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How the tech oligarchy colonizes our futures

Dr Jennifer Chubb, Department of Sociology, University of York & Professor Richard Tutton,
Department of Sociology, University of York

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Introduction

In this forum article, we focus on how the tech oligarchy exerts power over the present by seeking to shape collective feelings about the future. If we understand the term ‘colonize’ to mean establishing political control over a particular place or area, then we argue that the tech oligarchy are engaged in colonizing the future, claiming it as their own from others who might oppose or challenge them, such as those whom Marc Andreessen (2023) calls the ‘know-it-all credentialed expert’. This is enacted through their ownership of significant economic and cultural capital, whereby they can project not only normative visions of how society should be organized, but also the values that should underpin it and the human problems that should be solved. We argue that any critical account of the tech oligarchy needs to understand how their power is expressed through making the future in their own image.

We make use of work in STS to analyse how the tech oligarchy colonizes the future, principally through the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries, which has become a highly influential way for scholars to discuss collective beliefs and values about technological innovation and societal futures. We show how tech oligarchs conjure opposing visions of desirable and undesirable futures in their imaginaries, positioning their own technoentrepreneurial projects as the only path to prosperity and salvation. In doing so, they cultivate and play on emotions, such as dread and awe which serve a specific technopolitical function to enrol publics into enacting and indeed becoming dependent on their specific sociotechnical visions. Accordingly, tech oligarchs and their supporters bypass the potential for upstream public engagement (Stirling, 2008), where the direction of technological development could even be democratically contested. Instead, they present their imagined future as inevitable, effectively attempting to foreclose more democratic or inclusive alternatives.

We begin with outlining existing theorizations of the tech oligarchy and then discuss how STS work on the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries offers important insights for our article. We focus on specific examples of AI and outer space to explore affective dimensions that go beyond the focus on hopeful or utopian visions. Instead these actors perform a unique mode of sociotechnical enrollment, capturing resources and public imagination not just by promising progress, but by offering a form of escape from the very anxieties of their making. In doing so, we contribute to STS scholarship by demonstrating how negative affect and crisis-framing serve as powerful instruments for stabilising the hegemony of the tech oligarchy. Consequently, we contend that STS can help us understand how the tech oligarchy attempts to use affective imaginaries to narrow public choices, replacing collective deliberation with oligarchic control. We conclude by noting the emergence of counter-imaginary led social activism. Viewed through the lens of STS, these movements signal a shift in the co-production of technology and society, where the public actively is mobilising and organising resistance toward the tech oligarch’s affective framing of inevitable futures (Zuboff, 2019; McQuillan, 2022).

Theorizing the tech oligarchy

As conceived by Julie Cohen (2025) the tech oligarchy presents a different proposition to many of the actors previously studied by STS scholars (Farkas and Mondon, 2025). With their immense wealth, the tech oligarchy has unprecedented ability to fund and direct sociotechnical development and have expanded their power into ‘infrastructures for communication and control’ (Cohen, 2025, p.9), from social media platforms to satellite based internet services, with a global reach. Moreover, Cohen (2025: 10) argues that tech oligarchs are not content to only protect their existing wealth but engage in what she terms ‘wealth offence’, through the ‘technologically facilitated pursuit of advantage’ in ways that others without their immense wealth are less able to do. Cohen also observes that many tech oligarchs have retained significant personal control over the companies that they have founded, ~~suggesting that they are in effect their personal sultanates~~. This serves to buttress their image as exceptional individuals bestowed with gifts of entrepreneurship and technoscientific prowess. While no definitive list exists, the individuals identified as members of the tech oligarchy represent a highly select demographic: overwhelmingly male - from the likes of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Sam Altman, to Mark Zuckerberg and mostly but not entirely white (Cave and Dihal, 2020). For example, Cohen includes Sundar Pichai - the CEO of Alphabet - born in India and partly educated in the US, who attended President Trump’s second Inauguration in the company of Musk, Bezos and Zuckerberg (Katz, 2020).

Cohen’s (2025) work calls attention to what she terms ‘oligarchic projects’ that, for instance, involve the pursuit of imagined futures of human expansion in the solar system or artificial general intelligence and reflecting tech oligarchs’ adherence to ‘techno-futurist ideologies.’ For Cohen (2025, p.41) the action taken to realize these futures entails very real material consequences for current and future generations, with the effect of foreclosing alternatives, so that it becomes ‘harder to create infrastructures for alternative patterns of economic, cultural and technological production and more difficult to imagine and set in motion alternative trajectories of sociotechnical change.’ We share Cohen’s concern about the power of the tech oligarchy in this regard.

While Cohen talks in terms of ‘techno-futurist ideologies’, we argue that STS work on sociotechnical imaginaries holds significant value for analyzing how this elite group seeks to colonize imagined futures. For Jasanoff (2015, p.6) these imaginaries represent “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology”. While tech oligarchs often vie with each other, developing rival technologies and systems, ‘sociotechnical imaginaries encompass broader, collectively held visions of desirable societal futures that are not confined to specific strategic

goals or technologies’ (Hendricks et al., 2025, p.9). For example, while there are some differences in their expression of their visions, connecting Musk and Bezos is a shared sociotechnical imaginary of a desirable societal future in which human social and economic systems extend beyond Earth.

Cohen (2025, p.35) emphasizes the personal ambitions and ‘strategies for private wealth defence and offence’ of individual tech oligarchs in terms of how they frame and pursue their imagined futures. The presence and role of charismatic individuals who give voice to specific imagined futures has also been an important feature of STS analyses: see for example, Storey (2015) on imperialist Cecil Rhodes, McCray (2013) on physicist Gerard O’Neill, or Mike Fortun (2008) on biotech start-up leaders such as Kari Stefansson. However, the significance of imaginaries lies in how they mobilize others and so STS scholars have tended to emphasize more how the work of sociotechnical imaginaries are collective endeavours. Therefore, STS does not dwell for too long on single "inspired" individuals (Jasanoff, 2015, p.28) but is more concerned with how imagined futures circulate and form part of ongoing social relations and interactions. As Jasanoff (2015, p.19) argues, sociotechnical imaginaries ‘unlike mere ideas and fashions [...] are collective, durable, [and] are also temporally situated and culturally particular’.

Drawing on McNeil et al. (2017), Hughes (2024, p.910) argues that an important dimension to the collective and ‘productive political capacity’ of sociotechnical imaginaries is their ‘affective dimension’, distinguishing them from how theorists have tended to understand ideologies in more cognitive terms. Hughes (2024, p.910) argues that sociotechnical imaginaries are not merely rational scripts but are sustained through affective work, where emotions like hope, fear, and desire have a ‘technopolitical function’ in engaging diverse people in imagining and acting on possible futures. This approach resonates with a broader shift in STS away from focusing on analyzing ‘logic and epistemology’ to ‘research on aesthetics, values and emotions’ that emphasises ‘storytelling, imaging and imagining’ (McNeil et al., 2017: p.457). Tech oligarchs engage in storytelling and imaging to reach and attract investors and other public audiences. Their aim is to cultivate and draw from ‘social and psychological investments and future visions linked to specific technoscientific developments’ (McNeil et al., 2017), which have longer histories.

Before turning to discuss specific tech oligarch visions expressed in public statements, it is important to appreciate that sociotechnical imaginaries of AI or colonizing outer space predate the appearance of the tech oligarchy in the twenty-first century. Indeed, rather than originating them, tech oligarchs have played an important role in reinvigorating, reanimating and reshaping these sociotechnical imaginaries (Singer, 2020; Lefterova & Lefterov, 2024).

Musk and Bezos evoke feelings of nostalgia for the Apollo Programme as the peak of human space exploration, which their respective companies will revive (Rees et al., 2026). Likewise, as

Karen Hao (in Palumbo-Liu, 2025) relates, Sam Altman at OpenAI positions his company as returning to the original vision of AI as it was conceived in the 1950s. Using the expression ‘artificial general intelligence’, OpenAI has sought to contrast its vision from products and services that have been on the market for decades.

Therefore, an appreciation of the collective, durability and cultural particularities of sociotechnical imaginaries helps to recognize how tech oligarchs have sought public legitimacy for their own entrepreneurial projects, representing them as realizing desired futures that generations of technology developers, political leaders and citizens have mobilized around long before the tech oligarchs came on the scene.

That said, it is important to stress that these tech oligarchs’ visions are not fixed but are highly mutable, as they pursue multiple entrepreneurial projects. In February 2026, Musk’s announcement that SpaceX would prioritize creating a ‘self-growing city on the Moon’ and defer plans for a Mars city (Luscombe, 2025), caused consternation amongst groups who have long advocated for the human settlement of Mars (Zubrin, 2026). Journalistic analysis suggests that Musk’s decision is shaped at least in part by the need to counter the growing success of Blue Origin and reflects his vision that new AI and data capabilities will be developed in outer space (Berger, 2026). Therefore, while tech oligarchs align themselves with existing sociotechnical imaginaries, in their ‘technologically-facilitated pursuit of advantage’ (Cohen, 2025, p.10), the expression of their visions can change and thereby redirect resources to different technoeconomic objectives.

In the following section, we approach our discussion of specific tech oligarchic futures from the perspective of work on the affective dimension of sociotechnical imaginaries. We argue that tech oligarch visions tend to rest on a fulcrum, pivoting from stories of progress and salvation to existential fear and threat (Chubb et al., 2020; Cave and Dihal, 2019). In both, the protagonists of these stories - the tech oligarchs - appear indispensable to ensuring the survival and prosperity of western societies.

The Affective Dimensions of Tech Oligarchic Imaginaries

Turning to specific examples of AI and outer space to explore affective dimensions of tech oligarchic imaginaries, we see this affective strategy strongly evident in the case of AI, where visions expressed by tech oligarchs enthuse the public, through the ‘bright-siding’ (Chubb et al., 2022) of their positive benefits. Sam Altman is especially known for ‘bright-siding’. With respect to appealing to grand narratives, Altman in his blog ‘The Gentle Singularity’ in May 2024, claimed that: “the gains to quality of life from AI driving faster scientific progress and increased productivity will be enormous; the future can be vastly better than the present”. For Altman, AI is often articulated through stories of progress and productivity - everything more streamlined,

efficient, productive and optimised for growth with the assumption that this is in the interest of the public good (Bareis and Katzenbach, 2021). Altman also tends towards appealing to the narrative of opportunity and democratization, implying the tools will empower people “to express themselves in new and exciting ways.” In doing so, Altman is capitalising on public expectations as a central actor in AI development.

Regarding generative AI model ChatGPT, Altman stated “you have no idea what’s coming”, using the language of surprise or awe, implying that it is hard to comprehend quite what this technology will do. Altman almost consciously pushes the public to see him, with his power and influence, as the one who can, presumably, not only find out what this technology can do, but also to be the one save “the world from the world of AI that he created” (Fortson, 2023).

This anxiety-inducing narrative is the obverse to the awe-inspiring one in which AI is often positioned as an existential threat requiring intervention (Gallanos, 2019). Importantly, the intervention must come from not just anyone, but the tech oligarch themselves. By framing himself as the sole arbiter of society’s future safety, Altman leverages the inherent epistemic gap that exists between the oligarchy and the public (Fortson, 2023). In this context, Altman’s statements are prime examples of what Hughes (2024) states generates an “affective atmosphere” of both awe and promise and anxiety, compelling us towards the vision of the tech oligarch. Altman is not alone in taking this position; in 2014, Musk stated that:

With artificial intelligence, we are summoning the demon. You know all those stories where there's the guy with the pentagram and the holy water, and he's like, yeah, he's sure he can control the demon? Doesn't work out. (Musk, 2014, AeroAstro Centennial Symposium).

The cultivation of anxiety serves as the material hook to justify his actions. Musk often paints a dire picture of AI's existential threat, citing the likes of Nick Bostrom (2019) and Ray Kurzweil, positioning himself as the one sounding the alarm. Using occult imagery, Musk conveys the impression that AI is an unstoppable force and plays up to the notion that it is supernatural or magical (Giuliano, 2020). In doing so, the myth of the existential threat of AI persists (Hanna, 2024) as Musk shifts attention away from the everyday impacts of AI harms (Coeckelbergh, 2021), such as algorithmic injustice (Benjamin, 2023), towards more distant risks. This is perhaps not surprising, as oligarchs tend to leverage binary visions of fear and dread to provide apocalyptic warnings to the world. In doing so, they cement their prophet-like status in popular debate about the impact of these technologies on society (Geraci, 2010).

~~Elon Musk’s rhetoric directly echoes the now much criticized ‘paperclip’ experiment made popular by Bostrom (Brundage, 2015; Thorn, 2015; Goertzel, 2015), which highlights the heavily debated alignment problem of AI (Gabriel, 2020).~~

This narrative structure is also evident in Musk's other venture SpaceX where colonizing Mars offers the promise of a new frontier and fulfilment of a long-standing vision of space exploration. Musk (2019) has discussed his desire to 'inspire the public and get people excited about our future in space' by 'establishing a self-sustaining base on Mars [which] would be the most exciting adventure I could imagine for humanity'. For instance, SpaceX sought to appeal to the public imagination by using the demonstration flight of the Falcon Heavy vehicle in February 2018. This was a highly mediatized event, which involved using a cherry red Tesla car with a space-suited figure (aka "Starman") sitting in the driver's seat as its payload. During the launch Musk said how "it's just for fun... The car is just the most fun thing we could think of," and "crazy things come true!" and the rather geekish and giddy comment, "you can tell it's real because it looks so fake!" (Harwood, 2018). In this way, Musk is trying to evoke the emotional line of a new space frontier, which, while exciting to conjure, rather relies on existing stories to re-enchant the vision of progress in an ~~almost nostalgic and 'fun' way~~ (Felt, 2017).

At the same time, in other interviews, Musk has warned about impending global catastrophes that could end humanity unless there is a 'back-up' on Mars (Tutton, 2021). At the 2018 South by South West Film Festival (SXSW) in Austin, Texas, Musk ruminated on the 'probability of another Dark Age', especially if there a worldwide conflict, and justified dedicating resources to constructing a city on Mars 'to make sure that there's enough of a seed of human civilization somewhere else to bring civilization back, and perhaps shorten the length of the Dark Ages' (Wall, 2018, quoted in Tutton, 2021, p.430).

Fellow tech oligarch Jeff Bezos, whose company Blue Origin is also developing new spaceflight technologies, tends towards a less towards a catastrophic narrative but still relies on one that pivots on undesirable and desirable visions: he foresees a future when human societies will run out of energy, which is essential to growth and to living in a dynamic society (Bezos, 2019). Bezos imagines then there two possible futures: a society of stasis and rationing, or one of dynamism and growth, an incredible civilization of a trillion human beings living and thriving in the solar system (with 'a thousand Mozarts and a thousand Einsteins'), or far fewer sharing out the finite resources of Earth. As Bezos claims: 'you don't want to live in a retrograde world. You don't want to live on an Earth where we have to freeze population growth and reduce energy utilisation' (Bezos, 2019). Instead, Bezos' vision is one where humanity goes out into space for a limitless future while also 'saving Earth.'

The last insight we discuss from STS work on sociotechnical imaginaries concerns how they are performative in bringing visions of desirable futures into material form and how they become part of their affective dimensions as people experience and respond to them. As Cohen relates, tech oligarchs have the resources to develop new infrastructures, with their construction having material consequences both now and into the future. The relationship between imagination,

affect and materiality is important to consider as ‘physical spaces and material conditions shape and constrain imaginaries’ (Hendricks et al., 2025, p.11). As Jasanoff (2015, p.19) suggests, sociotechnical imaginaries emerge from the dynamic of visions of desirable and undesired futures and the technological systems and material infrastructures that people inhabit and experience. As tech oligarchs, and the companies they lead, invest in and create material assets, technologies and other systems based on their affective visions, these imaginaries have become sites of celebration and contestation.

Consequently, these visions become embedded in and give meaning to material investments. We can analyze the construction of data centres as a physical manifestation of the AI sociotechnical imaginary; for example, Mackenzie (2014, p.25) relates from his study of Cermak, a ‘data centre is full of stuff. No individual computer server is particularly heavy, but at Cermak there are tens of thousands of them, along with hundreds of miles of cabling, giant generators and transformers, 30,000-gallon tanks of diesel and big power distribution units.’ Several STS scholars have attended to the environmental and social harms of the ‘stuff’ of data centres (Kitchin and Lauriault, 2014; Crawford, 2021; Samuel et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2025), the expansion of which is becoming a lightning rod for a range of engaged publics contesting not only their development but also tech oligarch’s inevitability discourse (McQuillan, 2022; Chow, 2026). With respect to space colonization too, every ‘rapid unscheduled disassembly’ (in the jokey and minimizing corporate parlance of SpaceX) of Starship has contributed either to pollution in the upper atmosphere or adversely impacted the region around what is now called Starbase, its launch site in Texas (Pultarova, 2025; Reuters, 2023), built on land sacred to the Carrizo/Comecrudo tribe of Texas. While supporters of SpaceX find visiting Starbase an inspirational and exciting experience (Szolucha, 2024), for many other local people including members of the Carrizo/Comecrudo tribe, its presence engenders very different feelings (Mancias and Gal, 2025).

Concluding Discussion

We have explored contributions from STS work on sociotechnical imaginaries to analyze how the tech oligarchy seeks to colonize how we collectively imagine and feel about certain possible futures. They enact this colonization through expressing visions constructed around opposing affects of awe and anxiety, in which they alone are the only actors able to secure and realize what is presented as the inevitable and only possible future.

While we have demonstrated the strengths of STS analysis, studying the tech oligarchy also offers an opportunity to enrich and extend conceptualizations of sociotechnical imaginaries. For instance, in contrast to Jasanoff’s characterization of sociotechnical imaginaries as being a matter of ‘publicly performed visions of desirable futures’, we have seen that tech oligarchs repeatedly perform visions of both desirable and undesirable futures, that allows them to exploit an

epistemic gap in knowledge between themselves and their publics, ensuring that only their interventions are viewed as inevitable.

By leveraging this epistemic gap, the tech oligarchy achieves enrolment by framing their view as an indisputable reality that leaves the public with no choice but to enact and sustain their specific sociotechnical visions. In this way, they attempt and, in many ways, succeed to close down the public's ability to truly scrutinise it. This gap allows them to present their interventions not as choices, but as technical imperatives. When publics are excluded from the underlying knowledge-making processes, the oligarchy's visions achieve a state of epistemic closure whereby alternative futures are not just dismissed but become literally unthinkable. In this sense, power is expressed not just by colonizing the future, but by monopolizing the very tools we use to understand it.

The case of the tech oligarchy underscores the stark inequalities in 'future-making' that scholars have observed on a global scale. For those living in poverty, 'the future presents itself as a luxury, a nightmare, a doubt, or a shrinking possibility' (Appadurai, 2013, p.299). One consequence of this is that, as Jasanoff (2016, p.256) remarks, 'inequality - not only of access but even more of anticipation - thus emerges as an unresolved ethical and political barrier to the just governance of technological innovation.' Indeed, the whiteness of AI (Cave and Dihal, 2020) and proliferation of inequalities via algorithmic structures (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019; Miller, 2020; O'Neil, 2017) point to a known imbalance in those who operationalize these visions into scientific action and those in control of its infrastructure (Stathoulopoulos and Mateos-Garcia, 2019).

That said, it is important to appreciate that tech oligarchs are subject to ongoing contestation, with opponents fiercely challenging them and the material costs of realizing these sociotechnical imaginaries. When defining sociotechnical imaginaries, Jasanoff (2015, p.28) included in parenthesis that they could also encompass 'resistance against the undesirable', which is without doubt also 'collectively held and performed', while being animated by other understandings of what social life could be like. While Cohen (2025, p.625) strikes a somewhat skeptical note that regulatory or public law measures will suffice to address the 'pathologies of the tech oligarchy', we have alluded to how there is growing if inchoate resistance taking shape against the tech oligarchs. We concur that this resistance requires not just economic or regulatory changes, but a robust effort to articulate and amplify alternative, more inclusive, and democratically conceived sociotechnical imaginaries of desirable futures. Going forward this involves dismantling the affective binary that makes their control seem inevitable. Indeed, despite the efforts of the tech oligarchs to close down public debate, the emergence of grassroots 'counter-imaginary'¹ movements seek to reclaim democratic agency (Monsouri and Bailey, 2025; McQuillan, 2022). The growth of these movements implies that the aura of inevitability may be starting to diminish

¹ See, Pull the Plug and StopAI as one such example.

on the one hand, and yet on another, may drive more extreme reactions (Lubrano, 2025). STS has a role in contributing to debates that centre narrative responsibility (Coeckelberg, 2021), which extend beyond the western gaze (Dihal et al., 2021), embracing responsible innovation and collective stewardship of the future (Owen et al., 2013). Doing so means being alert to the deleterious effects and harms caused by the tech oligarchs and their claims that only they can make the future.

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