The ethics of sextech – design justice vs market demands?

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BACKGROUND

Research on sextech has focused on the biomedical or sexological aspects of sexuality, but rarely considers how sextech can be designed to lessen the impact on the marginalised communities disproportionally harmed by the collection, regulation, aggregation, and commercialisation of intimate data.

METHODS

We ran a 3-day online hackathon in 2022, drawing on design justice principles (Costanza-Chock 2020). The hackathon was supported by the **ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society**, with industry partners Sextech School and Thoughtworks.

Following presentations by activists and advocates representing stigmatised communities (including trans people, sex workers and people living with HIV), five interdisciplinary groups were supported by industry mentors to rapidly workshop and pitch a 'public-interest' sextech product or service.

RESULTS

1. **Community-focused participants** prioritised tech design based on **localised, collective and culture/context-specific approaches.**
2. **Market-focused participants** prioritised opportunities for **commercialisation** and **global scalability**.

We conclude that market-driven requirements to develop tech at scale may undermine the ethical development of sexual health and wellbeing technologies.

This does not mean that technologists are intrinsically 'unethical'. However, the requirement to attract venture capital or expand within global markets may be incompatible with the privacy needs of marginalised and stigmatised sexual communities.

We recommend that health researchers and practitioners who wish to collaborate with technologists seek to develop **clear and pragmatic** understandings of contemporary tech industry practices - particularly with respect to the market demands of 'start-up' culture.

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