A Skeptical View of Information Fiduciaries

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A Skeptical View of Information Fiduciaries

Lina M. Khan* & David E. Pozen**

The concept of “information fiduciaries” has surged to the forefront of debates on online platform regulation. Developed by Professor Jack Balkin, the concept is meant to rebalance the relationship between ordinary individuals and the digital companies that accumulate, analyze, and sell their personal data for profit. Just as the law imposes special duties of care, confidentiality, and loyalty on doctors, lawyers, and accountants vis-à-vis their patients and clients, Balkin argues, so too should it impose special duties on corporations such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter vis-à-vis their end users. Over the past several years, this argument has garnered remarkably broad support and essentially zero critical pushback.

This Essay seeks to disrupt the emerging consensus by identifying a number of lurking tensions and ambiguities in the theory of information fiduciaries, as well as a number of reasons to doubt the theory’s capacity to resolve them satisfactorily. Although we agree with Balkin that the harms stemming from dominant online platforms call for legal intervention, we question whether the concept of information fiduciaries is an adequate or apt response to the problems of information insecurity that he stresses, much less to more fundamental problems associated with outsized market share and business models built on pervasive surveillance. We also call attention to the potential costs of adopting an information-fiduciary framework—a framework that, we fear, invites an enervating complacency toward online platforms’ structural power and a premature abandonment of more robust visions of public regulation.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital businesses such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter collect an enormous amount of data about their users. Sometimes they do things with this data that threaten the users’ best interests, from allowing predatory advertising and enabling discrimination to inducing addiction and sharing sensitive details with third parties. Online platforms may also disserve their users and the general public in myriad other ways, including by facilitating the spread of disinformation and the harassment of certain categories of speakers. The European Union has responded to some of these concerns with a comprehensive personal data law, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).¹ After years of relative neglect, U.S. policymakers, roused by Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica scandal, have begun to consider a range of reforms to enhance consumer privacy, corporate transparency, and data security on the internet.² To an unprecedented degree, technology firms in general and online platforms in particular find themselves “in Congress’s sights.”³

Among the reforms under consideration is the idea of treating online platforms as “information fiduciaries.” Professor Kenneth Laudon appears to have coined this phrase in the early 1990s.⁴

⁴ See Kenneth C. Laudon, Markets and Privacy, in ICIS 1993 PROCEEDINGS 65, 70–71 (1993) (proposing a “National Information Market” within which “information fiduciaries would . . . accept
Since 2014, it has been identified with Professor Jack Balkin, who has developed the idea over a series of papers. Ordinary people, Balkin observes, are deeply dependent on and vulnerable to the digital companies that accumulate, analyze, and sell their personal data for profit. To mitigate this vulnerability and ensure these companies do not betray the trust people place in them, Balkin urges that we draw on principles of fiduciary obligation. Just as the law imposes special duties of care, confidentiality, and loyalty on doctors, lawyers, accountants, and estate managers vis-à-vis their patients and clients, so too should it impose such duties on Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Twitter, and Uber vis-à-vis their end users—although Balkin concedes that the duties will be “more limited” in the digital context.

Support for this idea is swelling. Dozens of legal scholars have endorsed Balkin’s proposal or discussed it approvingly. Journalists have covered it with undisguised enthusiasm; a recent deposits of information from depositors and seek to maximize the return on sales of that information in national markets or elsewhere in return for a fee”).


In recent years, a number of privacy law scholars have highlighted ways in which privacy and trust are intertwined online, if not co-constitutive. See generally, e.g., ARI EZRA WALDMAN, PRIVACY AS TRUST: INFORMATION PRIVACY FOR AN INFORMATION AGE (2018); Neil Richards & Woodrow Hartzog, Taking Trust Seriously in Privacy Law, 19 STAN. TECH. L. REV. 431 (2018).


On our reading, the academic literature taking up the idea of information fiduciaries has been overwhelmingly supportive. For representative responses from leading scholars of internet law, see Frank Pasquale, Toward a Fourth Law of Robotics: Preserving Attribution, Responsibility, and Explainability in an Algorithmic Society, 78 OHIO ST. L.J. 1243, 1244 (2017) (“I believe that Balkin’s concept of information fiduciary is well developed and hard to challenge.”); Tim Wu, An American Alternative to Europe’s Privacy Law, N.Y. TIMES (May 30, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/30/opinion/europe-america-privacy-
Bloomberg subheadline reads: “America needs data rules that won’t crush the tech industry. One law professor may have figured out a solution.”

Lawmakers from both parties have expressed interest. This past December, a group of fifteen Democratic Senators took the next step and introduced legislation that would require online service providers to act as fiduciaries for their users, drawing directly from Balkin’s proposal. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has now signaled his support as well.

Balkin is the legal academy’s preeminent diagnostician of how
theories can move over time from the margins to the mainstream, from “off the wall” to “on the wall.” He is also an ingenious idea entrepreneur whose own theory of information fiduciaries is rapidly making this very transition.

We admire Balkin’s ingenuity and applaud his efforts to advance the cause of platform regulation. Yet while we largely agree with his analysis of why certain digital firms should be regulated more vigorously, we question whether the concept of information fiduciaries is an adequate or apt response to the problems of information asymmetry and abuse that he stresses, much less to more fundamental problems associated with outsized market share and business models that demand pervasive surveillance. The primary aims of this Essay are, first, to identify a number of lurking ambiguities and tensions in the theory of information fiduciaries and, second, to raise concerns about the theory’s capacity to resolve them satisfactorily. The Essay also calls attention to the potential costs of adopting an information-fiduciary framework—a framework that, we fear, invites an enervating complacency about issues of structural power and a premature abandonment of more robust visions of public regulation.

I. FIDUCIARIES FOR WHOM?

Balkin offers his theory of information fiduciaries as a response to problems of asymmetric vulnerability and dependency online. A key feature of the digital economy, he observed in his original essay on the subject, is that “[m]any of the online services that people use require them to trust companies with sensitive personal information.” These companies have “increasing capacities for surveillance and control” of their users, but users have little ability to monitor the companies. Users therefore worry, with good reason, that the companies will take advantage of them. To help level the playing field and allay such worries, Balkin proposes that we draw on principles of fiduciary law that assign one actor (the fiduciary) “special obligations of loyalty and trustworthiness” toward another actor (the beneficiary). As Balkin emphasizes, fiduciary relationships have been created in a variety of contexts, including where ordinary individuals...

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14 Given that the firms Balkin would designate as information fiduciaries vary in the services they provide, the business models they use, and the market dominance they enjoy, any analysis of the designation’s appropriateness or helpfulness will necessarily vary to some extent by firm. For purposes of this analysis, we focus above all on Facebook, both because Facebook is Balkin’s main example of a digital information fiduciary and because it is the company whose practices have most galvanized privacy reformers in recent years. Facebook also happens to offer a particularly stark case study in the inadequacies of the information-fiduciary framework.

15 Balkin, Digital Age, supra note 5.

16 Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 12; see also Balkin, Algorithmic Society, supra note 5, at 1162 (“End-users are transparent to these organizations, but their operations are not transparent to end-users, and it is difficult if not impossible to monitor their operations.”).

17 Balkin, Information Fiduciaries, supra note 5, at 1207. Throughout this Essay, we will use “beneficiaries” as a catch-all term for those to whom fiduciary obligations are owed.
surrender sensitive information to a professional expert—such as a doctor, lawyer, or accountant—to obtain the benefit of the fiduciary’s valuable-yet-not-fully-comprehensible skills and services.\textsuperscript{18}

The principal goal of designating digital companies as fiduciaries for their users, Balkin explains, is to prevent these companies from engaging in “egregious . . . bad behavior.”\textsuperscript{19} No longer will they be able to act like “con artists.”\textsuperscript{20} “The long-term goal is to create legal incentives” for the development of “public-oriented” corporate cultures and industry norms.\textsuperscript{21} Importantly, Balkin maintains that these goals can be pursued without running afoul of the First Amendment\textsuperscript{22} or disrupting “the basic business model of free or subsidized online services” furnished in exchange for the collection and monetization of user data.\textsuperscript{23} A fiduciary approach, in the words of Balkin’s collaborator Jonathan Zittrain, “protects consumers and corrects a clear market failure without the need for heavy-handed government intervention.”\textsuperscript{24}

Assessing these claims requires consideration of, among other things, the legal status quo faced by the relevant companies. Start with corporate law.\textsuperscript{25} Balkin’s central example of a purported information fiduciary, Facebook, is a Delaware corporation.\textsuperscript{26} So are his other main examples, Google, Twitter, and Uber.\textsuperscript{27} Under Delaware law, the officers and directors of a for-profit corporation already owe fiduciary duties—to the corporation and its stockholders. Although the

\textsuperscript{18} See, e.g., Balkin, Algorithmic Society, supra note 5, at 1160 (discussing the development of fiduciary relationships in settings where a “client relies on the fiduciary to perform valuable services” but “is not well-equipped to understand and monitor the fiduciary’s operations”).

\textsuperscript{19} Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 11.

\textsuperscript{20} Balkin, Algorithmic Society, supra note 5, at 1163; Balkin, Triangle, supra note 5, at 2053; Balkin, Three Laws of Robotics, supra note 7, at 1229; see also Lindsey Barrett, Confiding in Con Men: U.S. Privacy Law, the GDPR, and Information Fiduciaries, 42 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 1057, 1094–95 (2019) (echoing Balkin’s “con men” formulation and surveying how advocates of the information-fiduciary framework have defined the obligations that digital fiduciaries would owe their users).

\textsuperscript{21} Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 12.

\textsuperscript{22} See infra section IV.A (reviewing and critiquing this line of argument).

\textsuperscript{23} Balkin, Information Fiduciaries, supra note 5, at 1227.

\textsuperscript{24} Zittrain, How to Exercise, supra note 5.

\textsuperscript{25} Part III turns, briefly, to consumer protection and contract law.

\textsuperscript{26} See Facebook, Inc., Registration Statement (Form S-1) (Feb. 1, 2012) (listing Delaware as Facebook’s jurisdiction of incorporation).

\textsuperscript{27} See Google Inc., Registration Statement (Form S-1) (Apr. 29, 2004); Twitter, Inc., Registration Statement (Form S-1) (Oct. 3, 2013); Uber Technologies, Inc., Restated Certificate of Incorporation (Feb. 28, 2015). Additional companies that Balkin has characterized as information fiduciaries, including Airbnb and OkCupid, are likewise Delaware corporations. See Balkin, Three Laws of Robotics, supra note 7, at 1230; Airbnb, Inc., Notice of Exempt Offering of Securities (Form D) (Mar. 9, 2017); Match Group, Inc., Registration Statement (Form S-1) (Nov. 9, 2015). Microsoft also makes Balkin’s list and is incorporated in the state of Washington. See Jack M. Balkin, The First Amendment in the Second Gilded Age, 66 BUFF. L. REV. 979, 1006 (2018) [hereinafter Balkin, Second Gilded Age]; Amended and Restated Articles of Incorporation of Microsoft Corporation (Nov. 24, 2009); cf. Shanika Weerasundara, State of the “Incorporation”—Delaware or Washington?, TeQLAA (Mar. 16, 2016), http://www.teqlaa.com/state-of-the-incorporation-delaware-or-washington (stating that “Washington corporate law is largely similar to Delaware law” and that “Washington courts often refer to Delaware case law as guidance” in interpreting the Washington Corporation Act).
doctrinal details are complex, the core duty of loyalty is fairly straightforward. As the Court of Chancery explained in 2017, “Delaware case law is clear” that to act loyally, officers and directors “must, within the limits of [their] legal discretion, treat stockholder welfare as the only end, considering other interests only to the extent that doing so is rationally related to stockholder welfare.” Or put another way: “Non-stockholder constituencies and interests can be considered, but only instrumentally, . . . when giving consideration to them can be justified as benefiting the stockholders.” In 2013, Delaware created by statute a new category of corporations, public benefit corporations, whose directors are permitted to “balance[] the pecuniary interests of the stockholders” against “the best interests of those materially affected by the corporation’s conduct” and other public values. The creation of this category reinforces the conventional view that Delaware fiduciary law simply “does not permit traditional corporations to consider non-stockholder constituencies.”

Right off the bat, these observations give reason to question the feasibility, if not also the coherence, of applying the information-fiduciary idea to the leading social media companies. A fiduciary with sharply opposed loyalties teeters on the edge of contradiction. Insofar as the interests of stockholders and users diverge, the officers and directors of these companies may be


29 Id. at *17 n.14 (quoting Leo E. Strine, Jr., The Dangers of Denial: The Need for a Clear-Eyed Understanding of the Power and Accountability Structure Established by the Delaware General Corporation Law, 50 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 761, 771 (2015)); see also eBay Domestic Holdings, Inc. v. Newmark, 16 A.3d 1, 34 (Del. Ch. 2010) (stating that Delaware fiduciary principles require directors “to maximize the economic value of a for-profit Delaware corporation for the benefit of its stockholders”); Julian Velasco, Fiduciary Principles in Corporate Law, in THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF FIDUCIARY LAW 61, 64 (Evan J. Criddle, Paul B. Miller & Robert H. Sitkoff eds., 2019) (“In Delaware, at least, . . . a corporate fiduciary’s duties ultimately are owed to the shareholders alone.”).


31 Ellen J. Odoner, Stephen A. Radin, Lyuba A. Golts & Andrew E. Blumberg, Fiduciary Duties of Corporate Directors in Uncertain Times, MILLSTEIN CTR. FOR GLOBAL MARKETS & CORP. OWNERSHIP 4 (2017), https://millstein.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/docs/105715_millstein_fiduciary_duties.pdf. The extent to which Delaware fiduciary law actually protects shareholders against managerial negligence and self-dealing, compliance failures that result in penalties on the firm, and other bad behavior by corporate officers has been debated for decades. See generally Velasco, supra note 29, at 62–63 (discussing the many “compromises” made by corporate fiduciary law to conserve legal resources and minimize “interference with risky business decisions”). In her response to this Essay, Professor Tamara Piety contends that Delaware law has not proven an effective deterrent to much of this behavior and that this track record supplies an additional reason for skepticism about Balkin’s proposal. Tamara R. Piety, Radical Skepticism About Information Fiduciaries, LAW & POL. ECON. [cite].

32 Cf. Paul B. Miller, Multiple Loyalties and the Conflicted Fiduciary, 40 QUEEN’S L.J. 301, 303, 306 (2014) (explaining that the fiduciary “right of loyalty is commonly understood as being an exclusive claim enjoyed by the beneficiary over the exercise of discretionary power by a fiduciary,” but noting that there are some “difficult” cases in which fiduciaries are “authorized to act in the face of a known conflict”). We consider in Part II how some of the standard legal strategies for managing conflicts among classes of beneficiaries might be mapped onto Balkin’s proposal.
put in the untenable position of having to violate their fiduciary duties (to stockholders) under Delaware law in order to fulfill their fiduciary duties (to end users) under the new body of law that Balkin proposes—at least barring some sort of “heavy-handed government intervention” that expressly prioritizes the latter set of duties.

It is not hard to imagine how the interests of a social media company’s stockholders and users could come apart. We will return to this point in section II.B, but just consider for a moment Facebook’s situation. Facebook is primarily a digital advertising venture. It charges users no monetary price for using the platform and instead makes the vast majority of its revenue through selling targeted advertising placements to third parties. Like other corporations with comparable business models, Facebook therefore has a strong economic incentive to maximize the amount of time users spend on the site and to collect and commodify as much user data as possible. By and large, addictive user behavior is good for business. Divisive and inflammatory content is good for business. Deterioration of privacy and confidentiality norms is good for business. Reforms to make the site less addictive, to deemphasize sensationalistic material, and to enhance personal

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33 Zittrain, How to Exercise, supra note 5.

34 See, e.g., Facebook’s Annual Revenue from 2009 to 2017, by Segment (in Million U.S. Dollars), STATISTA, https://www.statista.com/statistics/267031/facebooks-annual-revenue-by-segment (last visited Feb. 18, 2019) (indicating that over 98 percent of Facebook’s total revenue in 2017, nearly $40 billion, came from advertising). This is not true of dating sites or gig economy companies like Uber and Airbnb, which charge customers for services.

35 As Balkin notes, “advertising revenues depend on the amount of time and attention spent on the site.” Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 2.


37 See generally, Emily Bell & Taylor Owen, The Platform Press: How Silicon Valley Reengineered Journalism, TOW CTR. FOR DIGITAL JOURNALISM (Mar. 29, 2017), https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/platform-press-how-silicon-valley-reengineered-journalism.php (explaining that “the structure and the economics of social platforms incentivize the spread of low-quality content over high-quality material”); Sue Halpern, Apologize Later, N.Y. REV. BOOKS, Jan. 17, 2019, at 12, 14 (“While the formula [Facebook] came up with was quite simple—growth is a function of engagement—it so happened that engagement was best served by circulating sensational, divisive, and salacious content. Allowing discordant and false material on the platform was not a glitch in the business plan—it was the plan.”); Nicholas Thompson & Fred Vogelstein, Inside the Two Years That Shook Facebook—and the World, WIRED (Feb. 12, 2018), https://www.wired.com/story/inside-facebook-mark-zuckerberg-2-years-of-hell (discussing the growing recognition after the 2016 presidential election “that Facebook had long helped to create an economic system that rewarded publishers for sensationalism, not accuracy or depth”).

38 See, e.g., BERNARD E. HARCOURT, EXPOSED: DESIRE AND DISOBEDIENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE 1–28 (2015) (discussing Facebook’s data-mining and surveillance practices and the degree to which they foster and depend upon “a society of exposure and exhibition,” in which people are “dulled into not caring” about privacy “because there is ‘nothing to hide’ and ‘no place to hide’”); Bruce Schneier, How We Sold Our Souls—and More—to the Internet Giants, THE GUARDIAN (May 17, 2015), https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/may/17/sold-our-souls-and-more-to-internet-giants-privacy-surveillance-bruce-schneier (explaining, with reference to Facebook, that “[s]urveillance is the business model of the internet” and that people’s “tendency to undervalue privacy is exacerbated by companies deliberately making sure that privacy is not salient to users”).
privacy would arguably be in the best interests of users. Yet each of these reforms would also pose a threat to Facebook’s bottom line and therefore to the interests of shareholders.39

Doctors, lawyers, accountants, and the like do not experience such acute tensions within their sets of fiduciary obligations. Tensions do arise, both because these fiduciaries may stand to profit from selling beneficiaries as many products and services as possible (whatever the beneficiaries’ true needs) and because there may be misalignments among beneficiaries, as in the case of a financial servicer acting on behalf of multiple investors40 or a law firm partner with fiduciary duties to her copartners as well as her clients.41 Some of these fiduciaries may even be employed by publicly traded companies,42 although most are not; longstanding rules of professional conduct, for instance, prohibit nonlawyer ownership of law firms in the United States.43 Yet while Delaware law allows for directors’ duties to shareholders to be qualified by other legal duties44 and while digital information fiduciaries would not be unique in facing cross-cutting fiduciary obligations, the nature and scope of the inter-fiduciary conflicts they would face seem qualitatively distinct. As

39 Recent market developments corroborate this concern. In January 2018, Facebook adjusted its algorithm to favor more content from “friends” and less content from brands and publishers, a move its CEO promoted as ensuring that time spent on the platform is “time well spent.” Post of Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook (Jan. 11, 2018), https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10104413015393571. Immediately after Facebook announced that the adjustment had led users to spend less time on the platform, the company’s stock fell by five percent, “a rare decline for a company that consistently outpaces Wall Street’s estimates.” Seth Fiegerman, Facebook Users Are Spending Less Time on the Site, CNN (Jan. 31, 2018), https://money.cnn.com/2018/01/31/technology/facebook-earnings/index.html.

40 See Steven L. Schwarcz, Fiduciaries with Conflicting Obligations, 94 MINN. L. REV. 1867 passim (2010) (discussing this phenomenon); see also Kent Greenfield, New Principles for Corporate Law, 1 HASTINGS BUS. L.J. 87, 103 (2005) (noting that corporate directors “owe fiduciary duties to holders of all classes of stock even when the interests of the various classes are in conflict”).

41 See Robert W. Hillman, The Impact of Partnership Law on the Legal Profession, 67 FORDHAM L. REV. 393, 399 (1998) (“A lawyer as fiduciary serves two masters—the lawyer’s partners and the lawyer’s clients. The differing interests of the beneficiaries of a partner’s loyalty obligation may diverge significantly and even be in conflict.”); see also, e.g., Raymond T. Nimmer & Richard B. Feinberg, Chapter 11 Business Governance: Fiduciary Duties, Business Judgment, Trustees and Exclusivity, 6 BANKR. DEV. J. 1, 27 (1989) (describing how debtor-in-possession fiduciaries bear “not only the obligation to protect the estate, but also the explicit power to make choices that benefit some claimants and harm others”).


43 See Roberta S. Karmel, Will Law Firms Go Public?, 35 U. PA. J. INT’L L. 487, 490–91 (2013) (reviewing these rules and explaining that the “basic concern animating [them] is that permitting nonlawyer ownership or direction would subject lawyers to meeting the goals of the nonlawyers rather than meeting their duties to clients”). There has been some debate in recent years about whether these rules should be relaxed, as they have been in several Commonwealth countries, but as of now they still hold. See generally id.; Nick Robinson, When Lawyers Don’t Get All the Profits: Non-Lawyer Ownership, Access, and Professionalism, 29 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 1 (2016); Elizabeth Olson, A Call for Law Firms to Go Public, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 18, 2015), https://dealbook.nytimes.com/2015/02/18/a-call-for-law-firms-to-go-public.

44 This is the import of the phrase “within the limits of [their] legal discretion” in the passage quoted supra note 28 and accompanying text.
Balkin acknowledges, traditional commercial fiduciaries are not nearly as invested as digital firms in eliciting ongoing personal exposure from, or monetizing the personal data of, their customers.\textsuperscript{45} The potential conflicts between equity owners and end users that arise from these practices are not isolated or incidental but cut to the core of the firms’ business.

Traditional fiduciaries are also embedded in thicker relationships of care. Doctors, lawyers, and accountants have a limited number of clients or patients on whose behalf they perform specialized tasks and exercise judgment, in all cases guided by the beneficiary’s individual preferences and circumstances as well as by shared norms of a knowledge community.\textsuperscript{46} Within the context of such relationships, the law is generally able to manage the problem of divided loyalties by requiring fiduciaries to minimize self-dealing and obvious conflicts; to furnish informed disclosure when conflicts are unavoidable; and, above all, to prioritize the interests of clients and patients over the fiduciary’s own interests and the interests of any other beneficiaries.\textsuperscript{47}

Would the same legal strategies work for digital information fiduciaries? Can the duties they already owe to stockholders be harmonized with the new duties they would owe to users without doing too much violence either to the companies themselves or to fundamental principles of fiduciary law?

\section*{II. FIDUCIARIES IN WHAT SENSE?}

\subsection*{A. Managing Divided Loyalties}

Balkin has never squarely addressed the issue of cross-cutting loyalties.\textsuperscript{48} Nor, as far as we can tell, has any other advocate of the information-fiduciary proposal. But it is possible to imagine at least four ways one might try to reconcile a corporation like Facebook’s fiduciary obligations to stockholders with fiduciary obligations to users.

\textsuperscript{45} Balkin, Three Laws of Robotics, supra note 7, at 1229; see also Balkin, Triangle, supra note 5, at 2049 (contrasting social media companies and search engines, on the one hand, with doctors and lawyers, on the other, and remarking that the former “will always be tempted to use the data [they collect] in ways that sacrifice the interests of their end users to the company’s economic or political interests”).

\textsuperscript{46} On the idea of professions as knowledge communities, see Claudia E. Haupt, Professional Speech, 125 YALE L.J. 1238, 1241–42, 1248–54 (2016).

\textsuperscript{47} See, e.g., MODEL CODE OF PROF’L RESPONSIBILITY EC 5-1 (Am. Bar Ass’n 1980) (“The professional judgment of a lawyer should be exercised . . . solely for the benefit of his client and free of compromising influences and loyalties. Neither his personal interests, the interests of other clients, nor the desires of third persons should be permitted to dilute his loyalty to his client.”); Robert W. Hillman, Loyalty in the Firm: A Statement of General Principles on the Duties of Partners Withdrawing from Law Firms, 55 WASH. & LEE L. REV. 997, 1031 (1998) (observing that across numerous areas of legal practice “the overriding value of protecting the interests of clients serves to temper fiduciary duties that run between law partners”); Martha S. Swartz, “Conscience Clauses” or “Unconscionable Clauses”: Personal Beliefs Versus Professional Responsibilities, 6 YALE J. HEALTH POL’Y, L. & ETHICS 269, 348 (2006) (noting that the principle that “the ‘patient’s interest comes first’” “appears in all medical professionals’ codes of ethics”).

\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, the term “Delaware” does not appear once in any of Balkin’s writings in this area.
First, it might be argued that Delaware law does not categorically demand that the interests of shareholders (or the corporation itself, understood in some distinct sense\textsuperscript{49}) be prioritized over the interests of other constituencies. If this were true, then perhaps a Facebook director’s duties to stockholders could simply be subordinated to her duties to users when the two collide, much like a law firm partner’s duties to her fellow partners must sometimes give way to her duties to clients. The fundamental flaw in this argument, however, is that it runs counter to the prevailing understanding of Delaware doctrine—which, according to the Chief Justice of the Delaware Supreme Court, “could not have been more clear” since the mid-1980s “that directors of a for-profit corporation must at all times pursue the best interests of the corporation’s stockholders.”\textsuperscript{50}

Second, it might be argued that reforms to advance the best interests of users by reducing addiction, limiting advertising, protecting privacy, and so on would also advance the best interests of an online platform and its shareholders, for instance because fostering trust in the present period may make it easier to retain and recruit users in future periods. Delaware law broadly permits, and on some accounts even requires, directors to take a long-run perspective.\textsuperscript{51} The fact that corporations like Facebook have persistently declined to self-regulate along such lines,\textsuperscript{52} however, suggests that their boards do not see these reforms as likely to enhance firm value or shareholder wealth either in the short or the long term.

Third, as alluded to above,\textsuperscript{53} corporate law might be modified through state or federal legislation to authorize or compel platforms to put users’ interests ahead of stockholders’ interests (either in general or in specific respects). In a much-noted 2016 essay in The Atlantic, Balkin and Zittrain call for a preemptive federal statute to strike “a new, grand bargain organized around the idea of fiduciary responsibility.”\textsuperscript{54} As they describe it, however, the state and local laws this statute would displace are not laws about shareholder primacy but rather “laws about online privacy.”\textsuperscript{55} At no point has Balkin or Zittrain instructed that their proposal would require modification of companies’ existing fiduciary duties to accommodate new duties to users.

\textsuperscript{49} See generally Robert Barlett & Eric Talley, Law and Corporate Governance, in 1 THE HANDBOOK OF THE ECONOMICS OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE 177, 194–99 (Benjamin E. Hermalin & Michael S. Weisbach eds., 2017) (discussing the persistent “ambiguity” in Delaware fiduciary law about how to handle situations in which “the interests of the corporation writ large” appear to diverge from “the short-term interests of its common shareholders”).

\textsuperscript{50} Leo E. Strine, Jr., The Dangers of Denial: The Need for a Clear-Eyed Understanding of the Power and Accountability Structure Established by the Delaware General Corporation Law, 50 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 761, 771 (2015).

\textsuperscript{51} See Odoner, Radin, Goltser & Blumberg, supra note 31, at 4.

\textsuperscript{52} See, e.g., DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA & SPORT COMM., UK HOUSE OF COMMONS, DISINFORMATION AND ‘FAKE NEWS’: FINAL REPORT 20–42 (2019), https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1791/1791.pdf (detailing how Facebook has repeatedly taken actions that increased revenue at the expense of users’ privacy and data security).

\textsuperscript{53} See supra text accompanying note 33.

\textsuperscript{54} Balkin & Zittrain, supra note 5.

\textsuperscript{55} Id.
On the contrary, information-fiduciary advocates generally appear to endorse a fourth and final strategy for managing conflicts between stockholders and users, which is to cabin any fiduciary duties afforded to users so that they do not seriously threaten firm value—and thus might even be implemented by judges in the absence of legislation.\textsuperscript{56} Balkin has stated repeatedly that the new obligations he would impose on entities like Facebook, Google, and Twitter are “more limited” than the obligations imposed on lawyers, doctors, and accountants.\textsuperscript{57} One way to understand this formulation is as an effort to elicit better behavior from digital companies without undermining the shareholder primacy norm. If traditional professional fiduciaries must temper their duties to investors (if there are any) and other beneficiaries with a higher duty of loyalty to patients and clients, it seems that Facebook, Google, and Twitter would, as a rule, have to temper their duties to users with a higher duty of loyalty to shareholders. Delaware law would remain unaffected. The interests of shareholders would still come first.\textsuperscript{58}

Pursuant to this strategy, reformers may indeed be able to mitigate the problem of conflicting fiduciary obligations and purchase legal coherence—but at a steep price. For if the concept of digital information fiduciaries does \textit{not} require online platforms to place their users’ interests above all other interests, it is unclear what work the concept is supposed to be doing. More than that, it is unclear how this is a fiduciary approach in any meaningful sense.

\textit{B. Online Behavioral Advertising and the Implausibility of Putting Users First}

Balkin is quick to emphasize that fiduciary duties are not one-size-fits-all in the law and that they can and do vary from context to context.\textsuperscript{59} This is true, but within limits. The one thing that does not vary, in contexts where professional firms owe fiduciary duties to individual customers, is that the fiduciary always must act in the customer’s best interest. As Zittrain himself has written,\textsuperscript{57} E.g., Balkin, \textit{Information Fiduciaries}, supra note 5, at 1226; Balkin, \textit{Three Laws of Robotics}, supra note 7, at 1229; Balkin, \textit{Fixing Social Media}, supra note 5, at 12.

\textsuperscript{56} It is unclear whether, and how, Balkin believes judges could implement his proposal on their own, without prior statutory or regulatory reform, but certain passages seem to hold out the possibility of a lead role for courts in defining as well as enforcing new fiduciary obligations. \textit{See, e.g.}, Balkin, \textit{Fixing Social Media}, \textit{supra} note 5, at 15 (asserting that one advantage of the fiduciary approach is it “can be implemented \ldots by judges, legislatures, or administrative agencies”); Balkin, \textit{Digital Age}, \textit{supra} note 5 (suggesting that “common law courts,” as distinct from “the state,” might “treat online service providers as information fiduciaries”).

\textsuperscript{57} E.g., Balkin, \textit{Information Fiduciaries}, \textit{supra} note 5, at 1226; Balkin, \textit{Three Laws of Robotics}, \textit{supra} note 7, at 1229; Balkin, \textit{Fixing Social Media}, \textit{supra} note 5, at 12.

\textsuperscript{58} For the reasons given in the main text, this strikes us as the most natural reading of the literature to date. In recent conversations, Balkin has informed us that he assumes the corporate-law fiduciary duties owed by digital platform directors \textit{would} have to be curtailed in important respects to operationalize his proposal. That is, Balkin embraces a version of the third strategy on our list. We will consider this Essay a (partial) success if it pushes Balkin and other advocates of the information-fiduciary idea to clarify their position here—and to grapple explicitly with the question of whether and to what extent they envision sacrificing stockholders’ economic interests to advance users’ noneconomic interests.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{See, e.g.}, Balkin, \textit{Information Fiduciaries}, \textit{supra} note 5, at 1223 (“[A] changing society generates new kinds of fiduciary relations and fiduciary obligations that the law can and should recognize. The scope of the fiduciary duty, however, is not the same for every entity.”); Balkin, \textit{Digital Age}, \textit{supra} note 5 (“[T]here are many types of fiduciary duties.”).
“at its core [a fiduciary relationship] means that the professionals are obliged to place their clients’ interests ahead of their own.”

Abandon this core tenet, and it is unclear what is left of the legal analogy to doctors, lawyers, accountants, and estate managers. The social media executive who is exhort to treat users well (and prohibited from engaging in certain especially egregious behaviors) yet not required to place users’ interests first resembles, instead, the used car dealers and restauranteurs who are classic examples in the case law of service providers who are not fiduciaries for their customers. “Although each of these relationships involves significant information asymmetries,” as Professor Evan Criddle has explained, “the relationships are all presumptively arm’s-length; none by definition involves an entrustment of power from one party to another to be exercised under a purposive and other-regarding mandate.” Again, the United States Congress or the Delaware General Assembly could impose a broad user-regarding mandate on social media companies and thereby try to create duties of loyalty and care where none currently exist. But to succeed in this effort and wind up with anything recognizable as a fiduciary relationship, it seems to us that the legislators would have to force fundamental changes in the companies’ business practices—changes that information-fiduciary advocates have suggested are unnecessary and unwarranted—and preempt or dilute the stockholder-regarding norms under which the companies currently operate.

Part III will consider the practices that digital information fiduciaries, on Balkin’s account, would be barred from engaging in. But Balkin is clear that at least one core practice would survive his reforms: the selling of targeted advertisements tied to personally identifiable information. This concession alone highlights how strained the fiduciary designation is here. A business model built around behavioral advertising demands that companies like Facebook assemble a

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60 Zittrain, Fix This Mess, supra note 5; see also Bayer v. Beran, 49 N.Y.S.2d 2, 5 (1944) (“The fiduciary must subordinate his individual and private interests to his duty . . . whenever the two conflict.”); John C. Coffee, Jr., The Mandatory/Enabling Balance in Corporate Law: An Essay on the Judicial Role, 89 COLUM. L. REV. 1618, 1658 (1989) (describing as the “central conceptual difference” between contracting parties and fiduciaries “that a contracting party may seek to advance his own interests in good faith while a fiduciary may not”); Evan J. Criddle & Evan Fox-Decent, A Fiduciary Theory of Jus Cogens, 34 YALE J. INT’L L. 331, 350 (2009) (“In all cases the fundamental fiduciary duty is to exercise the entrusted power exclusively for the other-regarding purposes for which it is held or conferred.”).


62 Id. “The injuries that arise within these relationships can be remedied,” accordingly, through nonfiduciary regimes “such as contract law, tort law, property law, and criminal law.” Id.

63 See supra notes 19–24, 54–58 and accompanying text.

64 See, e.g., Balkin, Information Fiduciaries, supra note 5, at 1227 (“It cannot be the case that the basic business model of free or subsidized online services inherently violates fiduciary obligations . . . .”); Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 12 (“Social media companies and search engines provide free services in exchange for the right to collect and analyze personal data and serve targeted ads. This by itself does not violate fiduciary obligations.”).

65 The Federal Trade Commission has defined online behavioral advertising as the practice, “typically invisible to consumers,” of “tracking . . . consumers’ online activities in order to deliver tailored advertising” that is more closely aligned with their “inferred interests.” FED. TRADE COMM’N, FTC STAFF
maximally detailed portrait of their users’ lives, which the companies then sell to marketers and developers. While targeted advertising is not new, the internet has vastly expanded its scope and sophistication. Advertising of this sort may have some benefits. Balkin asserts that it “allows more efficient advertising campaigns” and can “give social media [companies] opportunities to structure and curate content for end users that they will find most engaging and interesting.” Yet as long as such companies make most of their money through personally targeted advertisements, they will be economically motivated to extract as much data from their users as they can—a motivation that runs headfirst into users’ privacy interests as well as any interests users might have in exercising behavioral autonomy or ensuring that their personal data is not stolen, sold, mined, or otherwise monetized down the line.


Facebook denies that it sells user data to third parties. But as Professor Michal Kosinski has pointed out, any time a user clicks on an advertisement, Facebook automatically reveals facets of the user’s identity to the advertiser by virtue of the fact that the advertiser has paid Facebook to target specific types of individuals. Michal Kosinski, Congress May Have Fallen for Facebook’s Trap, but You Don’t Have to, N.Y. TIMES (Dec. 12, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/12/opinion/facebook-data-privacy-advertising.html. And as Professor Chris Hoofnagle has observed, Facebook also grants access to user data to developers, a form of exchange that he argues should also be considered a “sale.” Chris Hoofnagle, Facebook and Google Are the New Data Brokers, DIGITAL LIFE INITIATIVE @ CORNELL TECH (Jan. 16, 2019), https://www.dli.tech.cornell.edu/blog/facebook-and-google-are-the-new-data-brokers.

Whether and under what conditions online behavioral advertising actually enhances consumer welfare is debated. See, e.g., Veronica Marotta, Kaifu Zhang & Alessandro Acquisti, Who Benefits from Targeted Advertising? 2–5 (2015) (unpublished manuscript), https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/documents/public_comments/2015/10/00037-100312.pdf (reviewing potential costs and “benefits of increasingly widespread and precise collection and usage of consumer data for the targeting of online ads,” and developing a model that suggests consumer welfare is generally higher “when less information is exchanged” with advertisers (emphasis added)).

Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 2.

Some predict that the GDPR will lead to fundamental changes in the business models of Facebook and other behavioral-advertising-based companies, at least in the European Union. See, e.g., Kimberly A. Houser & W. Gregory Voss, GDPR: The End of Google and Facebook or a New Paradigm in Data Privacy?, 25 RICH. J.L. & TECH. 1, 109 (2018) (arguing that the GDPR “may be an end to Facebook and Google as they currently operate”); Paul M. Schwartz & Karl-Nikolaus Peifer, Transatlantic Data Privacy Law, 106 GEO. L.J. 115, 143 (2017) (stating that the GDPR’s ban on tying, or the extension of “terms within a single contractual agreement . . . to include processing of personal data beyond that which is necessary to the purpose of the contract,” “takes aim at myriad new digital business models based around data trade”); Henry Farrell & Abraham Newman, Here’s How Europe’s Data Privacy Law Could Take Down Facebook, WASH. POST: MONKEY CAGE (May 25, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/25/heres-how-europes-gdpr-may-take-down-facebook (“Privacy activist Max Schrems and his new organization . . . have used the GDPR to launch four major court cases against Facebook and its subsidiaries. If Schrems’s interpretation prevails, Facebook’s business model will be fundamentally challenged.”). It is too early to assess these predictions. But it is worth noting that while Facebook’s user growth in Europe initially slowed after the GDPR took effect in May 2018, it has since rebounded—without any evident changes to the company’s core business model. See Elizabeth Schulze, Facebook’s User Growth in Europe Is Bouncing Back, Defying Stricter Privacy Laws, CNBC (Apr. 25, 2019), https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/25/facebook-q1-2019-user-growth-in-europe-is-bouncing-back-despite-
Balkin acknowledges that permitting online providers to collect personal data and serve targeted advertisements “creates a perpetual conflict of interest” between the providers and their users. 70 Rather than see this as an insuperable obstacle to a fiduciary relationship, however, he submits that “the goal should be to ameliorate or forestall conflicts of interest.”71 “[T]he law should limit how social media companies can make money off their end users, just as the law limits how other fiduciaries can make money off their clients and beneficiaries.”72 Sketching out what these limits might look like, Zittrain suggests that a digital information fiduciary would be prohibited from harnessing user data to enable “predatory” advertisements but permitted to expose users to nonpredatory advertisements. 73

Even if we accept for argument’s sake the soundness of the predatory/nonpredatory distinction in this context—although we are doubtful—74—it is unclear how a digital fiduciary is supposed to fulfill its duty of loyalty to users under conditions of profound and “perpetual” conflict. Fiduciary theorists debate the best way to conceptualize the duty of loyalty. On thicker, “prescriptive” accounts, a loyal fiduciary must not only avoid conflicts of interest but also act with “affirmative devotion” or “obedience” toward her beneficiary.75 On thinner, “proscriptive” accounts, the fiduciary must “avoid conflicts between pursuit of his self-interest and fulfilment of his duty to act


70 Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 13; see also Balkin, Information Fiduciaries, supra note 5, at 1226 (“The value of end-user data and its centrality in the business models of many online service providers, creates an inherent potential for conflicts of interest between the digital company and the end-user.”); Zittrain, Fix This Mess, supra note 5 (“It may be that aspects of an advertising-based business model are indeed incompatible with ethically serving users . . . .”).

71 Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 13.

72 Id.

73 See Zittrain, How to Exercise, supra note 5 (“A fiduciary duty wouldn’t broadly rule out targeted advertising—dog owners would still get dog food ads—but it would preclude predatory advertising, like promotions for payday loans.”).

74 Cf. SHOSHANA ZUBOFF, THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM: THE FIGHT FOR A HUMAN FUTURE AT THE NEW FRONTIER OF POWER 90 (2019) (“The word ‘targeted’ is another euphemism. It evokes notions of precision, efficiency, and competence. Who would guess that targeting conceals a new political equation in which Google’s concentrations of computational power brush aside users’ decision rights as easily as King Kong might shoo away an ant, all accomplished offstage where no one can see?”); Louise Matsakis, Facebook’s Targeted Ads Are More Complex Than It Lets On, WIRED (Apr. 25, 2018), https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-targeted-ads-more-complex-than-it-lets-on (noting that “companies who use Facebook have a near-endless number of data points with which to target their ads,” allowing them to pick out “hyper-specific audiences with extreme precision,” and that users are significantly more likely to click on “psychologically tailored ads”); Piety, supra note 31 (arguing that “the vast majority of [online] advertising practices are . . . manipulative in ways that people may not fully appreciate and [that] may encourage anti-social, unhealthy, or self-defeating behaviors or practices”).

for the benefit of the beneficiary” and “between this duty and the pursuit of others’ interests.” Even under this less demanding theory of loyalty, fiduciary law cannot tolerate an arrangement that places the fiduciary’s economic livelihood and its beneficiaries’ well-being fundamentally at odds. The whole point of prescriptive rules implementing the duty of loyalty is to minimize “biasing factors that might induce the fiduciary to subjugate the interests of beneficiaries” to any other end.77

To appreciate just how odd it is to think that a behavioral-advertising company could be a fiduciary for its users, imagine visiting a doctor—let’s call her Marta Zuckerberg—whose main source of income is enabling third parties to market you goods and services. Instead of requesting monetary payment for services rendered, Dr. Zuckerberg floods you (and her two billion other patients) with ads for all manner of pills and procedures from the second you set foot in her office, and she gets paid every time you try to learn more about one of these ads or even look in their direction. In fact, this is just about the only way she gets paid—as her financial backers are apt to remind her. The ads themselves, moreover, are tightly tailored to your economic, demographic, and psychological profile and to any consumer frailties you exhibit.78 They are also continually updated in light of information Dr. Zuckerberg collects on you; to be sure she does not miss anything, she has planted surveillance devices all around your neighborhood as well as her office.79 Can this institutional and incentive structure plausibly be reconciled with a commitment to prioritizing your health?80

76 Id. at 557 (internal quotation marks omitted).
77 Id.
78 See generally Ryan Calo, Digital Market Manipulation, 82 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 995 (2014). Dr. Zuckerberg may even assign scores to patients based on their susceptibility to certain sorts of ads, and then share those scores with third parties. See generally Danielle Keats Citron & Frank Pasquale, The Scored Society: Due Process for Automated Predictions, 89 WASH. L. REV. 1 (2014).
80 Consider, by way of contrast with this hypothetical, the rules limiting real-life doctors from receiving gifts valued $100 or more from pharmaceutical company sales representatives. See Elaine K. Howley, Do Drug Company Payments to Doctors Influence Which Drugs They Prescribe?, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP. (Aug. 31, 2018), https://health.usnews.com/health-care/patient-advice/articles/2018-08-31/do-drug-company-payments-to-doctors-influence-which-drugs-they-prescribe (describing these rules). Of course, Facebook is not a health care provider, and prioritizing a medical patient’s interests may require very different activities and assurances than prioritizing a social network user’s interests. Our point is simply that unlike doctors, Facebook does not come close to putting its customers first in any serious sense— notwithstanding Zuckerberg’s protestations to the contrary, see, e.g., Mark Zuckerberg, The Facts About Facebook, WALL ST. J. (Jan. 24, 2019), https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facts-about-facebook-11548374613—and that this follows from the structure of its business.

Apart from the business model, perhaps the most basic distinction between a real-life doctor and Facebook is that a doctor is a trained professional who makes individualized judgments, whereas Facebook is an automated communications network. We bracket in this Essay the deep questions raised by the notion that a fiduciary’s relationship with its beneficiaries could be mediated almost entirely by computer algorithms, although we note that Balkin’s theory is potentially vulnerable on this ground as well. As Professor Julie Cohen puts it in a response piece:
In other words, the business model matters. It determines the degree to which a commercial enterprise is motivated to advance the best interests of its customers, or the exact opposite. Although the economic incentives of commercial fiduciaries will sometimes diverge from the interests of their customers and raise difficult issues at the margins—indeed, perfect alignment might obviate the need for fiduciary duties in the first place—there are cases where the degree of misalignment renders fiduciary loyalty implausible. Businesses built on behaviorally targeted advertising appear to be one such case.

Moreover, if Balkin’s fiduciary obligations may be too weak or too compromised where they apply, one might also worry that they do not apply widely enough. Balkin never discusses the advertisers or content producers who rely on social media companies such as Facebook. Nor does he discuss the millions of nonusers whose data is systematically swept up by Facebook through user uploads of phone and email contacts and through “sites that use Facebook’s advertising pixel or other social APIs linking back to Facebook.” Like Facebook’s end users, these parties surrender to Facebook certain forms of information that they have an interest in keeping private. Facebook, however, has an economic incentive to monetize this information as well. For example, even though an advertiser is unlikely to want its marketing campaign data to be shared with competitors, Facebook may incorporate this data into its algorithms regardless—thereby passing on to rivals the benefits of the advertiser’s proprietary information. Many advertisers and content producers are just as captive to Facebook as its end users are, or even more so. Insofar as the purpose of the information-fiduciary proposal is to rebalance the relationship between dominant online intermediaries and those who depend on them, it is unclear why its protections should cover only one set of dependents.

Classic fiduciaries—doctors, lawyers, priests—operated on small scales and at human rhythms for a reason. The fiduciary construct implies a mutual encounter predicated on the knowability of human beings as human beings, with mutually intelligible desires and needs. The information fiduciaries proposal abstracts speed, immanence, automaticity, and scale away from that encounter and then assumes they never mattered in the first place. Julie E. Cohen, Scaling Trust and Other Fictions, LAW & POL. ECON. [cite].

81 Cf. Tamar Frankel, Fiduciary Law, 71 CALIF. L. REV. 795, 811 (1983) (“When the fiduciary’s interests coincide with those of the entrustor, the entrustor is partially protected because as the fiduciary acts in his own interest he will automatically act in the interest of the entrustor. . . . The fiduciary may have an incentive to abuse his power, however, if the loss from the joint enterprise is smaller than his gain from abuse of his power.”).


83 Kurt Wagner, This Is How Facebook Collects Data on You Even If You Don’t Have an Account, RECODE (Apr. 20, 2018), https://www.recode.net/2018/4/20/17254312/facebook-shadow-profiles-data-collection-non-users-mark-zuckerberg; see also David Ingram, Facebook Fuels Broad Privacy Debate by Tracking Non-Users, REUTERS (Apr. 15, 2018), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-privacy-tracking/facebook-fuels-broad-privacy-debate-by-tracking-non-users-idUSKBN1HM0DR (“Facebook often installs cookies on non-users’ browsers if they visit sites with Facebook ‘like’ and ‘share’ buttons, whether or not a person pushes a button.”); Wagner, supra (“There is no way to opt out of this kind of data collection.”).
C. Constructed Vulnerability

Beyond their reliance on targeted advertising, other practices of certain online platforms strain the fiduciary paradigm. Balkin notes that a basic feature of the expertise-based fiduciary relationships on which he focuses is that the fiduciary stands in a position of power over the beneficiary. The sources of this relational power are typically twofold. First, the fiduciary possesses professional skills and competencies that the beneficiary lacks. This explains both why the beneficiary is seeking the fiduciary’s services and why she is hampered in monitoring the fiduciary’s conduct. Second, obtaining the fiduciary’s services requires the beneficiary to disclose personal information that the fiduciary could potentially abuse. The fiduciary’s expertise and the beneficiary’s vulnerability are thus interrelated in a deep sense.

Balkin suggests that end users’ relationships with online platforms involve a similar combination of (1) valuable expertise and (2) personal exposure necessary to enlist that expertise. Each proposition warrants scrutiny.

Whether an online platform offers expertise may vary. In the case of Facebook, users are offered, first and foremost, access to a communications network, a vast infrastructure for social and economic exchange. Facebook employs hundreds of skilled professionals, such as the software engineers who create and maintain its database applications and search functions. But so do automobile manufacturers, oil and gas outfits, and any number of other firms not traditionally seen as fiduciaries for their customers. Expertise underwrites commercial fiduciary law only insofar as it enables specialized, individualized judgments and services to be rendered on the beneficiary’s behalf. Individuated experience on Facebook is largely limited to choosing certain settings and inputting certain information (friends requested, groups joined, posts “liked”), which trigger a series of automated responses. Maintaining a twenty-first-century version of the Yellow Pages coupled with a telecommunications infrastructure and search database requires significant technical expertise, to be sure, but not the kind of expertise that has helped justify fiduciary relationships in the past.

The one Facebook service that has involved a more context-sensitive form of judgment is content moderation. Content moderation refers to the practice of establishing and enforcing a set

84 See, e.g., Balkin, Information Fiduciaries, supra note 5, at 1216–17.
85 See id.; see also Frankel, supra note 81, at 810 (“The delegated power that enables the fiduciary to benefit the entrustor also enables him to injure the entrustor, because the purpose for which the fiduciary is allowed to use his delegated power is narrower than the purposes for which he is capable of using that power.”).
86 See, e.g., Balkin, Information Fiduciaries, supra note 5, at 1222 (“[E]nd-users’ relationships with many online service providers involve significant vulnerability, because online service providers have considerable expertise and knowledge and end-users usually do not. Online service providers have lots of information about us, and we have very little information about them . . . .”).
of rules to govern which kinds of speech are permitted on a platform. Facebook’s content moderators, however, do not apply their judgment for the benefit of any given user. Rather, they are called upon to protect community standards and the economic viability of the platform as a whole. In this way, an online content moderator is more akin to a traffic cop—applying rules that benefit the collective and help keep traffic flowing—than to a doctor or a lawyer. The fact that Facebook outsources the vast majority of its content moderation jobs, moreover, is some indication that it does not view the service as a core part of the business.

What about exposure? Here, too, the nature of the problem is notably distinct. Unlike in the case of obtaining legal advice or medical care, the sharing of intimate personal information with the provider is not a functional prerequisite to accessing Facebook or any other social media network. It is the price the online providers have chosen to set. Doctors and lawyers need to learn sensitive details about the individuals who engage their services to be able to serve them well. Social media companies do not.

The loss of privacy and control experienced by Facebook users therefore does not stem, organically, “from the structure and nature of the fiduciary relation.” It stems from Facebook’s deliberate efforts to create such vulnerabilities. Facebook’s dominant market position supports this strategy. To the extent that users feel beholden to Facebook, it is not because the company offers them especially skillful services or judgments so much as because of a lack of viable alternatives. By virtue of owning four of the top five social media applications, Facebook makes

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89 See, e.g., id. at 1625 (“Platforms create rules and systems to curate speech out of a sense of corporate social responsibility, but also, more importantly, because their economic viability depends on meeting users’ speech and community norms.”).
90 See Casey Newton, The Trauma Floor, VERGE (Feb. 25, 2019), https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/25/18229714/cognizant-facebook-content-moderator-interviews-trauma-working-conditions-arizona (detailing the psychological trauma that contractors may endure as part of their content moderation jobs, which pay a fraction of what full-time Facebook employees make); Queenie Wong, Facebook Content Moderation Is an Ugly Business. Here’s Who Does It, CNET (Mar. 1, 2019), https://www.cnet.com/news/facebook-content-moderation-is-an-ugly-business-heres-who-does-it (listing companies that have contracted with Facebook to provide content moderation).
91 Cf. ZUBOFF, supra note 74, at 508–09 (discussing the secretive, “outcast function of ‘content moderation,’” which always “operates at a distance from the corporation’s core functions”).
92 Frankel, supra note 81, at 810 (emphasis omitted).
93 This raises another point of disanalogy with traditional professional fiduciaries: They not only tend to “operate[] on small scales,” Cohen, supra note 80, but they also generally face meaningful competition. The need to compete with others in their profession gives doctors and lawyers a business reason to serve the interests of their beneficiaries. This is especially true today, when patients and clients can publicly post ratings and reviews. Dominant digital platforms, by contrast, operate in concentrated markets. Whereas the targeted-advertising-based business model of these platforms creates (from a user’s perspective) bad incentives, the underlying market structure attenuates good incentives.
it difficult to escape the company’s ecosystem. As legal scholars and German antitrust authorities have concluded, this market position enables Facebook to extract more data from its users—who often feel they have nowhere else to go—and thereby compounds their vulnerability.

By glossing over these points of disanalogy with doctors and lawyers, Balkin’s proposal risks obscuring the contingent and constructed character of the power imbalances that exist between ordinary individuals and the dominant online providers—imbalances that stem both from the business model these firms employ and from the market dominance they enjoy. This blind spot, in turn, risks foreclosing a broader discussion about interventions that might prevent those imbalances from arising in the first place.

D. First-Order and Second-Order Information Asymmetries

Implicit in the discussion above, traditional fiduciary relationships are marked by asymmetries of information. The duty of loyalty responds to these asymmetries by committing the fiduciary to the beneficiary’s best interests and thereby allowing the beneficiary “to take advantage of the [fiduciary’s] superior information and expertise” without having “to expend significant resources to monitor the [fiduciary’s] behavior.” In justifying his proposal, Balkin emphasizes that there are “strong asymmetries of information” between end users and online platforms, whose

94 In 2017, the top five most popular social media applications were WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, and Snapchat. Michael Grothaus, Facebook Owns Four of the Five Most Downloaded Apps in 2017, FAST COMPANY (Apr. 18, 2017), https://www.fastcompany.com/4035007/facebook-owns-four-of-the-five-most-downloaded-apps-in-2017. Facebook purchased Instagram in 2012 and WhatsApp in 2014. In 2013, Facebook reportedly attempted to purchase Snapchat, but Snapchat rebuffed the offer. See John Shinal, Mark Zuckerberg Couldn’t Buy Snapchat Years Ago, and Now He’s Close to Destroying the Company, CNBC (July 14, 2017), https://www.cnbc.com/2017/07/12/how-mark-zuckerberg-has-used-instagram-to-crush-evan-spiegels-snap.html. Users who decided to leave Facebook in light of recent privacy breaches discovered to their dismay that cutting it out entirely would require deleting Instagram and WhatsApp as well. See Will Oremus, If You Delete Facebook, Do You Also Have to Delete Instagram and WhatsApp?, SLATE (Dec. 22, 2018), https://slate.com/technology/2018/12/can-you-deletefacebook-if-you-dont-also-delete-instagram-and-whatsapp.html; see also id. (“After all, the unfortunate reality is that there aren’t a lot of prominent social networks that Facebook doesn’t own.”).

95 See Dina Srinivasan, The Antitrust Case Against Facebook: A Monopolist’s Journey Towards Pervasive Surveillance in Spite of Consumers’ Preference for Privacy, 16 BERKELEY BUS. L.J. 39, 40 (2019) (arguing that Facebook’s ability to extract so much data from users “is merely this titan’s form of monopoly rents”).


97 Maxwell J. Mehlman, Fiduciary Contracting: Limitations on Bargaining Between Patients and Health Care Providers, 51 U. PITT. L. REV. 365, 390 (1990); see also Tamar Frankel, Fiduciary Duties as Default Rules, 74 OR. L. REV. 1209, 1244 (1995) (“[I]n fiduciary law, the duty of loyalty is grounded in asymmetric information.”).
“operations, algorithms, and collection practices are mostly kept secret” and might be hard to interpret even if they were disclosed. 98 Balkin is surely right about this.

Yet not all information asymmetries are asymmetric in the same way. We might describe the information asymmetries that obtain in traditional fiduciary settings as second-order asymmetries: While the beneficiary may not grasp or even hear about any number of technical details concerning the fiduciary’s efforts on her behalf, she understands the core terms of their relationship. 99 This shared understanding enables the beneficiary to give meaningful consent and, in many cases, to exercise some control over the fiduciary’s behavior. 100 It also identifies the dimension along which the fiduciary is obligated to serve the beneficiary. Because a patient (say) is seeking medical services, the doctor’s duty is to protect and promote the patient’s health interests.

What happens when the service provider and the customer lack this shared understanding of the core terms of their relationship? We might describe the information asymmetries that obtain in some of the digital settings in question as first-order asymmetries: Beyond the technical details of an online platform’s operations, algorithms, and data collection practices, the typical user does not even understand—much less approve of—their basic contours. Most Facebook users, to stick with Balkin’s main example, rely on the platform to communicate with other Facebook users. According to a recent Pew survey, 74 percent of them do not know that the platform collects data to classify their interests and traits. 101 Other surveys have found that an overwhelming majority of Facebook users do not want to be exposed to any targeted political or commercial advertisements, reflecting a “resounding consumer rejection of surveillance-based ads and content.” 102 As a rule, it appears that Facebook users tend to be deeply ignorant of the ways the company serves (or disserves) them, and deeply unnerved when they find out.

This is not just an unusually stark asymmetry of information. It is an elaborate system of social control whose terms are more imposed than chosen. Seen in this light, the idea that the law could convert such companies into fiduciaries for their users without the need for fundamental restructuring looks even more far-fetched.

III. SOLVING WHICH PROBLEMS?

If the information-fiduciary proposal would not disrupt the basic business model of online platforms, what would it do to advance users’ interests? And how exactly would the new fiduciary

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98 Balkin, Information Fiduciaries, supra note 5, at 1226.
duties be enforced? Balkin is strikingly unclear on these questions. Reconstructing his potential answers gives still more reason to doubt that a fiduciary characterization is appropriate or that his proposal is adequate to the problems at hand.

A. Substantive Issues

Supporters of the information-fiduciary proposal have touted the “many benefits”\(^\text{103}\) and “enormous consequences”\(^\text{104}\) its adoption would bring. On closer inspection, however, the main prescriptions that Balkin associates with the proposal turn out not to require fiduciary law or theory at all. Balkin has repeatedly suggested, for instance, that treating digital companies as information fiduciaries will prevent them from acting like “con artists” toward their users.\(^\text{105}\) But deception is already prohibited by a suite of state and federal consumer protection statutes,\(^\text{106}\) as well as by common law antifraud doctrines and ordinary contract law, which imposes a duty of good faith and fair dealing that (unlike many fiduciary duties) may not be waived or contracted away even in arms-length transactions.\(^\text{107}\) When Google was accused in the early 2010s of acting like a con artist by biasing its search results in favor of its own services and passing off content from competing websites as its own, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) conducted “a wide-ranging

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\(^{103}\) Bloomberg Editorial, supra note 9.


\(^{105}\) See supra note 20 and accompanying text. “At base,” Balkin recently stated, “the obligations of loyalty mean that digital fiduciaries may not act like con artists.” Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 13.


\(^{107}\) See Paul M. Altman & Srinivas M. Raju, Delaware Alternative Entities and the Implied Contractual Covenant of Good Faith and Fair Dealing Under Delaware Law, 60 BUS. LAW. 1469, 1480 (2005) (“The implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing in contract law may not be waived or contracted away by the parties to an agreement.”); see also Paul MacMahon, Good Faith and Fair Dealing as an Underenforced Legal Norm, 99 MINN. L. REV. 2051, 2065 (2015) (“The duty of good faith and fair dealing has been invoked in several thousand [contemporary U.S. contract] cases, often successfully. And the duty has sometimes served as the basis for strikingly liberal impositions of liability.”). Standard legal definitions of good faith invoke the “absence of intent to defraud or to seek unconscionable advantage.” Good Faith, BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY (10th ed. 2014).
investigation”108 under the Commission’s organic statute that asked, in essence, whether Google had “acted in good faith” toward its users.109

At other points, Balkin has suggested that the information-fiduciary model would shelter users from “abusive”110 and “manipulative”111 corporate behaviors. But depending on how one defines these terms,112 almost all such behaviors may likewise be proscribed by state tort law or by state and federal consumer protection statutes, which prohibit “unfair” as well as “deceptive” practices.113 Perhaps, then, the information-fiduciary model is best understood as a restatement or refinement of consumer protection law, with particular application to online privacy.114 In that case, however, it is fair to ask why we need an abstract new theorization of the consumer–provider relationship, instead of an institutionally sensitive account of how existing legal norms can be more effectively elaborated and administered, whether by the FTC or a European-style data protection agency.115

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109 James Grimmelmann, *Speech Engines*, 98 MINN. L. REV. 868, 935 (2014). Professor Grimmelmann argues that the FTC was right to reject the “search bias” allegations against Google, but that the Commission should have given more “thought as to how to carry out” the continual monitoring of Google that it pledged to undertake. *Id.* at 934–36.


112 In his most recent piece on the regulation of social media, Balkin defines manipulation as “techniques of persuasion and influence that (1) prey on another person’s emotional vulnerabilities and lack of knowledge (2) to benefit oneself or one’s allies and (3) reduce the welfare of the other person.” Balkin, *Fixing Social Media*, *supra* note 5, at 4.


114 Cf. James Grimmelmann, *When All You Have Is a Fiduciary*, LAW & POL. ECON. [cite] (suggesting that while fiduciary principles are ill-suited to problems of self-dealing, content moderation, and market concentration on online platforms, the “best version” of U.S. information privacy law “would cash out fiduciary principles in specifying when and how platforms can use and share user data”).

Balkin’s frequent refrain that digital information fiduciaries would have to act in “good faith” toward their users\(^{116}\) is telling in what it leaves out. Again, all parties involved in all contracts, including terms-of-service contracts, must always act in good faith toward each other.\(^{117}\) As a matter of law, Balkin’s proposal would change nothing in this regard. What is distinctive about fiduciaries is that they are generally held to a standard of “utmost” good faith.\(^{118}\) The omission of “utmost” in Balkin’s narrative supplies further evidence that he does not really mean to hold online platforms to anything resembling traditional fiduciary obligations, so much as to basic standards of honesty and decency to which they are already held (however imperfect the enforcement).

This is not to say that every prescription Balkin associates with the information-fiduciary model would duplicate existing consumer protection or contract law. In particular, he has suggested in recent writing that digital information fiduciaries would be obligated to vet third parties before affording them access to user data\(^{119}\) (although not necessarily obligated to obtain users’ consent) and prohibited from encouraging addiction among users.\(^{120}\) If adopted, both suggestions might entail extra legal responsibilities for social media companies. Yet it is precisely in these areas where Balkin’s proposal seems to depart from current law that the tensions become most acute between the fiduciary duties he would create and the fiduciary duties that directors owe to shareholders—as a social media company’s bottom line certainly may benefit from broad data sharing practices and addictive user behaviors. To break new legal ground here, reformers may have to sacrifice shareholder value to a degree that the information-fiduciary literature has not yet acknowledged or considered.

### B. Enforcement Issues

If Balkin is vague on the substantive legal duties that digital information fiduciaries would owe to users, he is all but silent on how these new duties would be enforced. He has been similarly

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\(^{117}\) See supra note 107 and accompanying text.

\(^{118}\) See Robert W. Hillman, Private Ordering Within Partnerships, 41 U. MIAMI L. REV. 425, 458 (1987) (“[A]dmonitions concerning the duty of ‘utmost good faith’ dominate judicial analyses of fiduciary responsibilities.” (internal citation omitted)); David E. Pozen, Constitutional Bad Faith, 129 HARV. L. REV. 885, 890 (2016) (“Fiduciaries of all sorts are held to a standard of ‘utmost good faith.’”).

\(^{119}\) See, e.g., Balkin, Second Gilded Age, supra note 27, at 1008 (“The duties of care and confidentiality require information fiduciaries to keep data secure and not to disclose it to third parties unless those third parties are equally trustworthy and agree to the same duties of care, confidentiality, and loyalty as the fiduciary.”); see also Dobkin, supra note 104, at 36–43 (proposing similarly that information-fiduciary duties should prohibit sharing data with third parties under certain circumstances; Theodore Rostow, Note, What Happens When an Acquaintance Buys Your Data? A New Privacy Harm in the Age of Data Brokers, 34 YALE J. ON REG. 667, 700 (2017) (noting that under Balkin’s framework “[t]he responsibilities of information fiduciaries could be expanded to limit what data companies can sell to brokers”).

\(^{120}\) See, e.g., Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 14 (“[I]f social media companies are information fiduciaries, they should also have a duty not to use end-user data to addict end users . . . .”).
silent on what the remedies for breach would be. These are no small matters given the number of beneficiaries potentially involved, not to mention the many respects in which rights, remedies, and their enforcement are “inextricably intertwined.”

In fiduciary law generally, beneficiaries may enforce their rights in court and remedies “tend to be supracompensatory in order to deter abuse.” Judges in Delaware and beyond are often loath to “wield the stick” and impose legal liability, but across every private law context of which we are aware, the fiduciary relationship is a juridical relationship overseen by courts. Would the same hold true for the fiduciary relationship between online platforms and their end users? Or would some sort of purely internal or administrative complaint process suffice?

If private judicial enforcement is contemplated, the scale of such litigation could be staggering. As of 2018, Facebook and Google each had well over 200 million users in the United States alone. Given that cases involving newly minted information-fiduciary duties would likely raise a host of novel legal issues and technical complexities, Balkin’s proposal has the potential to swallow judicial dockets even with the aid of class actions, all while further undermining the defendant companies’ ability to serve their shareholder beneficiaries.

If, on the other hand, private judicial enforcement is not contemplated, then we have to ask once again whether this is an adaptation or an abdication of core fiduciary principles. Notably, the Balkin-inspired legislation introduced by Democratic Senators in December 2018 would treat fiduciary breaches as actionable only by the FTC and, in the FTC’s absence, state attorneys general. Short of direct judicial enforcement, it is also available to Balkin to urge courts to enlist fiduciary principles in an indirect, “gap-filling” manner when adjudicating contractual, tort, or statutory claims brought against online platforms. Courts already do a version of this in other contexts. Yet while limiting information-fiduciary duties to indirect enforcement might halt the

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127 *Cf.* John C. Coffee, Jr., *Privatization and Corporate Governance: The Lessons from Securities Market Failure*, 25 J. CORP. L. 1, 28 (1999) (arguing that “the common law’s concept of fiduciary duty both enables and instructs the common law judge to fill in the gaps in an incomplete contract”); Jonathan R. Macey, *An Economic Analysis of the Various Rationales for Making Shareholders the Exclusive Beneficiaries of Corporate Fiduciary Duties*, 21 STETSON L. REV. 23, 25 (similar); Pozen, supra note 118,
flood of lawsuits, it would relegate these duties to a supporting and possibly marginal legal role, rather than the starring role that advocates seem to have in mind, as well as to a kind of second-class status within the fiduciary family.

The prospect of judicial enforcement also raises questions about how individual users or institutional bodies are supposed to know when an online platform has violated its fiduciary obligations. In recent years, most of the leading examples of data breaches, privacy invasions, and other reckless behaviors by social media companies have been uncovered by journalists, with some of the reporting coming close to two years after the relevant events took place. Robust and enterprising investigative journalism, it seems, would be crucial to identifying fiduciary violations by the dominant online platforms. And yet, the stranglehold that these same platforms have on the digital advertising market is itself one of the biggest threats to the economic viability of such reporting. Whether or not any new fiduciary duties are needed, achieving effective legal enforcement under these conditions may require not just lawsuits but regular investigations and inspections along with the imposition of affirmative duties to disclose data breaches and other compliance failures promptly and publicly.

at 890 (noting that principles of good faith may be used by courts “in a ‘gap-filling’ role to disallow conduct that otherwise would not run afoul of controlling legal texts”).


130 The European Union’s major privacy law, the GDPR, requires that covered firms notify the relevant authorities of any data breach within seventy-two hours of having become aware of it. Council Regulation 2016/679, 2016 O.J. (L 119), art. 33.
C. Problems Unaddressed

The plight of journalism raises a more general issue. If it is unclear which problems Balkin’s proposal would solve, it seems quite clear that the information-fiduciary model would leave many profound problems untouched. This is not the place to offer a detailed inventory, but beyond the issues of privacy and data security that Balkin foregrounds, the dominant online platforms have been credibly associated with a host of social ills, from facilitating interference in U.S. elections;\(^{131}\) to serving as a tool for the incitement of genocide in Myanmar;\(^ {132}\) to decreasing users’ mental and physical health;\(^ {133}\) to enabling discrimination and harassment against women and racial minorities;\(^ {134}\) to amplifying the influence of “fake news,” conspiracy theories, and propaganda robots\(^ {135}\) as well as inflammatory and divisive content more broadly.\(^ {136}\) Betrayal of users’ trust as to how their data will be handled is just one category of concerns raised by these companies, and not necessarily the most worrisome category.

Many of the broader harms associated with these platforms are magnified or made possible by a behavioral-advertising-based business model coupled with dominant market positions. While these are distinct features—a company could have the business model without the market position, and vice versa—the problems they create tend to be mutually reinforcing. For example, in recent years Google and Facebook together have captured roughly three-quarters of all digital advertising revenue.\(^ {137}\)

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\(^{131}\) See, e.g., Nancy Scola, Massive Twitter Data Release Sheds Light on Russia’s Trump Strategy, POLITICO (Oct. 17, 2018), https://www.politico.com/story/2018/10/17/twitter-foreign-influence-operations-910005 (“Twitter and Facebook have been widely criticized since the 2016 election for not doing more to stem the abuse of their platforms by Russians and other foreign actors hoping to manipulate the American political landscape.”).


\(^{133}\) See, e.g., Holly B. Shakya & Nicholas A. Christakis, A New, More Rigorous Study Confirms: The More You Use Facebook, the Worse You Feel, HARV. BUS. REV. (Apr. 10, 2017), https://hbr.org/2017/04/a-new-more-rigorous-study-confirms-the-more-you-use-facebook-the-worse-you-feel (“[M]ost measures of Facebook use in one year predicted a decrease in mental health in a later year. We found consistently that both liking others’ content and clicking links significantly predicted a subsequent reduction in self-reported physical health, mental health, and life satisfaction.”). See generally ZUBOFF, supra note 74, at 461–65 (reviewing a “growing body of evidence [that] testifies to the psychic toll of life in the hive” of social media, especially for younger users).

\(^{134}\) See, e.g., Olivier Sylvain, Discriminatory Designs on User Data, KNIGHT FIRST AMEND. INST. 3, 8–16 (2018), https://knightcolumbia.org/sites/default/files/content/Sylvain_Emerging_Threats.pdf (discussing such discrimination and harassment and linking them to design features of online intermediaries).

\(^{135}\) See, e.g., Tim Wu, Is the First Amendment Obsolete?, KNIGHT FIRST AMEND. INST. 11–17 (2017), https://knightcolumbia.org/sites/default/files/content/Emerging%20Threats%20Tim%20Wu%20Is%20the%20First%20Amendment%20Obsolete.pdf (discussing the proliferation of “fake news,” “junk news,” “abusive online mobs,” “reverse censorship,” and “bots” on leading digital platforms).

\(^{136}\) See supra note 37 and accompanying text.
sales in the United States and an even higher percentage of growth.\textsuperscript{137} Their control over digital advertising networks appears to be an important factor behind the past decade’s consolidation within the publishing industry and tens of thousands of layoffs at newspapers and magazines.\textsuperscript{138} As the professional media has shrunk, more and more local communities have been left with little to no meaningful news coverage.\textsuperscript{139} On multiple interacting levels that transcend any given user’s experience, the behaviors of a few platforms have been affecting the fabric and functioning of our democracy—often for the worse.

Against this backdrop of platform dominance and democratic decay, the user-centric nature of the information-fiduciary proposal should give pause. The relevant inquiry for legal reformers, it seems to us, should not just be how a firm such as Google or Facebook exercises its power over end users, but whether it ought to enjoy that kind of power in the first place. Limiting the dominance of some of these firms may well have salutary effects for consumer privacy, both by facilitating competition on privacy protection and by reducing the likelihood that any single data-security failure will cascade into a much broader harm.\textsuperscript{140} More than that, the very effort to think


\textsuperscript{140} For example, one of the biggest data breaches that Facebook suffered over the past year derived from the site serving as a central “passport” to the internet, such that one’s Facebook login can serve as a credential for numerous third-party sales. Once hackers stole the single access key, they won access to users’ non-Facebook logins as well. See Issie Lapowsky, \textit{The Facebook Hack Exposed an Internet-Wide Failure}, WIRED (Oct. 2, 2018), https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-hack-single-sign-on-data-exposed. The primary problem here was not necessarily insufficient protection on Facebook’s part, so much as the structurally central role that the company plays in the digital realm. On the general relationship between market structure and the capacity to absorb unexpected shocks, see BARRY C. LYNN, CORNERED: THE NEW MONOPOLY CAPITALISM AND THE ECONOMICS OF DESTRUCTION 78–83 (2010); and Peter C. Carstensen & Robert H. Lande, \textit{The Merger Incipiency Doctrine and the Importance of “Redundant” Competition}, 2018 WIS. L. REV. 783.
through the ramifications of platform dominance would force policymakers to grapple with a wide range of systemic concerns that fall outside the fiduciary frame.

To be clear, we do not believe that addressing the dominance of companies like Facebook will remedy the full panoply of harms associated with them. Nor do we view antitrust enforcement as the sole tool for addressing this dominance. Our point here (which we will develop further in section IV.B) is that any broad regulatory framework or “grand bargain”\(^\text{141}\) for social media that focuses on abusive data practices, without attending to issues of market structure or political-economic power, is bound to be at best highly incomplete and at worst an impediment to necessary reforms.

IV. WITH WHAT BENEFITS AND COSTS?

We have argued that the information-fiduciary proposal could cure at most a small fraction of the problems associated with online platforms—and to the extent it does, only by undercutting directors’ duties to shareholders, undermining foundational principles of fiduciary law, or both. Why, then, has the idea proven so popular?

At a theoretical level, Balkin’s proposal is consilient as well as creative; it seems to resolve a tangle of thorny issues with a single, timeworn legal concept. The failure to specify institutional or operational details can thus be held out as a feature, not a bug.\(^\text{142}\) At a political level, the proposal comes across as consumer-protective yet conflict-suppressive; it promises to deliver broad social benefits without overly threatening the tech giants or their profits. At an aesthetic level, there is something attractive about the way in which a fiduciary framework would hold platforms to their own rhetoric of trustworthiness. In other areas of law, too, a number of legal scholars have been pressing in recent years for increasingly expansive accounts of fiduciary obligation.\(^\text{143}\) Perhaps the very idea of recasting powerful institutions as duty-bound, other-regarding agents, as if they “operate outside the capitalist free-for-all of exchange relations,”\(^\text{144}\) has become more alluring in an age of widespread anxiety about the state of capitalism and liberal democracy.

\(^{141}\) Balkin & Zittrain, supra note 5; see supra notes 54–55 and accompanying text.

\(^{142}\) See, e.g., Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 15 (“The fiduciary approach has many advantages. It is not tied to any particular technology. It can adapt to technological change. It can be implemented at the state or the federal level, and by judges, legislatures, or administrative agencies.”).

\(^{143}\) See Grimmelmann, supra note 109, at 904 (“[W]e are undergoing something of an academic fiduciary renaissance, with scholars arguing for treating legislators, judges, jurors, and even friends as fiduciaries.”) (internal citations omitted)); Daniel Yeager, Fiduciary-isms: A Study of Academic Influence on the Expansion of the Law, 65 Drake L. Rev. 179, 184 (2017) (describing “how academic writing, deploying a sense of fiduciary so open as to be empty, has influenced courts to designate” an ever-expanding set of actors as fiduciaries); Evan J. Criddle & Evan Fox-Decent, Keeping the Promise of Public Fiduciary Theory: A Reply to Leib and Galoob, 126 Yale L.J.F. 192, 193 (2016) (discussing the recent “revival of public fiduciary theory”).

\(^{144}\) Yeager, supra note 143, at 183 (“Fiduciaries are said to operate outside the capitalist free-for-all of exchange relations . . . .”).
Whatever the sources of its appeal (and there may be different sources for different audiences), the biggest legal benefit of Balkin’s proposal, on his telling, is that a fiduciary framework would allow regulations enacted in its name to withstand First Amendment challenges that might otherwise be fatal.145 Meanwhile, Balkin has clarified that his proposal is not meant to be a cure-all and could be complemented with other reforms, including “pro-competition rules or increased antitrust enforcement.”146 The implication is that there is no basis for worrying that the proposal does not accomplish enough on its own.

Both of these arguments are tantalizing. But both, in our view, are seriously flawed. We see little constitutional upside to the information-fiduciary proposal and significant policy downside. Let us consider each issue in turn.

A. The False Promise of First Amendment Flexibility

The First Amendment, Balkin observes, “may be a potential obstacle to laws that try to regulate private infrastructure owners in order to protect end-users[].”147 For example, broadband companies have challenged network neutrality regulations (unsuccessfully to date) as a violation of their free speech rights.148 And social media companies might challenge new measures “restricting how they use, distribute, or sell the consumer data that they collect” on the ground that this data is their “speech or knowledge.”149 First Amendment law, at least in its current “Lochnerian” form,150 works almost exclusively to the advantage of the online platforms. “Instead of empowering users to challenge their policies, the First Amendment empowers the companies themselves to challenge statutes and regulations intended to promote antidiscrimination norms or users’ speech and privacy, among other values.”151

If these companies were to be recognized as fiduciaries for their users, however, Balkin argues that the constitutional calculus would tip in the regulator’s favor. He maintains that because the speech that occurs in fiduciary settings concerns special services rendered in the context of special relationships of vulnerability and dependency, the “First Amendment treats information practices

145 This is a central theme of Balkin’s first, and still most extensive, academic statement of the proposal. See Balkin, Information Fiduciaries, supra note 5, at 1209–20.
146 Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 15.
147 Balkin, Second Gilded Age, supra note 27, at 982.
148 See, e.g., U.S. Telecom Ass’n v. FCC, 825 F.3d 674, 740–44 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (rejecting a First Amendment challenge to a 2015 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) order imposing “common carrier” obligations on telecommunications companies). But cf. id. at 418 (Kavanaugh, J., dissenting from denial of rehearing en banc) (arguing that the FCC order is unconstitutional because “the First Amendment bars the Government from restricting the editorial discretion of Internet service providers, absent a showing that an Internet service provider possesses market power in a relevant geographic market”).
149 Balkin, Second Gilded Age, supra note 27, at 982–83.
151 Id. at 1973.
by fiduciaries very differently than it treats information practices involving relative strangers."\textsuperscript{152} "Generally speaking, when the law prevents a fiduciary from disclosing or selling information about a client—or using information to a client’s disadvantage—this does not violate the First Amendment, even though the activity would be protected if there were no fiduciary relationship."\textsuperscript{153} In support of this claim, Balkin cites four state court cases, three from the 1970s and one from the 1990s, recognizing a doctor’s duty not to disclose patient information.\textsuperscript{154} He also interprets a 1985 securities law case that was decided by the Supreme Court on statutory grounds, \textit{Lowe v. SEC},\textsuperscript{155} as signaling that “ordinary First Amendment doctrine—including even the ban on prior restraints—would not apply to communications” between professional fiduciaries and their beneficiaries.\textsuperscript{156}

Balkin’s argument here is elegant and insightful, but it does not appear to track the approach that the Roberts Court would actually employ when evaluating First Amendment claims brought by online platforms that had been designated (by Congress, an administrative agency, or the Court itself) as fiduciaries for their users. This past Term, in \textit{National Institute of Family and Life Advocates v. Becerra}, Justice Thomas’s opinion for the Court was emphatic that the Court has never “recognized ‘professional speech’ as a separate category of speech.”\textsuperscript{157} Nor did the Court see any “persuasive reason” to reconsider that stance now.\textsuperscript{158} There is good reason to think that Justice Thomas overstated this point and that certain narrow categories of professional speech, such as doctors’ advice to patients, will continue to be treated differently than other categories of speech (or treated as nonspeech) under the First Amendment, unless the Court wishes to wreak havoc on longstanding regimes of professional licensing, informed consent, and malpractice liability.\textsuperscript{159} But at a minimum, \textit{Becerra} signals skepticism about Balkin’s broader claim that “the law does not treat speech in professional or other fiduciary relationships as part of public discourse” but instead treats such speech “as part of ordinary social and economic activity that is subject to reasonable regulation.”\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{152} Balkin, \textit{Information Fiduciaries}, supra note 5, at 1209.
\textsuperscript{153} Id. at 1210.
\textsuperscript{154} Id. at 1210 n.120.
\textsuperscript{155} 472 U.S. 181 (1985).
\textsuperscript{156} Balkin, \textit{Information Fiduciaries}, supra note 5, at 1219. Balkin maintains that “most professional relationships are fiduciary relationships.” Id. at 1209.
\textsuperscript{157} 138 S. Ct. 2361, 2371 (2018); \textit{see also id.} at 2371–72 (“Speech is not unprotected merely because it is uttered by ‘professionals.’”). Justice Thomas added that the Court “has been especially reluctant to ‘exempt[t] a category of speech from the normal prohibition on content-based restrictions.’” \textit{Id.} at 2372 (quoting United States \textit{v. Alvarez}, 567 U. S. 709, 722 (2012) (plurality opinion)). In her largely sympathetic 2016 response to Balkin, Bambauer anticipated a version of this rejoinder. \textit{See} Bambauer, \textit{supra} note 8, at 1950 (“[A]ny attempt to harness the power of fiduciary relationships in order to achieve broad privacy policy runs into an unavoidable problem: it violates the cardinal rule of content-neutrality.”).
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Becerra}, 138 S. Ct. at 2375.
\textsuperscript{159} \textit{See} Claudia E. Haupt, \textit{The Limits of Professional Speech}, 128 YALE L.J. 185, 188 (2018) (arguing forcefully that “despite the [\textit{Becerra}] Court’s insistence that it has never recognized professional speech as a category,” professional speech—when “narrowly defined”—is and should remain “a type of speech doctrinally distinct from others”).
\textsuperscript{160} Balkin, \textit{Information Fiduciaries}, supra note 5, at 1217.
Even if the Court were to affirm some sort of relaxed standard of First Amendment review for regulations of traditional fiduciary–beneficiary communications, it is not at all clear that the Court would apply this standard to the special case of digital information fiduciaries. Justice White’s concurring opinion in Lowe, which was joined by Chief Justice Rehnquist, suggested that regulations of a profession should be given more lenient First Amendment treatment only when there is a “personal nexus between professional and client” and the professional is “exercising judgment on behalf of [a] particular individual with whose circumstances he is directly acquainted.”

A “personal nexus” of this sort is arguably lacking altogether in the context of online platforms. Moreover, Balkin’s crucial concession that the fiduciary duties owed by online platforms to their users will be “more limited” than the duties of traditional fiduciaries leads naturally to the possibility that the government’s regulatory leeway may be more limited as well. Balkin is at pains to emphasize that fiduciary relationships are not one-size-fits-all in the law, why, then, should we assume that First Amendment review of these heterogeneous relationships will always take the same form?

In short, the notion that designating online platforms as fiduciaries would yield a significant First Amendment payoff strikes us as resting on an overly simple (if not nominalist) view of how judges would respond to such a designation, and as contradicted by the Roberts Court’s case law. Balkin’s argument here, in any event, only extends to regulations that could be characterized as speech regulations—most notably, restrictions on what platforms can do with the consumer data they gather. It is inapplicable to other policy tools that could not plausibly be characterized as speech regulations even by proponents of the “data is speech” view, including most antitrust and pro-competition tools, public certification or safe harbor programs “in which companies opt into various promises (backed by regulatory enforcement) in exchange for” certain legal or reputational benefits, requirements that firms pay people for their data, data portability and interoperability mandates, co-regulation schemes that incentivize businesses to continually

161 Lowe, 472 U.S. at 232 (White, J., concurring in result).
162 See supra sections II.B–C.
163 See supra note 7 and accompanying text.
164 See supra note 59 and accompanying text.
165 See generally Jane Bambauer, Is Data Speech?, 66 STAN. L. REV. 57 (2014). For a contrary perspective, see, for example, Neil M. Richards, Reconciling Data Privacy and the First Amendment, 52 UCLA L. REV. 1149, 1169 (2005) (“I believe that most privacy regulation that interrupts information flows in the context of an express or implied commercial relationship is neither ‘speech’ within the current meaning of the First Amendment, nor should it be viewed as such.” (internal citations omitted)).
166 Bambauer, supra note 8, at 1952. Information-fiduciary principles might themselves be instituted through a safe harbor program, see Balkin & Zittrain, supra note 5, but so presumably could other, more concrete legal obligations related to the goals of the program.
168 See, e.g., Bennett Cyphers & Danny O’Brien, Facing Facebook: Data Portability and Interoperability Are Anti-Monopoly Medicine, ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUND. (July 24, 2018), https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2018/07/facing-facebook-data-portability-and-interoperability-are-anti-
produce and share compliance information\textsuperscript{169} and any number of front-end limits or “taxes” on private data collection.\textsuperscript{170} Especially given the extraterritorial reach of the GDPR’s personal data protections,\textsuperscript{171} these sorts of policy tools may have more bite at this time than the regulations Balkin has in mind.

Furthermore, within the domain where it does apply, we question whether Balkin’s argument makes the strongest case for the constitutionality of public-interested platform regulation. Balkin grounds his argument in the special nature of the relationships that digital information fiduciaries, like all other fiduciaries, purportedly have with their beneficiaries. First Amendment theory, however, supplies numerous other possible grounds for justifying regulations meant to enhance platform users’ privacy, security, and control of their own data—from arguments that commercial speech and computer algorithms deserve only modest (if any) constitutional protection,\textsuperscript{172} to the contention that online service providers should be treated as “public trustees”\textsuperscript{173} or “public utilities”\textsuperscript{174}; to “systemic” perspectives on free speech that read the First Amendment as permitting or even requiring the government to take affirmative measures “to engineer a fairer, fuller, ‘freer’ expressive environment for everyone.”\textsuperscript{175}

We are not suggesting that these theories are without serious problems of their own, much less that the Roberts Court is likely to embrace any of them. But neither is the Court likely to embrace Balkin’s approach.\textsuperscript{176} And whatever their defects, these other theories at least focus attention on the most constitutionally salient feature of companies like Google and Facebook: not that their end users must be able to trust and depend on them, but that they are extraordinarily powerful actors with the potential to do great harm to (as well as good for) the freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press. Put more sharply, a First Amendment jurisprudence that analogizes the dominant online platforms to doctors and lawyers, while ignoring entirely their status as increasingly essential platforms for public communication and the “New Governors” of the public sphere,\textsuperscript{177} is not credible. It obscures the real social stakes.


\textsuperscript{172} See Kessler & Pozen, supra note 150, at 1988 nn.164–65 (collecting sources to this effect).

\textsuperscript{173} Wu, supra note 135, at 23.

\textsuperscript{174} Rahman, supra note 87, at 1668–80.

\textsuperscript{175} Kessler & Pozen, supra note 150, at 2002.

\textsuperscript{176} See supra note 157–164 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{177} Klonick, supra note 88, at 1663.
B. Downside Risks

Against this highly speculative and very possibly nonexistent First Amendment upside, a full analysis of the information-fiduciary proposal also needs to consider its potential downsides. We see several significant ones. As with the critical legal and conceptual points raised in Parts II and III, we have not encountered any discussion of these policy risks in the growing literature on the subject.

First, and most simply, a fiduciary framework paints a false portrait of the digital world. It characterizes Facebook, Google, Twitter, and other online platforms as fundamentally trustworthy actors who put their users’ interests first. As we tried to show in Part II, this is not a plausible depiction of what most of these companies—even if chastened in the ways Balkin outlines—are really like. The tension between what it would take to implement a fiduciary duty of loyalty to users, on the one hand, and these companies’ economic incentives and duties to shareholders, on the other, is too deep to resolve without fundamental reform. To suggest otherwise is to risk mystification of “surveillance capitalism,”178 entrenchment of prevailing business models, and legitimation of a wide range of troubling practices, if not also the unraveling of fiduciary law itself.179

Second, this false portrait of reality invites policy misfires. To a large extent, it seems that Balkin’s prescriptions would simply mirror or marginally refine longstanding consumer protection guarantees and antifraud doctrines,180 in which case our time and energy may be better spent figuring out how to strengthen enforcement of the existing rules rather than proliferating legal categories.181 Meanwhile, to the degree that Balkin’s prescriptions depart from existing consumer protection law,182 his theory lacks the resources to justify prioritizing those departures over countless other moves that might be made. The “grand bargain organized around the idea of fiduciary responsibility” that Balkin and Zittrain have put forward,183 in which a new federal statute would preempt state laws about online privacy, strikes us as an especially bad deal for proponents of online privacy, given the watered-down version of fiduciary responsibility such a

178 See generally ZUBOFF, supra note 74; cf. Kessler & Pozen, supra note 150, at 1971–73 (reviewing the critical literature on “informational capitalism” and “communicative capitalism”).

179 Even if “the law of fiduciary obligation has developed through analogy to contexts in which the obligation conventionally applies,” Deborah A. DeMott, Beyond Metaphor: An Analysis of Fiduciary Obligation, 1988 DUKE L.J. 879, 879, presumably some analogies would be so strained as to degrade rather than coherently advance this developmental process.

180 See supra notes 103–118 and accompanying text.

181 For a recent argument that the FTC’s ability to protect consumer privacy has been “severely curtailed” by the Commission’s lack of general rulemaking authority, its reluctance to target unfair practices as distinct from deceptive practices, and inadequate funding levels, among other factors, see Barrett, supra note 20, at 1073–78.

182 See supra notes 119–120 and accompanying text.

183 Balkin & Zittrain, supra note 5; see supra notes 54–55 and accompanying text.
statute would codify and the “pioneer[ing]” role that state attorneys general have played in enforcing their own unfair and deceptive trade acts and practices laws.\textsuperscript{184}

Third, the information-fiduciary proposal conceives of systemic problems in relational terms. The reason a company like Facebook can and should be regulated in a special way, it tells us, is that Facebook has (or should have) a special relationship of trust and dependency with each of its users. Not only does this argument ignore how Facebook generates dependency,\textsuperscript{185} but it also recasts what ought to be questions of the public interest—questions about what kind of social media landscape is good for our democracy—in a narrow quasi-contractarian frame that asks, instead, what Facebook owes any given individual who signs up for its service. This framing implicitly downgrades other accounts of the appropriate bases for government intervention and other models of public regulation, in particular those that conceptualize privacy as a public good\textsuperscript{186} or that aim to ward off extreme asymmetries of knowledge and power or “structural stranglehold[s] over digital media.”\textsuperscript{187} By the same token, the information-fiduciary proposal implicitly acquiesces in the legal decisions that enabled certain online platforms to become so dominant. It takes current market structures as a given.

Recently, Balkin has suggested that a fiduciary approach to regulating online platforms can be combined with more ambitious approaches, in effect giving us the best of both worlds.\textsuperscript{188} “The fiduciary approach,” Balkin writes, “meshes well with other forms of consumer protection” and, “[i]n particular, does not get in the way of new pro-competition rules or increased antitrust enforcement.”\textsuperscript{189} These policy tools would potentially “restructure how digital advertising operates” and “break up the larger companies into smaller companies that can compete with each other or create a space for new competitors to emerge.”\textsuperscript{190} Balkin’s interest in such tools resonates

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\item \textsuperscript{184} Citron, supra note 106, at 750, 785, 800, 811.
\item \textsuperscript{185} See supra section II.C.
\item \textsuperscript{186} On the ways in which digital privacy can be seen as a public good, see generally Joshua A.T. Fairfield & Christoph Engel, Privacy as a Public Good, 65 DUKE L.J. 385 (2015); Ben-Shahar, supra note 170, at 10–16; and Zeynep Tufekci, The Latest Data Privacy Debacle, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 30, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/30/opinion/strava-privacy.html.
\item \textsuperscript{188} This suggestion is echoed in Barrett, supra note 20, at 1107–12; and Grimmelmann, supra note 114.
\item \textsuperscript{189} Balkin, Fixing Social Media, supra note 5, at 15.
\item \textsuperscript{190} Id. at 10–11. Traditional antimonopoly and pro-competition remedies include horizontal and vertical breakups, interoperability and portability regimes, and common carriage requirements. For a taxonomy of “competition catalysts” used by agencies like the FTC and FCC, see Tim Wu, Antitrust via Rulemaking: Competition Catalysts, 16. COLO. TECH. L.J. 33, 47–61 (2017). For discussions of how some of these remedies might be applied to digital platforms like Facebook, see Tim Wu, THE CURSE OF BIGNESS: ANTITRUST IN THE NEW GILDED AGE 132–33 (2018) (“The simplest way to break the power of Facebook is breaking up Facebook.”); Barry Lynn & Matt Stoller, Facebook Must Be Restructured. The FTC Should Take These Nine Steps Now, THE GUARDIAN (Mar. 22, 2018), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/22/restructure-facebook-ftc-regulate-9-steps-now (proposing a series of reforms for Facebook, including a spinoff of its advertising network, divestiture of WhatsApp and Instagram, and limits on future acquisitions); and Luigi Zingales & Guy Rolnik, A Way to Own Your Social-Media Data, N.Y. TIMES (June 30, 2017),
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with and responds to a growing body of neo-Progressive scholarship that urges greater emphasis on “structural” (or “infrastructural”) solutions to problems of discrimination and domination online.191

While we commend Balkin’s turn toward structural analysis of this sort, we are deeply skeptical of the claim that the fiduciary approach “meshes well” with it. On the contrary, we suspect that the fiduciary approach, if pursued with any real vigor, would tend to cannibalize rather than complement pro-competition reforms. This fourth and final downside risk may be the most practically consequential of them all.

When introducing the information-fiduciary proposal, Balkin and Zittrain billed it as a kind of regulatory “third way” that could transcend ordinary political divides and policy tradeoffs. Highlighting the proposal’s “bipartisan appeal,” Zittrain explained that it “protects consumers and corrects a clear market failure without the need for heavy-handed government intervention.”192 Elsewhere, he suggested that a fiduciary approach might “nudge” companies like Facebook to “do the right thing,” “without outright requiring it.”193 The details were fuzzy but the message was clear. A fiduciary approach would promote users’ interests without necessarily causing too much trouble for the online platforms or their business models, thereby allowing Balkin and Zittrain to win wide support while sidestepping contentious questions like whether to restructure or break up Facebook, as a number of commentators have called for.194 The basic selling point of the fiduciary approach was that it would be flexible, light-touch, un-“heavy-handed”—in contrast to and in lieu of structural reforms.

Balkin’s and Zittrain’s early advocacy traded on an insight that remains as valid today as it was then: We can regulate the dominant online platforms as information fiduciaries or we can target their market dominance and business models, but very likely we will not do both. To assume otherwise is to overlook the opportunity costs, path dependencies, and expressive effects inherent in creating a new fiduciary regime. Mark Zuckerberg seems to grasp this. He is presumably attracted to the information-fiduciary proposal not just because of its “thoughtful[ness]”195 and

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/opinion/social-data-google-facebook-europe.html (advocating a data-portability regime that would reduce the cost of switching social networks and likely generate greater competition).


192 Zittrain, How to Exercise, supra note 5.

193 Zittrain, Fix This Mess, supra note 5.

194 See, e.g., ROGER MCNAMEE, ZUCKED: WAKING UP TO THE FACEBOOK CATASTROPHE 263 (2019); Wu, supra note 190, at 132–33; Lynn & Stoller, supra note 190; Sarah Miller & David Segal, Break Up Facebook: Latest Hack Proves It’s a Dangerous Data Monopoly That a Fine Won’t Fix, USA TODAY (Oct. 5, 2018), https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/10/05/facebook-dangerous-monopoly-divest-instagram-whatsapp-messenger-column/1512215002.

195 Brandom, supra note 9 (quoting Zuckerberg).
“intuitive[ness],” but also because of its political implications. An entity that is designated by the government as a loyal caretaker for the personal data of millions of Americans is not an entity that is likely to be dismantled by that same government. Facebook-as-fiduciary is no longer a public problem to be solved, potentially through radical reform. It is a nexus of sensitive private relationships to be managed, nurtured, and sustained.

V. ALTERNATIVE ANALOGIES

This Essay is an exercise in critique, not prescription. We have interrogated the increasingly popular analogy between online platforms and their end users, on the one hand, and professional fiduciaries and their patients and clients, on the other, and we have found this analogy inapposite on multiple levels. Analogical reasoning can retard rather than advance the cause of legal reform when it elides salient institutional differences or normative considerations. Although we do not elaborate any reform program of our own in this Essay, we will close by noting two analogies that strike us as more felicitous starting points than traditional fiduciary relationships for the project of platform regulation.

First, in the case of Facebook, Google, and other dominant online platforms, we might draw an analogy to “offline” providers of social and economic infrastructure. To the degree that these platforms serve as key channels of communication, commerce, and information flow, they can be recognized as controlling the terms of access to essential services. In the Progressive Era, policymakers feared that concentrated private control over infrastructure would create an intolerable imbalance of power between a small number of firms and the communities, businesses, and individuals dependent on them. Regulatory interventions were therefore focused on directly disciplining this power through a combination of legal tools, including nondiscrimination and common carrier regimes, limits on the lines of business in which firms could engage, interoperability requirements, corporate governance reforms, and public options.

The same regulatory principles deserve close consideration today. To the extent that Facebook and Google have achieved their dominance through anticompetitive means, antitrust lawsuits reversing key acquisitions and penalizing forms of monopoly leveraging might play a

196 Zittrain and Zuckerberg, supra note 12 (quoting Zuckerberg).
197 For a valuable argument to this effect, focused on the analogy that some have drawn between digital media companies and traditional news publishers, see generally Whitney, supra note 3.
198 We have already previewed this analogy. See supra notes 87 & 191 and accompanying text.
199 See Rahman, supra note 87, 1628–39. Professor Rahman defines infrastructure as “those goods and services which (i) have scale effects in their production or provision . . . ; (ii) unlock and enable a wide variety of downstream economic and social activities . . . ; and (iii) place users in a position of potential subordination, exploitation, or vulnerability if their access . . . is curtailed in some way.” Id. at 1643.
200 See id. at 1644–47; see also GANESH SITARAMAN & ANNE L. ALSTOTT, THE PUBLIC OPTION: HOW TO EXPAND FREEDOM, INCREASE OPPORTUNITY, AND PROMOTE EQUALITY (forthcoming 2019) (describing and defending “public options” that offer people a choice between governmental and private provision of a good or service); Khan, supra note 191, at 1037–52 (providing an overview of “separations regimes” applied throughout the twentieth century to proscribe certain organizational structures for railroads, bank holding companies, television networks, and telecommunication carriers).
complementary role, by opening up both primary and adjacent markets.201 Importantly, however, “structural” interventions do not necessarily have to break up firms. They can also reshape business incentives through bright-line prohibitions on specific modes of earning revenue, and they can reshape markets by creating the conditions for greater competition and consumer autonomy.202 Data interoperability requirements, for example, allow users to move their data across platforms, which in turn requires incumbent services to continuously compete.203 A platform that perennially violated users’ privacy would not benefit as much from the switching costs that keep users trapped within even unhealthy environments.204

Second, in thinking about the regulatory challenges posed by digital platforms’ collection, aggregation, and use of personal data, we might draw an analogy to environmental pollution. Professor Omri Ben-Shahar has recently proposed this analogy as a way to move beyond the privacy paradigm in addressing the social harms of these practices—not just the concerns they may raise for any given individual subject to surveillance but also the negative externalities they may cause for third parties and for public interests more generally.205 A pollution perspective helps to highlight why private law solutions are inadequate to the nature of the threat.206

The pollution analogy thus points away from individualistic, consumer-centric frameworks and toward a different set of techniques for reducing surveillance-related harms: namely, ex ante prohibitions on which sorts of data can be gathered and to what extent, Pigouvian taxes on data collection and retention that force firms to internalize their social costs, and ex post liability rules for data “spills” and other data disasters that facilitate deterrence and compensation.207 We take no stance here as to the optimal design of or balance among these techniques. We do, however, endorse the implicit insight that the harms from digital surveillance must be met with clear

201 Versions of this argument are made by the sources collected in note 194 supra.
202 See generally K. Sabeel Rahman, Democracy Against Domination 118 (2016) (distinguishing “structuralist” regulatory strategies, which “limit the underlying powers and capacities” of certain firms, from “prophylactic rules” that rely on “fine-tuning expert management”); Wu, supra note 190, at 34 (cataloging a range of “industry-specific statutes, rulemakings, or other tools of the regulatory state to achieve the traditional competition goals associated with the antitrust laws”).
203 Interoperability is thus what Professor Tim Wu calls a “switching cost reducer.” Wu, supra note 190, at 35, 56–58; see also id. at 56–57 (“Switching costs are a barrier to competition because they require that a competitor not just be slightly better, but quite a bit better to compensate for the costs incurred in changing providers.”).
204 Cf. supra notes 92–96 and accompanying text (suggesting that Facebook currently benefits from high switching costs of this sort).
206 See Ben-Shahar, supra note 170, at 9–16. Like all analogies, this one is imperfect even if illuminating. See, e.g., Ronen Avraham, Personal Data as an Environmental Hazard, JOTWELL (Nov. 14, 2018), https://torts.jotwell.com/personal-data-as-an-environmental-hazard (noting that unlike air pollution, “data pollution does not only create negative externalities, it also creates positive externalities”).
207 See Ben-Shahar, supra note 170, at 6–7.
prohibitions and economic disincentives, rather than morally laden standards. A fiduciary approach that targets “con artistry” 208 invites the dominant platforms to shun a small set of behaviors and then claim the mantle of trustworthiness, both narrowing the scope of public debate and normalizing the basic operations of surveillance capitalism. By contrast, outright limits or harsh penalties on certain forms of data collection or retention could help to detoxify the larger online ecosystem while preventing platforms from conditioning access to essential services on the ever-greater surrendering of personal data. The German competition authority recently provided an example of such an approach when it ruled that Facebook “will no longer be allowed to force its users to agree to the practically unrestricted collection and assigning of non-Facebook data [culled from third-party sources] to their Facebook user accounts.” 209 The upshot, the Bundeskartellamt’s President said, will be a “divestiture” of data 210—or, in other words, less power for Facebook and less pollution for everyone.

CONCLUSION

Figuring out how to regulate digital firms such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter is one of the central challenges of the “Second Gilded Age,” 211 and Balkin deserves credit for moving the conversation forward. His information-fiduciary proposal, however, is also moving the conversation backward—redirecting attention away from all of the problems associated with high levels of market concentration, away from all of the problems plaguing the speech environment on social media, away from all of the problems inherent in targeted-advertising-based business models. We do not claim to know what precise mix of reform strategies is best, and the answer will likely vary across markets. But for the reasons detailed above, we believe that pro-competition policies should assume a more prominent place in the debate. By contrast, we doubt that the information-fiduciary idea should play any significant role in the struggle to rein in the dominant online platforms and reclaim the online public sphere. If this Essay’s main arguments have been persuasive, the burden is on supporters of the information-fiduciary idea to clarify how it can be reconciled with the relevant firms’ economic incentives and with the facts of digital life, what it adds to existing theories and practices of consumer protection, and why anyone other than the dominant platform owners should see it as a promising path forward.

208 See supra notes 20 & 105 and accompanying text.
209 Bundeskartellamt Press Release, supra note 96 (emphasis added).
210 Id.
211 See Balkin, Second Gilded Age, supra note 27, at 980 (“The Second Gilded Age begins, more or less, with the beginning of the digital revolution in the 1980s, but it really takes off in the early years of the commercial Internet in the 1990s, and it continues to the present day.”).