

The End of a Hollywood Bedtime Story

BY

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The Ashley Madison fiasco is a tragi-comedy made for Hollywood. Get past the *schadenfreude* and you bump into a chilling moral: Digital hides then amplifies real dangers.

In this sordid affair all kinds of sharp practice and immorality were digitally enabled. The main players are venal and unsympathetic: seducer (Avid Life), thief (Impact Team), parasitic extorters. Don't pity the "victims" either; they were up to no good. *Only* children of the forthcoming broken homes deserve consideration.

Records of about 38-million wanna-be adulterers are stolen. Unsecure data gets dumped, revealing identities. Angst, betrayal, recrimination, despair, suicide follow. Avid Life's internal data is released so we see the company's slimy inner workings. It turns out to be a world record *sausage fest*, with all but a few female profiles being fake. The self-proclaimed, sleazy *King of Infidelity*, founder/CEO Joel Biderman, runs.

Typically, the salacious details dominate. But this misses the point: Digital is dangerous because you *still* can't tell what's real and what's CGI: women, commercial ethics, and so on. It comes down to blind faith.

Whether Avid Life consciously created a sham to take advantage of its market's lesser angels or it just turned out that way, is moot. In doing so it exposed the frayed threads connecting our private and public ethics.

They're not the first. They were just caught out leveraging the magic of digital to accomplish the task: exploiting the reality that the digital world emboldens people to do things that good taste, civility, and ethics inhibit — like, say, adultery.

This is *another* in a succession of important wake up calls. Irrespective of motives, millions of technology-enabled, economically able folks were lured in, disinhibited by the digital realm and unable to distinguish the hoax. Based on the shame and excuse-making, that's many more than judge the old fashioned way of screwing around too risky.

The irony of philanderers being found out because they have to trust is rich. But that is exactly what happens in the opaque digital world.

We have to trust that others, even purportedly legitimate businesses, are real and are good to their words. We have to suborn well-proven experience that businesses, pressured to satisfy markets and make large profits, show limited restraint if the odds favor not being caught. And the temptation is vastly greater in the digital world. After all, until a business (or government) is uncontrollably exposed by a hack, nobody knows.

You could stick your head ~~up your~~ in the sand and incant that it's just one bad apple — and what did you expect, anyway. Good, real, caring businesses managed by professionals don't do that.

Seriously? Only a decade's experience shows that to be a limited, hollow catechism. Historically it's naïve. After all, before August, the Amazonian kingdom was not publicly acknowledged to be effectively slave-enabled. Until 2015, studio exec bitchiness toward

customers and prima donna actors was anecdotal. Had this hack never happened, we'd never know about Avid Life.

What might we see if RBC's or Walmart's or Uber's *corporate correspondence* were similarly exposed? Shouldn't there be some way to know that beyond the usual organizational *Sturm und Drang*, the business is doing behind the curtain what it says in front of it? That even within the free-for-all right to personal data tenderly coerced from us, our secrets are treated appropriately?

The Ashley Madison affair is a very dead canary in the coalmine of digital technology. After all, Avid Life was neither Nigerian email scam nor Ponzi scheme. It was a known, *legitimate*, decade-old Toronto-based web business with millions of customers creating over US\$100-million of annual revenue. Except maybe it wasn't.

That ought to sound alarms of suspicion of every digital operation. Because every digital activity is opaque; a black box behind the screen. Nobody really knows what goes on. It is Schrödinger's cat: both aboveboard and a fraud until you open the box.

At least with a restaurant, you could see the inspection certificate, look at the restaurant, peek into the kitchen. You still might get food poisoning. But you're odds are better and you make an informed choice. You're not hoodwinked by linens and silverware (aka "user experience") to maybe partake of rehashed garbage and rotgut.

This is bad for business. If a US\$100-million web business turns out to be an untrustworthy façade, why not a \$200-million or \$500-million web business? Worse, what if they all follow digital "best practices?" It's just that 'best' is not yet especially good. None of which is economically or socially progressive.

One final word about how this could have been really catastrophic. Remember, Avid Life wanted a billion but was pushing a US\$200-million IPO. It's not outlandish to think

they'd have succeeded eventually. Had this fraud been exposed afterward, add vaporization of a quarter-billion dollars of wealth to its formidable wake of social and economic wreckage.

Wake up. Birds are dying and alarms are ringing.

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