Despite Ashley Madison furore, our view of infidelity has not always been fixed

24 August 2015, by Zoe Strimpel

When in 2010 I interviewed Noel Biderman, founder of infidelity website Ashley Madison, he said: "It's easy to vilify me. But I'm not doing anything wrong. I didn't invent infidelity." He had a point, though at the time the moral outrage generated by the site suggested that Biderman had not only invented adultery, but all the evil in the internet too.

Five years on, and his website – and attitude – has spectacularly backfired following a hack that has outed personal details of its members and corporate emails. The outrage value of unprincipled web businesses has certainly dwindled – and within the internet's wild west of trolling, pornography, cyberbullying, celebrity promotion, ungrammatical communication and hook-up apps, Ashley Madison seems positively tame. Who cares about some largely North American adulterers and their kinks? Arranging an affair through a dating site is pretty vanilla compared to a lot of what goes on. And mainstream dating sites like OkCupid and Match are perfectly good for cheaters too.

And yet Ashley Madison has never stopped being deeply contentious. Failed attempts to float on the New York and London stock exchanges suggested moral recoil on the part of bankers, a group hardly known for their disdain of smut. And so it fell to a group calling themselves Impact Team to reveal the site's secrets with the moralising zeal of the righteous. Or the wronged – it's suggested that the hackers had assistance from a disgruntled ex-Ashley Madison employee.

"Time's up!" the hackers announced when Ashley Madison and its two sister companies remained in business after a warning. "We have explained the fraud, deceit, and stupidity of ALM and their members. Now everyone gets to see their data."

Data, the new private parts, was duly exposed, with women told: "Chances are your man signed up on the world's biggest affair site, but never had one. He just tried to. If that distinction matters."

Marital infidelity brings people including, apparently, hackers, to the very highest pitches of moral indignation – even today, in a world where teenage daughters and sons may well make contributions to amateur pornography websites. So outrageous is the idea of being cheated on – and so staunchly moral – that adultery would seem a universal, timeless evil. But a look at 20th-century history, at least in Britain, suggests that infidelity was not always the worst thing that could happen to a marriage.

In fact, as leading social and cultural historian Professor Claire Langhamer makes clear, perceptions of the wrongness of affairs are linked to changes in attitudes to relationships in the post-war period. The more marriage became tethered to love, with sex its crowning glory, the more fidelity mattered. At the same time, the arrival of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s and no-fault divorce led to a more sexually-oriented, exploratory approach to relationships. Yet as Langhamer argues, even as attitudes grew more permissive, with experimentation before and during marriage becoming more common, attitudes towards infidelity hardened.
So does the tsunami of personal and marital nightmares unleashed by the data from a site like Ashley Madison being made public mean that modern relationships are too close, or endowed with too much importance? Would it be better for cheaters and their spouses if relationships were more economic and pragmatic, and less territorial and sexualised? Perhaps.

It might also be better if we saw a renewal of the art of discretion – itself a kind of pragmatism in a digitised age where commercial promises of security can be so quickly overturned. Here the hackers of Ashley Madison make a good point: the site said all its user information was deleted – and it wasn’t.

Looking back to mid-20th-century Britain, a female volunteer from the sociological Mass Observer project put the central, and perhaps distinctly British, role of keeping schtum instead of open censorship (or open admission) when she said:

*I would never have foreseen … that I would be involved in a significant number of extra-marital affairs or that they would prove part of the life experience of most (not all) of my family and friends … Such relationships were still spoken about in a whisper, behind closed doors, shocking. Yet my own family was quite considerably rattled by a quasi-affair of my father’s: muttered about, hinted about, never pronounced openly.*

Adultery is not likely to stop because people say it’s bad. Internet dating sites must learn to guarantee that private actions are “never pronounced openly” – in failing to do so, Ashley Madison has got its comeuppance. As for its customers’ best-laid plans, I'll leave that to you to judge.

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