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*Special Issue*

# Innovation and Organizational Ecosystems:

# Navigating Tensions and Shaping the Future of Innovation

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# *Introduction to Special Issue*

## Networked Innovation: Ecosystems, Tensions, and Collaborative Futures

a cura di Francesco Bolici[1] e Lorenzo Mercurio[2]

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In recent decades, network-based perspectives have become increasingly influential in understanding how actors—whether individuals, organizations, or institutions—coordinate and co-create innovations in rapidly changing environments (Haythornthwaite, 1996; Carayannis & Campbell, 2009; Bolici et al., 2022). Digital innovation, in particular, has significantly altered how ecosystems emerge and operate, introducing new opportunities as well as critical tensions (Nachira et al., 2007; Senyo et al., 2019; Eloundou et al., 2023). These tensions span multiple dimensions: privacy versus data-driven efficiency (Stahl & Wright, 2018); generative AI's transformative potential versus concerns for ethics and responsible adoption (Eloundou et al., 2023); technological reshaping of healthcare systems versus the need for inclusive patient-centered approaches (Illario et al., 2022); and the strategic rethinking of industrial operations in pursuit of sustainability (Riesener et al., 2019; Yung et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, the "Triple Helix" model and its various evolutions (Quadruple and Quintuple Helix) underscore the need for collaboration among academia, industry, government, and civil society to address these emerging complexities (Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz, 1998; Carayannis & Campbell, 2009; Carayannis et al., 2012). Embracing such ecosystemic thinking is vital to promoting innovation that is not only economically viable but also socially and ethically sound.

This Special Issue stems from the awareness that organizations today operate under multi-actor, multi-level influences, where ecosystemic structures—dynamic networks of interconnected actors—shape how knowledge is created, shared, and applied (Chang & West, 2006; Cuel et al., 2021). The call for papers emphasized several core themes. Among them are: the impact of innovative technologies on organizations, helix models of innovation and their extension to emerging technologies, patient-centric and one-health perspectives in healthcare, the growing role of AI and data governance in shaping knowledge flows, policymaker engagement in facilitating innovation ecosystems, approaches to industrial sustainability, and open innovation challenges for SMEs (Khan & Arshad, 2019; Radziwon & Bogers, 2019). Ultimately, this issue seeks to unveil the theoretical and empirical contours of tensions arising from advanced digital innovation and to present paths for their resolution.

The articles featured here collectively address these challenges and opportunities while grouping into thematic areas that showcase both the breadth of ecosystemic perspectives and the shared challenges across different domains. A first set of contributions underscores the crucial importance of *data governance and the orchestration of collaborative networks*.

In this vein, **Kazemargi et al. (2025)** examine data governance within emergent digital ecosystems and propose ways for organizations to navigate distributed data sources and blockchain-based certification, while **Carollo et al. (2025)** investigate organizational dynamics and tensions in innovation ecosystems, highlighting issues of trust, collaboration, and asymmetries in how innovation is distributed among stakeholders. **Ceci et al. (2025)**, moreover, explore multicultural networks and their role in shaping innovation ecosystems. Through an ethnographic study of a Dutch innovation hub, they show how cultural diversity catalyzes creativity and tacit knowledge exchange, even as it sometimes slows the execution of complex projects and large-scale initiatives.

Next, two studies delve into *sustainability, ethics, and social responsibility* as key elements of ecosystem design. **Colombi et al. (2025)** shed light on an ecosystemic approach to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), illustrating how collaborative networks and dynamic capabilities embed social and ethical values into a banking institution's operations. **Varone et al. (2025a)** complement this perspective with a focus on industrial sustainability in the naval and aerospace sectors, showing how circular business models and partnerships among public authorities, firms, and academia can remove obstacles to greener production processes.
Meanwhile, *AI-driven transformation* emerges as a powerful force in reshaping both societal practices and policy frameworks. **Orlando et al. (2025)** address how assistive AI-based technologies expand human capabilities, yet simultaneously demand careful consideration of ethical and inclusivity principles to avoid reinforcing "abilist" standards. **Varone et al. (2025b)** further broadens this lens, proposing a governance framework for emerging AI ecosystems in which public institutions become co-designers, coordinators, and technology-transfer promoters, rather than mere regulators.
A final strand of contributions explores the *organizational and societal implications* of these transformative processes. **Rodighiero et al. (2025)** focus on collaborative spaces—such as coworking and makerspaces—as innovation intermediaries that unify diverse actors, supporting new ventures, knowledge flows, and open innovation, particularly for smaller or less-resourced players. **Pernice et al. (2025)**, in turn, examine the tensions induced by digital transformation in healthcare, ranging from tecnostress among practitioners to changing requirements for patient advocacy groups, and discuss what managerial and policy measures can ensure these digital shifts enhance well-being rather than undermine it.

Taken together, these contributions underscore the fundamental importance of multi-actor collaborations, institutional orchestration, and inclusive design in harnessing the potential of advanced digital technologies. They point to the necessity of robust governance frameworks, knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and strategic policymaking to address tensions—such as data privacy versus utility, or efficiency gains versus ethical concerns. At the same time, they demonstrate the promise of collaborative, network-centric approaches capable of aligning diverse stakeholder interests for shared, sustainable outcomes. We hope this Special Issue serves as a platform for ongoing dialogue, research, and innovation in organizing complex ecosystems at the frontier of technological and social transformation.

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