Mapping What No One Else Wants to Map

In July and August of this year the world was pre-occupied with the Ashley Madison data breech. Hackers broke into the adult-focused site and threatened to leak details of the membership if the parent company did not shut down both Ashley Madison and a companion site. The demand was not met and the hacking team made the data available in August, reports Adena Schutzberg.

Since the data included location details a few teams started mapping. After a good deal of searching, I found just a few maps. Clearly, the nature of the site and the challenges of accessing the database kept the wary away. Tecnilógica, an IT shop based in Spain, took on the challenge and made what turned out to be the viral and highly-referenced map on the topic.

I have to give the Tecnilógica team members credit: they mapped the data with care and chose themes that were interesting enough, but not too interesting. The map included just two layers: the gender ratio and a number of users for each included city. The creators stripped out identifying information and omitted cities with fewer than ten users. There are 50,000 points reflecting the roughly 30 million AshleyMadison accounts in the database. Tecnilógica reports the mapmakers spent eight hours building the online map, using CartoDB technology.

It turns out the locations of members could be determined in two ways. One was from the location information used when they signed up. While they may be accurate, those city and country names may well have been consciously misrepresented. A second location for each registrant could be pulled from the IP address of the device from which they signed up. Those can be spoofed, too. Tecnilógica chose to use IP address locations.

The map became widely popular and Tecnilógica CEO Jorge Gutiérrez was quoted around the world. He noted he didn't expect such an interest in the map and confirmed how most people used his company's map: they looked at their location. News outlets did the same. Here's a headline from Lansing, Michigan, USA: Website: 28K Ashley Madison users in the Lansing area. And, here's one from a paper in India: Adultery Site Ashley Madison Had Thousands of Members from India. And, one from a regional UK paper: Cheshire names in Ashley Madison hack. These three articles, and some 2000 other stories, referenced the Tecnilógica map.

I watched carefully to see if CartoDB, would make any comments. Best I can tell, it did not. To its credit, it did not censor the map either.

What can we learn from the Ashley Madison data mapping efforts?

- If there are interesting data with location information, someone will map them. Even with a touchy subject, if the data are open, someone will create and share a map.
- One of the maps will win. Tecnilógica's map was prettier and perhaps more interactive than the others I saw. The timing of publication, very close to the date of the corrected second data dump, likely gave it a head start.
- The media will offer more large scale maps than large scale ones. All news is local!
- If the topic is a flash in the pan, the maps will be, too. Comments on the map's website and links to it in news stories peaked in the week of the data dump. Both then fell off quickly.
- Technology providers will choose to associate themselves, or not, with the topic or map. I suspect, even this risqué topic helped get CartoDB's name out.
- Mapmakers do not have to explain why they decided to make the map. Tecnilógica did not. It did, however, tag a blog post about the making of the map with "crazy projects."
- Maps are a way to talk about a topic without really talking about it. The articles about the map allowed the media to address a risqué topic in a safe and analytical way.

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