



OPINION

By **Chris Stokel-Walker**

Labour is making a catastrophic mistake by ignoring Elton John

If AI policy is written in big tech's boardrooms, then the public interest may well take a back seat

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Without the ability to profit from one's work, creatives will do less creating, hollowing out the UK's heralded creative and cultural sectors (Photo: Lester Cohen/Getty Images for City of Hope)



Most of us think Donald Trump is obsessed with powerful businesspeople who have made inordinate amounts of money. But by casting our eyes towards his orange visage, we overlook our own politicians' fetishisation of tech titans whose businesses straddle

continents.

How else to explain the cringingly subservient way in which the UK Government is approaching big tech, bowing to their every demand? The Technology Secretary, Peter Kyle, seems keen to undo decades of copyright law in order to please the likes of OpenAI's Sam Altman and Meta's Mark Zuckerberg.

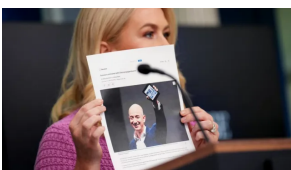
The subservience reached a new, stooping low last week. The Government dusted off its handbook on Commons procedure to [strip the Data \(Use and Access Bill\) currently going through parliament of an amendment](#) by Baroness Beeban Kidron, which would force AI companies to publish lists of copyrighted works they ingest and repurpose without permission to train their models.

Sir Elton John best [summed up](#) the Government's toadyish move to [please big tech](#) and annoy practically everyone else. The Government are "absolute losers", the knight of the realm said, and he felt "incredibly betrayed" by the way the Government is acting.

"The House of Lords did a vote, and it was more than two to one in our favour," he [told the BBC](#). "The Government just looked at it as if to say, 'Hmm, well, the old people ... like me can afford it.'" Young artists, he added, "haven't got the resources ... to fight big tech [firms]".

A spokesperson for the Government has said that it won't make any changes to copyright laws "unless we are completely satisfied they work for creators". Yet this same Government [launched a consultation before Christmas](#) that defaulted to requiring copyright holders to opt their works out of the great AI trawl. Anything else would apparently be too burdensome for the poor tech companies making billions from their products, who employ thousands of people and have vast volumes of cash sloshing around.

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Of course, [this fight is wholly unequal](#). Big tech companies have the resources to check twice before they stuff the collected works of you or I into their AI systems' training run. And with scores of different AI models out there, and entrepreneurs seeing the gold rush and setting up new AI startups every day, it'd be impossible for ordinary people to keep up with who is or isn't able to use their work.

Besides, at no time in the conversation has there been a serious consideration of whether those who do grant permission should ever be compensated for helping big tech make big moolah.

But it's par for the course for this Government, which has shown unusual infatuation with big tech. Sir Keir Starmer's Government [has previously been rumoured to have offered to water down its plan to tax US tech companies in order to please Trump](#), though of late the Government [has insisted](#) nothing will change under the US-UK trade deal agreed earlier this month.

Starmer's tech envoy, Kyle, [has said](#) that governments ought to show a "sense of humility"



when dealing with tech executives, because they're far bigger than him. Kyle was right that these supranational firms need to be treated with a little more statecraft than most businesses, but totally wrong when suggesting governments might be pliant to their demands. Instead, the Government needs to grow a backbone.

Certainly, Kyle seems keen to keep big tech close. He's held [70 per cent more meetings](#) with representatives of the tech sector in the first six months in office than Michelle Donelan, his predecessor. Interacting with the tech sector is no bad thing, but if he's following his own advice and tugging his forelock as he enters the room rather than striding in to stand up to big tech excesses as the secretary of state should, then we should all be worried.

I write as someone who has a stake in the outcome of the Government's AI copyright

tussle with big tech. My books are included in the training data of some large AI models. Those who haven't faced that issue, or don't create paintings, plays, poetry or prose, may well wonder what the fuss is about.

This is more than a bunch of luvvies complaining their copyright has been infringed. Without the ability to profit from one's work, creatives will do less creating, hollowing out the UK's heralded creative and cultural sectors. But beyond that, it also highlights a democratic deficit.

Governments are meant to act in the interests of the people who vote them in – and can vote them out, if they so choose. Businesses act in the interests of their shareholders and funders. If policy is written in big tech's boardrooms, then the public interest – and everything from privacy to fair pay, copyright and competition – may well take a back seat to profit.

