

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE STRATEGY FOR THE CULTURAL & CREATIVE SECTORS

ETC Contribution to the
European Commission
Call for Evidence

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ETC supports the European Commission's initiative to develop a dedicated AI strategy for the cultural and creative sectors. Europe needs a framework that enables cultural organisations to use artificial intelligence confidently and creatively while ensuring that technology complements - rather than replaces - human creativity, protects cultural and linguistic diversity, and widens access to culture.

ABSTRACT

ETC welcomes the European Commission's proposed AI strategy for the cultural and creative sectors and calls for a human-centred approach that enables theatres of all sizes to benefit from trustworthy AI. In theatre, AI is currently most useful behind the scenes - for translation, metadata, accessibility, administration, communications and audience development - rather than as a substitute for artistic creation. ETC sees particular potential in multilingual discoverability, audience access and AI-mediated communications. European policy should ensure that smaller languages, smaller cultural organisations and underserved audiences are not disadvantaged by systems optimised for dominant languages and large-scale content. At the same time, theatres need skills, resources and practical guidance to adopt AI responsibly. As AI becomes increasingly anthropomorphised and embedded in everyday life, theatre's defining qualities - live presence, human performers, shared space and direct interaction - become more, not less, valuable

1. AI IN THE THEATRE SECTOR TODAY: ENABLING RATHER THAN REPLACING

Theatre is already entering the AI transition, but much of the most practical adoption is happening away from the stage. For many theatres, especially publicly funded institutions and smaller organisations, the immediate value of AI lies in supporting existing work: translation and surtitling workflows; metadata creation and enrichment; archive search; transcription; accessibility; administrative processes; communications; audience analysis; and the adaptation of information for different channels and audiences.

This distinction matters. The policy debate around generative AI often focuses on the generation of artistic content. For the theatre sector, however, some of the most significant near-term gains may come from using AI to reduce repetitive workloads, improve access to information and allow cultural professionals to devote more time to artistic, curatorial and audience-facing work.

2. DISCOVERABILITY, MULTILINGUALISM AND EUROPE'S CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Discoverability should be a central pillar of the EU strategy. The European Commission's "Study on the discoverability of diverse European cultural content in the digital environment" demonstrates that availability alone does not guarantee visibility: platforms, algorithms, recommender systems and curation increasingly determine which cultural works audiences encounter. Although the study focuses primarily on music and books, its findings are highly relevant to the performing arts.

The Commission has highlighted language silos and translation gaps as obstacles to cross-border circulation, with cultural works in smaller and minority languages at particular risk of remaining less visible. For European theatre, this is fundamental. Europe's theatrical landscape is inherently multilingual and decentralised. A production in Slovenian, Lithuanian, Georgian, Catalan or another less widely used language should not become digitally invisible simply because the systems through which audiences increasingly discover culture are disproportionately optimised for English and other dominant languages.

AI can be part of the solution. High-quality multilingual translation, semantic search, automated metadata enrichment and cross-language recommendation can help audiences discover productions beyond their own linguistic environment. EU action should therefore actively support multilingual and culturally diverse datasets, interoperability and European language technologies, while ensuring that smaller organisations have access to the tools and expertise needed to make their work machine-readable and discoverable.

This is not simply a technical question. Discoverability is a cultural-policy question: if AI becomes an increasingly important gateway to information and cultural recommendations, linguistic and cultural diversity must be designed into that gateway.

3. HARNESSING AI TO WIDEN AUDIENCES AND REMOVE BARRIERS

ETC also sees significant potential for AI to widen participation in theatre. Cultural access is shaped by more than ticket availability. Language, disability, geography, unfamiliarity with theatre, limited contextual knowledge and the way cultural information is presented can all create barriers.

Used responsibly, AI can help theatres lower some of these barriers. Translation and language technologies can make information and performances more accessible across languages; speech-to-text and text-to-speech technologies can support accessibility; adaptive formats can make information easier to navigate; and AI-supported audience communications can help theatres explain productions in ways that are relevant to people who do not already see themselves as regular theatre-goers.

The objective should not be hyper-personalisation that narrows cultural exposure. On the contrary, public cultural organisations should be able to use AI to broaden horizons: helping people encounter unfamiliar artists, languages, stories and perspectives. The European strategy should encourage audience-focused innovation that measures success not only in efficiency or commercial conversion, but in inclusion, diversity of participation and meaningful cultural access.

4. IMPLEMENTATION: MAKING THEATRE VISIBLE IN AN AI-MEDIATED INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

For the theatre sector, implementation must include communications and information infrastructure. Audiences, journalists, policymakers and cultural professionals are increasingly receiving information through AI-assisted search, summaries, recommendation systems and large language models. Cultural organisations therefore need to understand how their work is represented and discovered in these new information environments.

ETC is already developing this approach through the EU-funded TRUST: TRUth on STage project. Its communications strategy treats visibility in AI-mediated environments as an extension of established digital communications practice. Alongside search engine optimisation, cultural organisations should develop an LLM-aware approach - sometimes described as Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO) - based on authoritative, structured and reusable information.

In practice, this means maintaining authoritative and regularly updated websites; publishing clear explainers, FAQs, fact sheets, case studies and background materials; using descriptive headings, metadata and consistent terminology; keeping public resources open, accessible and indexable; and building external authority through independent earned media, citations and links from credible sources. For projects introducing new concepts or methods, consistent terminology is especially important so that AI systems can connect information across multiple authoritative sources.

This should not become a new digital burden that only large institutions can afford. The EU strategy should support sector-specific guidance, training, shared tools and capacity building for small and medium-sized cultural organisations. European cultural networks can play an important intermediary role: translating technological developments into practical guidance, sharing tested approaches and ensuring that innovation reaches the sector as a whole rather than a small group of digitally advanced institutions.

5. KEEPING HUMANS AT THE CENTRE

ETC's ambition is to help drive innovation across the European theatre sector. We are excited by the possibilities AI offers: better multilingual access, stronger discoverability, new ways to reach audiences, more efficient organisational processes and new tools for experimentation. A European strategy can help ensure that these benefits are distributed across the cultural ecosystem rather than concentrated among the largest platforms, languages and institutions.

Yet the scale of technological change also reinforces the importance of what theatre uniquely provides. AI policy expert Sarah Nicole has warned against allowing anthropomorphic language around AI to become so normalised that we begin to attribute human qualities, knowledge or authority to systems that do not possess them. Her work argues for keeping human agency, critical thinking and collective understanding at the centre of our relationship with AI. As AI systems become more conversational, personalised and human-like in the way they are presented, spaces built around genuine human presence acquire new significance.

Theatre is made through bodies sharing a space: actors and audiences, attention and response, uncertainty and interaction. It creates encounters that cannot be reduced to frictionless digital exchange. In a society in which more communication may take place with or through machines, live culture can become an even more important space for practising human connection.

Our call to the European Commission is therefore simple: be ambitious about technology, but centre people in the strategy. Support cultural organisations in adopting AI, ensure that Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity is visible in AI systems, make innovation accessible to organisations of every size, and use technology to widen rather than narrow cultural participation. The strongest European approach to cultural AI will be one in which technology expands human creativity, agency and connection.

SOURCES

- European Commission, “Artificial intelligence strategy for the cultural and creative sectors” - call for evidence, 2026.
- European Commission, “Study on the discoverability of diverse European cultural content in the digital environment”, 2026.
- European Commission, “Conference addresses discoverability of European cultural content online”, 24 April 2026.
- European Commission, “Supporting AI Adoption in Europe’s Cultural and Creative Sectors, including media”, 2025.
- Sarah Nicole, AI Organon, “Giving It a Name That Belongs to Something Else” (2026), on anthropomorphism, epistemic authority and the importance of distinguishing AI systems from human cognition.

ABOUT THE EUROPEAN THEATRE CONVENTION

Founded in 1988, the European Theatre Convention (ETC) is the largest network of public theatres in Europe. It is an arts organisation that promotes European theatre as a vital platform for dialogue, democracy and interaction that responds to, reflects and engages with today’s diverse audiences and changing societies. ETC’s programme of grants and events support networking, professional development and artistic collaborations for theatre staff across Europe – championing theatre as a key European art form for the 21st century.

ETC has more than 80 members from 33 countries and is supported by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. In total, the network estimates its members put on 60.000 productions per year, reaching 25.000.0000 spectators annually.

