

An affair to delete: Technology for adulterers

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For all their crafty planning, philanderers are surprisingly easy to spot -- and it's usually technology that foils them. As a teenager, back in the dark, silent age before cellphones, I remember walking through my neighbourhood and seeing a friend's father having an urgent conversation on a payphone only two blocks from his house. *Gee*, I thought to myself, *Mr. Smith must be locked out*. That was the last sexually innocent thought I ever had.

Michael Demarco, a Chicago-area-based marketing executive, is no innocent himself. Two years ago, he was taking some time off, "trying to decide," he explained to me in a recent phone interview, "what to do when I grew up." When his jogging partner suggested he might have a business opportunity for him, Demarco decided to check it out. They met at an undisclosed location, where Demarco was introduced to a call centre full of employees, many of them actors, pretending to be hotel clerks from around the world. Others were busy falsifying documents -- flight confirmations, car rental receipts, false conference schedules and the like.

"I walked in," Demarco says, "and I thought, 'This is messed up.'"

Since then, Demarco has been vice-president of marketing for the Alibi Network, a company that describes itself on its website (<http://www.alibinetwork.com>) as "a cutting edge full service agency providing alibis and excused absences as well as assistance with a variety of sensitive issues." In essence, they help people cheat. And the cock-and-bull business is booming -- what with Monday-morning Super Bowl hangovers and the sticky business of Valentine's Day, which Demarco describes as "a real shot in the arm." It's not hard to guess why.

Politicians have spin doctors, celebrities have publicists, CEOs have lawyers -- but what's a regular Joe scam artist to do? To this end, Alibi Networks offers a democratic tech-support system for lies and the lying liars who tell them. The company, which has been a corporate entity for approximately two years now, boasts more than 1,500 clients. And where infidelity is concerned, Demarco says, an amazing 50 per cent of them are women.

Services include, but are not limited to, "rescue calls" to help you get out of an unwanted situation; phone number falsification (so it looks like you're calling from a business trip in Tokyo when you're really calling from a steamy weekend in Paris); call forwarding (your partner can call your hotel in "Tokyo" and it will be forwarded to you in Paris); falsified airline tickets, e-confirmation and flight information; and even the impression of a false job complete with business phone number, personal secretary and business cards.

It's lying with legs -- or, as Demarco explains in his loquacious Chicagoan way, "we create perception and perpetuate prevarication."

Oh, what a tangled World Wide Web we weave.

I have no problem with Demarco's ingenious little racket (and God, it *is* brilliant, isn't it?), but I do wonder how well it works in the end. The problem with illicit affairs (apart from the deceitful/immoral thing) is that they tend to be hopelessly, relentlessly complicated. And while the complexity of entanglement is often part of the initial thrill, eventually people get sloppy. It's human nature. Credit-card bills get left out on a table. Cellphones are misplaced. Your spouse's friends turn up in the strangest places . . . like the seedy bar where you're pawing the babysitter at 2 a.m.

Nietzsche observed that convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies. And when it comes to extramarital affairs, willful blindness on the part of the cuckold is often an enabling factor. But technological aids such as AshleyMadison.com (where bored marrieds can go to meet other bored marrieds for "discreet encounters") and the Alibi Network have taken things to a whole new level. Nietzsche, after all, wasn't living in an era when his wife could text him goodnight from a conference in Denver and actually be cavorting with her lover in the motel around the block.

A recent study conducted in the United Kingdom found that three-quarters of Britons said they regularly used technology to lie. The most favoured methods of false communication were texting, mobile phone and e-mail. The explanation for this wave of high-tech deceit is being called "the social distance hypothesis," which purports that the more heavily mediated our interactions become, the less likely they are to be honest. Or as Marshall McLuhan might say: The medium becomes the made up.

Using the Alibi Network inevitably becomes yet another complicating factor in an already messy situation. Now that you have a false e-ticket, what if you forget to delete the real one? How do you keep the authentic Visa bills separate from the fake? What if your spouse catches you on the site? How do you explain away an incriminating cookie in your computer history?

So technology aids the philanderer, but it introduces a host of new dangers as well. The Alibi Network, cellphones, e-mails -- they all leave electronic paper trails. But perhaps that's the point. As Esther Perel, the Franco-American author of *Mating In Captivity*, recently told me in her wonderfully Frenchy way: "Erotic desire doesn't play by the rules of good citizenship; it pursues the transgressive and thrives on the forbidden."

In other words, philanderers don't give a damn about fact or fiction -- and neither does Demarco. In true French intellectual fashion, he prefers to harvest a healthy profit from the grey area in between. "There's three sides to every story," he points out. "Your side, their side, and the truth."

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