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ESSAY



When hype polarises: the polarisation of moral evaluations around hyped innovations

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ABSTRACT

Innovations such as AI are the subject of much hype in society. Burgeoning scholarship on hype and entrepreneurship has focused on the sustained high expectations and excitement that hyped innovations attract. This essay reorients extant scholarship by uncovering an unexplored phenomenon: the moral polarisation that regularly accompanies hyped innovations from the outset. We articulate how the emergence of hyped innovations triggers polarised moral views in society as audiences disagree about the innovation's moral, rather than pragmatic, value, and what challenges this presents for the proponents of hyped innovations. We argue that this dynamic may emerge as the visibility generated by hype moves an innovation's evaluation beyond experts to audiences relying on conflicting sources, while its framing as highly consequential shifts that evaluation from the technical plane to the moral one. Under these conditions, opposing views may harden into mutually delegitimising camps rather than mere differences of opinion. We illustrate this through the case of 5G technology, a hyped innovation that faced celebration and condemnation at once. Our essay outlines four promising research opportunities about the important topics of how moral polarisation emerges alongside hype, how innovative companies may navigate it, how processes of depolarisation unfold, and how individuals associated with hyped innovations experience the micro-dynamics of this morally charged situation.

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Introduction

Hype around technological innovations is typically understood as the amplification of optimistic expectations around innovations that are portrayed as major breakthroughs. Research has conceptualised hype as a process through which innovations become invested with extraordinary promises and a sense that they could trigger a major transformation across industries (Borup et al., 2006; Logue & Grimes, 2022; Wedlin & Weinryb, 2025). Innovations such as artificial intelligence, blockchain technology, and

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quantum computing have become hyped due to audiences' expectations that they will reshape core sectors of the global economy. In this view, hype is not mere attention, but attention charged with anticipatory optimism about an innovation's transformative potential (Logue & Grimes, 2022; van Lente et al., 2013).

Yet, whereas existing scholarship on hype has focused on the excitement and high expectations that arise for hyped innovations (e.g., Logue & Grimes, 2022; van Lente et al., 2013), we have observed that another important reaction regularly plays out: across historical and contemporary cases, hyped innovations have often been construed both as vehicles of societal progress and as sources of societal danger. We refer to this reaction as 'moral polarization', that is, the construal of opposite understandings across societal groups of whether a hyped innovation is good or bad for the overall wellbeing of a society. The movable-type printing press offers a particularly telling example. Invented in fifteenth-century Europe, it was hyped as a revolutionary technology that promised to speed up the production of books and decrease its cost dramatically. In turn, some societal groups celebrated this innovation as a beneficial revolutionary force for society as a whole, as it would make knowledge more accessible, expand literacy across social classes, increase the speed of circulation of ideas across countries, fuel new industries (e.g., paper production), ultimately contributing to major cultural and political transformations across Europe. Yet, this hyped innovation also provoked deep anxieties across other societal groups. For example, elites and clerics feared that the press would facilitate the rapid spread of falsehoods, corrupt readers through the circulation of immoral literature, displace scribes, and upset the class system. What some groups hailed as a social breakthrough, others regarded as a threat to morality, order, and people's livelihoods.

Similar tensions surround hyped innovations presently. For example, artificial intelligence, hyped for its productive and creative potential, is hailed by some as enhancing the quality of human life, yet feared by others for its implications for surveillance, manipulation, loss of human control, and the displacement of entire job categories.

Despite this recurrent coexistence of promise and alarm around technological innovations, research on hype has paid limited attention to the negative evaluations that regularly emerge from the outset around hyped innovations. Existing work has explored convincingly how hype generates high expectations, enthusiasm, and anticipatory commitment (Logue & Grimes, 2022; Wedlin & Weinryb, 2025). When scholarship has investigated negative reactions to hyped innovations, such reactions are usually treated as arising at a later stage due to mistakes by the technology's innovator or audiences. For example, the potential backlash to hyped innovations is typically theorised as the outcome of inflated audience expectations that cannot be met or due to promises that innovators were unable to fulfil (Garud et al., 2025; Hampel & Dalpiaz, 2025). As a result, scholarship has suggested that negative reactions to hype mostly follow the failure to live up to the hype, rather than being a core reaction that hyped innovations may trigger.

In this essay, we argue that hype regularly generates not only optimistic expectations about the potential of a technology to revolutionise industries and management practice, but also polarised moral evaluations of technological innovations. When innovations are hyped, they often become objects of conflicting and mutually delegitimising judgements about whether they are socially beneficial or socially harmful. Building on research on how public opinion becomes polarised around social and political issues (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019; Jing et al., 2024; McCoy et al., 2018), we argue that this dynamic involves more than disagreement or scepticism. It may harden into an us-versus-them divide,

such that supporters and opponents increasingly view each other's positions not simply as different, but as illegitimate or even dangerous, making dialogue across opposing moral views of the innovation hardly possible (Iyengar et al., 2019; Waisbord, 2018). We therefore suggest extending the conceptualisation of opposition to hyped innovations from evaluations that arise primarily once audiences come to realise that they held exaggerated expectations or that innovators over-promised, to polarised moral judgments that hype can ignite from the outset.

This essay develops this argument in three steps. First, we present the dominant understanding of hype as a phenomenon centred on promise, excitement, and anticipatory optimism, showing that opposition has mainly been theorised as arising at a later stage due to mistakes by innovators or audiences. Second, we develop the idea that polarised moral evaluations accompany hyped innovations by drawing on polarisation research and the illustrative case of the introduction of 5 G technology. Finally, we discuss the implications of this perspective for research on hype and outline avenues for future research.

Hype and its underexplored side-effects

Research on hype and technological expectations has primarily examined how innovations become invested with future-oriented promises. Foundational work in the sociology of expectations shows how visions of the future, circulating through promises and expectations, orient attention towards an innovation's anticipated potential rather than its present reality (Borup et al., 2006; van Lente et al., 2013). In this sense, hype is not merely publicity or buzz, but part of a broader anticipatory dynamic through which emerging innovations come to appear transformative, desirable, and worthy of support.

This promissory perspective is important because it helps explain how uncertain innovations gain social traction before their outcomes are known. By projecting bold futures, hype can attract attention and mobilise actors, thus generating support for innovations whose practical viability remains incomplete or uncertain (Borup et al., 2006; Garud et al., 2026). In entrepreneurship research, this insight is captured by work that defines hype as a 'collective vision and promise of a possible future around which attention, excitement, and expectations increase over time' (Logue & Grimes, 2022, p. 1055). In more institutionally oriented work, hype is also examined as a broader process through which ideas are translated, linked to hope, and made resonant across wider audiences and institutional settings (Wedlin & Weinryb, 2025).

A central contribution of research on hype has therefore been to show how hype mobilises legitimacy and support. By amplifying expectations, hype can make a technology, venture, or emerging pathway appear more consequential and credible and therefore worthy of investment (see Garud et al., 2026 for a recent review). This is why hype is often associated with resource mobilisation, the attraction of stakeholders, and broader processes of legitimacy building around uncertain innovations (Heupel et al., 2024; Rady et al., 2025; Wadhwani & Lubinski, 2025).

At the same time, research has started to acknowledge that, as time passes, audiences can develop negative reactions to hyped innovations (Garud et al., 2025). One important line of work shows that inflated expectations may generate disappointment over time when breakthroughs that audiences anticipated fail to materialise (van Lente et al., 2013)

or when innovators are unable to deliver on the promises they made earlier (Garud et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2024). Another line of research has explored how the intense attention that hype brings to innovative ventures can expose their attempts to decouple their actions from their claims to fit the hype (Spivack et al., 2025). Additionally, hype can lead innovative ventures to engage in unethical practices because they see the hype as giving them permission to do whatever it takes to succeed (Hampel & Dalpiaz, 2025).

Taken together, this growing body of entrepreneurship work on hype's dark side suggests that negative dynamics are mostly outcomes of hype gone wrong. Scholarship suggests that negative reactions tend to arise after positive expectations have been established: when promises are not met, when temporal commitments are breached, or when intensified scrutiny reveals problematic implications or practices. In this sense, the dominant image remains one in which hype is initially promising, while negative reactions appear only later if actors – innovators or audiences – make a mistake.

Such a characterisation of the negative dynamics that may follow hype, however, sits uneasily with a broader literature on technological innovation, which has long shown that emerging technologies often elicit both enthusiasm and concern from the outset. Research in the sociology of expectations emphasises that new technologies are rarely surrounded only by promises and hopes; they may also generate fears and concerns about future risks and undesirable societal consequences (Borup et al., 2006). Consistent with this view, historical and contemporary cases (such as those briefly discussed above) show that innovations are often welcomed as vehicles of progress while simultaneously provoking anxieties about their broader implications for societal wellbeing. This suggests that positive and negative reactions to hyped innovations may coexist from the beginning, rather than unfolding only over time as a result of actors' mistakes.

The polarisation of moral evaluations around hyped innovations: conditions and an illustrative example

In contrast to prior research, we argue that hype does not just generate optimism around the potential of a technological innovation and negative reactions emerge only later on if expectations remain unmet because innovators cannot live up to the hype. Rather, hype may also foster the polarisation of moral evaluations around the innovation from the outset. In such cases, innovations do not merely attract different degrees of enthusiasm or scepticism; they become objects of opposed and antagonistic judgements about whether they are good or bad for society.

This argument builds on scholarship on polarisation, which defines it as 'a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "Us" versus "Them"' (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 16). Polarisation, in this sense, is more than disagreement. It refers to a condition in which opposed positions take on a mutually antagonistic character and constructive dialogue across camps becomes increasingly difficult because of this animosity (Iyengar et al., 2019; Waisbord, 2018).

Applied to technological innovation, the polarisation of moral evaluations refers to situations in which oppositional judgements emerge about the moral value of an innovation, that is, about whether it is socially beneficial or socially harmful, in ways that become increasingly antagonistic.¹ What is at stake is not simply whether actors favour or

oppose an innovation, or whether they differ in their views of its usefulness or effectiveness. It is whether they regard the innovation as morally desirable or morally threatening for society, and whether they come to see those on the other side as irresponsible, manipulated, or even dangerous.

We argue that hype can foster this dynamic because it typically combines two conditions. First, hype generates exceptional visibility and public attention (Borup et al., 2006; van Lente et al., 2013). Second, the innovations that become hyped are often framed as highly consequential, that is, as capable of reshaping important domains of social life (Garud et al., 2014; Ulnicane et al., 2021). We argue that this is especially likely to arise when hype concerns general purpose technologies. These are technologies, such as the printing press, the internet or AI, that have the potential to become widely used, to be capable of continuing to improve over time, and to enable a variety of applications across the economy (Bresnahan, 2010). Together, these two conditions move an innovation out of a narrow technical domain and into a broader arena of public moral contestation (Druckman & Bolsen, 2011), thus facilitating the emergence of contested moral views.

The first condition matters because, once an innovation attracts exceptional attention, discussion quickly extends beyond experts and immediate users. The hyped innovation becomes a public object (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), and the debates that shape its evaluation are no longer confined to a relatively bounded technical community with shared reference points for sources and truth claims. Instead, they unfold across wider publics whose members often rely on different epistemic assumptions to determine what is true, credible, and relevant (Druckman & Bolsen, 2011). This is especially likely today, as publics are increasingly fragmented across divergent media environments and informational communities (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023; Funk, 2019; Pollock & Rindova, 2026; Stroud, 2010). Different groups do not simply interpret the same facts differently; they may also rely on different sources, resulting in situations in which they effectively operate with different facts on the matter (Meyer & Vaara, 2020). As a result, the same hyped innovation may be evaluated through different regimes of truth (Waisbord, 2018), resulting in necessarily different views, backed up by different assumptions and facts.

The hype surrounding 5 G technology illustrates this dynamic well. Commercially introduced in 2019, 5 G technology is the latest generation of cellular network infrastructure. Already in the years preceding its rollout, 5 G had been framed as a hyped innovation by industry analysts (Columbus, 2017). Media and industry narratives – across both generalist outlets (e.g., BBC, 2018; CNN, 2020) and technology-oriented publications (Aten, 2019) – consistently portrayed 5 G as a transformative breakthrough, often using hype-typical characterisations of 5 G as a technology able to ‘unlock the future’ (Burton, 2018). These expectations were grounded in its significantly improved speed, responsiveness, and bandwidth, which were anticipated to enable smart infrastructures, the IoT, and autonomous systems, and thereby to reshape large parts of the economy, positioning 5 G as an enabling infrastructure expected to transform multiple sectors simultaneously.

This hype around 5 G made it a highly visible public issue, as reflected in online data showing that the 5 G topic reached nearly three million Twitter hits at its peak around April 2020 (RAND Corporation [RAND], 2024). The discussion was therefore no longer confined to engineers, telecom experts, and regulators debating its performance benefits. It entered a much broader public arena in which both expert and

non-expert groups – such as industry analysts, media organisations, civil society groups, policymakers, and online communities (Gualtieri & Lurati, 2025) – engaged in the debate. Yet, these groups often relied on different sources of authority to assess its implications for societal safety and well-being. Actors such as regulators and governmental bodies, as well as mainstream media outlets, industry players, and scientific experts, primarily relied on institutional and established sources of expertise. Within this interpretive space, 5 G was typically framed as safe, evidence-based, and necessary for economic and social progress (e.g., BBC, 2018; Grijpink et al., 2019; UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [UK], 2017). Other segments of the population, however, placed greater trust in alternative sources, leading to the emergence of anti-5 G activist networks and broader online communities opposing its deployment across multiple countries. These movements were documented in contexts such as the UK, the US, and continental Europe, where protests, petitions, and even attacks on telecommunications infrastructure were reported. Within these networks and communities, 5 G was described as insufficiently tested, harmful to health, and associated with surveillance, coercion, or hidden forms of control (Associated Press, 2020; The Guardian, 2020; Reuters, 2020).

The issue, then, was not simply that different groups emphasised different aspects of the same technology. They often relied on different epistemic authorities and, therefore, on different constructions of what 5 G meant for society's wellbeing, and what counted as credible evidence about it (Gualtieri & Lurati, 2025). Under these conditions, public communication becomes difficult because people lose 'common frameworks of understanding and communication' through which they discuss the technology (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019, p. 184; see also Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023).

The second condition matters because, when an innovation is framed as highly consequential, evaluation moves beyond the technical plane and onto a moral and emotional one (Borup et al., 2006; Garud et al., 2014), as the promises circulating around it become affectively charged (Geiger & Gross, 2017). As long as an innovation is perceived as limited in scope, debate may remain relatively contained around questions of functionality, efficiency, or adoption. But different dynamics arise when it is presented as a technology capable of transforming health, communication, work, or even democratic life, as is especially the case for general purpose technologies, such as electricity and AI. Then it becomes harder to treat the innovation's implications as merely technical. The question is no longer only whether the technology works, but what kind of society it enables or threatens (Davidson, 2002; Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). Under these conditions, evaluation becomes moralised: the innovation is no longer judged simply in terms of performance, but in terms of whether it serves or endangers the social good.

Again, 5 G illustrates this dynamic. Public debate around 5 G did not remain confined to the performance of telecommunications infrastructure. Survey data indicate that these divisions extended beyond technical considerations to broader concerns about the technology's implications for society. For instance, a Deloitte (see European Economic and Social Committee, 2021) study found that while 39% of respondents considered 5 G safe, 21% viewed it as harmful, suggesting widespread and unresolved moral contestation. Rather than being a purely technical discussion, debate around 5 G indeed became tied to broader questions of social progress, public safety, surveillance, control, and the legitimacy of powerful institutions (Massé & Vuarin, 2025).

Within this divided landscape, for some groups, 5 G represented innovation and connectivity and, thus, collective advancement. This moralised stance is reflected in narratives portraying 5 G as a technology that would ‘change the world’ and enable a better collective future (Rogers, 2019). Supporting 5 G therefore meant supporting progress and societal advancement. For others, however, 5 G represented health threats, intrusive surveillance, and concealed abuses of power. Activist groups framed the technology as a serious societal risk, calling for its immediate halt and describing it as a technology ‘not safe for humanity and the ecosystem’ (Alleanza Italiana Stop 5 G, n.d.) or emphasising that ‘wireless radiation is neither safe nor healthy’ (Stop 5 G, n.d.). Opposing 5 G therefore meant protecting society from harm and resisting illegitimate forms of control (Gualtieri & Lurati, 2025). What emerged, then, were not simply different views about the utility of the technology, but competing moral visions of what 5 G meant for society and of what a responsible stance towards it required (Gualtieri & Lurati, 2024).

Yet these moral views do not remain merely different; they may become mutually delegitimising. This happens because groups that rely on different epistemic authorities often do not recognise the legitimacy of the sources on which the opposing side relies (Braman et al., 2008; Druckman & Bolsen, 2011). When one group sees institutional expertise as authoritative and another sees it as corrupt or deceptive, disagreement no longer concerns only the technology itself: it extends to the legitimacy of the institutions and other social groups associated with each side. Under such conditions, opposing views are less likely to be treated as reasonable alternatives and more likely to be cast as irresponsible, if not manipulated and dangerous. What emerges, then, is not only disagreement about innovation, but dislike, distrust, and even animosity towards those who hold the opposing view (Iyengar et al., 2019).

In the case of 5 G, supporters of the technology often dismissed opponents as irrational, misinformed, or drawn into conspiratorial thinking.² Opponents, in turn, often treated supporters as manipulated or complicit in the uncritical acceptance of powerful institutions (Gualtieri & Lurati, 2025). In this way, the issue appeared not merely as a case of public disagreement, but as a struggle between antagonistic camps whose members regarded one another as both epistemically unreliable and morally suspect (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023; Gualtieri & Lurati, 2024). This is what distinguishes polarisation from ordinary controversy, scepticism, or risk perception: not the presence of opposing or doubtful views, but their hardening into mutually delegitimising camps that no longer share common ground on the facts and come to treat one another as morally suspect rather than merely mistaken.

Seen in these terms, the polarisation of moral evaluations around an innovation emerges when hype exposes a highly consequential technology to broad public attention. When hype draws an innovation beyond specialised circles into a broader public arena populated by heterogeneous audiences, different groups are likely to rely on different sources of authority and thus different interpretive frameworks to assess what the innovation is and what effects it will have. At the same time, the perceived societal consequentiality of the innovation shifts evaluation from the technical to the moral plane, making the innovation an object of emotionally charged judgements about the kind of social order it may enable or threaten. As these divergent moral

evaluations develop on different sources and channels, actors increasingly struggle to recognise the legitimacy of the other side's facts and concerns; resulting in a mutual delegitimizing of views. The result is thus not simply disagreement over a technology, but an antagonistic divide in which the same innovation sparks sharply opposed moral evaluations.

Implications for entrepreneurship and future research directions

In this essay, we argue that hype is not only a generator of optimism and excitement around technological innovation, but may also foster the polarisation of moral evaluations of hyped innovations from the outset. When innovations are hyped as having far-reaching societal consequences, they are thrust into broad public attention and become objects of evaluation far beyond specialised circles. In these broader and more fragmented public arenas, different audiences may rely on different epistemic authorities and competing interpretive frameworks to make sense of what the hyped innovation is and what it means for society. At the same time, its perceived consequentiality shifts evaluation from the technical plane to a moral one, as the innovation comes to be judged in terms of the kind of social order it may enable, reinforce, or threaten, thereby making evaluation morally charged. Under such conditions, innovations may come to attract not merely divergent opinions, but opposing and increasingly antagonistic moral judgements about whether they are socially beneficial or socially harmful, grounded in different facts and assumptions.

This perspective extends prevailing accounts of the side-effects of hype. We argue against treating negative evaluations to hyped innovations just as a consequence that may arise at a later stage due to mistakes by innovators or audiences (Garud et al., 2014, 2025, 2026). Instead, we suggest that a hyped innovation may generate antagonistic judgements about its social value while hype is still arising. In this sense, opposition to hyped innovations is not confined to arising afterwards; it may also be structural to the way hype organises public attention around highly visible and societally consequential technologies.

This argument has major implications for how the context of innovation is understood. Entrepreneurship research has shown that hype can mobilise attention, legitimacy, and resources by making uncertain technologies appear credible and consequential, and thus worthy of support (Garud et al., 2014; Hampel & Dalpiaz, 2025; Logue & Grimes, 2022). The argument developed in this essay suggests that hype may simultaneously expose innovators to an antagonistic evaluative environment in which support from some audiences is coupled with resistance or moral condemnation from others. In such contexts, hype does not simply increase visibility in ways that facilitate support: it may also intensify contestation over the innovation's social meaning and legitimacy. Innovators may therefore operate in a context in which achieving pragmatic legitimacy among some audiences is accompanied by gaining moral illegitimacy among others, simultaneously. This points to a more ambivalent view of hype, not only as a resource for mobilisation, but also as a condition that may produce polarised and unstable patterns of social evaluations around the innovation.

This novel perspective on the emergence of polarised moral evaluations of hyped innovations opens four major avenues for future research.

A first avenue concerns process. This essay argues that hype is regularly accompanied by polarised moral evaluations of the hyped innovation but more work is needed to specify *how* this happens. Research on hype has already started to explain how expectations build, circulate, and sometimes collapse (van Lente et al., 2013). Research on polarisation, in turn, has identified mechanisms such as social identity (Turner et al., 1979), motivated reasoning and biased assimilation (Druckman & Bolsen, 2011), and selective exposure (Stroud, 2010) that may support the process of dividing opinions in an antagonistic manner (see Iyengar et al., 2019). Indeed, hype could activate pre-existing divisions, amplify latent differences between audiences, or help constitute ‘new’ polarised alignments around an innovation, in addition to other possibilities.

It would also be important to explore which roles important actors, such as innovators, the media, regulators and detractors, play during the polarisation process. For example, do dynamics of moral polarisation of a hyped innovation play out differently if they occur in a regulated industry, rather than an unregulated one? How do the legitimacy and the actions of regulatory authorities or supportive stakeholders influence the process of moral polarisation?

Relatedly, not only actors but also technologies shape the polarisation process of hyped technologies. For example, social media algorithms may amplify extreme opinions about issues that attract particular attention, such as hyped technologies. It would be important to explore the role that different technologies, especially information and communication technologies, play in the polarisation process of hyped innovations. Relatedly, it would be valuable to uncover how proponents of hyped innovations can respond to these dynamics.

Further, it would be important to explore whether there are different trajectories of moral polarisation for hyped innovations. For example, is the process of moral polarisation different for innovations that get hyped early-on when a prototype is not yet available versus those innovations that get hyped later in their evolution? Further, how do moral polarisation dynamics unfold when hype is at an upswing phase, rather than at a downswing phase (Garud et al., 2026)? In particular, how does the onset of a downswing phase of the hype – when disappointment emerges – affect moral polarisation about the innovation (Garud et al., 2026)? As it remains unclear how polarisation dynamics unfold for hyped innovations, it would be important to explore this. Longitudinal studies exploring moral polarisation over time and across different phases of hype would be especially useful for shedding light on this topic.

A second avenue concerns the challenges that the polarised evaluation of hyped innovations poses for innovators. If hype can generate both support *and* opposition from the outset, innovators are forced to navigate a more complex evaluative environment than hype research typically assumes. Rather than being able to focus squarely on a single audience that is mostly enthusiastic about the hyped innovation, innovators may confront heterogeneous audiences whose judgements diverge sharply over the innovation’s legitimacy and desirability. This raises important questions, such as how innovators navigate hype when it simultaneously mobilises support and resistance – and do so on different grounds (pragmatic and moral). Indeed, the emergence of moral polarisation suggests that innovators may simultaneously have to engage with audiences that celebrate the hyped innovation and with audiences that oppose or even stigmatise it. It would be important to explore how innovators achieve this, and how they prevent opposition from

spreading from hostile audiences to audiences that initially were sympathetic. Relatedly, it would be important to explore how innovators deal with the moral contention about the hyped innovation that is at the core of polarisation. Whereas innovators may be more comfortable limiting themselves to the technical and functional aspects of the hyped innovation, they may have to learn to engage with the moral framing that detractors use to oppose the innovation. This is especially important because morally polarised evaluations may escalate into broader legitimacy crises or organisational scandals when innovators are perceived as irresponsible, deceptive, or indifferent to societal harm (Clemente & Gabbioneta, 2017). Future research should therefore examine this important yet understudied aspect of hyped innovations.

It would also be important to explore how innovators deal with the different time horizons that audiences use to assess hyped innovations. Indeed, the moral polarisation may emerge in part because one group focuses on the supposed benefits related to a hyped technology when adopting a shorter time horizon (e.g., the communication benefits of 5 G), whereas another group focuses on the harm that the technology may cause when taking into account a longer time horizon (e.g., the alleged health implications of 5 G). Innovators need to then choose carefully whether to stick to their time horizon or whether to also engage with the time horizons that other stakeholders put forward. It would be important to explore how innovators engage with this dilemma effectively.

Relatedly, both innovators and audiences regularly make unbounded claims (Murray & Fisher, 2023) – forward-looking assertions that are untethered to current reality – about hyped innovations and their expected moral impact on society. For example, there is a current debate whether AI will achieve human-level cognitive abilities (i.e., AGI: artificial general intelligence) and whether this may herald mass unemployment. Such unbounded claims about the potential impact that a hyped technology will have on society in the future are more likely to generate public attention (Murray & Fisher, 2023). When different actors engage in unbounded claims – and possibly also invoke different time horizons – this risks further amplifying moral polarisation, in part because it is not possible to verify these claims conclusively in the present. Thus, it would be important to explore how innovators can use unbounded claims and time horizons in a manner that dampens, rather than amplifies, moral polarisation.

It would also be important to explore how the polarised evaluation of hyped innovations shapes innovators' efforts to mobilise resources, engage stakeholders, and gain legitimacy. Future research could examine whether, and under what conditions, innovators may benefit from polarisation about hyped innovations, and when polarisation instead undermines access to critical resources.

Relatedly, a third avenue concerns processes of depolarisation of hyped innovations. If hype can foster polarised moral evaluations of an innovation, how might depolarisation unfold? For example, the moral polarisation around 5 G technology appears to have attenuated over time. As 5 G shifted from a highly visible and contested innovation to a more routinised component of digital connectivity, its moral salience diminished, suggesting that depolarisation may, in some cases, emerge through processes of normalisation and the gradual erosion of public attention (RAND, 2024). This case suggests that depolarisation may, in some instances, unfold through broader socio-temporal dynamics rather than active intervention, raising the question of whether, and under what

conditions, actors can actively shape processes of depolarisation. For example: How can innovators, regulators, or other actors reduce such polarisation? How can they do so without suppressing legitimate disagreement? Which roles can different actors play in supporting depolarisation? How do they cooperate in this endeavour? How does depolarisation unfold depending on the stage of polarisation, such as whether it is still emerging or has hardened? Perhaps most intriguing is the question of how actors can initiate depolarisation as soon as moral polarisation around a hyped innovation has emerged, and how they may be able to prevent it from escalating into entrenched antagonism in the first place.

A fourth avenue concerns the micro-dynamics of polarisation about hyped innovations. We also need research that uncovers the lived experience of those who work on hyped innovations that become morally polarised. Many important research questions await: What does it feel like to be an employee or manager at the frontline of a hyped innovation that is simultaneously praised as socially transformative and condemned as socially dangerous? How do individuals navigate the emotional, moral, and identity tensions that arise in such environments? How does this differ depending on the individual's role (e.g., founders, managers, rank-and-file employees) in the organisation? It would be important to explore how organisations can help employees to cope with the moral polarisation of their hyped innovation. For example, how does the organisation's culture affect employees' experience of moral polarisation and their responses to it? Scholars could draw inspiration from studies that have examined employees' sensemaking and practices under conditions of organisational stigma or controversy (see for example Tracey & Phillips, 2016) or of challenges to the moral legitimacy of once-hyped innovators (Hampel & Dalpiaz, 2023, 2025). Studies into the micro-dynamics would deepen our understanding of how polarised moral evaluations about hyped innovations are not only publicly expressed, but also internally experienced and managed.

Conclusions

Taken together, our essay suggests that research on hype would benefit from moving beyond its predominant focus on promise and excitement that may be followed by later opposition if actors make mistakes. As hype also regularly fosters moral polarisation from the outset, many of the dynamics affecting hyped innovation remain insufficiently theorised. Taking this phenomenon seriously requires extending the study of hype to better understand how moral polarisation emerges around hyped innovations, how hype reshapes their evaluative environment, how innovators navigate and potentially mitigate polarised responses, and how these dynamics are experienced and managed by individuals working at the frontlines of hyped innovations.

Hyped technologies arouse not only great expectations for a better future but also risk triggering moral polarisation. It is pivotal to engage thoroughly with this moral polarisation that can prevent these great expectations from ever becoming reality. We have high hopes that scholars will rise to the challenge of shedding light on this important and consequential issue.

Notes

1. Actors form a *moral* evaluation of a hyped innovation when they judge whether it is good or bad for the wellbeing of society. They draw on their values, which are their internalised 'conceptions of the desirable', when making this moral judgement (Rindova & Martins, 2023; Rokeach, 1973, p. 2; Schwartz, 1992). This is different to assessing pragmatically whether an innovation is useful or effective in technical terms. Since actors hold and apply different values, such as communitist versus universalist ones (Enke, 2020), the same innovation can be judged as desirable by some and threatening by others. This can be conducive to moral polarisation under specific conditions, as we explain in more detail in the remainder of our essay.
2. This conspiratorial framing is a vivid expression of the mechanism we describe: when hype pushes an innovation beyond expert conversation into broad publics, evaluation loses a shared regime of truth and fragments into competing ones (one of which may take the conspiracy turn), leaving room not for technical discussion but for morally loaded judgements about the innovation. Hyped general purpose technologies, such as AI or biotechnology, are prone to being affected by such a process, albeit with differing textures.

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