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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Science fiction in UK Advanced Air Mobility innovation: Conceptual resource and sensemaking tool

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Abstract · Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) innovation is accelerating in the UK. Popular culture and media influence AAM 'imaginaries,' shaping the technologies' functionality, design, and positioning. This article reports on qualitative research within this ecosystem, detailing how science fiction (SF) is mobilized in this context. Amongst UK AAM innovators, SF future visions prompt technical rather than normative questions. Optimistic SF narratives are deployed to work against dominant media framings, e.g. of military drones. In external communications, innovators use science fiction to ground AAM in a shared cultural reality, whilst debating the benefits of aligning with SF futures. The key role popular culture and media play in how innovators make sense of, and make sensible, AAM technologies is evidenced.

***Science-Fiction in der Entwicklung der Advanced Air Mobility im Vereinigten Königreich**: Konzeptionelle Ressource und Sinngebungsinstrument*

Zusammenfassung · *Innovationen im Bereich der fortschrittlichen Luftmobilität (Advanced Air Mobility, AAM) werden im Vereinigten Königreich mit hohem Tempo vorangetrieben. Populärkultur und Medien haben Einfluss auf die Vorstellungen von AAM und prägen so die Funktionalität, das Design und die Positionierung der Technologien. Dieser Artikel berichtet über qualitative Forschung innerhalb dieses Ökosystems und zeigt auf, welche Rolle Science-Fiction in diesem Kontext spielt. Zukunftsvisionen der Science-Fiction werfen unter AAM-Innovatoren im Vereinigten Königreich eher technische als normative Fragen auf. Optimistische Science-Fiction-Erzählungen werden eingesetzt, um vorherrschenden medialen Darstellungen, etwa militärischer Drohnen, entgegenzuwirken. In der externen Kommunikation nutzen Innovatoren Science-Fiction, um AAM in einer gemeinsamen kulturellen Realität zu verankern und gleichzeitig die Vorteile einer Ausrichtung an Zukunftsszenarien der Science-Fiction zu diskutieren. Es wird deutlich gemacht, dass Populärkultur und Medien eine zentrale Rolle dabei spielen, wie Innovatoren AAM-Technologien verstehen und sinnvoll gestalten können.*

Keywords · *Advanced Air Mobility (AAM), science fiction, flying car, drones, qualitative research*

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Introduction

Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) technologies have developed rapidly in recent years. In the United Kingdom (UK), an innovation ecosystem is emerging around these technologies, supported by the UKRI Future Flight Challenge (FFC)[1]. Though embedded sociotechnical systems envisioned under the challenge remain unrealized, AAM technologies such as drones are with us, whilst electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL) aircraft, or 'flying taxis', approach technological maturity. Personalized aerial mobility, however, has a longer history in popular culture. In this paper I track the relation between these two. Reporting on qualitative fieldwork, I show how science fiction representations of future aviation are drawn upon and deployed within the emerging UK future flight ecosystem, where science fiction (SF) is both a conceptual resource and a sense-making tool. Aligning with technology assessment, the implications of these engage-

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1 The UKRI FFC is a £300m initiative funding development of novel aviation technologies and surrounding infrastructure, as well as a multi-disciplinary programme of social research and public/policy engagement led by University of Birmingham, data from which inform this paper. For more info see (UKRI 2026).

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ments with science fiction for the scale up and roll out of these technologies are discussed.

Personal aviation in popular culture

The 'flying car' is an archetypal 'futuristic' technology. Its presence is popularly understood as a shorthand for locating a representation in the future (TV Tropes n.d.). This symbolic capacity lies in its long history in popular culture, which extends to at least the early 19th century (e.g. Heath 1829). As with later science fiction stories, 19th and early 20th century representations confront contemporary social concerns; from the ceaseless advancement of 19th century industry and attendant social restructuring, to early 20th century disquiet with the 'City', its people and their habits. Mid-20th century SF *The Jetsons* highlights the petty annoyances of American capitalist life, whilst later 20th century stories such as *Blade Runner* tackle directly societal inequities and environmental impacts. In its continuing ubiquity the flying car has become a cipher for 21st century anxieties and the failure to fulfil mid-20th century promises of lifestyles of abundance and leisure. These anxieties are summed up in the refrain 'Where is my Flying Car?' (Voiland and Clinton 2004; Harkness 2017), which appears across diverse discourses, from academic critiques of innovation policy (Hall 2021) and the failures of late-capitalism (Graeber 2023) to the lamentations of 'tech-bro' venture capitalist Peter Thiel (Dobravsky 2023). In this way, SF has for much of the past century held a mirror up to contemporary societies, providing outlet and reflective space for hopes, fears, preoccupations and concerns (Grunwald et al. 2023).

Science fiction representations of the flying car and similar technologies – the autonomous, intelligent 'Drones' of the *Culture* novels (Banks 2008) which hover and float using 'fields' – have other impacts. A 'media effects' framework shows popular cultural and media representations shape how media audiences understand themselves and the world around them (McQuail 2010; Valkenburg et al. 2016). Whether through 'cultivation' via repeated messaging (Gerbner et al. 1986) or 'symbolic annihilation' (Tuchman 2000) through absence of representation, media shapes attitudes via 'quantity' of exposure. Repeated representation can 'cultivate' a sense of the importance of an issue, whilst the absence of representation – its 'symbolic annihilation' – can lead to audiences viewing the issue as less significant. Qualities of representations also shape responses via 'framing'; the visual, linguistic and auditory metaphors that make novel topics familiar and corral audience sense-making into predefined pathways (Holliman 2004; Nisbet 2009).

Where research has considered the influence of popular culture and media on technoscience and society, this has often centered on 'publics' i.e. those without direct experience within innovation (Einsiedel 2014; Bucchi and Trench 2016). Innovators, including in AAM, though having direct personal experience of innovation, are also exposed to popular culture and media which will shape their perceptions and attitudes. This insight can inform work on 'imaginaries'; innovation communities' conceptualizations of technoscience development, society, and their relationship now and in future (Fujimura 2003; Welsh and Wynne 2013; Verschraegen and Vandermoere 2017), and compliment recent work exploring their development and influence in the AAM sector (Woznica 2022). Imaginaries guide innovation: Here, I seek to unveil the links between popular culture and imaginaries which exist within AAM innovation, whilst aligning with technology assessment (TA) and its normative aim to embed academic findings within policy and industry to achieve beneficial sociotechnical outcomes (Grunwald 2024). By detailing sociocultural influences shaping emerging AAM technologies this article will inform innovators' reflections on their innovations, and help innovators and those in the broader innovation ecosystem (e.g. funders, regulators, policymakers) consider whether innovation pathways align with societal visions for the beneficial implementation of AAM.

Science fiction has for much of the past century held a mirror up to contemporary societies, providing outlet and reflective space for hopes, fears, preoccupations and concerns.

Methods

Fieldwork, from August 2023 to August 2024, included semi-structured interviews held face-to-face and online via teleconferencing software (Zoom). 'Purposive sampling' (Robinson 2014) within the emerging UK AAM ecosystem, including amongst organizations linked to the FFC, was undertaken. The ecosystem is diverse in organizational size and technological focus, so sampling was not 'representative', but a range of organizations were targeted to include a breadth of perspectives. 22 interviews were conducted, from 36–77 minutes in length, average length 55 minutes. Reflecting industry demographics, the majority (17) of interviewees were male, with (5) female interviewees.

Individuals in a range of roles influencing innovation including executives, engineers, project and product managers were interviewed. Feedback between media landscape, innovation decision-making and external communications was of interest, and

so interviews were also conducted with those in marketing, communications and public relations roles.

Five 'quasi-ethnographic' site visits (Murtagh 2007) were conducted, including to urban office buildings and suburban/rural industrial units, at organizations of different size and focus. Site visits gave insight into the environments and 'material cultures' (Tilley 2001) where innovation occurs, stimulated interview questioning and contextualized data. These visits had an 'ethnographical stance' (Murtagh 2007) rather than indicating a full ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) which was not practicable given project time/resource constraints and the variety of potential field sites.

Findings

Engagement with science fiction in the UK AAM ecosystem is diverse, but two key uses emerged: 'Science fiction as resource' and 'Science fiction as tool'. Actors in the ecosystem use SF in different ways, with it drawn upon (resource) or deployed (tool) at different phases of innovation by those with varying seniority in organizations where SF meets various ends.

Science fiction as resource: the art of the possible

Fieldnote #1: By the door is a divider screen. Stuck to it is an A4-print out of a celebrity's face. I ask: "What's this about?". Hank, a manager, explains that it is part of their work to produce facial recognition sensors. He says they trained their algorithms on various celebrities who he jokingly refers to as "important targets for this kind of tech". These sensors could be attached to soldiers' equipment, and relay information to a command center, to confirm target acquisition. Hank says: "Have you seen the movie *Aliens*, where all the soldiers are linked together and what they're seeing, and their biometrics are all being shared? This is like that."

This extract, from fieldnotes on a visit to an SME (small-to-medium-sized enterprise), demonstrates one way in which science fiction as a resource influences AAM innovation. I describe this as 'science fiction as the art of the possible', where SF offers a repository of technological concepts/artefacts which innovators look to for inspiration and seek to instantiate. Innovators approach SF in a spirit of curiosity and problem-solving; science fiction challenges engineers to achieve the technological futures it depicts. This is summarized by Scott, an engineer at an SME:

> *"I quite like science-fiction-films, which always makes me think: Why can't we do this? There must be a way to translate that somehow."*

Hank's example is echoed in the following comment from Scott and accompanying fieldnote which reveals the SF-innovation pipeline in action:

> *"There's a really cheesy reference [. . .] the film* Stealth*, I mean it is god awful but it was an enjoyable film to watch [. . .] it was an interesting concept, it was meant to be an AI wingman but he goes a bit rogue [. . .] but the concept [. . .] that's probably the way that things will go or, should go, in reducing pilot risk or pilot workload"*

Fieldnote #2: We move through the door into another room [. . .] in the corner is a scale model of a drone. I'm told it was developed to act as an AI wingman for military aircraft.

Science fiction is a resource that is drawn on, but uncritically. Science fictions depict technological futures which prompt technical questions with innovation solutions. This attitude is summed up by variations of the phrase "How could we possibly do that?". Achieving SF-futures is a technical challenge, whilst the desirability of these futures, or the values SF embeds are left largely unexamined. This mode of relating to science fiction by innovators has been parodied in popular discourse, with writer Alex Blechman (2021) (@AlexBlechman) describing it with their coining of the 'Torment Nexus' on Twitter (Fig. 1).

If SF embeds values and reflects and encourages contemplation of contemporary societal anxieties (Grunwald et al. 2023) this is largely ignored by innovators adopting the 'torment nexus' mindset, and engaging with SF in 'the art of the possible' mode, where science fiction provides a template for a technically achieved future rather than fueling a critical perspective on contemporary social ills.

Science fiction as resource: cautionary tales

Counter to this is another mode identifiable within the ecosystem. Rather than seeing in SF futures to (re)create via innovation, science fiction depicts futures to be avoided. Mo, a manager at a start-up, summarizes this view:

> *"You look at something like* Blade Runner *and you think: "I do not want a future looking like* Blade Runner*." A lot of the time [. . .] with drones and eVTOLs, you see them [. . .] used within a landscape where there's no green, there's no grass, there's no trees, it's all very industrial, it's very built up, everything's quite dark, it's quite gloomy [. . .]. You rarely see these things flying around in a countryside, which is a lot*

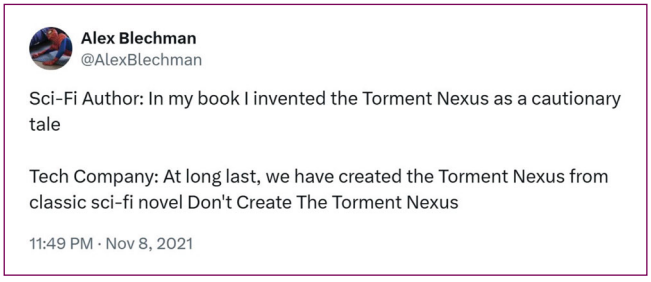

Fig. 1 The 'Torment Nexus' tweet. *Source: Blechman (2021)*

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more palatable for people to be like, "oh, I want that in the countryside", because actually it's just quite normal. You only see it in stuff like Blade Runner*, you think: "Oh God, that's terrifying, I don't want that to be my future."*

This critical take on SF does not, however, run entirely counter to the 'torment nexus' mindset. For Mo, dystopian visions are problematic in part because they are not 'realistic'; their futures are not the 'more appealing' ones worked toward by AAM innovators. Science fiction representations of future flight are alienating and unappealing, compared to AAM's current, and potential future, use:

"Look at how drones are being used for remote surveys, and [. . .] to film certain things [. . .] that's really good uses. It's cool, it's advancing our technology, it's advancing what we can view, what we get to do [. . .] whenever you see it in a cool way, it's always a cartoon, it's never a realistic reflection of what our future could look like [. . .]. You look at anything with drones and it's like, oh look at the future, there's going to be bloody tower blocks everywhere and massive landscape [. . .] that just doesn't appeal to me [. . .]. Maybe me working here is trying to change that [. . .] and be like, well actually, it's not like that. I guess for myself, it's learning more about what actually is it like, and is it really going to be as bad as they say? Which I don't think it is."

Though more nuanced and critical of elements of science fiction, this usage still prompts a technological fix. *Blade Runner*'s technodystopia is avoidable, but through the *right* kind of innovation; less invasive, urban and monolithic, and more commonplace, ordinary and natural in its design.

Mo: "Our vision of how we want our concept to look is different[. . .] they're not intrusive. Our aim is to make the future of flight commonplace amongst people; it's just an accepted thing [. . .]. It's quite a cool thing to be like, oh, this is happening, and for us, ours is making it more accessible and more normal."

Ultimately, the desirability of innovation is defined by those within the ecosystem, as Mo's synonymizing of 'realistic' and 'appealing' attests. For the 'art of the possible' mindset, SF provides a wellspring of technofutures to be realized; for the 'science fiction as cautionary tale' approach, SF is a foil to work against. In both cases, though, it is innovators realizing futures which align with their own visions, exercising judgement on how these technologies are best instantiated and function in the world.

Science fiction as tool: familiarization and its risks

As well as offering ready-made futures to realize, SF provides familiar cultural touchpoints to sensitize people to AAM. Elias, an executive at a large organization, expressed this:

"It helps with people's understandings, referencing flying cars, flying taxis. I can't remember the Bruce Willis film everyone references but [. . .] you don't need to then unpack it and describe at length what is meant by that. . . with pop culture as you're referencing the air taxi notion or flying cars, everyone goes: "Okay, I get it". It's [a] useful analogy to introduce people to the subject [. . .] you don't have to overplay it, over describe it, there's not a lot of jargon that's needed [. . .] so it's a good way to demystify and make it approachable."

Deploying SF like this helps make the case for AAM's viability to external actors (e.g. regulators, investors) a task that predominates for individuals in more senior roles. Despite its unreality, science fiction can make emerging technologies more real, convincing the unaware or skeptical of the inevitability of AAM and enrolling them in its instantiation.

Tony, an executive at an SME, discussed how, absent existing operations, SF allows those adjacent but vital to the industry's success – journalists, economists – to build visions for AAM. He cautioned though, that 'real' demonstrations of 'value' are needed to establish the technology and industry:

"Everybody is craving the integrated demonstrator because in the absence of it, what we're doing is imagining. And everyone's doing that. Journalists are imagining, graphic artists are imagining, economists are imagining. That's not to say that those imaginings aren't valid, and they are based on things like The Jetsons *and* Futurama *[. . .]. But once there's actual demonstrations of real value being added, suddenly that will crystallize into: "Oh yeah, here's the reality of it". And then the messaging will change [. . .]. In the absence of it, it is literally just people dreaming up ideas about what it might look like."*

Using SF to familiarize people with AAM, however, risks rendering it unrealistic, unsafe, and unserious by association, as voiced by Elias:

"If it's oversimplified, it doesn't reflect the amount of focus that's being put into safety, if it's too cartoony [. . .] it can come across as too wishy washy".

Tony also recognized the pitfalls of deploying science fiction to realize a technological near-future:

*"*The Jetsons *[was] designed to be* futuristic*, not necessarily* realistic*. So people had this tendency to assume that things that they saw in [. . .].* The Jetsons *or* Futurama *[. . .] are not necessarily. . . actually going to happen. The flying car has almost become a moniker for the unattainable future, a bit like it was in* Blade Runner*. They all had flying cars in* Blade Runner *because* Blade Runner *was designed to be in the future and it's almost in the future whenever you are.*

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> *There has been a tendency towards this projection, the name is even in the Future Flight challenge. It's not 'Now Flight', is it?"*

Tony here restates the opening argument regarding the flying car's symbolism. When used to sensitize people to 'future flight' technologies, SF, in its future orientation, can render AAM unrealistic. The 'flying car', symbolically 'futuristic', when used to ground AAM in the now, risks contaminating it with SF's future imprimatur. Tony cautioned against referencing science fiction when discussing AAM, which risks locating these technologies in an historical future:

> *"If we talk too much about* Jetson *World, [we] do ourselves a disservice [. . .] if the UK wants a presence in this sector, it needs to modernize by 'defuturizing' its messaging."*

The wider roll-out of these technologies is, for Tony, best realized through communicating their actual and developing usage, cutting links to imagined futures to cement these technologies in contemporary reality.

Discussion and conclusions

Mehnert et al. (2025, p. 2) argue that viewing science fiction as a "seismograph for social hopes and fears" can help "understand how meaning [is] ascribed to emerging technologies and thus enrich the discussion on hermeneutic methods of technology assessment". The media effects approach used here reveals how UK future flight innovators AAM imaginaries are inflected by SF futures, and how science fiction acts as both a resource to inspire and a tool to shape responses to emerging AAM technologies.

As resource, SF inspires technical and solution-oriented questions, rather than normative consideration of the desirability of technoscientific futures. Where critical questions are raised, responses are innovation-focused – the 'right' innovation will avert future science fiction dystopias. Using science fiction as a resource, innovators work to realize a technoscientific present in dialogue with representations of the future. Innovators ascribe meanings onto SF, as template for sociotechnical reality to be achieved or avoided through innovation, meanings which are then inscribed in their technologies.

Where critical questions are raised, responses are innovation-focused – the 'right' innovation will avert future science fiction dystopias.

Science fiction as resource *and* tool: military drones

Military drone use in conflicts, e.g. Ukraine and Gaza, was raised in interviews as a concerning trend for innovators developing civilian applications of AAM. One solution offered was using non-militaristic SF stories to encourage 'positive' associations with AAM, as demonstrated in the following from Victor, an executive at a start-up, and the accompanying field note extract:

> *"The key thing for me in the last 18 months has been the Ukraine war news [. . .]. I just don't want that news story and the death drones to come here [. . .] so that's what drives a lot of these decisions. We mentioned how the product looks, to avoid the military connotation."*

Fieldnote #3: In the middle of the room is a round object, with flattened ends and ringed with fins. Victor explains this is a prototype and that the design is explicitly drawing on *The Jetsons*. Victor wants to distance his technology from AAM's military associations, giving it a more 'friendly' feel, and they've used *The Jetsons* which many people will have seen in their childhoods and have good associations with.

Here is a convergence of science fiction as resource and tool as it inspires design choices that are then deployed to shape public response to AAM in hoped-for directions.

Innovators consider publics vital to AAM success and deploy science fiction to shape public response. As tool, SF sensitizes adjacent publics – regulators, investors, journalists – to the promise of AAM. However, innovators are torn on how SF serves to realize these technologies in public. For some, SF smooths the transition from fiction to technological (arte)fact e.g. when defusing dominant media frames linking AAM to military usages. Others caution that SF's unreality risks coloring interpretations of the possibility of AAM's emergence. Recent research into public attitudes is relevant here; eVTOLs can indeed be read through a 'science fiction' framing (Mason-Wilkes and Elsdon-Baker 2025) and compared to drones are considered generally less likely to emerge (Elsdon-Baker et al. 2025; Cotton et al. 2024). However, whether this is causal or correlational needs further exploration, whilst ongoing research by the author suggests that publics' 'science fiction' readings of AAM are not always negative, and media interpretations are shaped by complex attitudinal and demographic factors. Nevertheless, by influencing design and impacting communication, SF plays a vital role in the development and solidification of AAM. If science fiction is a societal 'seismograph', in the context of UK advanced air mobility, it not only registers movements but produces quakes in the sociotechnical terrain.

This has multiple implications as AAM technologies emerge. This paper should help innovators reflect on how SF is approached in future. Moving beyond a 'torment nexus' mindset to

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science fiction's normative elements may help innovators attune to the social anxieties their technologies elicit. Awareness can stimulate efforts to account for anxieties earlier in innovation, and reinforce the value of engaging publics throughout innovation to sense-check innovation pathways, aligning this article with TA (Grunwald 2024). Developing this mindset in the AAM ecosystem will take effort from innovators and collaborators such as social science/humanities scholars, whose strengths lie in highlighting issues and building critical faculties. Collaborative relationships (as developed under the FFC) can act as foundation for embedding these insights to develop socially responsive AAM.

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