

Life's short, have you had an affair?

August 21 2015, by Rob Brooks



Shhhhh! AshleyMadison Not so anonymous now! Screenshot of the Ashley Madison website. Still up and running. Credit: AshleyMadison.com

Today, millions of very nervous adults are furtively checking sites like "[Have I been Pwned](#)" to check if their account details at [Ashley Madison](#) have been leaked. Others are checking if their partners or acquaintances had accounts. The hacking and subsequent release of data from the world's biggest infidelity-focussed dating service continues to

reverberate, provoking an interesting suite of ethical questions.

Unless you've confined your news intake to re-runs of Jarryd Hayne's BIG MOMENT in a trial game for the 49ers, you will be well aware that a group calling themselves Impact Team hacked the systems of Avid Life Media (ALM), who operate a number of sex and dating websites. Impact Team threatened to release sensitive information about users unless ALM close down Ashley Madison, which specialises in connecting people looking to have extra-[relationship](#) affairs, and [Established Men](#), which they argue is a "website for rich men to pay for sex". Established Men, understandably, puts it a little more gently: "connecting young, beautiful women with interesting men".

So much for the libertarian hacker stereotype. Impact Team are waging a moralist crusade against both the websites themselves, and the people whose extra-marital or transactional sex shenanigans the websites enable.

Neither website has been shut down and yesterday Impact Team uploaded information about over 30 million users, including their email addresses. Security experts quoted in [news outlets](#) seem to agree that the data dump is genuine.

The media coverage has varied from titillating attempts to dissect where the "cheating" [hotspots](#) are to the very real personal stories of spouses who've been busted. Sydney radio station NOVA even tried, and rather spectacularly failed, to turn it into [edgy commercial radio](#), searching the database on behalf of callers. They very quickly learned how spectacularly bad their idea was when they found the husband of one of their callers was indeed subscribed to Ashley Madison.

Nobody wins here. The whole business reeks of weakness and failure. As Gaby Hinsliff put it in [the Guardian](#),

it's hard to decide which of the activities involved – cyber blackmail, building a business on wrecking marriages, or just good old-fashioned philandering – is least charming.

More than gossip

But some people seem bouyed by the whole business. I'm intrigued by the level of schadenfreude; so many people are relishing the slow implosion of Ashley Madison and the exposure of millions of people's most embarrassing intimate details. What disappoints me most is how the exposure of 30 million people is being shoe-horned into a one-size-fits-all view of sex and relationships. How this is all about "cheating", and that infidelity means the same thing in every relationship.

We might not like to admit it to ourselves, but relationships differ enormously from one another. So do the reasons people have sex, both within and outside of committed relationships. Yes, a great many - probably most - Ashley Madison clients were furtively seeking extra sexual partners without the knowledge and consent of their long-term partners. And many did so despite their relationships being otherwise functional, productive and respectful. This kind of infidelity has its victims: the partners who remain at home, pouring their selves into the shared enterprise of coupledness, unaware that the other party isn't matching their effort and commitment.

And yet nobody can properly evaluate another's relationship from outside, much less 30 million relationships. The evolutionary sciences continue to show that humans have a marvellous capacity to form loving, cooperative relationships, to remain sexually faithful to one another, and to work hard to build both families and wealth. Marvellous as those relationships can be, profound as the love that binds us together might feel, not all relationships remain functional.

One of the less-explored dimensions of the Ashley Madison schamozzle is the fact that many people had quite defensible positions for looking outside their relationships. Their current relationships might be loveless, sexless, dysfunctional, exploitative or even abusive. They may be in the process of coming out to themselves, facing the daily dissonance of being gay in a straight marriage.

A great many people are trapped by economic circumstances and questions of child custody in hellish relationships. Who would deny those people the chance to connect with another, perhaps to find the courage or even the ally they need to escape, or perhaps to enjoy being loved, appreciated and getting properly laid?

How many people, whose names appeared on that database last night, had to go home to their controlling, jealous, or abusive partners? How many people, living straight lives, many in countries where homosexuality is illegal and harshly punished, were outed by Impact Team's self-righteous moralism?

Beyond the many dysfunctional relationships from which affairs might offer respite or escape, the Ashley Madison affair forces us to confront even more uncomfortable realities about relationships. Even "a mommy and daddy who love each other very much" are likely to find that they cannot be everything one another needs. Our evolved capacity to be really quite good at monogamy has its limits. We have also evolved, thanks to our ancestors' tastes for sexual intrigue, an exquisitely context-dependent capacity to throw off the shackles of monogamy when it suits us. It takes a spectacular denial of human nature to believe that life-long heterosexual monogamy represents some kind of social zenith and that deviations from this one true path represent deep aberrations.

On-line dating has imposed what economists call a "technological shock" on the mating market, reshaping how people meet, court and, ultimately,

mate. Ashley Madison's success, and the marketing genius behind it's quasi-inspirational slogan ("Life's short. Have an affair."), reshaped the extra-couple mating market. And the realisation to which so many customers are waking today, that even a website set up to guarantee discretion in extracurricular hooking up is vulnerable to hacking and public shaming, will change the dynamics of sex once again.

I would be disappointed if the whole business turns into a witchhunt on "cheaters", if we slide back toward the puritanism that had Hester Prynne wearing the [Scarlet Letter](#). Perhaps we need to embrace the messier, more complex reality that [sex does not equal love](#), and love does not always mean exclusively and forever. Our relationships are negotiated every day in the way we treat one another and accept our partners, and lovers, as they are, rather than packing them into the neat box of a one-size-fits-all relationship.

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