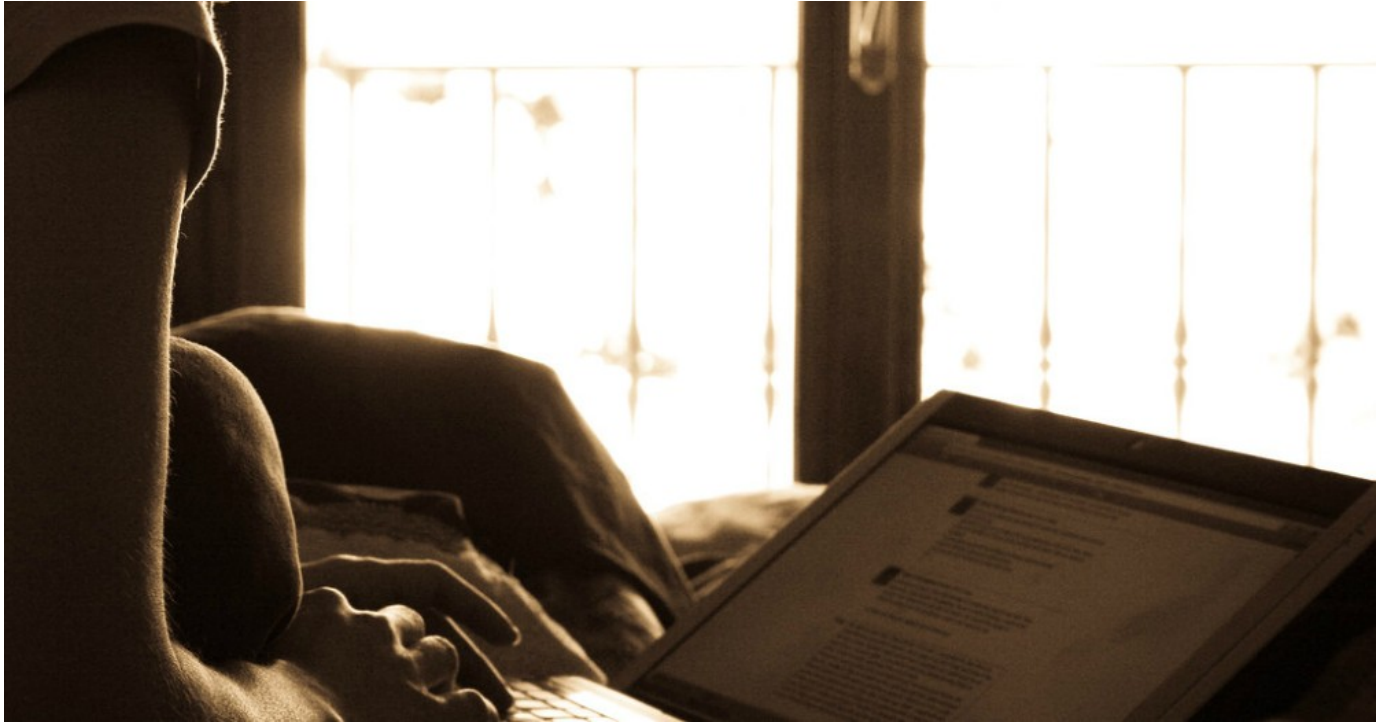


What Google doesn't know: Lessons from the Ashley Madison hack

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [September 30, 2015](#) issue



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I remember discovering, years ago, that Google's default setting is to preserve one's entire online search history. I immediately disabled the feature. I didn't want to know. I preferred the search box in the corner of my web browser to function as a gateway to oblivion. Whether a query was a work-related bit of research, a telltale sign of procrastination, or evidence of embarrassing curiosity, I did not want to face the long and absurd list of things for which I had searched.

The existence of this search history gave me a glimpse of something I've since come to understand more deeply, as the years pass and I amass more log-ins and apps and "friends": the Internet knows me very, very well.

And the Internet is astounding, isn't it? You can FaceTime the grandparents. You can locate Bible verses, slow-cooker recipes, sports scores, and the symptoms of fibromyalgia, mitochondrial disease, and yeast infection. You can generate driving directions from Tallahassee, Florida, to Sioux City, Iowa. You can Google "mushrooms growing out of showerhead," "is pokeweed poisonous," "Taylor Swift

Lisa Kudrow smelly cat.” You can find other people who are equally passionate about rat terriers, the Avett Brothers, typography. You can tweet #blacklivesmatter. You can watch pandas sneeze and episodes of *Family Ties*. You can get stuck on the 117th level of Candy Crush. You can uncover the digestive effects of eating escolar at the sushi bar without having to weather an extremely awkward conversation with another human being.

Lest we forget that it’s not all cat videos and convenience, you can also propagate hate on white supremacist sites. You can access pornography calibrated to titillate any proclivity under the sun. You can get radicalized and make arrangements to travel to Syria to join ISIS. You can upload images of violence and degradation so unthinkable that the people employed to review these images suffer from posttraumatic stress. You can cyberbully adolescents. You can sign up for a website that purports to connect you discreetly to locals interested in torrid extramarital affairs.

You can do all this on the Internet, yet the Internet is not all-powerful. For starters: it cannot promise privacy, and it cannot guarantee security.

The recent hack of the Ashley Madison website and the subsequent release of its user data exposed a lot of people who had done an incredibly dumb and immoral thing. The online service’s purpose is to connect people looking for an extramarital affair. The exposed data included a disconcerting number of .mil, .gov, and .edu e-mail addresses, and *Christianity Today* blogger Ed Stetzer estimated that around 400 pastors would resign once they were outed as Ashley Madison customers. Publicly and privately, many people are grappling with disillusionment, betrayal, and heartbreak as the site’s users fall hard and fast from grace.

The reaction to the hack has been fairly predictable. There has been a frantic search for familiar names; infamy is much more fun when the culprit is already famous. There has been schadenfreude, especially in response to perhaps the most brazenly hypocritical offender: reality TV star, former Family Research Council staffer, and alleged child molester Josh Duggar. There has been hand-wringing about the moral bankruptcy bespoken by an adultery site with 32 million users. There has even been find-the-silver-lining talk: in a recent post for Think Christian, a site funded by the Christian Reformed Church, Kory Plockmeyer celebrates that “the predominant reaction [to the hack]—even beyond the church—is that marriage is to be sacrosanct between spouses.”

One common response appears to be humility, an admission that we are all sinners. After the hack, R. C. Sproul Jr. confessed publicly that he had visited the site. A month earlier, the conservative theologian wrote, “We are all sinners, and we are all, in ourselves, justly under the wrath of God, and we will all give an answer for all that we’ve done, all that we’ve said, all that we’ve thought, and for every website we have visited.” It’s like the story in John’s Gospel of the woman caught in adultery. The only difference is that there are a great many more potential targets as we ponder whether we really have the moral credibility to throw the first stone.

A few years ago, Tim Kreider wrote this for the *New York Times*:

I’ve often thought that the single most devastating cyberattack a diabolical and anarchic mind could design would not be on the military or financial sector but simply to simultaneously make every e-mail and text ever sent universally public. It would be like suddenly subtracting the strong nuclear force from the universe; the fabric of society would instantly evaporate, every marriage, friendship and business partnership dissolved.

An utterly chilling thought, isn’t it? It makes the Ashley Madison hack look quaint in comparison. I have certainly said and done things in one context that would be troublesome in another. I suspect that my private e-mails, made public, could undo me in a quick minute.

We affirm a right to privacy, yet privacy is largely an illusion. As Sproul rightly if unwisely pontificated, we hide nothing from God. Ironically, the Internet, in becoming such a powerful force in our lives, illustrates this—albeit as a mere idol. If you took the sum total of everything the Internet knows about any one user—search history, website memberships, financial data, e-mail archive—you might well be able to conjure up a reasonable facsimile for Who You Really Are, secrets and all.

But the avatar person constructed by the idol god is not, ultimately, our true self, the one knit together in a mother’s womb by a Creator God. Perhaps it is an article of faith, in this strange new world, to confess that God knows us much more fully than any algorithm or digital trail ever could. For most of us, this may well be a sobering reminder. Human beings are so much more screwed up, collectively speaking, than we care to admit. But we are also so much more beloved than we might dare to believe.

“Go,” Jesus says to the adulteress, the hypocrite, the hacker. “Go, and sin no more.”