforms which seemed to only reflect historic patterns, boredom progressively transformed into activism. Journalists wrote about a new kind of media unfolding, as people wanted more involvement in climate support projects. ***TerraNex*** took up attention subtly as a scrappy, independent journalism, built on a private server protocol managed by special interest investors. It would livestream distributed adaptation projects across the globe, simulate potential rewilding projects, interpret animal and plant communication in exchange with local people, and share prototypes of tailored microorganisms released to generate new ecosystems.

Collectives of activist investors began supporting cultural programmes around nation-spanning bioregions, as they increasingly faced common natural changes. A speculative fiction residency called ***'bioregion building'*** drew collaborations between scientists and creatives, surfacing environment projections and archaic myths into a new kind of visual, acoustic, and cultural language that supported solidarity across borders. Eventually, political alliances strengthened to navigate shared environmental risks.

3D bio-printing for the creative sector... Props, sets, costumes, and more can now be developed into a range of custom organic compounds like timber, cotton, wool, fur... Reducing the need for shipping raw materials, absorbing rising costs, and supporting the recovery of key environments flagged as International Risk Zones, part of the IRZ Multi-lateral Treaty... Recommended by the UK government's ***New Sustainability Mandate for Creativity*** (Protecting the Environment and Culture) for companies seeking investor accreditation... We offer free consultations regarding how you can write in our technology into the earliest planning phases in your production, enhancing the production design process, cost, and legal compliance...

Outdoor lessons were increased in primary schools so children could build awareness of other species, touching on the relationship between health and nature. A youth friendly AR device with simple 3D modelling and interactive software, the ***Eko***, would bring creative practices to media ecosystem workshops. Exhibition was embedded early, with children's interactive artworks projected across the high street on responsive LEDs, which doubled as an ongoing news pulse to the health of the local environment.

Pressured by government, conservation embraced new policies. The growth capacity of plants could be modified and scaled, so botany progressed into a real-time design practice, a kind of theatrical performance. New public rituals surfaced, including ***Pagan Cinema***, inviting people into town squares. Narrative-driven exhibits of forests within nature-poor areas of cities would later be planted in allocated lots. Ecological design was the next phase in cultural storytelling, representing another kind of Expo or Fair, where digital artists would work closely with horticulturalists to design nature for immediate human experience.

Somewhere between social media, image simulator, game engine, and civic forum, ***the Dirt platform*** enabled users to manipulate local environments to express hopes for future nature. Narratives would be published for others to experience and build upon in participatory mode. The trajectory feature would add a layer of plausible extreme weather, climate changes, species threats, and other emerging signals reflected in local datasets, gamifying the user's strategies. With a multimodal distribution system, narratives could be exported with freedom, to interactive murals, films, or mobile games.

Probes

Is our climate change story working?

Populations have been expected to get on board with a catastrophic story that is largely framed outside their control, and borders. The media ecosystem plays a significant role in accurately reporting scientific strides, but the nature of the climate crisis is so vast it requires some contextualising to people's local reality.[82] **A paradigm shift around narrating climate change at the local level could be needed.**

Where does creativity play in conservation?

There are norms around citizen and community science in the UK, alongside a history of imaginative gardening and rewilding activism. Yet, it isn't described as creative, nor framed as a critical cultural medium. As experts explore evolving conservation approaches, creating participatory spaces where residents have a role in shaping climate change mitigation reflects democratic process. **Media innovation plays a role in how connected people feel to adaptation efforts.**

How might information flows change?

The media industries are the information layer and interface in our society. Considering how important the natural transformation over coming decades is framed, **the question is what new information flows, interfaces, systems, and feedback loops would become useful**. This shift could enable people to see themselves as everyday agents of the natural system they're a part of, moving climate change from an opaquely understood crisis at the local-level, to a well-defined, socially-involved issue.

Researchers could investigate the role of media in centring residents in local environment strategies, opening provocations around creativity in conservation, and assessing the evolving role of information ecosystems in environment monitoring.

> *The role of creatives in multimedia studies of local environments for the purposes of decision making, education, storytelling, and participation.*
>
> *Advances in media simulation technology and applications in ecological challenges like rewilding, with a lens on the role of public engagement.*
>
> *Plausible intersections of creative storytelling and biodesigners.*
>
> *Media infrastructure safeguarding in weather scenarios, including how cultural production needs may shift with refugees displaced by natural crises.*

Policymakers may question how media engagement could evolve with storytelling needs around the climate crisis,[83] the role of creatives in community engagement, and how might information security evolve with environmental pressures.

> *Evaluating UKRI funding, metrics, and positive externality filters to locate opportunities for interdisciplinary problems, crossing biology, media, conservation and more.*
>
> *Ongoing mapping of ecological risks in media production areas, including reliance on foreign cloud-based services and crisis/backup plans.*[84]
>
> *Prototyping a programme around local creators narrating ecological change.*
>
> *Considering intersections between community science and regional storytelling when funding different kinds of local media prototypes.*

Investors might reflect on how environment interest is expressed through unique cultural platforms, consider media interventions adjunct to conservation strategies, and solutions changing how we model, anticipate, and plan for crisis.

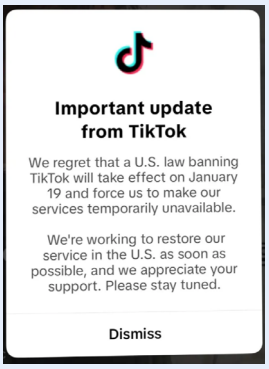
> *Social-first ways of anticipating and making meaning of environmental change, including how this interacts with new forms of intellectual property.*
>
> *Ventures relating differently with local nature and enhancing citizen agency, as part of the search to revive local news, such as platforms surfacing collective visioning, narratives, and community action.*
>
> *Immersive experiences, or simply different kinds of gathering using media technologies in unique ways, to process grief from natural change/crises.*
>
> *Creative collectives addressing sustainability challenges in various parts of the private sector, translating science clearly, visualising data for the public, or supporting stakeholder relations (e.g. as a part of ESG communications).*

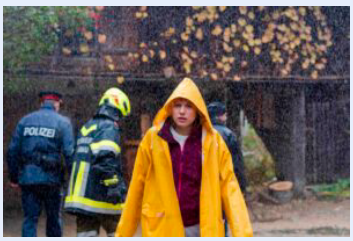
Protectionist attitudes

An impulse in response to fragmentation

Protectionism is a political-economic philosophy around bolstering domestic trade and creating barriers for foreign competitors. While there are varying views on what constitutes protectionism, it rarely occurs in an economic vacuum. In practice, it is often entangled with reinforcing identity, values, and security.

While media ecosystems have always had a relationship with protectionism within nations, the relevance of platforms has made this discourse urgent over the years. Rising concern around digital protectionism and sovereignty highlights how media platforms, and now interfaces to machine learning technologies,[85] represent a unique challenge. Media protection concerns increasingly bridge citizen, industrial, national, and ecological issues given the power asymmetries inherent to these technologies.[86] Wider policy seems ripe to shift as Europe prioritises sustainability in step with its Green Deal,[87] while the current American administration seeks to regain control of Hollywood, a symbol of its wider cultural plays.[88] As media and creativity take different places in nations' objectives, the UK must define what it hopes to protect, even as it stumbles toward a new language for national identity.





Images left to right: The TikTok ban reflects caution around how platforms shape the cultural, political, and economic landscape, suggesting protectionism is shifting toward data and algorithms (USA Today, 2025); the crime drama *Vier* qualified for Austria's green tax incentive, an extension of the wider bloc's measures which some critics have referred to as 'green protectionism' (Dragosits J, Lechner G, 2023); Donald Trump's announcement of special envoys for a Hollywood revival (Truth Social, 2025).

Protectionist tactics around media, long deployed by nations, are overdue adapting to new media norms and their influences, which now includes 'artificial intelligence'. Platform regulation is sprouting uniquely: while Europe's platform stances are critiqued, America's TikTok ban arrives from similar ideological origins. Concern is increasing around the security of information networks,[89] including what media ecosystems do within nations as the geopolitical landscape shifts multipolar.[90]

Hollywood's transformation over the last two decades has reflected a complex dance between adapting to streaming business models, global labour arbitrage, financing relationships with China, protecting income streams through expansion into new markets, and more recently, adapting to a stronger private equity presence in leadership.[91] This confluence of events has led to a moment where Hollywood's identity within America is uncertain, a thought pattern present on online film production forums as much as reflected in Jon Voight's plans to save it.[92] In this setting, the screen sector and revival of cinema-going as a ritual is not only a plea to bring funding back more squarely into the United States for production workers, but to resuscitate one imaginary in American culture — alongside the rise of Yellowstone, country music, and symbols of Christian Nationalism across Whitehouse interactions. Looking at the economic explanation loses the theatre that has been unfolding around it for the past decade, a theatre that in practice, has always been present in the American project.[93]

Protective behaviours broadcast from America have intensified protectionist attitudes in China since the late 20-teens, and more recently, in Canada, which could equally reflect quiet reservations with previous political norms. Platforms have facilitated major co-productions, foreign investment, exporting of cultural narratives,[94] with user-generated applications holding entire creator economies. However, it has equally raised concerns of existential dependencies, corporate glocalisation strategies eroding media cultures[95] with "from everywhere and nowhere" narrative strategy[96] through to the notion of deculturation without acculturation: the unravelling of regional cultures, with no stabilising alternative.[97] America may have the most concerning (and ironic) take for the UK screen sector, but protective tones rhyme across the globe, such as the reaction to how streaming is affecting local production in South Korea.[98] It can also be found in the rise of low cost Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian productions that zero in on local culture.[99]

Insularity is often used as a critique, but it has evolutionary and cultural advantages in moderation. Cultural theorists have long known this with Cool Japan, the soft power of Japanese cultural exports, from anime to Hello Kitty, cultivated through strategic barriers between Japan and the rest of the world.[100] What is unanswered is what balance looks like when protecting national identity, but present disorder seems to be a symptom of searching for it in a techno-economic landscape beyond borders.

As the adoption of machine learning technologies is shaped by the AI Action Plan, it's worth considering how UK datasets may reinforce new kinds of cultural value, while remaining critical with harmonising historic patterns, instilling singular stories, identities, and aesthetics. Just as official archives are challenged by personal and ancestral stories,[101] there is a tremendous responsibility for developers to consider how software design acts as a new form of gatekeeping. Calling it the 'AI sector' echoes previous platform approaches: it obscures how profoundly it could escalate tensions in identity, imaginary, and canon.

Signals of change

— **The shift to platform technologies is demanding new ways to think about incentivising domestic stories.** Levies on streaming services have been proposed to reroute funding to UK productions, or alternatively, initiate a cultural fund addressing the gap.[102] The concern around loss of cultural narratives at the national level is at the tail-end of a long-standing decline of local broadcasting. Place-based capital and community wealth building approaches have been proposed in other industries and could bear relevance to the complexity around media ecosystem discussions. And, even in the absence of sweeping governmental policies, the political will of citizens in their communities should be watched. For example, organic, locally-led boycotts and micro-tariffs[103] targeting American imports are unravelling across countries.

— **Political gestures could be reshaping global cultural influence and narrative dominance in real-time.** The growing consensus among Chinese public figures of reducing or altogether banning American films in response to tariff policies is a symbolic gesture.[104] The signal is not in the plausible short–term financial loss that can be mitigated, but in the ambiguous opportunity cost over the long horizon. Losing soft power may be hard to quantify, but in industries driven by identity, affect, and cultural capital, the drop off can be one-to-zero. Unpopular protectionist gestures against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive global landscape, with rising production hubs across the globe,[105] could have countries turn toward other national entertainment hubs, redrawing where narrative exchange, foreign influence, and creative power lives.

— **An evolving global order is not only creating investment uncertainty, but identity and narrative confusion too.** Economic experts with global outlooks, like Bridgewater fund owner Ray Dalio, are already describing the moment as a collapse in world order, an unravelling he has discussed for the past decade.[106] This leaves an intensely liminal state where value is unclear. In media industries, this liminality becomes particularly evident as national identity starts to lack coherence, coming up in how archetypes and plotlines feel. This is already being observed in recent American action films, where political change is manifesting in how stories are experienced by critics and audiences, where themes, conflicts, and characters are experienced differently on screen.[107]

— **The UK will need to address media supply chain uncertainties proactively given its importance to the population.** Analysis led by our policy team raised that tariffs would indirectly shape creative R&D in the United Kingdom. It would also shape how a range of electronics are priced and developed over time, given many supply chains are based across countries with high tariff proposals in Southeast Asia.[108] Given the importance of creative and media technologies to the UK, exemplified in measures as simple as including virtual reality headsets in measuring inflation,[109] it's worth exploring whether more of the ecosystem can be hedged against price fluctuations for businesses and consumers. Part of this involves asking what exactly UK technology stands for, what parts of the media system could represent critical infrastructure, and how the country could proactively design a secure system in an uncertain climate.

— **Interest in sovereign technology is growing as a solution to external dependency and influence.** As the risks associated with reliance on foreign powers become clear,[110] interest in the concept of 'sovereign technology' is rising. Talk of

domestic development across essential technologies is growing to ensure national security and alignment with citizen priorities.[111] 'Public AI' rhetoric echoes a commons approach, where open-source cultures, participatory governance, and institutions facilitating safer, pro-social approaches are prioritised. What's worth questioning is if this probe could lead to a wider reconsideration of the web, social media, cybersecurity, and identity protections, all of which are active discussions evolving from Europe's historic policies against platform companies.[112]

— **New media enclaves may act as critical bellwethers to coming political shifts affecting the creative industries.** While broadcasters have always been part of a political feedback loop with the public, this role is progressively shifting to independent media communities on the web with highly engaged fanbases. The *manosphere* has been described as an indicator for how protectionist political decisions are being received in real-time, especially by highly influential voter groups that supported the recent Republican win.[113] But other influential communities to creative industry policy, residing in increasingly fractured Discord servers, Reddit threads, WhatsApp groups, and Substack subscriptions, all act as a new kind of underground regulator of discourse, which likely elude institutions. It raises questions if media communities could play a stronger role in informing domestic and foreign policy foresight, as the gravity of politics shifts toward distinct, highly influential enclaves on the web.

— **Manufacturing strategies expose economic and cultural vulnerabilities in the creative sector.** The threat of tariffs, while unpredictable, exposes uncertain manufacturing entanglements beyond ensuring the performance of creative companies. The games industry comes directly in the crossfire given consoles classify as goods, with pressure to relocate to the United States to avoid tariffs. While Nintendo Switch 2 has had a smooth launch, likely from strategic planning around a diversified manufacturing mix,[114] the cultural impact of evolving trade patterns could shape all downstream decisions: from game design to price accessibility. It will likely be more indie hardwares that are hardest hit — suppliers operating in valued niches such as retro gaming — which which could have a knock-on effect for the vitality and preservation of wider games culture.[115] While this is less discussed in favour of more topline trade changes, small, cumulative effects on how technology is designed, shared, disseminated carry significant intangible repercussions to industries that act as cultural cornerstones.

Scenarios

The UK Identity Fund is a unique category of tax incentives, funding, supportive resources, and intellectual property protocols accessible to investors in UK productions. Investors can apply based on a revised and comprehensive British Cultural Test, including a vow to the BAI (British Artificial Intelligence) set of national technologies for the production.

Trained on a collection of data from speeches, texts, paintings, films, and other media prioritising national interests over global cooperation, this installation is part of an activation of over 100 other structural, LED cubes in cities across the globe dealing with themes of protectionism, national culture, and the impacts of global fracturing. Politically-influential communities with hyper-nationalistic themes, now used as indicators of policy changes in financial modelling, are interlinked in real-time, exposing patterns in how we relate to other countries and ***our shared planetary reality*** across time.

[speech from King William at Balmoral]
...and at the same time, the creative sector, the beating heart of story in the United Kingdom, are in need of new direction since foreign investment has fallen. This is why I am announcing the ***Commonwealth Cultural agreement****, to encourage new forms of collaboration and financing between Commonwealth partners, ushering in a new era of creative exchanges between countries with shared values, and historic friendship, an agreement my father, and grandmother, would have supported.*

As costs in cities soared, creative collectives dispersed across the country, leading to a renewal of national identity in art production, with the land being common ground for diverse people and narratives, called ***Provenance Art***. Location scouting returned as a craft in identifying undiscovered local settings, with techniques increasingly inspired by the psychogeographics of an area. Local cafes took up space as insular studio playgrounds, blocking out the influence of foreign stimulus, from neighbouring towns, states, countries. Dialects reinforced, and exports gained cult status.

In addition to funding discoveries in computing materials, a set of agreements with foreign partners around shared technological values formed a new kind of global innovation ecosystem. The UK started funding new media platforms through this new technical paradigm, the ***Sovereign Technology Protocol***. A continuation of the Network Prototypes programme, the government partnered with industry to incentivise individuals and their communities to provide feedback for an identity-verified web for residents, containing a set of protections that incentivise security, privacy, and equitable exchange online.

A global tariff regime started to sap innovation by removing competition within domestic markets. Consumers and businesses were left with higher prices. Quality standards and regulations started to ease to keep prices in check, though quality suffered. In response, DIY hardware communities grew to fill gaps, cultivating a robust repair sector. Coinciding with investor interest in sustainability, the UK started to become competitive for its 'patchwork technology sector,' with a retro aesthetic described as ***British Bricolage***.

As control over financial flows spreads into the service economy, a new foreign auditing function is added to the US government, operating between the IRS and CIA. Priority industries like media and entertainment are carefully audited, with citizen tax returns requiring disclosure of detailed information about any foreign investment activity for national security, with a focus on media creation and distribution. Some entertainment companies move to the United Kingdom to avoid ***The American Financial Audit***, reduce red tape, cost, and maintain creative freedom.

Global trade and cultural exchange was reshaped with the formation of an imperial ***US-USSR-China axis of Super***. Unable to meaningfully retaliate, the UK becomes a walled garden and turns inward for its needs, while brokering trade agreements with other mid-sized countries. The creative industries focus on making older style content and programmes for an ageing population, forging relationships with countries navigating similar demographic change.

Move over MAGA, welcome ***MEGA (Make England Great Again)***, the transatlantic merger. A new offshore tax haven, global golfing destination, and home to the Americas' best vineyards. With a vast network of world-leading production hubs, California's old imaginaries are remade for a golden age in English borders, just in time for the arrival of a lovely Mediterranean climate. Vote for England, the 53rd state.

As production became increasingly competitive, the United Kingdom positioned itself as a partner expert at optimised, culturally-sensitive workflows, with creative technologies supporting the design of cultural features and narratives, depending on target audiences for a production. Part of this distribution toolkit was a CCP-validated model to allow optimal content fit with Chinese audiences, and another bespoke tool for new American Cultural standards, ensuring 'Christian-aligned' messaging. Over time, a phenomenon emerged where production workers began to take on specific foreign attitudes, leading to a slow burning movement of Christian Evangelism in the UK, described as ***Propaganda Sam***.

Probes

What is the aim of UK media ecosystems?

An inspired vision of **what media and creativity could and should be doing for the UK appears to be lacking**. A comprehensive audit of infrastructure, interfaces, capabilities, gaps, and changing media behaviour is required by R&D institutions to make sense of the full risks and potential. The power dynamics of platform and machine learning technologies reflect a liminal moment in UK media.

How is media shaping national identities?

While ensuring the balance between domestic and foreign media is an established topic in government, creators and platform economies are only recently taken seriously. Platforms connect nations, but their design also flattens how we participate in creativity. **With signs of platforms fracturing, the next generation could be designed according to citizen values and needs, and its plural expressions.** This is part of a wider query around how identity is shaped by digital spaces.

Are there indicators of identity distress?

The media plays a central role in vocalising identity, reflecting diverse expressions inherent to a complex national history. In the last decade, across the globe, there has been increasing conversation around the role of new technologies in deterriorialising local and regional identities, observed most extremely in the provocation around network states.[117] It raises questions around whether **UK identity issues have only been intensifying, and the role of media systems in paving a different way forward.**

Researchers should piece together design principles on what UK media systems reflect, explore worst case scenarios in foreign media influence, and audit media infrastructure for its capacity to facilitate constructive sensemaking as a nation.

Pipelines for domestic intellectual property at all levels of creative funding and development, especially creators and user-generated platforms.

Plausible scenarios of media protectionism in large trade partners, and implications, including extreme scenarios of internet fracturing.

What 'sovereign technology' means to the United Kingdom.

Exploring the plurality of UK identity in intellectual property, as well as how platforms challenge and shape this.

Policymakers could explore how funding is supporting UK creativity and distribution channels, enabling domestic innovators in co-creation and adoption of sovereign AI, and assessing the ongoing role of new technologies shaping national identity.

Cross-departmental collaborations across government to cater for the increasing complexity and risk around technological sovereignty.

Monitoring excessive dependencies on specific nations in the media system.

Programmes safeguarding the risk of singular narratives on UK identity, including foreign interference in media ecosystems.

The role of national media outlets in a progressively platform-driven ecosystem, with a focus on platform fracturing and user dignity issues.

Investors may explore companies addressing challenges in epistemic security, entrepreneurs carving out spaces to reflect national identity and citizen creators, and informing policymakers of issues in funding UK-based IP in the present landscape..

Ventures supporting cultivation, plurality, and critique in UK identity, especially as it intersects with platform design and culture.

UK-owned technological stacks, platforms, and media devices, possibly governed by nationally held values like design, safety, diversity, and creative risk-taking.

Grassroots and hyper-local UK scenes where insularity can be a form of exporting soft power and intrigue.

Media studios hedging against unpredictable policies, for example, by diversifying financing and content pipelines to growing media markets (e.g. in Africa, India, Southeast Asia etc.), or to other countries otherwise prioritising multilateral rules-based order.

Designing for resilience

The most transformative changes to industry are often vaguely tethered to where we are and what we're doing in the present. It's only years later we are so obviously submerged in its force; as was the case with design software, financialisation, handheld devices, cloud computing, and now, a changing world order.

If we deconstruct the creative sector, it is a collection of psychic and material capabilities that have evolved with the moment in time. Sometimes, in response to new technological affordances for communication, and in other cases, from a social need for subversion, to check power imbalances, even assert sovereignty. In a highly fragmented commercial landscape, form follows fellowship.[116] What the United Kingdom's creative industries represent domestically, and internationally, is an open question around relationships the sector forges. This work maps alternative futures by turning our focus to forces of change outside our present line of sight — forces that pose an existential demand for adaptation over the coming decades. In doing so, it probes what it means to design the sector for resilience. It doesn't outline recommendations, but asks questions readers can pose, shape, and reconfigure as they progress their own perspective.

Scenarios in Creative Convergence is a first draft in highlighting, bending, and distorting what convergence may really mean for CoSTAR. We encourage readers to reflect on how the creative sector's capabilities may find relevance in seemingly distant issues. To document signals of change, question the connections they imply, and draft scenarios that come to mind, as an exercise in seeing new possibility — beyond disciplinary boundaries.

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4 Signals of change are discontinuities in time suggesting ambiguous, impactful change in a context, altering future trajectories in ways that influence opportunity or survival. Signals can take various forms, and may come as news releases, artworks, emerging technologies, corporate decisions, scientific papers, politician soundbites, observed behaviour in public, and more.

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7 This instability can be understood through the shifting role of digital artists, where board members shared future expectations that digital artists would play a larger role outside their industrial siloes.

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CoSTAR
THE UK R&D NETWORK FOR CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY

ForesightLAB

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