Leak site's launch shows dilemma of radical transparency

December 3 2018, by Raphael Satter

Journalist Emma Best poses for a photograph in Las Vegas on Tuesday, Nov. 27, 2018. Best serves as de facto spokesperson for a new leak website called Distributed Denial of Secrets; her online library's struggle with what leaks to keep on its shelves is illustrating the difficulty of balancing full transparency with respect for privacy in an age of mass disclosures. (AP Photo/Regina Garcia Cano)

A new leak website is wrestling with what to make available to the public, an illustration of the difficulty of balancing full transparency with respect for privacy in an age of mass disclosures.

The site, dubbed Distributed Denial of Secrets, is aimed at capturing the cascade of leaked data coursing through the web, securing it for researchers and journalists before it disappears amid the digital churn of the internet.

But the content of Denial of Secrets' library—including tranches of data from the infidelity website Ashley Madison—drew criticism ahead of its public debut Monday. The site's founders eventually decided to pull from its public collection the haul from the Ashley Madison site along with more than a dozen other leaks.

"The criticism and feedback is what prompted us to change," said journalist Emma Best, the site's de facto spokesperson.

The move, she added, was "half playing it safe and half just a practical measure."

Denial of Secrets carries more than 1 terabyte of data from many of the highest-profile leaks from the past decade, including stolen documents released by the Anonymous movement of digital vigilantes, leaks organized by the pseudonymous hacker Phineas Phisher and more recent disclosures by the media collective Unicorn Riot. More controversially, the site also included gigabytes worth of username and password data, as well as copies of highly sensitive leaks including the Ashley Madison material and data drawn from the religious dating site Muslim Match in 2016 .

The site initially met with skepticism.

"You should not be hosting the Ashley Madison hack," said Joseph Cox, who has regularly covered data breaches for Motherboard, Vice's technology publication. "Ordinary people have killed themselves over this data."

Both Cox and Gabriella Coleman, a McGill University anthropologist known for her in-depth work on Anonymous, said they could see a use for an online repository of major leaks.

Coleman worried that information from such incidents was sinking into "the quicksand of the internet," but she said preserving lists of passwords and user data made little historical sense.

"I just don't see any justification," she said.

Best acknowledged being uncomfortable with the Ashley Madison data but argued that any sensitive material was "stale and is now only useable for historical purposes." She said it was hard to predict how useful data could eventually be, pointing to a number of academic studies based on the Ashley Madison leak. Eventually, she and her colleagues changed their approach; the site's public debut was delayed as some of the most controversial material was removed, including the Ashley Madison and Muslim Match files.

Best said the data would now be made available to researchers privately on a case-by-case basis, a decision that mollified some critics.

"Much better," said Coleman after reviewing the newly pared-back site. "Exactly the model we might want."

Journalists and academics alike have long struggled with how best to share massive amounts of data. Recently, for example, The Associated Press received several gigabytes of internal WikiLeaks files but only

published a small selection , holding the rest back for further review. WikiLeaks itself has repeatedly come under criticism for its publish-everything approach to leaks.

Thomas Rid, who teaches at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, said that transparency websites sat at the ethical fault line between two core values that many activists held dear: Privacy and transparency.

"You can't be radically in favor of both at the same time," he said. "Pretending this harsh dilemma doesn't exist is naive and dangerous."

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Online:

Distributed Denial of Secrets: ddosecrets.com

Dark web site: ddosecretspzwfy7.onion

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