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LIGHTS - Leadership

AI imaginaries: a critical lens for managerial action

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is often presented in binary terms: either as a threat to humanity or as a miracle solution to all our problems. This opposition—between fear of a dystopian future and hope for an ideal one—is amplified by the media, yet it oversimplifies a much more complex reality. To make informed decisions in response to the transformations driven by AI, it is essential to understand that this technology is not fixed: it is a “technology-in-the-making,” shaped by the discourses we produce about it. Analysing these discourses is therefore crucial, as they actively contribute to constructing what we refer to as “AI.” In this context, we propose a critical reading of public discourse on AI through the lens of social imaginaries. This concept sheds light not only on the moral dimension of such discourse, but also on the worldview, or cosmology, it conveys, while emphasizing the central role of imagination in shaping our collective understanding.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, social imaginaries, utopia, dystopia

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AI imaginaries: a critical lens for managerial action

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is much more than just a technology. As researchers Susan Scott and Wanda Orlikowski explain, it is a “technology-in-the-making” (Scott & Orlikowski, 2023). In other words, AI is a constantly evolving phenomenon, shaped both by how we use these technologies and by our attempts to make sense of them.

In this paper, we build on the idea of AI as a “technology-in-the-making” while emphasizing that it is embedded in a network of cultural, economic, and political meanings. In other words, the narratives and discourses we produce about AI construct the phenomenon itself (Zdenek, 2003) and influence how organizations engage with it. Some managers perceive AI systems as a threat to their sector, while others see them as a growth opportunity. This framing—as either an opportunity or a threat—then shapes the actions considered, particularly the willingness to take risks.

To offer a critical reading of how we make sense of and give meaning to “AI,” we use the concept of social imaginaries: the collective visions that shape our perception of technology, progress, and the future (Adams et al., 2015). This concept allows us to question the meanings we give to AI and to understand what we project onto this phenomenon. Its value, in the context of AI, lies in its capacity to capture the moral dimension of discourse—particularly prominent in the case of AI—and to highlight the worldview, or cosmology, it reflects. This notion also accounts for the role of imagination in the discursive construction of the AI phenomenon.

In what follows, we first introduce the concept of social imaginary, and then, explore the main imaginaries that fuel the discourse around AI.

The notion of social imaginary

The concept of social imaginary originates from social theory and philosophy. Although we can distinguish at least three major traditions—those of Cornelius Castoriadis, Charles Taylor, and Paul Ricoeur (Adams et al., 2015)—the term generally refers to the collective visions, meanings, and expectations that societies hold about their social order and possible futures. Theories of social imaginaries thus aim to explain how individuals within a society collectively conceive of their world, their role within it, and the possibilities for social change.¹

As shown in Table 1, the concept of social imaginary is particularly useful for analysing AI, as it encompasses three key dimensions:

- Moral dimension: Social imaginaries express judgments about what is “good,” “bad,” “desirable,” “inevitable,” etc.
- Imaginative dimension: They emphasize the collective and social nature of imagination and its role in shaping our worldviews.
- Cosmological dimension: They convey a vision of the world and the place of humans within it.

¹Although Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist approach and theories of social imaginaries share certain commonalities—particularly their focus on collective symbolic structures and their anchoring in long-term temporalities—they differ in fundamental ways. In this work, we draw on the tradition of social imaginaries, which provides a rich and relevant conceptual framework for our analysis.

Table 1: Characteristics of a social imaginary and application to AI

	Social imaginary	Application to IA
Moral value	Express judgement about what is “good” or “bad”, “desirable”, “inevitable”	Structuring opposition between a utopian discourse (AI will save us) and a dystopian discourse (AI threatens us) in the media
Imagination	Highlight the collective and social nature of imagination	Visible in the numerous references to science fiction and quasi-religious narratives about the construction of future worlds populated by AI
Cosmology	Conveys a worldview and humans’ place within it.	Presence of quasi-religious or transcendental visions in AI discourses (e.g., AI as a deity, human transcendence, quest for immortality)

Understanding AI through the lens of social imaginaries: the moral dimension of AI discourse

The notion of social imaginary places the moral dimension of discourse at the heart of the analysis of AI. A key feature of social imaginaries is their normative character: they express and shape a society’s moral order by defining what is considered “good,” “desirable,” “feared,” or “inevitable.” This perspective encourages us to interrogate the value systems underlying our representations of AI.

Recognizing the moral dimension of AI is crucial, as public discourse, through news articles, TV shows, or podcasts, often pits two dominant narratives against each other: a dystopian narrative predicting a dark and threatening future, and a utopian one offering an idealized and hopeful vision. The TechTonic podcast by the Financial Times, focused on emerging technologies, illustrates this opposition well. It ran a series of episodes on AI’s promises and dangers titled *The Doomers* and *The Utopians*. In one episode, renowned AI expert Yoshua Bengio stated:

“If this [AI systems becoming as capable or more capable than us] comes within the next decade—or worse, within the next few years—I don’t think, and many other don’t think, that society is organized, is ready to deal with the power that this will unleash and the disruptions it could create, the misuse that could happen. Or worse, what, you know, I’ve started to think more about this year—the possibility of losing control of these systems. There is already a lot of evidence that they don’t behave the way we want them to.”
(*TechTonic – The Doomers*, 14 Nov 2023).

In its extreme form, the dystopian narrative depicts a world in which autonomous AI systems could destroy civilization. It often draws on the concept of “existential risk”, popularized by the Future of Life Institute in a 2015 open letter signed by more than 10,000 people, including leading scientists like Stephen Hawking, who repeatedly warned that AI

might "end humanity" (*BBC News*, Dec 2, 2014²; Jan 12, 2015³). More recent letters (e.g., 2023) signed by Bengio and Geoffrey Hinton echo these concerns:

"AI is progressing rapidly... Increases in capabilities and autonomy may soon massively amplify AI's impact, with risks that include large-scale social harms, malicious uses, and an irreversible loss of human control over autonomous AI systems."⁴

In contrast, some tech entrepreneurs and other influential economic actors describe AI as a transformative force for good. One DeepMind co-founder, for example, stated that AI is not a threat but will help solve problems like water scarcity, financial inequality, and market instability⁵. Similarly, Sam Altman (CEO of OpenAI) wrote on his website that we are in "the intelligence age" and that "superintelligence" will bring about "astounding triumphs" such as the climate and space colony⁶. In the *Wall Street Journal* (Oct 2023), Vinod Khosla claimed that AI will "cause great abundance – more than enough to share."⁷

This utopian discourse frames AI as a positive evolutionary step, enhancing human intelligence, creativity, and productivity. For Yann LeCun (Meta's Chief AI Scientist):

"It [AI] will amplify human collective intelligence, if you want. It's like having a staff of really intelligent people working for you. We shouldn't feel threatened by this. This is going to amplify human intelligence, similar to the effect of the invention of the printing press on humanity back in the 15th century. I'm thinking of this in terms of a new renaissance for humanity, like, the next step for humanity, really."⁸(*TechTonic – The Doomers*, 14 Nov 2023)

While these two discourses are morally opposed, a deeper analysis, using the concept of social imaginary, reveals important convergences, particularly in terms of imagination and underlying cosmology.

Beyond the utopia vs. dystopia divide: the imaginary and cosmology in AI discourses

Despite their clear differences, utopian and dystopian discourses on AI share a key feature: they are both future-oriented and imagination-driven. In this sense, they are expressions of social imaginaries. The concept emphasizes that imagination lies at the heart of social processes (Adams et al., 2015), linking meaning-making to shared narratives. This imaginative dimension is especially apparent in AI discourse—on both sides. Media speakers often refer to science fiction, whether optimistic or pessimistic. The film *Her* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are commonly cited. Some scholars argue that science fiction has become a reference point in ethical debates around AI, to the extent that "fictional AI" is now part of the broader corpus of AI narratives shaping our fears and hopes (Hermann, 2023).

2 <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30290540>

3 <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30777834>

4 <https://managing-ai-risks.com/>

5 DeepMind: "Artificial intelligence is a tool that humans can control and direct". *The Guardian*, 9 June 2015

6 The intelligence Age (23 September 2024). <https://ia.samaltman.com/>

7 <https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/ai-utopia-or-dystopia-venture-capitalist-vinod-khosla-bd6c037c>

8 <https://www.ft.com/content/27764392-f2c4-492e-9ee3-4ca71354a071>

Beyond imagination, these discourses express a cosmology—a worldview and a vision of humanity's place in it. A social imaginary reflects how people “encounter” and “make sense” of the world, offering meaning to the universe in terms of its structure, origin, and evolution (Augustine et al., 2019). Studying AI through this lens helps us uncover the collective worldviews embedded in public discourse. This cosmological dimension is particularly explicit in dystopian narratives, which frequently use terms like “doomsday” or “apocalypse.” AI is sometimes portrayed as a demonic entity heralding a post-human age where we become obsolete or enslaved in a future that “doesn't need us” (as reported in *Wired* magazine⁹). Such rhetoric echoes religious imagery, especially from Christian and Jewish traditions (Geraci, 2008).

Less visibly but just as significantly, utopian narratives also carry quasi-religious cosmologies, notably in the transhumanist movement, which seeks to improve the human condition through technology. Like eschatological beliefs, it promises a new and better world, where humans and intelligent machines coexist peacefully (Ganascia, 2017). Keywords like “coexistence” and “partnership” abound. AI becomes a vehicle to reach a kind of Golden Age or new Eden. Though optimistic visions of progress are common—especially in the West—AI utopianism often couples progress with salvation: humanity will be saved by technology.

The theme of transcendence, escaping our biological limitations, is central. Transhumanists believe technology will allow humans to overcome cognitive and physical limits—and even achieve immortality. One example is the *Alcor Life Extension Foundation*, a nonprofit affiliated with the transhumanist movement. It uses cryonics to “save lives by using temperatures so cold that a person (...) can be preserved for decades or centuries until a future medical technology can restore that person to full health.”¹⁰ Though the dream of uploading consciousness is recent, it echoes an ancient religious idea—that a soul or self can survive physical death. Some scholars see this as a revival of long-standing religious (e.g., Christian) aspirations (Ganascia, 2017; Geraci, 2008).

Some even argue that transhumanism and the Singularity movement could replace traditional religions. Greg Epstein, author of *Tech Agnostic*, claims that Silicon Valley's obsession with AI “looks a lot like religion.”¹¹ *Wired* interviewed Anthony Levandowski, founder of the religion *Way of the Future*, who stated: “What's going to be created [as AI] will effectively be a god.”¹² These movements promise new forms of immortality, and their proponents often portray AI as godlike—not just anthropomorphized, but divine. The optimistic narrative presents AI as a benevolent deity or omnipotent force, capable of solving humanity's deepest problems. The dystopian version, by contrast, sees it as a demon or existential threat—a force that could lead to authoritarianism or the end of humanity. Even more moderate dystopian views suggest that AI will exacerbate inequality, amplify bias, or become uncontrollable. The most extreme visions foresee human extinction, either from malicious use or because AI becomes autonomous.

Conclusion

In this Impact Paper, we treated AI as a “technology-in-the-making” and examined the discourses that shape its construction. More specifically, we analysed utopian and dystopian narratives through the lens of social imaginaries. We showed how the concept of social

⁹ <https://www.wired.com/2000/04/joy-2/>

¹⁰ <https://www.alcor.org/library/introduction-to-cryonics/>

¹¹ <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/silicon-valleys-obsession-with-ai-looks-a-lot-like-religion/>

¹² <https://www.wired.com/story/anthony-levandowski-artificial-intelligence-religion/>

imaginary helps us understand the discursive construction of AI in media, by highlighting its moral, imaginative, and cosmological dimensions. These discourses draw on deep-rooted social imaginaries, and our analysis reveals how AI reactivates pre-existing collective visions.

We also emphasized that the frequent utopia vs. dystopia polarization in mainstream media is a dominant and structuring mode of how AI is constructed. However, our analysis also showed that beneath this moral opposition lies a deeper convergence: both narratives draw on shared mythological structures, often rooted in religious traditions (especially Christianity). Thus, whether depicted as a saviour or an existential threat, AI embodies powerful figures in our collective imagination, raising ancient questions about progress, human destiny, and the meaning of existence.

From a managerial perspective, our study shows that AI systems—like other technologies—are not neutral tools with predetermined meaning. Their significance is collectively constructed, particularly through social imaginaries. Our analysis helps organizations better shape their change management and technology adoption strategies. It encourages managers to reflect on the perceptions employees may project onto AI, and by situating those perceptions within shared social imaginaries, to take seriously the hopes and fears it inspires.

Future research could explore to what extent the concept of social imaginary is useful for studying how other technological innovations have been interpreted over time. It could also extend our analysis of the AI phenomenon, by articulating the social imaginary approach with a more ideological reading, to examine the power dynamics surrounding the development of this technology.

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