

A French Affair Dot Com

I was recently in Paris for an academic conference on computer science and I found myself on a train station platform staring at a billboard on the other side of the tracks. From that billboard a picture of woman, seen only from her neck to just under her eyes held a finger up as if to beckon me to be quieter, "Shhhh!" It was not particularly remarkable. It certainly wasn't as visually provocative as high-end clothing retailers (e.g., Bebe, Guess, Deisel) tend to be. Since I don't read French easily, I didn't initially take notice. But what caught my attention was the graffiti on it. Scrawled across the larger-than-life image were the words "fidélité" and "le mariage est sacré". Ever on the lookout for Banksy, I tried to make sense of the tags. That was strange, I thought, who writes, "Marriage is sacred" on a billboard?

As college students, most of whom are single, you may have passing familiarity with a few dating websites. Perhaps match.com, eHarmony or the various explicitly Christian clones. Further along a spectrum of such services are smartphone apps such as Tinder. These location-aware services are often implicated in the breathless reporting on "hook-up culture". Appropriately in my opinion, as they sure seem to be optimized to facilitate fleeting sexual encounters and objectification of both genders.¹

It turns out that this billboard was for something yet further afield, a service, called Ashley Madison. This service's mission was focused on helping married individuals have affairs with each other. I never saw it advertised outside of that train station in France, but if you have recently read the news you know that it appears to be wildly popular in the U.S. Malicious people with the ability to break into computer systems broke into AshleyMadison.com and stole the database of users. After alerting the site that the data had been copied, and presumably making an attempt at blackmail, they released the data to the public. One can now go and use a variety of third-party services to search the data to see who was brazenly registered with the salacious site.

It's clear that the fallout of this breach is profound. This isn't just your email address being compromised (sigh, more spam). This isn't just your shopping habits at Target. It is a privacy breach with social not just economic ramifications. Just yesterday my mom texted me with the latest acquaintance found to be listed in the site's database. In an unfortunate, but common pattern it was remarkable because it was a former pastor. I'm sure we will see several more examples in the coming days of people who are brought low by similar discoveries.

People who study online privacy have in many ways predicted this. What I find interesting about their predictions is not that such a breach would happen: that was pretty obvious to the computer scientists. What was more remarkable was the

¹ [Tinder and the Dawn of the "Dating Apocalypse"](#)

claim that we would stop caring. The argument goes that as more and more of our data goes online, those aspects of our lives that we used to keep private will no longer be able to be kept private and the result will not be a change in behavior but a change in standards. Our collective desire to have affairs is the most recent taboo to fall under the test of this hypothesis.

So what can we learn from this? The first thing that I'm reminded of is that we should set Christ as our model and example. He is before all things and holds all things together. He is our prize and our redeemer. To the degree that we create idols out of fellow humans, even those that pursue Christ, if that person is discovered in the AshleyMadison.com database we can be devastated. Imagine if an Old Testament version of you had put all your hope in the fidelity of King David and Nathan suddenly was at the door. This data breach is strikingly similar to the prophet in that story (2 Samuel 12).

Secondly is a socio-technical note. In our increasingly digitized world there is very little that can be kept hidden anymore. As the Internet of things pursues the manifest destiny of silicon, some organization will have access to everything you choose to do. It may be time to get honest with who you really are and if that is hard, scary and chaotic, start finding brothers and sisters who can walk with you through the parts that need redemption. On campus there are a variety of resources from friends, to RAs, to the [Student Life Counseling Center](#) that are waiting to come alongside you. I dare say we will all be in some database like this before we are done.

Finally, a note to those hopeful computer science majors: what you choose to build matters. How you choose to build it matters. Don't take a job with the next AshleyMadison. Don't start the next AshleyMadison. You are some of the few who will be able to put the power of computing to work for the kingdom of God. Be an information architect who strives after Christ. The next time I'm in Paris I'd like to see your billboard beckoning me to a better world and the graffiti decidedly more crass.

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P.S. A brief word on these users: just because someone's information was in the database doesn't *technically* mean that they entered it in. It was apparently not very difficult to sign other people up. It also doesn't necessarily mean they had an affair. So don't necessarily freak out. Walk with grace.²

² [Almost None of the Women in the Ashley Madison Database Ever Used the Site](#)