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Technological Hype and AI in Journalism: Five Functions and Why They Matter

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ABSTRACT

Technological hype—such as that surrounding AI at the moment—can seem like just a fad, yet it powerfully organizes attention, resources, and meaning in and around journalism. We argue for taking hype more seriously as an object of inquiry because it represents something more than mere ephemeral excitement or superficial puffery: It offers a lens through which to explore the social, cultural, and institutional dynamics at work during crucial moments of technological change and anxiety. We introduce a two-by-two matrix that explores the *nature* of hype's effects (symbolic vs. material) with their *site* (internal to journalism vs. external to wider publics). This framework yields five functions of technological hype for journalism: *attentional* (how strategic capital is gained by adopting or resisting hype), *orientational* (how organizations set priorities and allocate scarce resources), *signaling* (how news media frame technologies and present themselves as innovative), *mobilizing* (how hype galvanizes partnerships, policies, and collective action beyond the newsroom), and *reflexive* (how journalists reconsider roles, values, and identities in relation to hype). Taken together, these functions clarify how hype channels power, legitimizes investments, shapes public narratives, and provokes professional self-reflection amid the present fascination with AI as “the next big thing.”

KEYWORDS

Artificial intelligence; AI; emerging technologies; hype; journalism studies; generative AI; institutional change; sociology of expectations

Introduction

Hype can seem like such an unserious thing. As a concept, hype conjures images of bubbles—here today, popped tomorrow. It denotes frenzy and fanfare, but simultaneously a kind of emptiness: puffery and promotion that serve as a placeholder for the “next big thing.”

Seen that way, hype can be easily dismissed. This is true not least because there is a reasonable expectation that, soon enough, the idea, technology, or phenomenon being hyped in public discourse is likely to be sidelined or forgotten by whatever captures the collective imagination and attention next. And so the hype cycle repeats.

It is rational, therefore, for scholars of media and technology—people trained to take a longer-term view of the history and consequences of emerging media—to be reflexively skeptical of hype, particularly when it emanates from Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and venture capitalists who seem to shape-shift around the latest “shiny new thing” (Posetti 2018).

We argue in this commentary, however, that for all its seeming unseriousness, hype should be taken more seriously in journalism studies. This is not to say that researchers should be less skeptical of what is being hyped at this or any other time—they shouldn’t, of course. Rather, we argue, the *character* of hype—the flurry of attention, promotion, and speculation, the fevered discussion about adoption of a particular technology or technique within newsrooms, the tug pulling the industry toward The New Thing—constitutes a more substantive object of inquiry than researchers may acknowledge.

Hype is worth studying because of what it represents: a window into consequential discussions around what counts (and why) in work, life, and media. These discussions ultimately contribute to shaping both the symbolic boundaries of a given domain as well as the material allocation of scarce resources within and across social worlds, organizations, and industries. Hype can act as a powerful catalyst for frame-setting emerging technologies and techniques (see Lewis, Markowitz, et al. 2025; Perreault, Lewis, and Ely 2025) and tilting strategic planning and decision-making (Heupel et al. 2024). Ultimately, studying hype is useful because it represents a socially significant manifestation of what key actors are imagining and prioritizing during key periods of uncertainty or transition (Borup et al. 2006). In this way, studying hype affords an opportunity to examine how and why zones of scholarly interest, such as journalism, respond to social and technological developments.

We explore conceptualizations of hype in this essay and present a two-by-two matrix that we hope will facilitate more theoretical examinations of the *nature* (symbolic vs. material) and *site* (internal vs. external) of individual, organizational, and institutional responses to hype. This matrix can be used to guide analyses of five functions of hype in journalism: *attentional*, *orientational*, *signaling*, *mobilizing*, and *reflexive*. These functions are particularly, though not exclusively, applicable to hype around the development and deployment of technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) in news and journalism. So, while we focus on the widespread fascination with AI that is evident around every corner, the conceptual framework we present is not limited to this moment: It applies to past, present, and future dynamics.

Hype and Technological Advancements

Technological hype is generally understood as a wave of rising expectations about emerging technologies, which is frequently followed by disappointment when those expectations are not met (van Lente, Spitters, and Peine 2013). Gartner Inc.’s Hype Cycle model, introduced in 1995, operationalizes hype as a five-stage process: (1) an initial innovation trigger generates outsized attention to proofs of concept featuring the technology; (2) early successes seed unwarranted optimism and investment, creating a peak of inflated expectations; (3) subsequent general or high-profile implementations of that technology subsequently fail or prove to be less impressive, and

the resulting waning interest spawns a trough of disillusionment; (4) gradual improvements by persistent adopters paired with a better general understanding of how to effectively institutionalize the innovation lead to a slope of enlightenment; and (5) ultimately, a plateau of productivity, where expectations align more closely with the technology's actual capabilities, allowing for widespread adoption (Dedehayir and Steinert 2016; van Lente, Spitters, and Peine 2013). However, not every technology goes through this process in the same way or at the same pace, and some hyped technologies never reach the latter stages at all.

Human expectations and the nature of the technology both shape and are shaped by hype (Fenn and Raskino 2008). Expectations, or the “real-time representations of future technological situations and capabilities” (Borup et al. 2006, 296), guide thinking and action by setting agendas for decision-makers and stakeholders involved with emerging technologies. Expectations also provide legitimacy to technologies and attract the necessary resources to materialize them through experimentation and product development (van Lente, Spitters, and Peine 2013). Emerging technologies, such as AI, tend to attract optimism because of psychological mechanisms including novelty bias, social contagion (bandwagon effects), and human tendencies to use heuristics (mental shortcuts) in the face of uncertainty (Fenn and Raskino 2008). When expectations are built up not only by the technological project itself but also by external entities, such as industry and societal observers, the risks of disappointment increase (van Lente, Spitters, and Peine 2013). Consequently, the technology's ability to meet expectations about its performance, usability within real working environments, assimilation into mainstream practice, and the potential benefits it brings to its users all contribute to cycles of optimism toward the innovation (Fenn and Raskino 2008).

Social dynamics and structures further complicate this process, with media and social networks serving as enabling mechanisms for generating hype (Dedehayir and Steinert 2016). As an innovation becomes more visible through news media, particularly once it enters mainstream (as opposed to specialist) coverage, expectations about the technology become amplified. At the same time, as more users become interested and eventually adopt the innovation, they can reach a critical mass where expectations are validated, creative uses emerge, and disappointments and failures are exposed—all of which users then communicate through their networks. These complex social dynamics both indicate and drive hype (Dedehayir and Steinert 2016).

But a more nuanced understanding of hype frames it as “collectively pursued explorations of the future that affect activities in the present” (van Lente, Spitters, and Peine 2013, 1616). In this view, hype is not only related to positive expectations (and subsequent disappointments) built around technologies but also to how these expectations shape the materialization of those technologies and its implementations. In other words, hype is inherently generative: These expectations, blown up into larger proportions, guide present action and reshape current conditions, which sets the stage for future expectations, and so on. Similarly, within the context of AI, hype has been described as “the gap between an AI's possibilities and realities,” where perceptions of AI's potential can be “quite detached from technology and still influence how it is developed, deployed, and regulated” (Spyridou and Ioannou 2025, 3).

Journalism offers a particularly interesting site for examining that nuance precisely because it represents an intersection of environmental variables (e.g., economic challenges and labor disruption), evolving institutional identity (e.g., perceived relevance in society and questions about creativity amid the rise of generative AI), and positionality within information networks (e.g., shaping hype as purveyors of mainstream news). Such examination requires moving beyond “internalist tendencies” in some research on journalism and technology (Anderson 2013, 1006) to develop a broader understanding of technological hype as a social and cultural force that both actively shapes and is shaped by the news industry and the institution of journalism.

The Functions of Technological Hype for Journalism

One way to make sense of the complex roles that hype surrounding AI plays is to examine two key intersecting dimensions: (1) the *nature* of the effects wrought by hype, whether symbolic or material, and (2) the *site* of those effects, whether internal to the professional field of journalism or externally directed toward the wider public arena.

In terms of its *nature*, hype functions on a symbolic level, promoting visions of technology and conveying social cues about what is desirable and what is unacceptable. Such symbolism can become instrumentalized to enhance the reputation of individuals and organizations, depending on how they position themselves (Min and Fink 2021). At the same time, hype generates material outcomes—tangible effects such as resource allocations, partnership formation, and product creation (De Togni et al. 2023).

Hype also operates differently across distinct domains—which we label as *site* in our framework. Internally, hype creates pressures and motivations for individual and organizational actors to adopt or reject certain technologies like AI within their work, which in turn guides how they adapt things like domestic processes and teams. Externally, hype influences broader public discourse, audience expectations, and the perceptions and selections of alignments with outside forces.

By analyzing the nature and site of hype-related expectations and effects, we can begin to identify the multiple functions of hype in journalism. The following framework maps these functions according to the interplay of these two key dimensions (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

Internal-Symbolic: Attentional Function

Hype directs attention by creating the impression that its subject merits serious consideration. Journalists, as chroniclers of what is new and meaningful, must engage with hype through their work and, in doing so, invariably internalize at least some of it—regardless of whether they buy into the hype or are critical of it. The attentional function thus captures how individual, organizational, and institutional actors translate that into formal and informal social expectations, as well as who they choose to turn to for disentangling the hype and ascertaining the appropriate responses to it.

As Schaetz and Schjøtt (2025) observe, hype can be strategically oriented toward symbolic capital within a group or organization. By evangelizing would-be disruptive

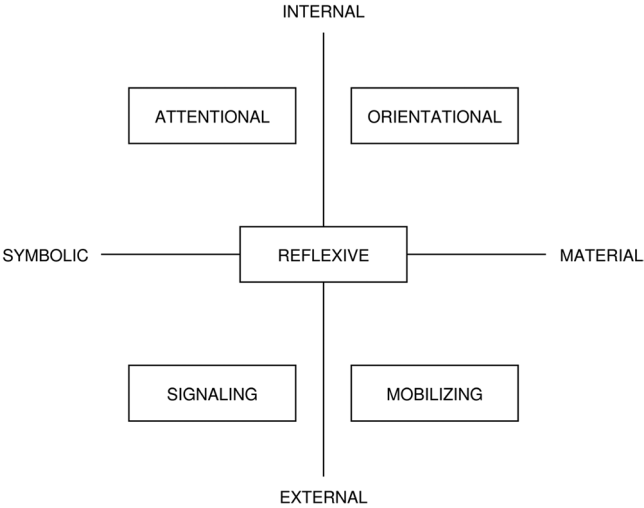


Figure 1. The five functions of technological hype. The 2x2 matrix is organized by the *nature* (X-axis) of the expectations and effects of hype and the *site* (Y-axis) where such outcomes become manifest, whether internal to the journalistic field (i.e., its individuals, organizations, and institutionalized forms) or externally toward the broader public arena.

Table 1. The five functions of technological hype for journalism.

Name	Function	Examples
Attentional	Allows strategic actors to gain symbolic capital by taking advantage of hype or rejecting it, while pushing others to simply identify reference networks to help make sense of the hype and ascertain appropriate internal responses to it.	Morosoli et al. (2025); Thäsler-Kordonouri and Koliska (2025)
Orientational	Guides internal decision-making about what objectives and investments appear to be worth pursuing internally—especially when dealing with scarce resources and/or environmental uncertainty—and how to go about such pursuits.	de-Lima-Santos, Yeung, and Dodds (2025); Kuai (2025); Schaetz and Schjøtt (2025)
Signaling	Indicates what is most noteworthy about the technology, which journalists can challenge or reify through their news coverage, while simultaneously providing newsroom managers with an anchor to cultivate images of organizational innovation that they can present to audiences, investors, and other external stakeholders.	Lammar, Horst, and Müller (2025); Shorey and Rodriguez (2025); Simon (2024a)
Mobilizing	Influences how news media engage with key AI stakeholders beyond journalism or necessitates proactive collective responses in order to protect existing resources or the institution itself against external threats.	Ananny and Karr (2025); Beckett and Yaseen (2023); Simon (2024b)
Reflexive	Pushes journalists to revisit their professional roles, identities, norms, and practices—often through metajournalistic discourse—amid the emergence of generative AI and related synthetic agents that can engage in some, or some form of, functions previously reserved for human journalists.	Lewis, Guzman, et al. (2025); Møller, van Dalen, and Skovsgaard (2025); Perreault, Lewis, and Ely (2025); Wu (2024)

technologies and getting others to view them as experts on it, actors can gain new agency and status as visionaries and boundary spanners (Thäsler-Kordonouri and Koliska 2025). Conversely, actors may strategically reject hype as a form of boundary

work to preserve (if not attempt to increase) their authority within that domain (Morosoli et al. 2025). In both cases, the attention attracted through hype can be instrumentalized to gain power in the struggle to set formal and informal social expectations by engaging in what Steinhardt and Jackson (2015) call anticipation work. Or, hype can be used more simply to justify rationales for why certain practices, processes, or ways of thinking ought to be pursued internally (or not).

Hype isn't just an instrument for drawing attention, though. It can, itself, function to direct attention toward particular reference networks, or the actors whose actions and opinions an individual cares most about (Bicchieri, Lindemans, and Jiang 2014). As foregrounded by frameworks like social influence theory, those actors—through the appeal they hold, which hype helps shape—play important roles in establishing or changing expectations and norms. Much of AI hype centers on technology companies like OpenAI, and that outsized attention thus gives such firms even more power to shape expectations and norms in journalism, a field outside their own. This, in turn, feeds concerns about the growing technologization of journalism, and what that means for the institution.

Internal-Material: Orientational Function

Hype also serves to direct that attention toward specific ends that have material consequences. As actors internalize hype, they develop ideas for how to translate those understandings into objectives and, subsequently, strategies. The orientational function thus captures how actors translate symbolic elements associated with hype (e.g., the aforementioned social expectations and reference networks) into material decisions about what is worth pursuing internally and how to go about it.

An evident manifestation of this is a dilemma that many news organizations currently face: ascertaining which technologies are worth investing scarce resources in, and how they should reconfigure organizationally (if at all) in response to the technology's implementation. Hype, of course, plays a role in those decisions. If an organization believes that generative AI is on the cusp of semi-autonomously producing articles, it may look to hire more technologists at the expense of reporters—or perhaps integrate them more tightly. Schaetz and Schjøtt (2025) illustrate this prospect clearly in showing that when individuals framed desired initiatives as “AI projects” and situated them within an existing AI initiative at The Associated Press, it became easier to legitimize those projects and redistribute resources accordingly. In other words, leveraging hype-influenced beliefs allowed actors to orient material resources toward their goals.

Hype also serves to orient organizational responses. For example, hype around AI shapes public perceptions about how associated technologies are being used in domains like journalism. Similarly, such hype may also raise concerns within an organization about how that organization is entangled with hype-related actors. Kuai (2025) illustrates this through the concerns expressed by Chinese journalists around their editorial independence in the face of potential entanglements, which led to their seeking approval to report critically on potential AI partners. In both cases, hype can orient the production of material objects like AI codes of ethics, which numerous

news organizations now have (de-Lima-Santos, Yeung, and Dodds 2025), by highlighting the most salient concerns and considerations, to which those actors must develop an institutional response.

External-Symbolic: Signaling Function

The signaling function of hype underscores its symbolic features as manifested externally, facing outward toward the public and other stakeholders beyond the news organization or institution of journalism. While journalists in many parts of the world have a diminished role in setting the agenda for public discussion, it is nevertheless true that they can act as elite tastemakers in shaping public narratives about disruptive technologies and the relative sense of hope or fear that people should feel about them (see Lewis, Markowitz, et al. 2025; Perreault, Lewis, and Ely 2025). This signaling function can work in at least two major ways: (1) in how news media frame AI in their reporting; and (2) in how journalists seek to present to their audiences and other stakeholders a “modern,” progressive image of continuous innovation, often by showing off their adoption of AI. In these ways, journalists contribute to broader social signals about the urgency, importance, and disruptive impact of hyped technologies such as AI.

Several articles in this issue underscore the role of journalists in public-facing symbolic constructions of hype. Chen, Chen, and Lu (2025) highlight how Chinese news coverage amplifies global enthusiasm about ChatGPT, often through sensationalist strategies, despite limited domestic access to it. Journalists, especially those at market-driven media, are central in driving this hype through reliance on repetitive sourcing patterns that primarily involve technology companies and executives. Lammar, Horst, and Müller (2025) identify two dominant narrative constructions about AI by journalists in Germany but observe that even the detailed accounts of localized use ultimately reinforce the broader cultural narratives of inevitability and transformation, revealing how journalists maintain AI’s status as an indispensable technology without critically interrogating its fundamental assumptions or potential societal consequences. Magalhães and Smit (2025) find that, despite some nuances, leading newspapers in the U.S., Brazil, and the Netherlands do not fundamentally question the overarching assumption that AI will invariably change society, and Shorey and Rodriguez (2025) note similar frames that effectively reinforce industry-driven hype by presenting AI as unquestionably positive and essential for addressing labor shortages and operational efficiency. In other words, journalists sustain hype themselves through the signals they send in their work—not because they report favorably on the technology but because they repeatedly fail to cover it critically and expand their sourcing networks.

Key actors in journalism—both individuals and their organizations—also seek to signal their strategic edge by flaunting their AI prowess. Institutional isomorphism encourages and amplifies this signaling effect, as news organizations frequently look to peers as critical members of their reference networks for cues on adopting new technologies, particularly amid uncertainty and intense pressure to innovate (Simon 2024a, 2024b). The perceived necessity to be seen as forward-looking is evident even among newsrooms in the Global South, which, despite encountering significant

adoption challenges, also express enthusiasm and urgency in building AI capacities to sustain relevance in an AI-driven media landscape (Beckett and Yaseen 2023). Ultimately, the signaling function of hype encourages news media to publicly demonstrate how adopting AI is crucial for maintaining institutional legitimacy, relevance, and competitiveness (Schaetz and Schjøtt 2025).

External-Material: Mobilizing Function

The mobilizing function highlights how heightened expectations surrounding emerging technologies lead not only to ample talk about AI but also to the marshaling of material resources through actions and strategies that face beyond the inner workings of the organization or institution. Seen this way, hype influences how news media engage with key AI stakeholders beyond journalism—from LLM providers and platform companies to policymakers, labor unions, and more. In the most prominent manifestation of this phenomenon, major news organizations, perhaps driven by a sense of urgency and FOMO, increasingly look to form direct partnerships and licensing agreements with AI providers. High-profile examples include collaborations among *The Wall Street Journal*, Axios, and OpenAI that aim to accelerate innovation, product development, and competitive advantage (Patel 2025).

While hype motivates these externally facing collaborations, it can also mobilize a counter-reaction by actors who wish to resist such partnerships or reclaim journalistic autonomy against the intrusion of the AI industry. As Ananny and Karr (2025) observe, labor unions play a critical role in stabilizing AI hype in media organizations by setting boundaries around AI use through collective bargaining agreements. These unions demand transparency, push publishers to develop AI guidelines, and negotiate specific contractual protections against automation and unauthorized use of journalists' content and identities. The mobilizing force of AI hype has likewise encouraged journalists to speak up and push back. For example, when the BBC uncovered inaccuracies generated by prominent AI chatbots summarizing its content, senior leadership publicly pressured tech companies to reconsider their use of generative AI to protect journalistic integrity (Rahman-Jones 2025).

Additionally, the pervasive nature of AI hype has led news organizations to look outward for new expertise. They increasingly prioritize specialized training in prompt engineering, data science, and AI-specific literacy, hiring technical experts capable of bridging the gap between traditional journalism and emerging technologies (Beckett and Yaseen 2023). Journalism schools have also felt this mobilizing impact, feeling pressured to adapt curricula to emphasize skills required for proficient handling of AI technologies (Gotfredsen 2023). The mobilizing function thus spurs organizations and institutions to revisit who they work with and how, doing so sometimes through collective action to address concerns that hype suggests to be imminent, field-wide, or even interdisciplinary.

Cross-Cutting: Reflexive Function

Finally, the reflexive function refers to how hype ultimately acts as a catalyst for journalists to critically reflect upon their professional roles, identities, and practices.

The introduction and integration of emerging technologies sometimes prompts reflection and reevaluation about what it means to do journalism and be a journalist, especially when such technologies substantially alter workflows and power arrangements—or, in the case of generative AI, involve machines assuming creative roles once distinctly associated with humans (cf. Lewis, Guzman, et al. 2025; Wu 2024). Hype forces reflexivity by making more extreme possibilities salient, and therefore necessitating reflection from the individual to the metajournalistic discourse levels. Such reflexivity therefore cuts across each of the four quadrants illustrated in Figure 1, drawing on and connecting with each of the functions described above.

The reflexive function of hype resonates with what Carlson and Lewis (2019) described as *temporal reflexivity*, or “critical judgment about whether some phenomenon is indeed a break from what came before, a continuation of what has existed, or some middle-ground mutation” (p. 644). Just as the advent of the internet and social media previously forced journalists to reflect on what they do, AI is prompting renewed introspection into which journalistic skills remain uniquely human and which can be effectively replicated by machines. As the role of AI expands, concerns about automation-driven job loss have become prominent among journalists (Møller, van Dalen, and Skovsgaard 2025).

Notably, these anxieties are more than economic concerns. They trigger critical self-examination around professional values such as pride, purpose, and autonomy, and they raise questions about what it means to engage in certain activities—such as writing—that have long been seen as crucial to journalists’ identity as creative professionals (Lewis, Guzman, et al. 2025; Wu 2024). Journalists face disillusionment and frustration as generative AI seems to exhibit complex skills that previously required years of human mastery (Møller, van Dalen, and Skovsgaard 2025). At the same time, the rise of generative AI has also led some journalists to reframe this threat as an “epistemic opportunity” (Perreault, Lewis, and Ely 2025, 1), a chance to prove that human-centric journalism is uniquely better—more creative, empathetic, authoritative—than what could be accomplished by machines or other peripheral actors to the field (cf. Møller, van Dalen, and Skovsgaard 2025). And, as journalists use AI and become more aware of its practical limitations in actual newsroom operations, they begin to draw parallels with previous technological developments—such as social media and smartphones—that prompted similar levels of anxiety about the disappearance of journalism but ultimately proved to be less disruptive than feared (Vicsek, Pinter, and Bauer 2025).

Conclusion

We have argued for taking hype more seriously in journalism studies. This is not because hype around emerging technologies like AI should be incorporated uncritically, either by journalists or academic observers—hardly so. Rather, hype matters because it represents something more than mere ephemeral excitement or superficial puffery: It offers a lens through which to explore the social, cultural, and institutional dynamics at work during crucial moments of technological change and anxiety.

Our contribution has been to outline a first-of-its-kind matrix for making sense of technological hype, particularly for journalism but also to related institutional domains. The five functions of hype that we have outlined—attentional, orientational, signaling, mobilizing, and reflexive—point to the various ways in which hype makes a difference in our understanding of journalism: from its norms, values, and professional self-presentation to its priorities as manifested through investments to its role as a tastemaker in society. While the scholarship we see in this special issue shows these functions at play, there is still much more to be explored. We thus hope our model offers a theoretical foundation for the continued examination of change and uncertainty—a seeming constant in the history of digital journalism—and the roles that hype plays in it.

Generative AI Use Disclosure

ChatGPT-4.5 was used to aid in copy editing of the manuscript.

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