

Ashley Madison
The Observer

Life after the Ashley Madison affair

It's six months since hackers leaked the names of 30 million people who had used the infidelity website Ashley Madison. Resignations, divorces and suicides followed. Tom Lamont sifts through the wreckage



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End of the affairs: at the time of the leak, Ashley Madison claimed to have 37.6m members, all of them assured the site was totally discreet.

It was 9 o'clock on a Sunday night last July when a journalist called [Brian Krebs](#) came upon the scoop of his life. The 42-year-old was at home in Virginia at the time, and wearing pyjamas. For years Krebs had written a popular blog about internet security, analysing thefts of consumer data from big companies around the world, Tesco, Adobe, Domino's Pizza among them. Now Krebs, as his weekend came to an end, was being tipped off about a more sensational breach. An anonymous informant had emailed him a list of links, directing him to caches of data that had been stolen from servers at a Canadian firm called Avid Life Media (ALM). Krebs vaguely knew of ALM. For years it had run a notorious, widely publicised web service called [Ashley Madison](#), a dating site founded in 2008 with the explicit intention of helping married people have affairs with each other. "Life is short. Have an affair" was the slogan Ashley Madison used.

At the time Krebs received his tip-off, Ashley Madison claimed to have an international membership of 37.6 million, all of them assured that their use of this service would be "anonymous", "100% discreet". Only now Krebs was looking at the real names and the real credit-card numbers of Ashley Madison members. He was looking at street addresses and postcodes. Among documents in the leaked cache, Krebs found a list of telephone numbers for senior executives at ALM and Ashley Madison. He even found the personal mobile number of the CEO, a Canadian called [Noel Biderman](#). "How you doing?" Krebs asked Biderman when he dialled and got through – still not sure, until this moment, that he was on to a legitimate story.

Biderman said: "You can probably guess."

Then the CEO of [Ashley Madison](#) began the slow, careful work of begging Krebs not to publish anything about the most appallingly intimate internet leak of the modern age.

Only a few hours later, in the west of England, a contentedly married man we'll call Michael woke up and went through his usual Monday-morning routine. Coffee. Email. A skim of the news online. Already [Krebs's story](#) about a hack of servers at Ashley Madison had been picked up by prominent media agencies. The story was a lead item on every news page Michael browsed. Infidelity site hacked, he read; a group calling itself the Impact Team claiming responsibility and threatening to release a full database of Ashley Madison customers, present and past, inside a month. More than 30 million people in more than 40 countries affected.

Though in the days to come the number of active users of Ashley Madison's service would be disputed – was that figure of 37.6 million for real? – Michael could say for sure there were many authentic adulterers who used the site because he was one of them. “I'd taken some elementary precautions,” Michael told me recently, explaining that he'd registered on Ashley Madison with a secret email address and chosen a username by which he couldn't be personally identified. He *had* uploaded a photograph. He was experienced enough with adultery websites – Ashley Madison and a British equivalent called [Illicit Encounters](#) – to know that “if you don't put a photo up you won't get many responses”. But the picture he chose was small and he was wearing sunglasses in it. “Deniable,” Michael said. Whenever he visited the site he was careful. If he wanted to log on to Ashley Madison to speak to women he would only do so on a work laptop he kept in his office at home. Michael had six internet browsers installed on the laptop, and one of these browsers could only be loaded via external hard drive – this was the browser he used to arrange affairs. So Michael was “irritated and surprised” to realise, that Monday morning, that his elaborate precautions had been pointless. He tried to work out ways in which he would be exposed if the hackers went through with their threat to release Ashley Madison's customer database.

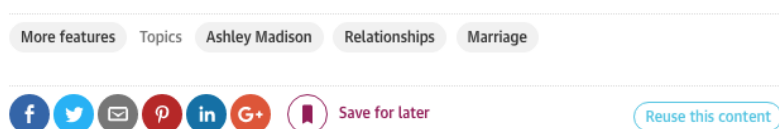
Subscriptions to the site were arranged so that women could use the service for free while men paid a monthly fee – this, in theory, to encourage an even balance in its membership. Michael had joined Ashley Madison after seeing it written about in a newspaper. He recalled getting a deal as a new signee and being charged something like £20 for his first month. He paid using his credit card. The profile name and email address he'd chosen were no threat, the photograph deniable – “but your credit card,” Michael realised, “is your credit card.” At this time there would have been a lot of men (even conservative estimates put the number of paid-up Ashley Madison subscribers at the time well into the millions) thinking: your credit card is your credit card.

Michael followed it all from his home computer as the story evolved, through July and into August, into an enormous, consistently strange, consistently ghastly global calamity.

On 18 August, Ashley Madison's entire customer database was indeed put online. In the subsequent panic, rewards for information about the hackers were offered. Police in Toronto (the city where ALM was based) vowed to find the culprits. Meanwhile politicians, priests, military members, civil servants, celebrities – these and hundreds of other public figures were found among the listed membership. Millions more, formerly anonymous, suddenly had their private details sprayed out on to the internet. It varied according to an individual's caution when signing up to the site, and to their luck, and to their gender (the men in general more exposed because of Ashley Madison's requirement they pay by credit card), but after the leak some people found they could be identified not only by their names and their addresses but also by their height, their weight, even their erotic preferences.

Moral crusaders, operating with impunity, began to shame and squeeze the exposed. In Alabama editors at a newspaper decided to print in its pages all the names of people from the region who appeared on Ashley Madison's database. After some high-profile resignations all around North America, people wondered if there might not be a risk of more tragic repercussions. Brian Krebs, with some prescience, wrote a blog advising sensitivity: “There's a very real chance that people are going to overreact,” he wrote. “I wouldn't be surprised if we saw people taking their lives because of this.”

A small number of suicides were reported, a priest in Louisiana among them. Speaking to the media after his death, the priest's wife said he'd found out his name was among those on the list before he killed himself. She said she would have forgiven her husband, and that God would have too. “God's grace in the midst of shame is the centre of the story for us, not the hack. My husband knew that grace, but somehow forgot that it was his when he took his own life.”...



For the rest of the piece go to <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/feb/28/what-happened-after-ashley-madison-was-hacked>