# Ethical debt and the great online pivot

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Technical debt is a well-known concept to those in technology. But, what I want to talk about in this post is ethical debt.

In our rush to deploy technical solutions in response to the online pivot are we employing due diligence? Why should we care?

The first consideration is that of social justice. What content are we sharing with our students and in what formats? What are the requirements to be able to access the resources? Many UK Higher Education Institutions have been working very hard over the last year in response the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018. We are still working with colleagues in our institutions to create and share accessible teaching and learning materials. However, with the rush to move online and source additional resources, are they key principles still be adhered to. There has been a lot of use of video. Either the sharing of previous year's lecture capture, pre-recorded mini lectures or live interactive sessions. All of these have issues for those with hearing impairments. At present they are not legally required to have captions or transcripts. There are some workarounds but these are not ideal, adding additional burden to students and colleague start are already struggling in an ableist system.

There is also the other meaning of accessible, having access. There is an inherent assumption that all students have sufficient IT equipment and internet access to be able to view video content. Also, there needs to be an awareness that students are now scattered all over the globe and may find attending live sessions difficult due to time zone differences. All of which other members of our community and may be detrimental to their learning and relationship with their institution.

In addition, vendors are taking the opportunity to promote their services through special offers and 'helping' during this time of crisis. These 'solutions' become part of an institutions eco-system

How ethical are a lot of these services that both Higher Education and compulsory education are flocking to? Some of these services have known concerns over privacy and have had their use in education questioned by our European neighbours.

In her presentation for the Accessibility Scotland 2019, Laura Kalberg spoke about Accessible unethical technology (https://accessibility.scot/accessible-unethical-technology/), she defined unethical technology as technology having:

- Inequality in distribution and access
- Lack of accountability and responsibility
    - Misinformation
    - Profiling
    - Automated decisions
    - Targeting

- o Insufficient Security
- Environmental Impact
- Business ethics
  - o Proprietary lock-in
  - o Industry monopoly
  - o Tracking
  - o Data brokers

Almost all web-based technologies do some of these things. By requiring students to use specific platforms and online tools we are removing their ability to give consent to these practices. Where students are being encouraged to use social media, we are also subjecting them to a programmed sociality pre-determined by the platforms that they are using.

Is it ethical for us as institutions to do this? The power is in our hands. Students may feel that they have no choice but to use these recommended platforms. This is even worse in the compulsory education sector where many peoples are not considered old enough to make these decisions for themselves re: consent and GDPR. Should we be making these decisions for them? Creating a digital footprint and tracking history that they have no control over? Who will own that data?

As surveillance capitalism increasingly becomes the norm, I think that we need to remain mindful. Who are offering these services? To what end? And most importantly at what cost to our staff and students?

## References

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