

13 JUNE 2025 09.00 - 11.00

Panel 11. Critical Hype Studies: Towards a Collaborative and Unified Approach

Convenors:

Vassilis Galanos, University of Stirling

Andreu Belsunces, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

Keywords: expectations, history of technology, hype studies, imaginaries, interdisciplinarity, technology assessment

The field of hype studies is ever-growing, but what remains a challenge is its absence of a unified approach. During last year's 4S/EASST conference, we called to leverage collective experiences, to cocreatively build foundational structures and establish an STS-rooted, but outer-disciplinary, field of critical hype studies.

This panel will target a twofold aim: (1) firstly, we want present our current progress as a collective of researchers focusing on critical hype studies as part of our introductory presentation; (2) secondly, we aim to invite new contributions explore dynamic transformations, implications, and theoretical underpinnings of hype.

We, thus, invite researchers and scholars interested in problematising the complexities of hype as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that operates at sociotechnical, epistemic, psychological, transmedial, and environmental levels. We are particularly interested in insights into the intentional production of hype as a media and persuasion strategy or the unintentional emergence of hype driven by, or influencing, material, political and economic factors, as well as psychological, affective, and embodied ones. We welcome contributions that are not limited in the examination of the performative capacities of hype but we are also intrigued by its causal and historical origins, its stabilisation, management and abandonment.

We are equally interested in case studies that chart hype narratives: abandoned hypes, troughs of disillusionment, and cases of incremental, unhyped progress of technology. We wish to explore and problematise deterministic narratives about hype cycles, the social and psychological processes engendering hype, and the consequent effects on both innovation and public perception.

Further, and in alignment with the theme of STS Italia 2025, we are committed to explore aspects of hype that have been revealed as nascent tendencies during our research, such as responsible hype or the mobilisation of hype for socially beneficial purposes. We are therefore interested in treatments of hype as boundary object, not only as a force of alienation, but also as motivational force, with heightened focus on the empowerment of marginalised social groups while attentive to capitalist processes of co-optation and appropriation of critical voices for profitable gain. In this regard, we are interested in investigations regarding responsible hype or hype assessment.

Scholars with a background in STS and innovation studies, particularly those engaged in studies of expectations, expertise and experience, fictions, deep transitions, and imaginaries, are especially invited. Contributions from media studies, design studies, philosophy, cybernetics, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis are also highly welcome, as we weave together multiple threads to formulate a comprehensive understanding of hype phenomena.

13 JUNE 2025 09.00 - 11.00

ID 136 - "Strong Opinions, Weakly Held": Hype as a part of Speculative Finance in Silicon Valley

Michelle Venetucci, Yale University

Keywords: Ideology, Technology Studies, Silicon Valley, Venture Capital, Hype

Critical analyses of Silicon Valley often focus on the problem of ideology, deconstructing techno-utopian



Technoscience for Good:
Designing, Caring and Reconfiguring



meta
UNITÀ DI STUDI UMANISTICI E SOCIALI
SU SCIENZA E TECNOLOGIA

claims in an effort to address the harmful outcomes of corporate technology projects. As this focus on ideology can locate the problem within individuals and their beliefs, this paper instead directs analytic attention to the structural conditions through which these publicly circulating narratives are produced, exploring how centering analysis around institutionalized contexts can change our understanding of what drives industry behaviors. Using empirical examples from ethnographic research conducted in Silicon Valley between 2022 and 2024, I show how hyped claims are cultivated as a way to take action within the uncertainty of venture capital's speculative financial models, representing weakly held beliefs that are subject to change in the face of shifting investor interest and market conditions. Given that the companies constituting "Big Tech" were all structured by venture capital from early stages, this article starts with two seed-stage startups in the crypto and AI spaces, showing how founders frequently changed their narrative claims as they searched for a fit between their product strategy and a growth-oriented market that fits into shifting investor hype cycles. I then follow a third startup as they raised what is called a Series A round of funding, showing how investors made financial decisions based on a revenue chart that indicated product-market fit in a growth-oriented market. These examples demonstrate how industry actors at every level pivot around capital in order to survive, directed by structural conditions of speculative finance rather than ideologies about techno-utopian futures. For scholars who may hope to positively affect society with critical analysis, this article highlights the importance of engaging with the constraints felt by so-called powerful actors in untangling how power structures continue to be reproduced in the face of critical inquiry.

13 JUNE 2025 09.00 - 11.00

ID 550 - Beyond anti-intellectual bullshit: Can we do hype responsibly?

Danielle Shanley, Universiteit Maastricht

Darian Meacham, Universiteit Maastricht

Keywords: hype, bullshit, anti-intellectualism, responsible innovation, technology ethics

Hype isn't just the steam that drives technological innovation; it's also the fog that clouds our collective judgment. From blockchain evangelists to AI utopians, the machinery of tech discourse runs on a steady supply of exaggerated claims, vague promises, and selective truths. Or, as Harry Frankfurt would call it: bullshit. That is to say, talk that prioritizes persuasion over accuracy. In an era of increasing anti-intellectualism, where scepticism of expertise is worn as a badge of honour and critical voices are dismissed as obstacles to progress, technological hype is not merely tolerated, but widely embraced. In the first part of this paper, we interrogate the uneasy alliance between hype, bullshit, and anti-intellectualism, tracing how this relationship shapes the stories we tell about innovation—and what those stories leave out. We explain how when taken together, these forces create a perfect storm, where new technologies are oversold, underexamined, and misunderstood by the very publics they claim to serve. In examining the dynamics between these forces, we reveal how tech hype distorts public understanding of technological capabilities and consequences by 1) using oversimplified metaphors and analogies (e.g., "AI as your personal assistant") that obscure the reality of technical limitations, ethical risks, or systemic impacts; 2) marketing hyped technologies as solutions to complex social, economic, or political problems, while sidelining critical discussions about feasibility, ethical concerns, or unintended consequences; 3) exacerbating existing inequalities, while downplaying expert critiques that highlight these issues, and finally; 4) co-opting the language and symbols of intellectual authority (e.g., scientific terminology) in order to gain legitimacy, while simultaneously promoting a distrust of expertise through the rejection of critical analysis.

Drawing upon our experience as practitioners of technology ethics, working in and around responsible innovation, we end by reflecting upon whether such a thing as responsible hype could ever be possible. We reflect upon the challenges involved in doing responsible innovation, from trying to weave together different interdisciplinary perspectives, to championing transparency and fostering public engagement. Despite these challenges, we see imagining a framework for responsible hype as an aspirational exercise that enables us to consider how we might foster innovation, without losing sight of its limits, risks, and realities.



13 JUNE 2025 09.00 - 11.00

ID 590 - The Hype of Risk: Unpacking the Social Construction of Cybersecurity in Norway

Olga Usachova, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet

Keywords: cybersecurity, Norway, governance, risk

Cybersecurity has emerged as a dominant concern in contemporary Norwegian society, shaped by a complex interplay of the current geopolitical situation, technological developments, policy initiatives, and media narratives. The increasing securitization of digital infrastructure has been driven by a heightened focus on cyber threats from state and non-state actors, particularly in light of Norway's strategic role in NATO and its dependence on digitalized public and private services. This paper explores how cybersecurity is framed within Norwegian public discourse, focusing on the role of hype in shaping risk perceptions and governance strategies.

Based on a critical discourse analysis of governmental reports, including Risiko (NSM, 2014-2024) and national cybersecurity strategies, this study examines how cybersecurity threats are constructed through political rhetoric, expert claims, and media representations. Norway's cybersecurity discourse has been increasingly characterized by references to "hybrid threats" and "cyber warfare," often amplifying uncertainties about digital vulnerabilities. The analysis of key policy documents, expert reports, and public debates traces how uncertainty and fear have been mobilized over the last decade to justify specific interventions in cybersecurity governance.

This paper also investigates the implications of cybersecurity hype, including its effects on resource allocation and regulatory frameworks. The growing alignment of Norway's cybersecurity policies with international security concerns, particularly those of the EU and NATO, has led to increased public and private sector spending on cybersecurity measures, while simultaneously shaping narratives about national resilience and technological sovereignty (Cavelty, 2018). By situating cybersecurity within broader Science and Technology Studies (STS) discussions on sociotechnical imaginaries and the politics of expertise, this study critically analyzes perceived threats in Norway's digital landscape.

Through this analysis, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on cybersecurity governance, emphasizing the need for a more reflexive and evidence-based approach to digital security policy in Norway. References:

Cavelty, D. M. (2018). Cyber security meets security politics: Complex technology, fragmented politics, and networked science. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41(1), 5-32.

NSM (Norwegian National Security Authority). (2014-2024). Risiko Reports.

13 JUNE 2025 09.00 - 11.00

ID 610 - Hype at work: Exploring the role of technological expectations in the reshaping of work

Robbie James, University of Bristol

Keywords: Expectations, Future of Work, Sociodigital futures, Fourth Industrial Revolution

Some of the most hyped technologies are those that are claimed to boost work productivity. The widespread notion of the fourth industrial revolution, for example, tells us that the future of work is one in which technologies like AI will augment the capabilities of workers, and the most successful firms will be those that can tap the potential of this coming era. For such imagined futures to take performative effect, a range of actors will need to be mobilised towards their realisation; not just investors, technologists and policymakers but more diffuse groups like businesses and employees. A simple analytic model of the coordinating power of expectations might take these latter groups as the 'societal level', for whom the question is one of acceptance and adoption of the technologies that have already emerged as success-



ful. However, could it be argued that such an analytic division reproduces a weak form of technological determinism? What are the opportunities to investigate the reshaping of work in a way that challenges the dominant model of stepping-stone inventions which simply ripple through society? How can critical hype research expand who is described as an active agent and demystify the power relations—material and discursive—enacted in processes of sociotechnical change? In this presentation, I will explore what it means to empirically investigate the role of expectations with a 'flat' approach across multiple sites in and around work. I will expand on the analytic and methodological approaches that might be useful to critical hype scholars in tracing the performative role of expectations in the transformation of work processes.

13 JUNE 2025 09.00 - 11.00

ID 788 - Spacerelated Worlds of Labour within Socio-technical Change

Teresa Hoefgen, Fachhochschule Frankfurt am Main

Keywords: hype studies, new work, office real estate, socio-technical change, decentralization, facility management

The discourse on "New Work" has gained significant traction in academic, managerial, and public debates, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic acted as a catalyst, accelerating existing trends toward mobile and decentralized work, often framed as an inevitable and desirable evolution of labour practices in accordance with the new spirit of capitalism. The space-related transformation was accompanied by speculative expectations regarding the future of the office, with imaginaries of flexible, technology-driven, and worker-centric environments shaping investment and regulatory decisions. However, recent data from the German real estate market suggest a dramatic downturn: by early 2024, transaction volumes in the office sector had plummeted by approximately 76%, with rising vacancy rates indicating structural disruptions rather than a smooth transition to "better" work environments.

This paper critically examines the "New Work" phenomenon through the lens of hype studies, interrogating its socio-economic consequences for the office building sector. Was the widespread adoption of remote and hybrid work modes truly a revolutionary shift, or did it contribute to a speculative bubble driven by media and managerial narratives? Drawing on Ulrich Dolata's framework of socio-technical fields and insights from spatial sociology, this study explores how the neo-material and regulatory landscapes of office work have been reshaped by the interplay of digitalization, building technologies, and shifting labour imaginaries.

Empirically, the study builds on auto-ethnographic explorations of decentralized office environments, illustrated through a potential case study of a publicly accessible, privately owned office complex. Using Schütz's concept of *Lebenswelt* to understand the world of labour, I argue for shifting the research focus toward examining interaction patterns between facility management and office space users rather than remain in analyzes of operational organisation groups. In doing so, this research seeks to uncover how health, productivity, and infrastructural governance are negotiated in light of ongoing socio-technical changes. This perspective contributes to the broader discussion on the performative power of hype in shaping expectations, policies, and material investments in work environments.

The contribution will engage with key themes of Critical Hype Studies, and will discuss:

- An office on my own: The performativity of hype – How did the "New Work" narrative construct expectations and shape economic decisions in the office sector?
- The measuring of nothing: Abandoned hypes and disillusionment – Is the downturn in office real estate a symptom of a burst bubble, and what remains of the hype once initial enthusiasm fades?
- My habits and my routines: Socio-technical transformations beyond the hype – How do shifts in infrastructure, technology, and workplace governance persist beyond speculative expectations?
- Revisioning regulation patterns: The intersection of hype, labour, and space – In what ways does the regulation of health and productivity adapt (or fail to adapt) to decentralized office environments?



- Finding a way out: Responsible hype and its co-optation – Can narratives around “good” workspaces be mobilized for equitable and sustainable transformations, or do they primarily serve market-driven logics?

By situating “New Work” within a critical hype framework, this study not only historicizes and contextualizes the phenomenon but also offers insights into its neo-material and regulatory consequences in the built environment.

13 JUNE 2025 09.00 - 11.00

ID 836 - Not just a ride on the hype train: how machine learning researchers and practitioners navigate AI hype

Oksana Dorofeeva, Aarhus Universitet

Keywords: hype studies, AI/ML, symbolic boundaries, interpretive approaches

The emerging field of hype studies signified hype set out to comprehend hype as a complex phenomenon that unfolds through a multitude of practices and interactions. This presentation contributes to this line of research by considering the interpretive dimension of hype and the implications of actors' conceiving of phenomena around them as hyped.

Developments in machine learning since the 2010s have fuelled the latest 'AI summer', with artificial intelligence being as hyped as ever. Based on interviews with 43 academic and industry professionals who train ML models, I explore how technology hype is navigated by those working with the technology in question. My interlocutors are aware of the current valorisation of AI and AI/ML research; many of them also use words like 'hype' and 'buzzword' to describe the field. For them, hype can have positive or negative effects, but the hype itself is not necessarily problematic. However, boundaries can be drawn against those who 'overhype' AI and ML/AI research, both inside and outside the field. This pattern of boundary drawing suggests that it is anchored in a latent 'true' value that ML specialists ascribe to AI/ML and to which they implicitly compare (over)hyped representations of AI/ML.

Moreover, I focus on the ML researchers' and practitioners' relationship with the buzz(word) 'AI' to investigate the role buzzwords play in the self-identity and self-presentation of professionals in proximity to a hyped technology. The narratives of my interviewees present a coexistence of utilising the term and problematising it, a dynamic that is intertwined with their recognition of AI as a buzzword and the hype around the technology it signifies. The use of the term 'AI' is linked to the pragmatic use of its affordances, and I explore what ML specialists think AI can 'do' for them in different contexts. At the same time, ML specialists do not fully de-problematise 'AI' – either as the new definition of their work or as a useful but empty signifier – as reflected in the boundary work they do that invokes the notion.

My analysis of the ML specialists' hype narratives reveals the complexity of actors' relationships with AI hype, which goes beyond the binaries of hyping and buying into the hype, hyping up or hyping down. Moreover, this presentation highlights the interplay between the ways in which ML researchers and practitioners make sense of AI hype dynamics and the other meanings ascribed to their work. On a theoretical level, this analysis contributes to the formation of a synergistic conceptual framework in hype studies by considering the role buzzwords can play within hype.



13 JUNE 2025 09.00 - 11.00

ID 850 - Looking into AI Hypes: AI Professionals' Reflections on Hype & Problematizing the Hype Abundance

Jason Kalathas, University College Dublin

Keywords: AI Hype, AI/ML Professionals, Hypecycles, Politics of Technology

From the early-day Internet, social media networking sites & digital platforms, up to cryptocurrencies and lately Artificial Intelligence (AI), hype cycles abound today and constitute central cultural, social, and economic devices that steer towards potential directions of emerging technologies. Interestingly, hype cycles seem to occur by a plethora of social actors that act with different and degrees of power: leading figures of tech companies announcing the newest products in corporate events, media and journalistic coverages exalting the ingenuity and effectiveness of different chatbots, or social media influencers reviewing novel products and devices.

In all their non-symmetrical and differing iterations, hype discourse aims to meet a dual purpose: first, the creation of an enchanting portrayal, the initial description of what the most recent tech novelty is or will be like; in a sense, it seems to operate as expert voices talking from the front and future of cutting-edge technologies, sharing insider insights with the publics. Second, hype discourse actively seeks to catch the public's eye, kickstart discussions and increase engagement with the hyped object. Although acting within different socio-technical, economical, cultural contexts, hype cycles seem to perform by extolling tech innovation as a promise realising the optimisation and amelioration of the quality of life, an enticing opportunity for economic investment and wealth growth, or more connection that equals more pleasure on a psychological level.

An interesting and possibly overwhelming amount of hyped discourse is ample today, with different hype actors attempting to out-perform their competitors and out-give hype content in an arms race to capture the public attention.

This proposal seeks to contribute to this panel in two ways: First, it seeks to offer empirical findings related to critical hype studies by focusing on the contemporary hypes around AI chatbots and competing language models. Drawing from research interviews with AI/ML professionals in the tech industry and academia from AI-hubs in different European cities, this contribution aims to shed light on if and in what ways hype cycles around the evolution of AI permeate the expert professionals that contribute to their development. In this regard, it aims to connect how workers consume and perceive hype content, if and how they critically assess it, and how they reflect on it.

Second, this proposal speculates that there is an abundance of hype around AI products and aims to interrogate this over-accumulation of hype phenomena and critically problematize their occurrence. Why so much hype? What are the cultural, social, psychological, and economic objectives of hype discourses? And what does this over-performance and over-supply of hype phenomena signify? Is this a hype arms race, with competitors jolting to capture more space in a rivalrous attention economy? Or is this a hype excess, operating as a symbolic reaffirmation of power, as if participating in a modern Potlach ceremony?

Reflecting on these, this contribution espouses a unifying and critical approach, seeking to highlight the interplay of hype cycles with the politics of technology, the political economy of technology and corporate business models, as well as with the construction of user needs.

