

JACK THORNE: 'AUTHORSHIP IN THE AGE OF AI', DELIVERED AT QUEEN ELIZABETH HALL, SOUTH BANK CENTRE, LONDON, ON 13 SEPTEMBER 2026, AS PART OF THE CREATIVE INTELLIGENCE FESTIVAL

Hello. Thanks for coming today. To talk about something quite complicated but, I think, absolutely vital. The way this is going to work is I'm going to talk for about 30 minutes, and then Baroness Beeban Kidron is going to come on and we're going to have a discussion, then we'll open up the floor to include thoughts and questions from you.

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I am genuinely terrified standing up here.

Not because I'm frightened of public speaking - I should be, I'm an autistic man who struggles to complete a sentence, however, I trust you to bear with me.

Not because I'm frightened of push back from big AI, Elon Musk has already called me a creep for some of my casting choices, I don't wear it as a badge of honour, I wish he hadn't, but I've been through it and come out the other side.

No, the reason why I'm terrified is because I do not wish to appear ignorant. I am trying to understand AI, I've spent a long time trying to understand the nuances of this debate, but if you were to ask Claude, Grok, Gemini or ChapGPT I'm sure they'd reassuringly tell you that there is a 99% chance I know less than some of the people in this room. The worry about doing these things, and it's happened to me, is that you stand up here as the big I am and someone nails you with a gotcha question. I am telling you now that is hugely possible.

My worth, if I have any, to this debate, is that I am a practitioner and that I am here as a representative of practitioners. As President of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain I am absolutely certain the next five years and the way that government acts or doesn't act to protect our sector will define what the next hundred years looks like for every writer in this country. These are my thoughts and tentative answers to that problem but this debate relies on people better educated than me.

Writers are a group for whom – whilst instruments may have changed, chalk to the quill to the pen to the typewriter to the computer – the process of creation – sitting in a space and making shit up – hasn't really altered ever in human history. With AI it is fundamentally altering, because words arranged as thoughts can now be artificially generated. A version of imagination is now replicable. As such, we're facing our moment of enclosure, our moment of rapid industrialisation, and how we cope and how we're supported, is crucial.

I don't know whether I need to defend our importance as an industry but I will quickly. The cultural sector represents approximately £145.8 billion of our economy in terms of Gross Value Added, roughly 5.5% of our country's total GVA. The Writers' Guild represents everyone from dramatists to authors to comedians to screenwriters to game creators. We

are one of the hearts of that sector. Psychologically and sociologically, of course, culture adds far more than money – I always loved this Yann Martel quote “If we citizens do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams”.

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Now I recognise the government is staring at AI with eyes wider than Bugs Bunny.

It doesn't know what it is, it doesn't know whether to run towards it or run away. It doesn't know whether it's the future of our country's economy or a massive destructive force. But on security the government has acted decisively – or at least leant in - the government under Rishi Sunak founded the AI Security Institute, which according to the New York Times is “one of the world's largest and best-funded government efforts dedicated to probing the technology's potentially catastrophic risks”. There's at least 100 people within it doing major work. On copyright this is what the government has done – pushed a terrible idea – the idea of the opt-out, which was then abandoned and replaced with – a consultation.

Copyright is, of course, traditionally an opt-in protection. In order to use someone's work, you have to get permission or a licence. The government proposed an opt-out system – where third parties, ie AI developers, presumed they had the right to harvest and process data unless the creator formally objected. A system placing the full burden of copyright on makers as opposed to takers.

I was given an opportunity to go on Question Time last year, I was on with Peter Kyle, our then Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology. I asked him about copyright, in fact, I asked him specifically about Baroness Kidron's amendment to the Data (Use and Access) Bill which targeted AI and copyright, forcing scrapers to disclose training data transparency, something his government had resisted. This was at a crucial point in that debate, and – thanks to Beeban's huge efforts – the last time that copyright was truly in the spotlight.

I was told by Peter Kyle that the government had an answer to it and the larger issue of copyright. The truth is, it didn't then and it doesn't now. In March 2026 the government published it's Report on Copyright and Artificial Intelligence, it did not set new rules rather it said “we will not introduce reforms to copyright law until we are confident that they will meet our objectives for the economy and UK citizens. This means protecting the UK's position as a creative powerhouse, while unlocking the extraordinary potential of AI to grow the economy and improve lives”. Many in our sector rejoiced because the report saw the end of the government's plan for the opt out, but the truth is the report should have had a plan to replace that opt out with and it didn't. It did that thing that governments do when they don't have a plan, waiting and seeing. They claimed in the report to have listened to the outcry from creators, but they can't have listened hard, because six months later the large-scale theft of creative work continues.

There are Court cases ongoing with copyright at their core – there are important issues being raised in different cases, The New York Times versus OpenAI, Authors vs Anthropic,

and GEMA vs Suno. All are necessary, all about assigning a cost to broken copyright. Machines have allegedly stolen and entities are fighting for the right to charge them for what they've allegedly stolen. They're being fought in different courts, and with different intent. But whilst, as the recent cases on child protection against Meta have shown, the courts are vital in doing this work, they also cannot be a replacement for government action. In fact, arguably what the Meta cases have shown is government failure, it's something I spent time looking into making Adolescence, the damage done to our young people over a number of years because the government failed to act is deeply shaming. And copyright is perhaps even harder to prove than harm, what all three cases show is that it is incredibly difficult to prove that your work has been scraped. Scraping, as it names suggests, involves taking small pieces from a wide variety of sources, therefore showing where something has been scraped from is hugely difficult. They steal, but because they don't have to declare where they stole from, the stealing goes unpunished.

The government is not leading on this, the government is not even trying to lead. No-one knows what the rules are and so everyone is left in the position of finding their own way. And the way we're finding as an industry, is becoming increasingly problematic.

There are some in the industry who are welcoming AI with open arms, there are some who are welcoming it with cautious arms. There are some who are using some aspects of AI. There are some who are using a lot of it. Scorsese, Ben Affleck, Zemeckis, the Russos, Tom Hanks, all have consented or adopted the use of AI in their work. Not to generate art, but to support their artistic processes. Doug Liman has just made a film that has been "enhanced" by AI, using a performative capture stage, actors work on largely bare sets and AI conjures a world around them. Perhaps even more gravely, one of my heroes, Paul Schrader, has declared he's making a film using AI generated characters. For writing the picture is even more complicated than in other parts of the profession, because what we do is behind closed doors. I have spoken to a number of execs and studio heads about their use of AI, and got hugely different responses, but what I did hear from them – and what anecdotally I've heard from a few writers close to me – is that some in my profession are using AI to cheat. What I'm not talking about here is using AI to help: To discuss things with, to check for spelling errors or help with lay-out. I'm talking about using AI as a replacement for endeavour, as a replacement for writing at all. Using prompts instead of writing words. That is, simply put, failing to write, they're cheating their employers in doing so, and they're cheating their fellow writers.

Which leads me onto the Take A Break problem. One of our countries most popular magazines, this summer wrote to contributors to tell them their Fiction Feast section would be undertaking a trial to explore how AI could support the creation of their in-house fiction. A trial which resulted, in at least one issue, in AI being used to generate the first draft of every story used. There was a fascinating section on The Rest Is Entertainment podcast about this, where they talked about the importance of this section remaining writer generated but also talked about Clarkesworld, a magazine which had to temporarily pause similar submissions because they were having to wade through so much AI generated submission slop. Slop that people are being taught to do on 'how to make money quickly' vlogs. In fact, these magazines can chart spikes in their submissions from when those videos come out. This is a problem for two reasons (i) obviously no-one likes the idea of cheats

making money (ii) and I believe more importantly - if publishers, studios, streamers, can point to the writer as the problem, that gives them the excuse to behave however they'd like with content. 'We have to use AI because you guys are.' The Take a Break problem is 'you're cheating, so we have to'.

'We have no alternative but to...' is one of the worst phrases in politics, and it is going to be brought into the creative industries if we do not do more to stop this. If we cannot police our profession, if we are not given the ability to police our profession, then practices are going to result which are going to lead to the partial destruction of this profession.

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To be clear, I don't think the Armageddon of total replacement of creators – actors and makers – is probable. But I do think a partial replacement is more than possible. Doug Liman is doing away with sets, Paul Schrader is doing away with actors, in China, as the Financial Times reported recently, AI generated characters have name recognition. I think this won't work in the most part, that the personal and authentic will win out. But that personal and authentic will be bounded and contained by AI. For this talk, I did a list of all the ways I think AI will encroach in the next five years on my specific part of the industry. I came up with a list of hundreds but these are the four most crucial ones,

- (i) I think the written script might soon be "supported" by an animatic. A rough moving draft of a film, a moving storyboard. I worked in animation very briefly, I was brought in to do some 'weekly' work on an animated film in its final stages, and was fascinated that I would write some pages and almost immediately they'd be basically animated so everyone could see rather than read what I'd done. I can see a future where scripts are instantly processed into an AI machine so that pretty sophisticated animatics can be produced and executives can see and hear them. The page will not die but slowly be replaced with an animatic. This endangers pre-making decisions for creators later involved in the process, actors, directors, designers, and thus disrupting the page to film transition.
- (ii) I think it will also play a role in the development of ideas. In fact, I suspect it already is. Executives putting different prompts into the machine in order to generate future 'original' films – imagine what this prompt could make – what would the film Chinatown look like on Mars – the machine spews something about industrial misuse of precious resources on a planet - OK, next prompt, introduce world ending stakes – the machine spews something about how earth is under threat from an Armageddon extinction event and Mars relocation is essential and thus: Mars being starved of crucial ingredients by this industrial misuse is potentially deadly - OK, next prompt, give me a Tom Cruise starring role – Tom Cruise is the newly appointed head of NASA, having been a captain who was previously responsible for the death of his crew in a failed exploratory mission to, you guessed it, Mars. He must see through his fears to make this work. Fifteen four-page scenarios are generated from these prompts, one is seen as better than the others, that scenario is given to writers. The writer as originator is replaced. And, to be clear, all the previous stuff was this author's work and I claim copyright.

- (iii) The rewrite becomes increasingly redundant. Because you input the script into a system and ask it for five additional jokes for every page, for an action scene that might make audiences scream, the computer says yes. In fact, the AI rewrite becomes a compulsory part of every process and writers on Eastenders are shocked to find new jokes appearing in their script because the machine bade it so.

But the biggest and most troubling idea I thought likely was the fourth...

- (iv) Because of all the above - a more limited version of us becomes possible – and so the development of new talent becomes less important to our industry...

And this is the bit, with my President hat on, that really worries me. I talked about this in a speech I made at Parliament last year. I talked about a hero of mine Michaela Coel. I, like many, think her show *I May Destroy You* was a profound revolutionary event. I charted, in the speech, her development as a writer with her show *Chewing Gum* Dreams which went from fringe London theatre – the Yard in Hackney Wick – to the National Theatre’s temporary space, The Shed – to Channel 4’s E4, where it became the comedy drama *Chewing Gum*. *Chewing Gum* is seen as yielding an exciting new voice, and the BBC commission *I May Destroy You*. Every stage of that process required investment, investment from actors, directors, designers, producers and enthusiasts. If a Michaela Coel script can be digitally created, then that investment becomes less interesting. If Michaela Coel can be scraped and those scrapes can be used to create shadows of her work, can be used to create a Michaela Coel substitute then the investment in the next Michaela Coel becomes less likely. On the Mars script outlined above one more prompt is needed, write this like Michaela Coel. Or Aaron Sorkin. Or a mixture of the two. And this is the vital thing, copyright is the equivalent of the science patent. The science patent leads to vast injustice, but it is seen as necessary in the most part because it protects the science industry. GlaxoSmithKline need to know that if they develop a new antibiotic, that that antibiotic will be profitable for a set length of time. This is why they invest the money. Copyright is exactly the same for the industry that has built up around writers. For producers, production houses, channels, streamers, and studios. If we do not have copyright today, then tomorrow dies.

Now there are some that say that AI won’t win even partially because the product is not good enough. That humans produce writing which cannot be replicated. I agree with that notion entirely. The Dennis Potter loophole. AI can’t replicate *The Singing Detective*. But my point is I’m not talking about total incursion but partial. And Dennis Potter’s first works? When he was finding his voice? If that gets stymied by AI, what damage does that do? And, frankly, how many *Singing Detectives* get made?

There are those that argue audiences will demand the authentic non-AI experience. I recently got the opportunity to speak to some of the guys behind *The Human Made Mark*, which is a really beautiful initiative. It’s an ident that will sit before films and say no AI was used in this film. I don’t think it will work for all films and TV, the cost savings AI will generate will prevent that, but for some films and TV I think the Human Made Mark – look it up, www.thehumanmademark.com – it’s a scheme that needs elevating - will be incredibly powerful and is incredibly important.

And finally, there are those that argue this is a challenge for change. A friend said to me those that are frightened of AI are the same as those that were frightened by the loom. That we must adapt or die. Again, I see the point. I think that's what Scorsese and others are doing – what the whole industry will do. Adapt. Use certain pieces. I have no interest in being a hypocrite here and have no doubt I will work on films and TV which will use AI, I will be using the Human Made Mark on some of my work, on others I won't, it simply won't be economically possible and I am not in charge of all the economic choices that are made on the films and TV I work on. I will have to adapt. But my point is, for me and others, the pieces of AI we use cannot be built using thievery. Cannot be built on a copyright crime. That's what government is there for, to set lines in an argument. Whilst adaptation is probably necessary, legislating so that you are protecting us from the worst excesses is essential.

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AI is not sitting still, they are not observing and watching, these language models are in an arms race with each other - and China - and are intent on getting stronger. I have spoken to people inside the machine who've told me the worst excesses in tech are encouraged and led by the idea that whatever they're doing, the other side are doing worse. They are working at speed and with great intelligence on their side. Our industry is worth billions and so is worth billions to them. There was a story in the Washington Post this year of Anthropic spending tens of millions of dollars acquiring second hand books, slicing off their spines and scanning them. The Guardian reported on Barter books – based in Northumberland – selling hundreds of random books to three buyers – who they believed to be tech companies – books by John Le Carre, Anne Bronte, and the October 1983 issue of Warship, a monthly magazine. When questioned about their tactics, Anthropic replied “Claude is trained on a mix of publicly available web data, commercially acquired datasets and data we generate ourselves. Sourcing books is a widely used approach for training large language models across the AI industry”. These models are getting better, stronger, and they are doing so using Anne Bronte, John Le Carre and Warship Magazine. Two out of three of which are still in copyright.

There's a passage in Beeban's book which I thought really beautifully illustrated our current position, she says:

'The tech sector frames the world as though we must swallow every harm in order to access every benefit. This is not a law of technology. It is a story which protects the current model.'

I have no doubt AI is going to bring huge benefit. Of course, if harnessed correctly, AI will bring advances to science and the economy, it already has. I watched our Chancellor John Healey's speech this week and he described the incorporation of AI as 'urgent' for UK businesses, and I don't doubt that's true. Personally, I am hugely excited by the possibilities it gives for disabled access. People with restricted sight and hearing being given the ability to have the world described to them. That's incredible. But the harm it produces could outweigh that benefit if we believe that the current modellers are entitled to behave however they like for the furtherment of their technology.

There are so many things the government could be doing. Crucially, observation without intervention for fear of upsetting *their* apple cart could be replaced by observation *with* intervention for fear of upsetting *our* apple cart. It comes down to who you feel you need to protect, the tech titans or, to quote Dominic Cummings, the fucking ballerinas. This is some of the legislation I'd suggest we need:

- (i) Full transparency - the report from March 2026 did not set a date for a subsequent comprehensive copyright report but we are due in this autumn session for the AI Labelling Taskforce to announce its interim findings. Which will apparently provide creators with clear technical tools to identify if their intellectual property has been used. How this happens will be fascinating. What obligation it places on the AI companies will be very interesting. From the outside, it doesn't seem as if there is an intention for this to lead to the transparency Baroness Kidron asked for. So let's be clear, we need mandatory data sets in which developers publish audited summaries of every input that has led to their outputs. We need watermarking for every text used.
- (ii) The texts that are used need to generate a cost. Those with copyright need to be paid for their work being used. That's what these Court cases are arguing for. These costs need to be large enough that generating ideas through machines isn't necessarily cheaper than generating ideas through humans. How these particular costs are calculated is going to be immensely difficult, and I'm not clever enough to write the equation, but someone needs to.
- (iii) Passing AI work off as your own needs to be unlawful. If you use AI to generate content and you do not declare it as such then that is fraud and the companies you do it to should be entitled to prosecute you. If I excitingly pitch my Mars show to Netflix and they send me to script, and I write the script using AI and do not tell them, then they should have the right to take me to Court. The line on this needs to be carefully drawn, I do not think conversation and research should be illegal, I do not think using AI to check your spelling and sense should be, but if AI writes a scene for me solely using prompts I've given, I haven't written that scene. Some of this is covered in existing fraud legislation, some needs to be written into a specific piece of work. Interestingly, the EU AI Act is very clear on synthetic labelling, but as I understand it gives writers a pass with the 'human in the loop' aspect of the legislation. If a piece of work has been prompted and reviewed then that's not synthetic according to them, a UK law needs to disallow this get out. This is the only way to combat the Take a Break problem, writers need to be squeaky clean. And to discourage it, the impact should be sizable and that requires laws but also us as an industry responding. Just as it should get you threatened with expulsion at University if you use it for essays, so it should have some professional impact on your career if you use it for text. In this case, the range of powers available to US unions may make it easier for the WGA than the WGGB, but our industry is probably small enough to police some aspects of it ourselves, the BBC should threaten sanctions, Channel 4. To protect the most vulnerable it is essential. As writers what we are is what we make, and both the law and our industry should be absolutely crystal clear on that.
- (iv) AI cannot be allowed to impersonate, not actors, not directors, and not writers. I asked Gemini to write a script in the style of Craig Mazin, no other prompts just

that, it did and it wasn't good but there were aspects of his writing I recognised and remember – AI is getting better. I asked ChatGPT to write a Channel 4 pitch for a show from me – disappointingly that was pretty good, but that may say more about my writing and choices than AI. This should be prohibited. Actors are currently asking to have their voices likeness protected. We should be able to do the same as writers. Just as if you ask AI to do something illegal, it tells you it can't, so if you ask it to impersonate someone, use its actual or literary likeness, it should just say no.

- (v) The government should create a Copyright Institute. Just as security requires a specific taskforce, so copyright should be given the same privilege. AI is going to have a nuanced response, and to protect against the excesses requires more than just laws. A Copyright Institute which looks at both protecting existing content and crucially generating future content. A regulatory body that monitors and regulates AI expansion and suggests government intervention, if necessary, in the market. It may sound insignificant, but the loss of Doctors and River City has done serious damage to the ladder for new screenwriters – why can't the BBC Charter renewal conversation include a provision for a proportion of the licence fee to be spent on new voices? The BBC is magnificent at creating pathways, Lindsay Salt, the BBC's Director of Drama, is an amazing supporter of new talent, but by enshrining it in the creative output provision of the charter we might make her job easier in getting those new voices through. Why not ask ITV and Channel 4 to incorporate a similar commitment in their public service provision? Skins was my breakthrough because Bryan Elsley specifically looked for new voices. We need more Bryan Elsley's empowered in our system. Perhaps we can also talk about the tax break for premium dramas being extended to all dramas and documentaries? I know for a fact smaller dramas are essential to maintain homegrown output in this country and are essential for new writers. Perhaps we can talk about regional theatres and the importance of producing houses around the country? A report in The Stage suggested after a few dark years, many are flying at the moment but specific funds being put aside for local storytelling would do so much good. Perhaps we can even talk about English and Drama provision in schools? That'd be fun. None of these require huge amounts of money being spent, but are rather careful interventions made by this specific Institute to offset some of the effects of AI.

A few years ago I was lucky enough to give the Edinburgh TV Festival's MacTaggart lecture. I talked about the need for industrial change in order to include disabled creators in our industry. The remarkable thing is – since then change has happened. Green shoots have shown up everywhere, because far better people than me leant in and made it happen. Leaders at the top of the BBC, Channel 4, ITV, Disney, Sky, BritBox, and many others, joined together to say this cannot happen anymore. The TV Access Project – TAP – was born, disabled centred and disabled led. The best thing I've ever been part of. As such we now have Access Coordinators, we have Access Funding, we have studios auditing and changing their spaces, and crucially we have disabled creators writing, starring, producing and leading their own shows.

That we could do ourselves. This requires government leadership. In fact, it requires our government to take global leadership.

Of course, there will be pushback from certain economies, in all probability the American government won't like aspects of it, but surely – surely – this sector is worth, to quote our new Prime Minister, some political capital.

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It does feel as if the last administration was a bit dazzled by tech.

The hope is that Burnham's government can look at tech seriously, the good and the bad within it.

Andy Burnham wants a Britain that represents. He wants a diverse Britain, which caters to the local. He wants a thriving culture sector – and has appointed very early in his term Freelance Champions which is bloody brilliant news. But nothing these champions can do will be enough if we do not look at this problem carefully. We at the WGGB want writers who tell stories about our country, we want this generation to be truly empowered and the next generation to be truly liberated, and we need his help to ensure it. And what is true of us is true of Equity, the NUJ, the Musicians' Union, and Bectu. If we do not have a wide variety of people telling stories – in all mediums – about who they are and what they care for, then we will shrink as a country both economically and culturally.

AI, in its current state, is a shrinking tool.

And it doesn't need to be.

We do not wish to be shrunk.

Thank you.

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And now I'm going to bring on Beban Kidron, whose knowledge and work in this sphere is vast and wonderful. Her book, Users, is a mighty book, please do get hold of a copy, and her advocacy both in and out of the House of Lords has been mightier still. Ladies and gentlemen, Baroness Kidron.