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Do Facebook and Twitter Make You a Public Figure?: How to Apply the Gertz Public Figure Doctrine to Social Media

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DO FACEBOOK AND TWITTER MAKE YOU A PUBLIC FIGURE?: HOW TO APPLY THE GERTZ PUBLIC FIGURE DOCTRINE TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Matthew Lafferman

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Smith, like the majority of American adults,¹ has a social media profile, and he posts daily on his whereabouts, hobbies, and other interests. Mr. Smith becomes involved in promoting animal rights and over a period of several months, he posts numerous accounts of animal brutality and encourages philanthropic action on his profile, which is accessible to around eight hundred “friends.” Ms. Jones, who has access to Mr. Smith’s social media site, accuses Mr. Smith of being a fraud and labels him an animal killer. Experiencing reputational damage, Mr. Smith sues Ms. Jones for defamation. Can Ms. Jones claim Mr. Smith is a public figure and therefore avoid liability unless Mr. Smith can prove she with actual malice? Mr. Smith arguably thrust himself into a public controversy by posting comments on a controversial subject.

However, finding Mr. Smith a public figure could result in defining every social media user as a public figure, which would substantially that many users could recover for defamation under the stringent actual malice standard.² On the other hand, if courts were to avoid applying the public figure test altogether, it could deter many users who fear defamation liability from using social

³ Chris Williams, The Communications Decency Act and New York Times v. Sullivan: Providing Public Figure Defamation a Home on the Internet, 43 J. MARSHALL L. REV. 491, 504 (2010) (stating that the actual malice “standard proves a difficult hurdle for public figure plaintiffs to clear, thus making the likelihood of success in a public figure defamation action minimal”).
networks, chilling speech on social media that has proved to be socially beneficial in recent political and social movements, such as the Arab Spring.

This hypothetical underscores the problems that courts will encounter when applying the public figure doctrine announced in *Gertz v. Welch* to social media. The public figure doctrine extended First Amendment protections to libel law by requiring a public figure plaintiff to establish that the defendant defamed the plaintiff with actual malice, instead of negligence, in order to recover damages for defamation. With more courts applying libel law, instead of slander, to Internet postings the application of the public figure doctrine to social media users has become particularly relevant. Furthermore, courts cannot necessarily look to similar forums when applying the public figure doctrine to social media. The widespread use of social media and its fully customizable privacy settings make judicial application of the public figure

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4 Jeffrey Kosseff, *Private or Public? Eliminating the Gertz Defamation Test*, 2011 U. ILL. J.L. TECH & POL’Y 249, 272 (2011) (“If such voluntary action were enough to qualify someone to be a limited-purpose public figure, it could have an additional chilling effect on free speech: it would cause people who fear defamation to not take advantage of services such as Facebook.”).


7 For the purposes of this Comment, social media is used interchangeably with social networks, and refers to social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+.

8 *Gertz*, 418 U.S. at 342-43.

9 See Robert D. Sack, Sack on Defamation § 2:3 (4th ed. 2011). Historically, slander was defamation through spoken word while libel was “written or visual defamation.” *Id.* Courts have applied libel law to defamation resulting from Internet postings. *Id.* (citing W.J.A. v. D.A., 4 A.3d 601, 604 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Div. 2010); Too Much Media, LLC v. Hale, 993 A.2d 845, 865 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Div. 2010), aff’d, 20 A.3d 364 (N.J. 2011) (“[I]t may take more aforethought to type an Internet posting than it does to blurt out spoken words . . . unlike spoken words that evaporate, Internet postings have permanence, as the posts can remain on that particular site for an indefinite period and can easily be copied and forwarded.”)). Judge Robert D. Sack argues that in the future the distinctions between libel and slander will vanish and the two causes of action will eventually evolve into the “single tort of ‘defamation.’” *Id.* (citing Collins v. Purdue Univ., 703 F. Supp. 2d 862, 874-75 (N.D. Ind. 2010); Dugan v. Mittal Steel USA Inc., 929 N.E.2d 184, 186 (Ind. 2010)).

10 See sources cited supra note 1.

doctrine to social media distinguishable from application to computer bulletin boards, blogs, or the Internet in general.

Particular developments have also signaled a rise in online defamation suits. The recent discovery that most homeowner’s insurance policies cover libel liability has contributed to a 216 percent increase in Internet defamation suits against bloggers and Internet users over the past three years alone. Attorneys now target these groups in online defamation suits because they can recover up to the limits of these individual’s policies. The increased chance that a plaintiff will collect in defamation suits, combined with the growing number social media participants, make an overall increase in these suits—especially those concerning social media platforms—inevitable.

However, courts face challenges when applying the public figure doctrine to social media, especially the particular dilemma of invalidating Gertz. The Supreme Court relied on two major rationales to delineate the Gertz doctrine: public figures “voluntarily exposed themselves to increased risk of injury” and had “significantly greater access to the channels of effective communication.” Each social media user has access to the same basic features as

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16 Id.
17 See Online Defamation Cases in England and Wales ‘Double’, BBCNEWS.COM (Aug. 26, 2011, 1:03 PM), http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14684620 (stating that the increase in social media users has led to an increase in online defamation cases).
18 This Comment assumes that social media users are initially private figures and have essentially equal media contacts in the material world. As a result, this Comment does not discuss the potential problems that occur when applying the public figure doctrine to social media users who may already qualify as public figures.
every other user on the same social media platform.\(^{20}\) As a result, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for one social media user to have “greater access to the channels of effective communication” than other users.\(^{21}\) Thus, the *Gertz* Court’s rationale for what constitutes a public figure is partially inapplicable to social media users.\(^{22}\) Despite this inapplicability, *Gertz* can still be relevant in social media defamation cases. Courts could retain *Gertz*’s relevance by upholding *Gertz*’s other main principle—namely, that a social media user voluntarily assumes the risk of injury—when finding a social media user is a public figure.\(^{23}\)

This is not to say this approach is without problems. Focusing on the voluntary principle of *Gertz* is especially challenging when applying the involuntary public figure designation, which has no assumption of risk or voluntary action test.\(^{24}\) Moreover, courts also must be cautious when determining what action is “voluntary,” which *Gertz* defined as “assum[ing] roles of especial prominence in the affairs of society”\(^{25}\) or “thrust[ing] themselves to the forefront of particular public controversies.”\(^{26}\) Courts should avoid a voluntariness definition that is not to say this approach is without problems. Focusing on the voluntary principle of *Gertz* is especially challenging when applying the involuntary public figure designation, which has no assumption of risk or voluntary action test.\(^{24}\) Moreover, courts also must be cautious when determining what action is “voluntary,” which *Gertz* defined as “assum[ing] roles of especial prominence in the affairs of society”\(^{25}\) or “thrust[ing] themselves to the forefront of particular public controversies.”\(^{26}\) Courts should avoid a voluntariness definition that

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\(^{20}\) See Boyd & Ellison, *supra* note 11, at 211-14.

\(^{21}\) See Ann E. O’Connor, *Access to Media All A-Twitter: Revisiting Gertz and the Access to Media Test in the Age of Social Networking*, 63 Fed. Comm. L.J. 507, 526, 529 (2011) (“Communicating constantly through social networking and other Internet service providers has become so much a regular and routine practice of private individuals that there is not an assumption of receiving widespread attention from those communications. . . . When the *Gertz* Court spoke about accessing the media and the ease by which public figures were able to do so, it was addressing in simple terms what was a simple truth: those with a firm grasp on the public’s attention through their position as public officials or widely known figures would have the opportunity to garner the press’s attention to rebut statements made against them.”); Nathaniel Gleicher, Note, *John Doe Subpoenas: Toward a Consistent Legal Standard*, 118 Yale L.J. 320, 335 (2008) (“[B]ecause anyone can easily publish speech on the Internet, the effect of public figures’ ‘significantly greater access to the channels of effective communication’ is limited.” (citing Reno v. ACLU, 521 U.S. 844, 870 (1997) (“[A]ny person with a phone line can become a town crier with a voice that resonates farther than it could from any soapbox.”))); see also PAUL SIEGEL, COMMUNICATIONS LAW IN AMERICA 495 (2002) (stating that online plaintiffs “can reach an audience as large as the one exposed to the original defamation”).

\(^{22}\) *Gertz*, 418 U.S. at 344.

\(^{23}\) See O’Connor, *supra* note 21, at 525 (“In order to appropriately protect the private blogger from the heightened standard of actual malice that she would be required to prove as a limited-purpose public figure, it is necessary to give weight to the other prongs of the test-that is, whether there is an isolated controversy, whether the plaintiff has voluntarily thrust herself into the controversy, and so on-before jumping straight to the access to media prong.”).

\(^{24}\) *Gertz*, 418 U.S. at 345 (“Hypothetically, it may be possible for someone to become a public figure through no purposeful action of his own . . . .”).

\(^{25}\) Id.

\(^{26}\) Id.
encompasses simple operation of a social media site. Such an approach would convert millions of users into public figures in one fell swoop,\textsuperscript{27} which in turn would substantially decrease social media users’ chances at recovering for online defamation.\textsuperscript{28} This result would violate a major principle of \textit{Gertz},\textsuperscript{29} as well as a main tenet of tort law: compensation for the victim.\textsuperscript{30} Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act ("CDA")\textsuperscript{31} makes the proper application of \textit{Gertz} to social media platforms even more important. Section 230 immunizes Internet service providers from liability for the defamatory statements of users.\textsuperscript{32} As a result, social media users can only recover under defamation suits in suits against individual social media users, as opposed to a social media platform or operating system. Thus, to allow users a remedy, courts must cautiously structure the public figure doctrine to prevent all social media users from becoming public figures. However, courts should also avoid completely rejecting the public figure doctrine in order to avoid chilling speech on social media platforms\textsuperscript{33} and, consequently, contradicting an


\textsuperscript{28} Williams, \textit{supra} note 3, at 504 (stating that the actual malice “standard proves a difficult hurdle for public figure plaintiffs to clear, thus making the likelihood of success in a public figure defamation action minimal”).

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Gertz}, 418 U.S. at 341, 343 (“The legitimate state interest underlying the law of libel is the compensation of individuals for the harm inflicted on them by defamatory falsehood...[W]e conclude that the state interest in compensating injury to the reputation of private individuals requires that a different rule should obtain with respect to them.”).

\textsuperscript{30} See W. PAGE KEETON ET AL., PROSSER AND KEETON ON THE LAW OF TORTS 6 (W. Page Keeton ed., 5th ed. 1984) (“The purpose of the law of torts is to adjust these losses, and to afford compensation for injuries sustained by one person as the result of the conduct of another.” (citing Cecil A. Wright, \textit{Introduction to the Law of Torts}, 8 CAMBRIDGE L.J. 238, 238 (1944))).


\textsuperscript{32} See Ciolli, \textit{supra} note 13, at 275 (stating that courts have interpreted the statute to grant “broad immunity to Internet service providers, website hosting services, mailing list operators, discussion board owners, and other electronic services covered by the statute”).

\textsuperscript{33} Kosseff, \textit{supra} note 4, at 272 (“If such voluntary action were enough to qualify someone to be a limited-purpose public figure, it could have an additional chilling effect on free speech: it would cause people who fear defamation to not take advantage of services such as Facebook.”).
important principle of the public figure doctrine and reducing the socially beneficial speech that derives from such platforms.\(^{35}\)

This Comment sets forth a workable public-figure test to apply to social media users that upholds Gertz’s principles. Courts should require defendants to overcome certain initial presumptions by clear and convincing evidence before designating a social media user an involuntary public figure or a general public figure. To overcome the presumption that the plaintiff is not an involuntary public figure, courts should require defendants to provide clear and convincing proof that the plaintiff has greater access to the media than other users on the plaintiff’s social media network. To overcome the presumption that the plaintiff is not a general public figure, however, a defendant must offer clear and convincing evidence that the plaintiff has general notoriety or notoriety within the social media platform. Moreover, when determining what constitutes voluntary activity on a social network for limited-purpose public figures, courts should consider social media as an extension of a social media user’s private life.

Part I of this Comment provides a working definition of what constitutes social media, the differences between social media and the Internet in general, and the social benefits that derive from speech on social media platforms. Part II gives a short analysis of Supreme Court precedent on the public figure doctrine and a brief overview on lower courts’ application of this test. Part III examines the Communications Decency Act and how the act affects the remedies

\(^{34}\) See New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 376 U.S. 254, 279, 300-01 (1964) (“A rule compelling the critic of official conduct to guarantee the truth of all his factual assertions-and to do so on pain of libel judgments virtually unlimited in amount-leads to a comparable ‘self-censorship’. . . . Under such a rule, would-be critics of official conduct may be deterred from voicing their criticism, even though it is believed to be true and even though it is in fact true, because of doubt whether it can be proved in court or fear of the expense of having to do so. . . . The opinion of the Court conclusively demonstrates the chilling effect of the Alabama libel laws on First Amendment freedoms in the area of race relations.”); Gertz v. Welch, 418 U.S. 323, 342 (1974) (stating that “[s]ome tension necessarily exists between the need for a vigorous and uninhibited press and the legitimate interest in redressing wrongful injury” but that “[i]n our continuing effort to define the proper accommodation between these competing concerns, we have been especially anxious to assure to the freedoms of speech and press that ‘breathing space’ essential to their fruitful exercise”).

\(^{35}\) See Shirky, supra note 5, at 29-33.
available to a plaintiff defamed by online speech. Part IV analyzes how each public figure designation can be applied to social media and recommends that to best uphold the principles of Gertz, courts should require a defendant to overcome certain starting presumptions by clear and convincing proof when determining whether a social media plaintiff is a general or involuntary public figure. This section then suggests that courts define voluntary activity as deliberate, nonincidental contact with a public forum—that is, any forum in which the public can freely access information without encountering privacy restrictions.  

36 Although this definition includes social media profiles that users treat as “loudspeakers” instead of as “mailboxes,” courts should avoid defining merely accessing social media access as accessing a public forum and instead conclude such access is an extension of an individual’s private life.

I. WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

A. Defining Social Media

Social media refers to more typical social media platforms37 and features that are considered general characteristics of these widely used social media platforms. These characteristics include a viewable profile listing personal characteristics,38 some kind of viewable list of contacts or “friends,”39 and the ability for one social media user to post comments or statements on the

36 See infra notes 276-279 and accompanying text.
37 Good examples of more typical social media networks include the three major social media networks, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. Lauren McCoy, 140 Characters or Less: Maintaining Privacy and Publicity in the Age of Social Networking, 21 MARQ. SPORTS L. REV. 203, 210 n.43 (2010) (citing Don Bulmer, The Big Three Social Networks Have Emerged as Professional Networks: Linkedin, Facebook, and Twitter, SOCIALMEDIA TODAY.COM (Nov. 19, 2009), http://www.socialmediatoday.com/SMC/143975 (stating that the most popular social media platforms are LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter)).
38 Boyd & Ellison, supra note 11, at 213 (“The public display of connections is a crucial component of SNSs. The Friends list contains links to each Friend’s profile, enabling viewers to traverse the network graph by clicking through the Friends lists. On most sites, the list of Friends is visible to anyone who is permitted to view the profile . . .”).
39 Id. at 211 (“While SNSs have implemented a wide variety of technical features, their backbone consists of visible profiles that display an articulated list of Friends who are also users of the system.”).
profile of another user. Social media platforms may also include some more advanced characteristics, most notably video and photo sharing capabilities. The defining feature of social media is the fact that users can modify their privacy settings to allow public access to their pages.

B. Distinguishing Social Media from Other Internet Media

Social media is a unique feature of the Internet. For this reason, other articles discussing the public figure doctrine and its legal consequences for Internet platforms are inapplicable to social media. Social media differs from the rest of the Internet in three major ways. One distinguishing feature is that social media has internal privacy mechanisms. These mechanisms allow social media users to modify their privacy settings to permit anywhere from general access to the user’s social media page to exclusive access by a group of predetermined users. The ability to limit access on social media differs from the generally open nature of the Internet.

Private blogs and webpages may offer this opportunity to users. However, they do not offer another distinguishing social media characteristic: the sheer number of people participating in a structured online community with each user possessing identical web capabilities. The third difference between social media and other Internet platforms is the public expectations of these

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40 Id. at 211, 217 (“Most SNSs also provide a mechanism for users to leave messages on their Friends’ profiles. This feature typically involves leaving ‘comments,’ although sites employ various labels for this feature.”).
41 Id. at 214 (“Beyond profiles, Friends, comments, and private messaging, SNSs vary greatly in their features and user base. Some have photo-sharing or video-sharing capabilities; others have built-in blogging and instant messaging technology.”).
42 Id. at 211 (“What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks. This can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be made . . .”); see also Data Use Policy, supra note 11 (discussing “profile visibility control”); Twitter Privacy Policy, supra note 11 (discussing privacy settings).
43 See Data Use Policy, supra note 11 (discussing “profile visibility control”); Twitter Privacy Policy, supra note 11 (discussing privacy settings); see also Boyd & Ellison, supra note 11, at 213 (“The visibility of a profile varies by site and according to user discretion.”).
44 See Data Use Policy, supra note 11 (discussing “profile visibility control”); Twitter Privacy Policy, supra note 11 (discussing privacy settings).
45 See sources cited supra note 27.
46 See Boyd & Ellison, supra note 11, at 211-14.
forums. Many see social media platforms an extension of their social life in the material world. These three dissimilarities create a unique challenge for applying the public figure doctrine in the social media context.

C. The Social Benefits of Social Media

Social media also provides an important benefit to society. Although some critics have claimed that social media has a limited social benefit, many examples exist that rebut this claim. For example, social media has played a pivotal role in political campaigns in the United States. Social networks also had an important role in several political movements throughout the world, including most notably the Arab Spring. Most recently, the social media use has helped proliferate information about the human rights violations in Syria. These incidents provide only a few examples of the numerous occasions in which social media use has played a key role in an important social or political event or movement by helping organize or disseminate ideas throughout the group. As a result, courts should seek to facilitate speech on social media platforms when deciding how to apply doctrine to social media platforms.

47 See id. at 211, 221 (“On many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily ‘networking’ or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. . . . Although exceptions exist, the available research suggests that most SNSs primarily support pre-existing social relations.”).
51 See Anthony Shadid, With Internet, Exiles Shape World’s Image of Syria Revolt, N.Y. TIMES, April 24, 2011, at A1.
52 See Shirky, supra note 5, at 29-33.
II. THE PUBLIC FIGURE DOCTRINE

Before considering how to apply the public figure doctrine to social media, it is instructive to review defamation law to highlight potentially troublesome aspects of the doctrine. Under the Second Restatement of Torts, the plaintiff satisfies the elements of defamation by proving that the defendant (1) published a statement to a third party (2) that is a false defamatory statement concerning the plaintiff, (3) the defendant’s fault at least amounts to negligence, and (4) the statement caused damage to the plaintiff. In order to establish the defendant negligently made the statement, the plaintiff must prove that the defendant failed to verify the truth of the statement. The public figure doctrine, however, changes the threshold liability that the plaintiff must prove in order to recover. If a plaintiff qualifies as a public figure, he must prove the defendant acted with “actual malice” when making the defamatory statement, which is defined as “reckless disregard for the truth.” It is not entirely clear when an individual acquires public figure status. An analysis of the public figure doctrine and cases explaining the doctrine illustrates the confusion surrounding the public figure doctrine.

53 RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF TORTS § 558 (1977); Quin S. Landon, Comment, The First Amendment and Speech-Based Torts: Recalibrating the Balance, 66 U. MIAMI L. REV. 157, 163 (2011) (“To prevail in a defamation action a plaintiff must prove the following elements: (1) a false and defamatory statement was made against another; (2) an unprivileged publication of the statement was made to a third party; (3) if the defamatory matter is of public concern, fault amounting at least to negligence on the part of the publisher; and (4) damage to the plaintiff.” (citing Aaron Larson, Defamation, Law, and Slander, EXPERTLAW.COM, http://www.expertlaw.com/library/personal_injury/defamation.html (last visited Sept. 11, 2010))).
54 SACK, supra note 9, § 6:2:1.
56 See id. at 328, 342-43 (“Under [the New York Times v. Sullivan] rule respondent would escape liability unless petitioner could prove publication of defamatory falsehood ‘with ‘actual malice’-that is, with knowledge that it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not.” (quoting New York Times v. Sullivan, 376 U.S. 254, 280 (1964))).
A. Supreme Court Precedent

1. New York Times and Gertz

New York Times Co. v. Sullivan\(^5^7\) is the starting point for American defamation law and the public figure doctrine.\(^5^8\) New York Times involved a defamation lawsuit by an elected official of Montgomery, Alabama, against the New York Times after the Times published an advertisement criticizing Montgomery for the city’s role in the civil rights movement.\(^5^9\) In finding in favor of the Times, the Supreme Court extended First Amendment principles to defamation law by holding that individuals classified as “public officials” must prove “actual malice,” instead of negligence, to recover for defamatory speech.\(^6^0\) The Court based its decision on the premise that defamation law would have a chilling effect on free speech if a person critical of public officials would have to guarantee the truth of all his statements.\(^6^1\) The Court based its conclusion on the presumption that the risk of civil liability would force people being critical of “official conduct” to self-censor.\(^6^2\) The majority explained that such censoring would detract from the “debate on public issues,” which “should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open,” and “may well include vehement, caustic, and sometimes unpleasantly sharp attacks on government and public officials.”\(^6^3\)

\(^5^7\) 376 U.S. 254 (1964).
\(^5^8\) RODNEY A. SMOLLA, LAW OF DEFAMATION § 2:1 (2nd ed. 2010).
\(^5^9\) New York Times Co., 376 U.S.at 256-60.
\(^6^0\) See id. at 283-84 n.24.
\(^6^1\) See id. at 279, 300-01 (“A rule compelling the critic of official conduct to guarantee the truth of all his factual assertions-and to do so on pain of libel judgments virtually unlimited in amount-leads to a comparable ‘self-censorship’. . . . Under such a rule, would-be critics of official conduct may be deterred from voicing their criticism, even though it is believed to be true and even though it is in fact true, because of doubt whether it can be proved in court or fear of the expense of having to do so. . . . The opinion of the Court conclusively demonstrates the chilling effect of the Alabama libel laws on First Amendment freedoms in the area of race relations.”)
\(^6^2\) Id.
\(^6^3\) Id. at 270.
The Supreme Court expanded the actual malice standard to public figures in *Curtis Publishing Co. v. Butts*[^64] and *Associated Press v. Walker*[^65] in plurality opinions; however, *Gertz v. Welch* was the first case in which the Court officially set forth guidelines and a rationale for determining public figure status.[^66] In *Gertz*, an attorney sued a publisher of a magazine who wrote an article claiming the attorney was a communist.[^67] The publisher argued the attorney was a public official or a public figure and thus “entitled to invoke the privilege enunciated in *New York Times*.“[^68] In refusing to find that the lawyer fell into either of these designations, the Court effectively outlined the public figure doctrine.[^69]

The Court explained the public figure doctrine rests on two major foundations[^70]: the individual’s access to the media[^71] and the individual’s assumption of risk of injury.[^72] The majority argued that both public officials and public figures have “significantly greater access to the channels of effective communication” and can thus rebut false statements more effectively than private individuals.[^73] The Court also reasoned that public figures have assumed an “increased risk of injury” from defamatory statements by voluntarily assuming a role of fame or influence in society.[^74]

After explaining its rationale, the Court proceeded to identify at least two, and perhaps three,[^75] types of public figures: general public figures, limited-purpose public figures, and

[^64]: 388 U.S. 130 (1967).
[^65]: 389 U.S. 889 (1967).
[^68]: *Id.* at 343-46, 350.
[^69]: *Id.* at 344.
[^70]: *Id.* at 344-45; SMOLLA, *supra* note 58, § 2:13.
[^73]: *Gertz*, 418 U.S. at 344.
[^74]: *Id.* at 345.
[^75]: Hopkins, *supra* note 24, at 21 (“[T]here is disagreement as to whether the Supreme Court identified two or three categories of public figure status.”).
involuntary public figures. According to the majority, general public figures attain public figure status by voluntarily assuming a role of “especial prominence” in society. In comparison, limited-public public figures reach public status when they “thrust themselves” into a specific public controversy in order to influence the outcome. Although some controversy exists about their existence, the Gertz Court also left open the possibility of the existence of involuntary public figures. However, the majority pointed out that such cases would be few and far between. Finally, the Court made a point to eschew a bright-line rule or a case-by-case approach and instead indicated a preference for developing broad principles when determining public figure status.

2. Subsequent Supreme Court Cases

Gertz provided the general outline of the public figure doctrine, and later Supreme Court cases shed light on its precise definition. Two years after Gertz, in Time, Inc. v. Firestone, Mary Alice Firestone filed a defamation suit after Time published defamatory material about her divorce from Russell Firestone, a descendant of the wealthy Firestone family. Time argued that because Mrs. Firestone was a public figure, it did not act with the requisite intent of actual

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76 SMOLLA, supra note 58, §§ 2:14, 2:33.
77 Gertz, 418 U.S. at 345 (“[T]hose who attain this status have assumed roles of especial prominence in the affairs of society.”).
78 Id. at 345 (“More commonly, those classed as public figures have thrust themselves to the forefront of particular public controversies in order to influence the resolution of the issues involved.”).
79 Hopkins, supra note 24, at 21 (“[T]here is disagreement as to whether the Supreme Court identified two or three categories of public figure status.”).
80 Gertz, 418 U.S. at 345 (“[I]t may be possible for someone to become a public figure through no purposeful action of his own . . . .”).
81 Id. at 345 (“[I]t may be possible for someone to become a public figure through no purposeful action of his own, but the instances of truly involuntary public figures must be exceedingly rare.” (emphasis added)).
82 See id. at 343, 346 (“Because an ad hoc resolution of the competing interests at stake in each particular case is not feasible, we must lay down broad rules of general application. . . . Nor does the Constitution require us to draw so thin a line between the drastic alternatives of the New York Times privilege and the common law of strict liability for defamatory error.”).
84 Id. at 450-52.
malice to incur liability.\textsuperscript{85} The majority refused to find Mrs. Firestone was a general or limited-purpose public figure and in the process elucidated the public figure doctrine.\textsuperscript{86} The Court noted that an individual needed more than merely local notoriety to be a public figure.\textsuperscript{87} The Court also expressed a concern about adopting a broad definition of a public figure that would encapsulate too large a class of people.\textsuperscript{88} It therefore refused to define public controversy as any debate or issue that concerned a subject of public interest.\textsuperscript{89} The Court also displayed great deference to \textit{Gertz}’s voluntariness requirement by relying on Mrs. Firestone’s lack of voluntary action to decide she was not a public figure of any sort.\textsuperscript{90}

Subsequent Supreme Court cases, \textit{Wolston v. Reader’s Digest Ass’n}\textsuperscript{91} and \textit{Hutchinson v. Proxmire},\textsuperscript{92} further developed the boundaries of the public figure doctrine. In \textit{Wolston}, the Court refused to find that an individual who failed to appear in a grand jury hearing investigating Soviet intelligence activities in the United States was a public figure.\textsuperscript{93} The Court reiterated its definition of a public controversy stated in \textit{Firestone}, stating, “A private individual is not automatically transformed into a public figure just by becoming involved in or associated with a matter that attracts public attention.”\textsuperscript{94} On the other hand, \textit{Hutchinson}, involved a suit brought by an adjunct professor against a U.S. Senator who criticized the professor’s federal spending as

\begin{footnotesize}
85 Id. at 452-53.
86 Id. at 453 (“Respondent did not assume any role of especial prominence in the affairs of society, other than perhaps Palm Beach society, and she did not thrust herself to the forefront of any particular public controversy in order to influence the resolution of the issues involved in it.”).
87 Id. (“Respondent did not assume any role of especial prominence in the affairs of society, other than perhaps Palm Beach society . . .”).
88 Id. at 456-57 (“It may be argued that there is still room for application of the \textit{New York Times} protections to more narrowly focused reports of what actually transpires in the courtroom. But even so narrowed, the suggested privilege is simply too broad.”).
89 Id. at 454 (“[P]etitioner seeks to equate ‘public controversy’ with all controversies of interest to the public. . . . Dissolution of a marriage through judicial proceedings is not the sort of ‘public controversy’ referred to in \textit{Gertz} . . .”).
90 See id. (“Nor did respondent freely choose to publicize issues as to the propriety of her married life.”).
93 \textit{Wolston}, 443 U.S. at 159-61.
94 Id. at 167.
\end{footnotesize}
unreasonably excessive. The Court refused to find the professor was a public figure partly because of its concern for crafting a rule that encompasses too large a class of people. The majority explicitly stated that if it concluded the professor was a public figure, “everyone who received or benefited from the myriad public grants for research could be classified as a public figure—a conclusion that our previous opinions have rejected.” Both Wolston and Hutchinson emphasized the need to identify some voluntary action taken by the plaintiff before finding the plaintiff is a public figure.

B. Lower Court Application of the Public Figure Doctrine

Despite the Supreme Court’s efforts, lower courts continue to experience difficulty applying the public figure doctrine. In fact, one court has complained that the Supreme Court has not “fleshed out” the difference between a public figure and private person. In light of the gaps remaining in the public figure doctrine, lower courts have shaped much of its finer contours. Most lower courts have supported a plain reading of Gertz and found Gertz can support three different public figure designations: general public figures, limited-purpose public figures, and involuntary public figures. Lower courts have established a large variety of tests for each of

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96 Id. at 135 (“[I]t is not sufficient to make Hutchinson a public figure. If it were, everyone who received or benefited from the myriad public grants for research could be classified as a public figure—a conclusion that our previous opinions have rejected.”).
97 Id.
98 See id. at 135 (“Hutchinson did not thrust himself or his views into public controversy to influence others.”); *Wolston*, 443 U.S. at 166 (“[T]he undisputed facts do not justify the conclusion of the District Court and Court of Appeals that petitioner ‘voluntarily thrust’ or ‘injected’ himself into the forefront of the public controversy surrounding the investigation of Soviet espionage in the United States.”).
100 Ciollì, *supra* note 13, at 266 (“Because the Supreme Court’s most recent public figure decisions have failed to clarify the *Gertz* framework, lower courts have developed most of contemporary public figure doctrine.” (citing Erik Walker, *Defamation Law: Public Figures – Who Are They?*, 45 BAYLOR L. REV. 955, 977 (1993))).
101 Hopkins, *supra* note 24, at 21 (“[T]here is disagreement as to whether the Supreme Court identified two or three categories of public figure status. . . . [A] number of courts have recognized--either explicitly or implicitly--that the involuntary public figure is one of three types of public figures identified by the *Gertz* Court.”).
these designations.102 This Comment will focus on the general features or potentially problematic tests for each designation.

1. General Public Figures

Courts have generally required that an individual assume a level of notoriety in society before concluding the individual is a public figure.103 Within the constructs of this test, courts have interpreted an assumption of risk to be some form of voluntary action on the plaintiff’s behalf.104 Most have defined voluntary activity as actually seeking and obtaining notoriety.105 However, some courts have interpreted the assumption of risk to include behavior from which publicity inevitably results,106 such as marrying a famous television-show personality107 or a music star.108

In regards to notoriety, most lower courts have set a high bar for an individual to be notorious in society.109 Upon first glance it seems that an individual or entity must be a household

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102 Walker, supra note 100, at 971 (“The tension between Gertz and subsequent Supreme Court decisions has produced inconsistent lower court holdings.”).
103 See SACK, supra note 9, § 5:3:2; SMOLLA, supra note 58, § 2:80.
106 See James Corbelli, Comment, Fame and Notoriety in Defamation Litigation, 34 HASTINGS L.J. 809, 816 n.46 (1983) (“Although there is language in Gertz that appears to require ‘persuasive power and influence,’ . . . some lower courts have interpreted Gertz to allow a finding of public figure status based solely on fame.” (citations omitted)).
107 See Carson, 529 F.2d at 209 (finding Johnny Carson’s wife a public figure).
name to achieve general public figure status, which has included the likes of Johnny Carson,\textsuperscript{110} Clint Eastwood,\textsuperscript{111} Carroll Burnett,\textsuperscript{112} Jerry Falwell,\textsuperscript{113} Ithaca College,\textsuperscript{114} the Globe Newspaper,\textsuperscript{115} and even a billion dollar corporation, Reliance Insurance.\textsuperscript{116} However, courts have also found individuals to be general public figures when they experience notoriety within a smaller community or context.\textsuperscript{117} Courts have found individuals to obtain notoriety when they gained fame or renown in narrow contextual situations, such as within the surfing community,\textsuperscript{118} inside a particular metropolitan ethnic community,\textsuperscript{119} or within a city’s sports community.\textsuperscript{120} Moreover, courts have also found a party to be a general public figure when the person gains notoriety in a specific geographic area.\textsuperscript{121} These cases have found individuals public figures when an individual gains notoriety in regions like Alabama,\textsuperscript{122} Montana,\textsuperscript{123} and even smaller localities, such as the University of Minnesota.\textsuperscript{124} This contextual notoriety presents particular problem when applied to social media platforms where users can freely segregate themselves into communities or groups of connections.\textsuperscript{125} The different tests for notoriety and assumption of notoriety under the general public figure test make it important that courts analyze the doctrine’s application to social media to determine the potential positive or negative effects of such application.

\textsuperscript{110} Carson, 529 F.2d at 209.
\textsuperscript{111} See Eastwood, 149 Cal. App. 3d at 423-25.
\textsuperscript{112} Burnett, 144 Cal. App. 3d at 1008.
\textsuperscript{113} Falwell, 521 F. Supp. at 1208.
\textsuperscript{117} See SMOLLA, supra note 58, §§ 2:51-52.
\textsuperscript{119} Celle v. Filipino Reporter Enters. Inc., 209 F.3d 163, 177 (2d Cir. 2000).
\textsuperscript{121} See Williams v. Pasma, 656 P.2d 212, 216 (Mont. 1982); Mobile Press Register v. Faulkner, 372 So. 2d 1282, 1285-86 ( Ala. 1979); Nelson v. Univ. of Minn., No. 92-3599, 1993 WL 610729, at *3 (Minn. Dist. June 25, 1993).
\textsuperscript{122} Mobile Press Register, 372 So. 2d at 1285-86.
\textsuperscript{123} Williams, 656 P.2d at 216.
\textsuperscript{124} Nelson, 1993 WL 610729, at *3. Note that the court found the plaintiff to be a limited-purpose public figure, and not a general purpose public figure, based on his notoriety at the University of Minnesota. Id.
\textsuperscript{125} See Boyd & Ellison, supra note 11, at 218-19.
2. Limited-Purpose Public Figures

The limited-purpose public figure test is perhaps the most frequently used test in the public figure doctrine.\(^\text{126}\) Although the different types of tests available are numerous, generally the test can be broken into two parts: (1) a preexisting public controversy (2) that the plaintiff influences through his voluntary actions.\(^\text{127}\)

Lower courts have adopted a wide variety of approaches to determine what constitutes voluntary action.\(^\text{128}\) The approaches can be distilled into two general methods\(^\text{129}\) that mirror the assumption-of-risk approach for general public figures.\(^\text{130}\) Under the first approach, an individual acts voluntarily when he takes definitive and assertive action to influence a controversy.\(^\text{131}\) Examples of this behavior range from a scientist trying to advocate a particular viewpoint\(^\text{132}\) to a builder promoting his business.\(^\text{133}\) Under the second approach, actions that are merely likely to result in influence or publicity constitute voluntary action.\(^\text{134}\) Courts differ when finding what behavior satisfies this test. The Third Circuit has found an attorney should have known publicity would result from his actions after he represented a motorcycle gang involved in drug

\(^{126}\) Marcone v. Penthouse Int’l Magazine for Men, 754 F.2d 1072, 1082 (3d Cir. 1985) (“More common are individuals deemed public figures only in the context of a particular public dispute.”).


\(^{128}\) SMOLLA, supra note 58, § 2:31 n.11 (“The voluntariness element is truly an example of the existence of authorities ‘too numerous to mention,’ for almost no case dealing with the public figure classification fails to discuss it.’”); Hopkins, supra note 24, at 24 (“One court held, for example, that while voluntariness is important to public figure status, ‘what is and is not voluntary is by no means self-evident.’” (quoting Schiavone Contr. Co. v. Time, Inc., 619 F. Supp. 684, 703 (D.N.J. 1985))).

\(^{129}\) See supra text accompanying notes 81-84.

\(^{130}\) See supra text accompanying notes 81-84.

\(^{131}\) Walker, supra note 100, at 972-73.

\(^{132}\) See, e.g., Reuber, 925 F.2d at 710.

\(^{133}\) See, e.g., Carr v. Forbes, 259 F.3d 273, 280-81 (4th Cir. 2001).

\(^{134}\) See Marcone v. Penthouse Int’l Magazine for Men, 754 F.2d 1072, 1083 (3d Cir. 1985); Rosanova v. Playboy Enters., 580 F.2d 859, 861 (5th Cir. 1978); see also Walker, supra note 100, at 972-73.

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trafficking. However, the Fifth Circuit has held a mobster acted voluntarily when “he engaged in a course of criminal conduct which was bound to invite attention.”

Similar diversity exists in the lower courts’ approach to the public controversy requirement. Aside from adopting a case-by-case interpretation, courts have generally adopted two interpretations of a public controversy. More often courts have held a public controversy exists when controversy affects members of the public other than the litigants in the case. A prime example of such a test is the public controversy test utilized in *Waldbaum v. Fairchild Publications, Inc.* In *Waldbaum*, the D.C. Circuit held that a story about a CEO being dismissed from the second largest cooperative in the nation constituted a public controversy because the company’s “pathbreaking marketing policies,” started a debate which encapsulated “consumers and retailers in the Washington area.” The second variation of the public controversy test requires that the situations at issue be likely to draw publicity. For example, the Third Circuit has found “that a dispute over a professional football player’s ability is a public controversy because such an issue is always newsworthy.” The variety of approaches under the limited-purpose public figure doctrine indicates it is equally as muddled as the general public figure doctrine.

An important distinction between the limited-purpose public figure doctrine and the general public figure doctrine is that a public figure plaintiff only needs to meet the actual malice

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135 *Marcone*, 754 F.2d at 1086.
136 *Rosanova*, 580 F.2d at 861.
138 See SACK, supra note 9, at 5:3:3; SMOLLA, supra note 58, § 2:29.
140 627 F.2d 1287 (D.C. Cir. 1980).
141 *Id.* at 1299.
142 Walker, *supra* note 100, at 970.
143 *Id.* at 970-71 (citing Chuy v. Phila. Eagles Football Club, 595 F.2d 1265, 1280 (3d Cir. 1979)).
standard regarding the statements made within the context of the controversy. This difference is an important aspect for courts to consider when applying this doctrine to social media because of the potential implications on a defendant’s liability.

3. Involuntary Public Figures

The last, and most controversial, public figure designation from Gertz is the involuntary public figure. Courts have used this doctrine so sparingly that some courts and commentators have questioned its existence altogether. Where courts have adopted the involuntary public figure designation, they have taken two general approaches.

Courts have often considered the involuntary public figure to be a separate public figure designation. For example, consider Dameron v. Washington Magazine, Inc., where an air traffic controller sued Washington Magazine for defamation after the magazine asserted he was among the air traffic controllers who were to blame for an airplane crash that killed ninety-two people. The D.C. Circuit agreed with the district court’s determination that the air traffic controller was not a limited-purpose or general purpose public figure because he never “injected”

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144 SMOLLA, supra note 58, § 2:78 (“The only difference between [public figures and limited-purpose public figures] is that the actual malice test applies to limited public figures only with regard to speech connected to the public controversy out of which the public figures, status arises, whereas the pervasive public figure is subject to the actual malice test in all defamation actions.”)
145 Id.
146 Wells v. Liddy, 186 F.3d 505, 538 (4th Cir. 1999) (“So rarely have courts determined that an individual was an involuntary public figure that commentators have questioned the continuing existence of that category.”); Hopkins, supra note 24, at 18 (stating that “one commentator pointed out that ‘rare’ appeared to be a euphemism for ‘non-existent’” (quoting Nat Stern, Unresolved Antitheses of the Limited Public Figure Doctrine, 33 HOUS. L. REV. 1027, 1092 (1996))).
147 Hopkins, supra note 24, at 21-28.
148 Id. at 21-22.
149 779 F.2d 736 (D.C. Cir. 1985).
150 Id. at 738.
himself into the controversy. However, the court held the air traffic controller was an involuntary public figure. The court based its finding on the fact that the air traffic controller assumed a role of special prominence in a public controversy, albeit by “sheer bad luck” of being the “controller on duty at the time of the . . . crash.” Other courts that have employed this doctrine have adopted a similar approach to that of *Dameron*, requiring only that the plaintiff obtain a high level of publicity, either within a specific controversy or in general.

However, some courts consider the involuntary public figure to be a subset of the limited-purpose public figure or general public figure designations. The Third Circuit best explained this rationale when it stated that “rather than creating a separate class of public figures, we view such a description as merely one way an individual may come to be considered a general or limited-purpose public figure.” Thus, based on this approach, an individual can still become a general or limited-public figure involuntarily. Nevertheless, although courts have sparingly used the involuntary public figure doctrine, they should consider the role the test plays when considering how to apply the public figure doctrine to social media.

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151 *Id.* at 740-41.
152 *Id.* at 742.
153 *Id.*
156 Hopkins, *supra* note 24, at 23 (stating that the Third Circuit has held “that there are not three categories of public figure status, but that ‘involuntariness’ is merely one means through which a libel plaintiff becomes a public figure”); *see also* Grossman v. Smart, 807 F. Supp. 1404, 1409 (C.D. Ill. 1992).
158 *Id.; see also* Walker, *supra* note 100, at 972.
159 Hopkins, *supra* note 24, at 21 (“O]ver the quarter-century following *Gertz*, some twenty-three courts have struggled with the involuntary public figure doctrine in more than thirty cases, identifying plaintiffs as involuntary public figures nine times.” (citations omitted)).
III. THE LACK OF AVAILABLE REMEDIES—SECTION 230 OF THE COMMUNICATIONS DECENCY ACT

Application of the public figure doctrine to social media is particularly important because current statutory online defamation law severely limits the remedy available to plaintiffs.160

Today, online defamation law is largely controlled by Section 230 of the CDA, which was meant to overrule cases like Stratton Oakmont v. Prodigy Services Co.161 In Stratton Oakmont, a New York state court considered whether an online service provider should be liable after an unknown person posted defamatory statements on one of the service provider’s computer bulletin boards.162 The posting stated an investment banking firm’s securities offering was “major fraud,” the firm’s president was “soon to be proven criminal,” and Stratton brokers “lie[d] for a living or get fired.”163 The court found the service provider liable pursuant to the common law rule that subjects those who repeat or republish defamatory statements to liability.164

In response to this decision, Congress decided to eschew common law approach, and it passed the CDA.165 Congress passed this legislation with the purpose of overruling Stratton Oakmont and other similar cases166 because these decisions could hamper the growth of the Internet or the “vibrant and competitive free market that presently exists for the Internet.”167

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160 See SIEGEL, supra note 21, at 494; Ciolli, supra note 13, at 275 (stating that courts have interpreted the statute to grant “broad immunity to Internet service providers, website hosting services, mailing list operators, discussion board owners, and other electronic services covered by the statute”).
162 Id. at *1.
163 Id.
164 Id. at *4-5.
166 H.R. REP. NO. 104–458, at 194 (1996) (Conf. Rep.) (“[S]ection [230] provides ‘Good Samaritan’ protections from civil liability for providers . . . of an interactive computer service for actions to restrict . . . access to objectionable online material. One of the specific purposes of this section is to overrule Stratton–Oakmont v. Prodigy and any other similar decisions which have treated such providers . . . as publishers or speakers of content that is not their own because they have restricted access to objectionable material.”).
167 47 U.S.C. § 230(b)(1)-(2) (1998). (“It is the policy of the United States . . . to promote the continued development of the Internet and other interactive computer services and other interactive media [and] . . . to preserve the vibrant and competitive free market that presently exists for the Internet.”); see also Perzanowski, supra note 14, at 854 n.137 (2006) (“At common law ‘every one who takes part in the publication, as in the case of the owner, editor, printer, vendor, or even carrier of a newspaper is charged with publication’” (quoting KEETON ET AL., supra note 30, at 799)).
Section 230 is responsible for shaping the current state of online defamation. The applicable language in this section states that “[n]o provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider.” This statement has widely been read to absolve online service providers of liability “even when the Internet company clearly intended to benefit from the rhetorical excesses of those subscribers.” Subsequent cases have supported this broad interpretation of Section 230. Moreover, courts have found or indicated that social media platforms fall within the definition of an Internet service provider. One such case is *Doe v. MySpace, Inc.* In *Doe*, the plaintiff sued MySpace for failing to “implement basic safety measures to prevent sexual predators from communicating with minors on its Web site.” In finding for the defendant, the Fifth Circuit found MySpace to constitute an Internet service provider. Thus, because Section 230 bestowed immunity on the social media platform, the court found plaintiffs “may sue the third-party user who generated the content, but not the interactive computer service that enabled them to publish the content online.”

*Doe* indicated not only that courts will consider social media platforms Internet service providers but also that they are immune from suits alleging negligence for failure to adequately

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170 SIEGEL, supra note 21, at 494.
171 See, e.g., Batzel v. Smith, 333 F.3d 1018, 1027-28 (9th Cir. 2003); Zeran v. America Online, Inc., 129 F.3d 327, 330 (4th Cir. 1997).
172 See Doe v. MySpace, Inc., 528 F.3d 413 (5th Cir.), cert. denied, 129 S. Ct. 600 (2008); see also ANDREW B. SERWIN ET AL., supra note 168, §4:4, at 49-50 (2011). Cases in which courts have found blogs to be an Internet service provider are also informative on this issue because of the similar features between blogs and social media platforms. For that reason see Dimeo v. Max, 433 F. Supp. 2d 523, 527-32 (E.D. Pa. 2006), aff’d, 248 Fed. App’x 280 (3d Cir. 2007); Blumenthal v. Drudge, 992 F. Supp. 44, 50-53 (D.C. Cir. 1998).
173 528 F.3d 413 (5th Cir.), cert. denied, 129 S. Ct. 600 (2008).
174 Id. at 416.
175 Id. at 419.
176 Id.
operate internal safety measures. Another part of Section 230 immunizes Internet service providers from potential liability stemming from “any action voluntarily taken in good faith to restrict access to . . . obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable, whether or not such material is constitutionally protected . . . ” By immunizing Internet service providers from liability, Section 230 prevents social media users from obtaining a remedy from a social media platform that negligently operates the its internal safety measures.

Section 230 has complicated online defamation and narrowed plaintiffs’ available remedies to include only direct defamation lawsuits against the speaker. Although many scholars have different views of the main purpose of tort law, almost everyone can agree that providing a remedy to a wronged individual plays a large role. Thus, when developing a test that applies the public figure doctrine to social media, courts must ensure the test provides an adequate remedy to plaintiffs in order to uphold this important tort law principle.

IV. APPLYING THE PUBLIC FIGURE DOCTRINE TO SOCIAL MEDIA

This Comment analyzes potential legal and policy implications that arise when applying the public figure doctrine to social media by analyzing each public figure designation individually. To best enhance understanding of the doctrine’s application, this Section first considers involuntary public figures, then general public figures, and, finally, limited-purpose public figures, before recommending an approach for courts to consider when applying the

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177 See id. at 419; see also SERWIN ET AL., supra note 168, §4:4, at 49-50 (stating that the CDA immunizes the Internet provider in all circumstances except for when the “service provider contributes to the content”).


179 See Ciolli, supra note 13, at 275 (stating that courts have interpreted the statute to grant “broad immunity to Internet service providers, website hosting services, mailing list operators, discussion board owners, and other electronic services covered by the statute”); SIEGEL, supra note 21160, at 494.

180 See KEETON ET AL., supra note 30, at 6 (“The purpose of the law of torts is to adjust these losses, and to afford compensation for injuries sustained by one person as the result of the conduct of another.” (citing Wright, supra note 30, at 238)).
public figure doctrine to social media. This Comment then recommends an approach to follow when applying the involuntary public figure and general public figure doctrine to social media. Finally, it analyzes certain approaches courts have taken when applying the public figure doctrine to the Internet in general to ascertain the best approach to identifying and defining what constitutes voluntary activity on social media.

A. Background Principles

When applying the public figure doctrine to social media, courts should uphold several general background principles. First, courts must be faithful to the binding precedent of *Gertz* and its progeny.\(^\text{181}\) Second, they must provide the plaintiff with an adequate remedy.\(^\text{182}\) This involves balancing the First Amendment concerns about chilling speech, against the plaintiff’s need for a remedy in online defamation.\(^\text{183}\) Accordingly, courts should avoid bestowing individuals with public figure status en masse due to the general difficulty of establishing actual malice.\(^\text{184}\) Finally, courts should consider the policy repercussions of determining social media users are public figures using the different public figure tests.

As mentioned earlier, an initial problem that arises when applying the public figure doctrine to social media is the inapplicability of the access-to-media rationale of *Gertz*.\(^\text{185}\) Unlike the material world, each social media user has access to essentially the same tools as the next user.\(^\text{186}\) As a result, no user has an advantage over another in accessing channels of

\(^{181}\) See supra Part II.A.1-2.

\(^{182}\) Legal scholars have previously highlighted one main purpose of tort law is to provide a remedy to a wronged defendant. KEETON ET AL., supra note 30, at 6 (“The purpose of the law of torts is to adjust these losses, and to afford compensation for injuries sustained by one person as the result of the conduct of another.” (citing Wright, supra note 30, at 238)).

\(^{183}\) See supra notes 62-63 and accompanying text.

\(^{184}\) Williams, supra note 3, at 504 (stating that the actual malice “standard proves a difficult hurdle for public figure plaintiffs to clear, thus making the likelihood of success in a public figure defamation action minimal”).

\(^{185}\) See supra notes 19-22 and accompanying text.

\(^{186}\) One commentator has argued that this equal access gives Internet users a self-help measure which upholds the access to the media rationale of *Gertz* because the majority in *Gertz* based the access to the media prong on the fact that public figures could use their greater access to the media to rebut defamation more effectively than private
communication to respond to defamatory statements. Thus, in order to avoid rendering *Gertz* irrelevant, courts should rely heavily on the other main principle of *Gertz*, the assumption of risk or voluntariness rationale, when finding a social media user is a public figure. With this premise in mind, it is useful to analyze each public figure designation individually to identify the unique problems each designation poses when applying the respective designation to social media.

**B. The Public Figure Designations**

1. Involuntary Public Figures

The involuntary public figure designation presents the most legal and policy problems when applied to social media users. Primarily, applying this doctrine to social media invalidates *Gertz*. With the voluntary rationale of *Gertz* inapplicable to the involuntary public figure doctrine, the test becomes heavily reliant on the access-to-media rationale. However, as noted earlier, no social media users have an inherent advantage over one another in access to the media. Therefore, applying the involuntary public figure test in the context of social networks would render *Gertz* completely inapplicable.

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187 See sources cited supra note 21; Boyd & Ellison, supra note 11, at 211-14.
188 See O’Connor, supra note 21, at 525 (“In order to appropriately protect the private blogger from the heightened standard of actual malice that she would be required to prove as a limited-purpose public figure, it is necessary to give weight to the other prongs of the test-that is, whether there is an isolated controversy, whether the plaintiff has voluntarily thrust herself into the controversy, and so on-before jumping straight to the access to media prong.”).
189 See Barbara L Stocker, Note, *An Analysis of the Distinction Between Public Figures and Private Defamation Plaintiffs Applied to Relatives of Public Persons*, 49 S. CAL. L. REV. 1131, 1217-18 (1976) (“If the involuntary public figure concept is to be made consistent with the first amendment theory of *Gertz*, then only people who are apparently prominent in a particular controversy are involuntary public figures.”); see also W. Wat Hopkins, *The Involuntary Public Figure: Not So Dead After All*, 21 CARDOZO ARTS & ENT. L.J. 1, 21 (2003) (citing Stocker approvingly).
190 See supra notes 20-22, 185-188 and accompanying text.
With no guiding principles, any judicial determination that an individual is an involuntary public figure would be arbitrary and discretionary. This case-by-case approach would violate another principle of Gertz, as the Supreme Court deliberately avoided a case-by-case approach in favor of “broad rules of general application.” Moreover, using a case-by-case determination substantially increases the possibility that courts designate a large number of people involuntary public figures. After all, social media users would be powerless to escape a public figure designation without avoiding social media altogether. This indiscriminately broad application of the test would also disregard the Court’s reluctance to apply the public figure doctrine when the test would convert an entire class of people into public figures.

The policy implications of adopting a case-by-case approach supplement this analysis. Section 230 of the CDA already presents the plaintiff with little, if no recourse, other than a direct defamation suit against the original party. Thus, if every social media user would be designated a public figure, the online defamation doctrine would bar most social media users from obtaining a remedy. With most social media users having to meet an actual malice standard, it would be extremely unlikely that any user would recover because of the difficulty in overcoming this burden.

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191 Gertz, 418 U.S. at 343 (“Theoretically . . . the balance between the needs of the press and the individual’s claim to compensation for wrongful injury might be struck on a case-by-case basis . . . . But this approach would lead to unpredictable results and uncertain expectations, and it could render our duty to supervise the lower courts unmanageable.”).
192 Id. at 343-44.
193 See Hutchinson v. Proxmire, 443 U.S. 111, 135 (1979) (“[I]t is not sufficient to make Hutchinson a public figure. If it were, everyone who received or benefited from the myriad public grants for research could be classified as a public figure—a conclusion that our previous opinions have rejected.”); Time, Inc. v. Firestone, 424 U.S. 448, 456-57 (1976) (“It may be argued that there is still room for application of the New York Times protections to more narrowly focused reports of what actually transpires in the courtroom. But even so narrowed, the suggested privilege is simply too broad.”). An en masse application would also contradict the Gertz Court’s assertion that involuntary public figures are “extremely rare.” Gertz, 418 U.S. at 345.
194 See supra Part III.
195 See Williams, supra note 3, at 504 (stating that the actual malice “standard proves a difficult hurdle for public figure plaintiffs to clear, thus making the likelihood of success in a public figure defamation action minimal”).
Indiscriminately determining public figure status would also carry many negative incentives for social media users. First, adopting such a test would disincentivize people from using social media platforms. Some scholars argue that a social media users’ fear of reputational damage from defamatory speech would lead to some social media users at the margin to abandon social media altogether.\textsuperscript{196} Other scholars argue that fear of obtaining public figure status would cause social media users to desert social networking.\textsuperscript{197} Whatever the reason users abandon social media platforms, leaving such platforms would reduce the speech on social networks that has had such a socially beneficial role.\textsuperscript{198} Instead of leaving social media, implementing an indiscriminate test would also incentivize users to put more effort into making any potentially defamatory statements anonymously. This would exacerbate the problem of anonymous online defamation suits, which already poses a significant problem in the online defamation doctrine.\textsuperscript{199} Finally, for users who ultimately chose to remain on social media platforms, this indiscriminate test could lead to converting social media users into public figures en masse. As a result, social networks could become increasingly hostile and slanderous environments,\textsuperscript{200} which in turn would decrease the social utility of speech on such platforms. These negative repercussions that would

\textsuperscript{196} Kosseff, supra note 433, at 272 (“If such voluntary action were enough to qualify someone to be a limited-purpose public figure, it could have an additional chilling effect on free speech: it would cause people who fear defamation to not take advantage of services such as Facebook.”).

\textsuperscript{197} O’Connor, supra note 21, at 528 (arguing that if social media users could easily becoming public figures “individuals might be deterred from sharing or networking broadly online”); Gleicher, supra note 21, at 334-35 (“[T]he uncertainty of whether online speech will transform its speaker into a public figure may dissuade people from contributing to the public sphere. Faced with reduced legal protection, potential speakers may avoid speaking if they risk transforming themselves into public figures. While true public figures have to accept this bargain in order to ensure robust public debate, the lower the threshold, the more those not seeking publicity will refrain from even limited contribution, and the less participatory the public sphere will become.”).

\textsuperscript{198} See supra Part I.C.


\textsuperscript{200} See Ciolli, supra note 13, at 278 (“If courts require blogger-plaintiffs to meet the high actual malice standard to succeed on a defamation claim, a significant amount of false statements and other misinformation about bloggers may become commonplace on the Internet, thereby undermining the Internet as a ‘marketplace of ideas.’ Bloggers, knowing that they can escape liability for posting defamatory statements about a fellow blogger by not investigating their source’s credibility, will post potentially untrue statements with impunity.”).
inevitably result from applying the involuntary public figure test to social media platforms should provide enough reasons for courts to reconsider the application of the involuntary public figure test to such platforms.

2. General Public Figures

The general public figure test poses its own unique problems for courts when applied to social media. One of the most pressing challenges that courts face is the notoriety prong of the general public figure test.\(^{201}\) Courts have found figures such as Clint Eastwood, Johnny Carson, Carroll Burnett, and Reverend Jerry Falwell to be general public figures,\(^ {202}\) and it is unlikely a social media user would obtain such notoriety based on social media activity alone.\(^ {203} \) However, problems arise when courts have only required contextual or geographic notoriety.\(^ {204} \) It is well-known that many social media users set their privacy settings to only allow their own social circles to view their profile.\(^ {205} \) Moreover, several smaller social media platforms are already segregated based on ethnic, religious, nationality, or other “niche demographics.”\(^ {206} \) Thus, if courts were to find social media users meet the notoriety requirement when they are well-known within their own social media circles, the notoriety requirement would be reduced to a mere formality in many cases. After all, most social media users would inevitably gain notoriety within some subset of their friends or contacts.\(^ {207} \)

\(^{201}\) See supra Part II, B.1.

\(^{202}\) See supra notes 109-116 and accompanying text.

\(^{203}\) See William M. Krogh, Comment, The Anonymous Public Figure: Influence Without Notoriety and the Defamation Plaintiff, 15 Geo. Mason L. Rev. 839, 847 n.82 (2008) (“One reason that universal public figure status is rarely litigated may be that the bar is set so high that those who qualify leave little room for doubt.”); see also Gertz v. Welch, 418 U.S. 323, 352 (1974) (“Absent clear evidence of general fame or notoriety in the community, and pervasive involvement in the affairs of society, an individual should not be deemed a public personality for all aspects of his life.” (emphasis added)).

\(^{204}\) See supra notes 117-124 and accompanying text.

\(^{205}\) See sources cited supra note 11.

\(^{206}\) See Boyd & Ellison, supra note 11, at 218-19.

\(^{207}\) See James Grimmelmann, Saving Facebook, 94 Iowa L. Rev. 1137, 1159 (2009) (“[T]he constant human desire to be part of desirable social groups drives social-network-site adoption and use.”).
The contextual notoriety approach would be particularly problematic when combined with some courts’ tendencies to define voluntary activity under the general public figure test as behavior from which publicity inevitably results. Publicity inevitably results from almost all activity on social media because social media users inevitably participate in these social groups, and some level of notoriety for the user within these groups is bound to occur. However, when combined with the contextual notoriety approach, defining voluntary activity as behavior from which publicity inevitably results would further guarantee an en masse designation of social media users as general public figures.

Utilizing this definition of voluntary activity or contextual notoriety approach would also violate several foundational principles in Gertz. First, in both Firestone and Wolston the Court indicated disapproval for this definition of voluntary activity. Second, the en masse designation of public figures that would inevitably result from either of these approaches would violate a common principle of all Supreme Court public figure cases: courts should avoid applying the doctrine when the doctrine would encompass too large a class of people. Finally, courts should avoid this definition of voluntary activity because such a definition would water down the last applicable rationale of Gertz to social media. Because public figures on social media are unable to experience a media advantage as compared to other social media users, courts would place more emphasis on the voluntariness rationale of Gertz. It is hardly voluntary to engage in activity that is likely to engender publicity when such publicity has such a low threshold.

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208 See supra notes 106-108 and accompanying text.
209 See Grimmelmann, supra note 207, at 1159 (“[T]he constant human desire to be part of desirable social groups drives social-network-site adoption and use.”).
210 See supra notes 89, 94 and accompanying text.
211 See supra notes 88, 96-97 and accompanying text.
212 See supra text accompanying notes 19-23, 188.
213 See Gleicher, supra note 187, at 334-35 (“A single video, posted to YouTube, is all that is required to start a phenomenon. Because online speech is inexpensive, long-lasting, and far-reaching, it is difficult to predict what
Thus, the current notoriety approach would permit an inordinately large number of social media users to become general public figures. The approach suffers from the same policy repercussions as the involuntary public figure test.\(^{214}\) For the same reasons outlined above, courts should avoid using contextual notoriety tests or defining voluntary activity as actions likely to engender publicity.

3. Limited-Purpose Public Figures

The limited-purpose public figure test presents the fewest problems when applied to social media. However, this public figure designation creates some challenges. Lower courts’ divergent definitions of what constitutes a public controversy pose a problem for legal and policy reasons.\(^{215}\) The definition of a public controversy as an issue “likely to engender public interest” would likely encompass most social media users for similar reasons the definition of voluntariness in the general public figure doctrine would do so.\(^{216}\) Social media users, after all, have garnered international attention with a single posting about their preferences despite their relatively anonymity.\(^{217}\) Thus, any social media activity whatsoever expressing an opinion on a subject could create a public controversy. Moreover, this definition would directly contradict the Supreme Court’s preference to avoid encompassing too large a class of people within the public figure status, which the Court has repeatedly reiterated.\(^{218}\)

Each designation under the public figure doctrine poses its own problems when applied to social media users. The presence of problems in every designation warrants the consideration of a dynamic new approach to the doctrine for social media users.

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\(^{214}\) See supra test accompanying notes 194-200.

\(^{215}\) For the different legal approaches courts have adopted to determine a “public controversy” see supra Part II.B.2.

\(^{216}\) See supra text accompanying notes 137-143.

\(^{217}\) Sarah Lyall, A Tweet Read Across Britain Unleashes a Cascade of Vitriol on a User, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 2, 2009, at A8 (recounting how a Twitter user’s social media posting catapulted him into the national spotlight in England).

\(^{218}\) See supra notes 88, 96-97 and accompanying text.
C. Recommended Approach for Public Figure Designations

Because of the negative consequences that result from applying the involuntary public figure or general public figure analysis to social media, courts should require defendants to meet a higher burden of proof to establish these particular public figure designations. Courts have frequently applied the clear-and-convincing standard to situations in which courts disfavor certain claims. Furthermore, strong presumptions can only be overcome by clear and convincing evidence. The standard is particularly appropriate for overcoming the strong presumption that social media users experience relatively equal media access within their social networks and for avoiding the disfavored approach of allowing a social media user to easily meet the access to the media prong, which carries negative legal and policy implications. Thus, courts should only consider a social media user an involuntary public figure if the defendant can provide clear and convincing evidence that the user-plaintiff had greater access to the media than other users on the plaintiff’s social media network. Moreover, courts should strictly construe this burden when considering a social media user’s access to the media within the social network itself because of the difficulty in determining when a social media user has greater access to the media. If defendants can make such a showing, the access-to-the-media rationale for public figure designations would no longer be inapplicable to involuntary public figures in the social

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219 See supra Part IV.B.1-2.
221 See 31A C.J.S. Evidence § 209 (2011) (“The general rule is that strong presumptions are accepted, unless clear and convincing evidence has been introduced by the party opposing the presumption which establishes the nonexistence of the presumed fact.”); see also Rahnema v. Rahnema, 626 S.E.2d 448, 458 (Va. App. 2006).
222 See sources cited supra note 21.
223 See supra Part IV.B.1.
224 O’Connor, supra note 162, at 527 (noting that on social media, especially Twitter, “a relatively unknown individual can drum up followers numbering in the thousands, many of whom may not even know the user’s real name”). However, if a defendant can provide any evidence that the plaintiff has greater media access outside of the social network, especially media contacts in the material world, the presumption that media access is equal within social networks would no longer be relevant and the defendant would have satisfied his burden.
media context. After all, requiring a defendant to prove that there was a “high probability” the plaintiff had a greater access to the media would require more certainty than a preponderance of the evidence standard. This increased certainty would lead to a more definable standard, which would substantially reduce, if not eliminate, the arbitrariness of the involuntary public figure test when applied to social media users. Eliminating the arbitrary standard reduces risk that courts using the involuntary public figure test will convert every social media user into a public figure.

Courts should consider a similar argument when deciding if the defendant has satisfied his burden in proving that the plaintiff is a general public figure. The clear-and-convincing standard should be adopted for the notoriety prong of the general public figures analysis for similar reasons that the standard should be used for the involuntary public figure test; courts should disfavor allowing social media user to easily obtain notoriety because of the substantial risk in invalidating Gertz or encompassing too large a class as public figures. Adopting this burden would also mirror the advantages of using the test for involuntary public figures, as a higher evidentiary standard would likely create a less arbitrary test, reducing the risk of mass flight from social media networks without decreasing the chance of recovery. Thus, courts should only find that a social media user is a general public figure if the defendant can provide clear and convincing evidence that the user-plaintiff had notoriety within the social network itself. Similar to the involuntary public figure test, courts should strictly construe this burden but

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225 See supra text accompanying notes 19-23, 189.
226 Although various definitions have been offered for “clear and convincing” evidence, the most applicable standard to social media context would be the “highly probable” standard because this situation does not fall under criminal law. See BROWN, supra note 220, at 425.
227 See supra text accompanying notes 201-213.
228 See supra text accompanying notes 194200.
find the burden satisfied when the defendant provides evidence of notoriety in the material world.229

Comparatively, courts should favor applying limited-purpose public figure doctrine to social media users because this designation presents the fewest legal and policy problems if certain precautions are taken. First, the use of limited-purpose public figure test would be unlikely to invalidate Gertz if courts refused to define public controversy as an event that is likely to engender publicity.230 Instead courts should adopt the test used in Waldbaum and find that a public controversy occurs when controversy affects members of the public other than the litigants in the case.231 Furthermore, preferring to apply the limited-purpose public figure test to social media users upholds the Gertz Court’s determination that the limited-purpose doctrine is the preferred public figure doctrine.232 Finally, adopting this approach would increase the likelihood plaintiffs have remedies because even if a plaintiff is a public figure, the actual malice standard would only apply to statements the plaintiff made in connection to the controversy.233 Thus, unlike the other two designations, finding a plaintiff is a limited-purpose public figure would not practically bar the plaintiff from recovering in all circumstances, improving the overall likelihood that the plaintiff could recover in the future.234

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229 Similar to the access to the media prong of the involuntary public figure test, this burden should be strictly construed when considering whether a social media user is notorious within the social network itself because of the unlikelihood that a social media user would obtain such notoriety within a social media platform. See supra text accompanying notes 202-203. Evidence that the plaintiff is notorious outside of the social media context would be sure to satisfy this burden because the presumption that media access is equal within social networks would no longer be relevant and the risk of violating Gertz would disappear.
230 See supra text accompanying notes 216218.
232 See Gertz v. Welch, 418 U.S. 323, 352 (1974) (“It is preferable to reduce the public figure question to a more meaningful context by looking to the nature and extent of an individual’s participation in the particular controversy giving rise to the defamation.” (emphasis added)); see also SMOLLA, supra note 58, § 2:79.
233 See supra text accompanying notes 144-145.
234 Id.
One problem with the limited-purpose public figure doctrine is its ambiguity in identifying voluntary activity. This ambiguity might create problems with invalidating, or at least diminishing, the rationales of *Gertz* by watering down the last applicable rationale of *Gertz* to social media. Even if a court were to eschew the definitions of voluntariness that include less unequivocally voluntary behavior, what exactly constitutes voluntary activity for a social media user is not clear. In order to determine the best approach to defining voluntariness in the context of social media activity, it is instructive to consider how courts have defined voluntary activity on the Internet in general.

**D. Approaches to Consider for Voluntary Activity**

The Supreme Court has yet to consider the definition of voluntariness in the context of the Internet. Although only a few lower courts have employed the limited-purpose public figure test when determining if a plaintiff’s Internet activity renders him a public figure, these courts have generally considered two main approaches: the inherently public approach and the inherently private approach.

1. **Inherently Public Approach**

Courts utilizing the inherently public approach have implicitly or explicitly treated the Internet as a public forum. As a result, courts have concluded that merely entering this forum equates to voluntarily accessing an arena for public discussion. For example, consider *Hibdon v.*

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235 See supra text accompanying notes 128-136.
236 See supra text accompanying notes 19-23, 188.
237 Kosseff, supra note 4, at 272 (“The ease at which people can disseminate personal information over the Internet calls into question whether there ever could be a black-letter definition of ‘voluntary’ in the *Gertz* context.”); see Gleicher, supra note 21, at 334-35 (“A single video, posted to YouTube, is all that is required to start a phenomenon. Because online speech is inexpensive, long-lasting, and far-reaching, it is difficult to predict what speech will seize enough public attention to transform its speaker into a public figure. This undermines the notion of voluntary accession to publicity that is inherent in the public figure doctrine.”).
Grabowski, where jet ski enthusiasts posted remarks on rec.sport.jetski, an Internet news group devoted to jet skiing. The enthusiasts criticized Hibdon, the owner of a jet ski customizing business, after he appeared in two magazine articles and advertised and published information about the speed of his jet skis on rec.sport.jetski. In response to this criticism, Hibdon sued the jet ski enthusiasts for defamation. However, the Tennessee state court held Hibdon voluntarily inserted himself into a public controversy over the top speed of his jet skis when he posted statements on rec.sport.jetski and appeared in a magazine. The court explicitly indicated it considered the Internet a public forum, explaining, “The controversy was ‘public’ due to the international reach of the Internet news group rec.sport.jetski.”

The Ninth Circuit employed similar analysis in Tipton v. Warshavsky, where the court found that an individual qualified as a public figure when he “voluntarily involved himself in public life by inviting attention and comment on ourfirstime.com.” Based on the court’s explicit reliance on Ninth Circuit precedent, which considered a media outlet a public forum, the court was equating a website with a public forum. Both of these courts, either implicitly or explicitly, defined voluntary activity as merely publishing content on the Internet. Thus, under the inherently public approach, the Internet is a public forum because Internet activity in itself is sufficient to constitute voluntary activity under the limited-purpose public figure test.

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240 Id. at 54.
241 Id. at 53–54.
242 Id. at 54.
243 Id. at 60.
244 Id.
245 32 Fed. App’x 293 (9th Cir. 2002).
246 Id. at 295.
247 See id. at 295; Ciolli, supra note 13, at 262 (“The court relied on both Gertz and Stolz v. KSFM 102 FM in making this determination. In Stolz, a California appellate court held that the owner of a media outlet is a limited purpose public figure, even if he or she as an individual does not have public notoriety. Through its reliance on the Stolz holding, the Ninth Circuit clearly considers websites media outlets.”). This conclusion is also supported by the fact that ourfirstime.com was not a media website but an adult entertainment website.
2. Inherently Private Approach

Courts have also used the inherently private approach. This approach implicitly or explicitly treats the Internet as an inherently private forum. For example, consider *D.C. v. R.R.*

In *D.C.* a high school student, D.C., operated a website on which he promoted his entertainment career. Another group of fellow high school students posted messages on D.C.’s website which called D.C. derogatory slurs for a homosexual and threatened his safety. After D.C. sued these students for defamation, the court considered whether D.C. had obtained public figure status. The court specifically avoided designating D.C. a public figure based on his online activity. In fact, the court explicitly expressed concerns about the implications of finding public figure status based on web access, or social media access, alone. Primarily the court seemed to act out of fear that finding D.C. a public figure would turn “millions of teenagers” into public figures. Accordingly, the court in *D.C.* treated the Internet as an inherently private forum when it refused to hold that mere access to the Internet was sufficient to render someone a public figure. Thus, this court viewed the Internet as an extension to the material world, where participation in activities that are widely considered attributable to a private forum—talking and socially interacting with friends—is not considered sufficient in itself to turn someone into a public figure.

Whether or not the court in *D.C.* thought a certain breadth or specific type of online activity would turn an Internet user into a public figure is uncertain. However, other courts that have

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248 106 Cal. Rptr. 3d 399 (Cal. Ct. App. 2010).
249 Id. at 405.
250 Id. at 405-06.
251 See id. at 406, 429-30.
252 See id.
253 See id. at 428, 429-30 (“Millions of teenagers use MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube to display their interests and talents, but the posting of that information hardly makes them celebrities.”).
254 See id. (“Millions of teenagers use MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube to display their interests and talents, but the posting of that information hardly makes them celebrities.”).
255 See id.
considered the Internet a private forum have looked to certain activity when determining if an individual has left the private forum. One such case is *Franklin Prescriptions, Inc. v. New York Times Co.* 256 In *Franklin Prescriptions*, a Pennsylvania district court considered whether a local pharmacy injected itself into a controversy after it created an information-only website. 257 The court refused to find that the pharmacy voluntarily acted when the website never sold or took orders over the Internet, but only advertised. 258 A Minnesota state court employed a similar standard in *Bieter v. Fetzer*. 259 In *Bieter*, a philosophy professor who published articles about a conspiracy theory sued Fetzer for defamation after Fetzer started an Internet chat group in an effort to refute Bieter’s conspiracy claims. 260 In finding Bieter to have voluntarily acted, the court relied on particular behavior exhibited by Bieter. 261 The court specifically pointed to the fact that Bieter had trumped his own credentials when arguing with Fetzer on the Internet chat group. 262 *Franklin Prescriptions* and *Bieter v. Fetzer* demonstrate the inherently private designation of the Internet in which courts consider mere Internet activity alone insufficient to constitute voluntary activity under the public figure doctrine. Instead, these courts tried to identify specific behavior or activity the court could point to as evidence of voluntary activity.

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257 *Id.* at 429-31.
258 *Id.* at 437. For another case in which a court looked to the scope of Internet advertising to determine public figure status see *Worldnet Software Co. v. Gannett Satellite Info. Network, Inc.*, 702 N.E.2d 149, 155 (Ohio Ct. App. 1997) (“Despite the fact that Worldnet advertises on the Internet, the record, as developed thus far, does not demonstrate extensive advertising.”).
260 *Id.* at *1.
261 See *id.* at *4.
262 *Id.*
E. The Recommended Approach for Voluntariness

1. Inherently Public Approach v. Inherently Private Approach

Courts should adopt the inherently private approach employed in *Franklin Prescriptions* and *Bieter v. Fetzer* to determine what acts are voluntary. This approach upholds Gertz’s voluntariness rationale, which must take precedence in a world of balanced media access for social media users. It is important for courts to preserve Gertz’s relevancy by providing a clear definition of voluntary action. Moreover, adopting a clear definition also provides clear guidelines for social media users, offering users increased certainty about the legal consequences of their actions. The inherently private approach provides clarity by providing broad identifying characteristics of voluntary behavior while leaving discretion to individual courts to define the precise actions that constitute voluntary activity.

Further analysis demonstrates why courts should prefer the inherently private approach over the inherently public approach. The inherently public approach carries serious legal and policy consequences. The test sets a very low bar for a social media user to become a limited-purpose public figure. As a result, once a public controversy develops, every social media user could become a limited-purpose public figure. Thus, this approach is converts too large a class of people into public figures, which not only contradicts the principles elucidated in Supreme Court cases but also has policy implications by running the risk of incentivizing people to avoid

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263 See supra Part IV.D.2.
264 See supra text accompanying notes 236-237.
265 See Hutchinson v. Proxmire, 443 U.S. 111, 135 (1979) (“It is not sufficient to make Hutchinson a public figure. If it were, everyone who received or benefited from the myriad public grants for research could be classified as a public figure—a conclusion that out previous opinions have rejected.”); Time, Inc. v. Firestone, 424 U.S. 448, 456-57 (1976) (“It may be argued that there is still room for application of the New York Times protections to more narrowly focused reports of what actually transpires in the courtroom. But even so narrowed, the suggested privilege is simply too broad.”).
social media altogether. The inherently private approach avoids these consequences. The approach permits individual courts to measure a social media user’s activity and establish a threshold to determine when he voluntarily thrusts himself into a public controversy.

Faithfulness to Gertz requires a test that avoids encompassing too large a class of people within the public figure designation. The inherently private approach accomplishes this goal better than the inherently public approach.

Moreover, utilizing the inherently private approach provides the appropriate balance between a remedy and chilling speech that Gertz attempted to strike. This test avoids universal public figure status for social media users, allowing some social media users a remedy through defamation suits. An inherently public approach, on the other hand, would not provide the same balance because this approach would substantially decrease the likelihood of social media users from succeeding in defamation suits.

The inherently private approach would also avoid chilling speech, one of the most important principles of First Amendment law espoused in New York Times. Under the inherently public approach, the risk of obtaining public figure status by merely joining social networks would lead many social media users to eschew entering such networks or to leave them

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266 Kosseff, supra note 4, at 272 (“If such voluntary action were enough to qualify someone to be a limited-purpose public figure, it could have an additional chilling effect on free speech: it would cause people who fear defamation to not take advantage of services such as Facebook.”).

267 See Gertz v. Welch, 418 U.S. 323, 342 (1974) (stating that “[s]ome tension necessarily exists between the need for a vigorous and uninhibited press and the legitimate interest in redressing wrongful injury” but that “[i]n our continuing effort to define the proper accommodation between these competing concerns, we have been especially anxious to assure to the freedoms of speech and press that ‘breathing space’ essential to their fruitful exercise”).

268 Williams, supra note 3, at 504 (stating that the actual malice “standard proves a difficult hurdle for public figure plaintiffs to clear, thus making the likelihood of success in a public figure defamation action minimal”).

altogether. The resulting hesitation to participate in social media platforms could chill discussion on a forum many see as an extension of their private lives and, thus, a new forum where the First Amendment protects members’ speech. Chilling speech on social media platforms also reduces the socially beneficial speech that occurs on these platforms. In contrast, an inherently private approach does not convert social media users into public figures by merely accessing social networks, presenting less risk that users easily obtain public figure status. Accordingly, this approach avoids disincentivizing people from joining social networks and engaging in socially beneficial behavior. Adopting the approach would also align the law with people’s expectations of social media as an extension of their private lives. Thus, the inherently private approach strikes the appropriate balance between providing a remedy to social media plaintiffs without chilling speech on social networks.

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270 O’Connor, supra note 21, at 528 (“If individuals no longer feel that they are free to connect and share with one another without exposing themselves to the risk of becoming public figures in defamation claims, this modern version of the marketplace of ideas could be chilled.”).

271 See Boyd & Ellison, supra note 11, 211, 221 (“On many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily ‘networking’ or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. . . . Although exceptions exist, the available research suggests that most SNSs primarily support pre-existing social relations.”).

272 See id. (“On many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily ‘networking’ or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. . . . Although exceptions exist, the available research suggests that most SNSs primarily support pre-existing social relations.”).

273 See supra Part I.C.

274 See Ciolli, supra note 13, at 278 (“If courts require blogger-plaintiffs to meet the high actual malice standard to succeed on a defamation claim, a significant amount of false statements and other misinformation about bloggers may become commonplace on the Internet, thereby undermining the Internet as a ‘marketplace of ideas.’ Bloggers, knowing that they can escape liability for posting defamatory statements about a fellow blogger by not investigating their source’s credibility, will post potentially untrue statements with impunity.”); see supra Part I.C.

275 See Boyd & Ellison, supra note 11, 211, 221 (2007) (“On many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily ‘networking’ or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. . . . Although exceptions exist, the available research suggests that most SNSs primarily support pre-existing social relations.”); see also O’Connor, supra note 21, at 526 n.107 (“[I]t has become clear more recently that the Internet is more often a place for private individuals to network broadly than for private individuals to take on a public persona by virtue of their networking.”).
2. Identifying Voluntary Activity

Perhaps the most important advantage of considering a social network an inherently private forum is that it allows courts to apply much of the current public figure doctrine in the social media context. Courts have found social media users to have acted voluntarily when they have had deliberate contact with a public forum.\(^{276}\) On social networks and the material world alike, a public forum comprises any forum where all users can freely access information the plaintiff placed into the forum.\(^{277}\) To be voluntary, the plaintiff’s action of placing information into a public forum must go beyond incidental, everyday contact.\(^{278}\) Individuals in the material world regularly contact or place information into public forums, yet the current case law indicates an individual only acts voluntarily when the contact or placement is deliberate and nonincidental.\(^{279}\) This rationale applies equally well to social media.

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\(^{276}\) Some courts case law has indicated that an action is voluntary when the plaintiff has deliberate, non-incidental contact with a public forum. For example in *Carr v. Forbes*, 259 F.3d 273 (4th Cir. 2001), the plaintiff acted voluntarily when he advertised his business. *Id.* at 280-81. Thus, the plaintiff in *Carr* acted voluntarily when he deliberately put information into a public forum by releasing information about his business in public meetings, editorials, and in local media stories. *Id.; see also* Reuber v. Food Chem. News, Inc., 925 F.2d 703, 710 (4th Cir. 1991) (finding a scientist acted voluntarily when he constantly advocated and disseminated his research by sending his research to government agencies); Waldbaum v. Fairchild Publ’ns, Inc., 627 F.2d 1287, 1299-00 (D.C. Cir. 1980) (finding a company CEO acted voluntarily when he directed an aggressive advertising campaign and sent a letter to shareholders about a public controversy).

\(^{277}\) An example of a public forum on a social network would be a ‘Page’ on Facebook because outside members of Facebook can access this information. *About Facebook Pages: What is a Facebook Page?*, FACEBOOK.COM, http://www.facebook.com/help?page=262355163822084 (last visited Mar. 11, 2012) (“Pages are for organizations, businesses, celebrities, and bands to broadcast great information in an official, public manner to people who choose to connect with them.”). In comparison, Groups on Facebook allow for privacy settings which would prevent the forum from being considered public. *See Group basics: How are Pages Different From Groups?; Which One Should I Create?*, FACEBOOK.COM, http://www.facebook.com/help/groups/basics (last visited Mar. 11, 2012) (stating that Groups have privacy settings which could “provide a closed space for small groups of people to communicate about shared interests”).


\(^{279}\) Some case law has indicated that an individual’s contact with a public forum must be beyond what is considered incidental contact with a public forum that occurs during the course of the individual’s private life or occupation. *See, e.g.*, Hutchinson, 443 U.S. at 135 (finding a professor not to have acted voluntary when “Hutchinson’s activities and public profile are much like those of countless members of his profession”); *Franklin Prescriptions*, 267 F. Supp.2d at 437 (finding that a pharmacy did not act voluntary when the pharmacy’s website never sold or took orders over the Internet); *Worldnet Software*, 702 N.E.2d at 155 (“Despite the fact that Worldnet advertises on the Internet, the record, as developed thus far, does not demonstrate extensive advertising.”).
Public forums not only include publicly accessible locations on social networks but also social media user profiles that are used as a “loudspeaker” instead of a “mailbox.” A social media page or profile is analogous to a loudspeaker when it has no privacy or visibility restrictions and even those who do not use social media have complete access to the page or profile’s content. On the other hand, a social media page or profile with its visibility limited to a set group of people is analogous to a mailbox. A user with a loudspeaker profile is more likely to deliberately enter information into a public forum than a user with a mailbox profile, who is more likely to only have incidental contact with public forums. As a result, the loudspeaker-mailbox dichotomy would properly align with the interpretation of voluntary activity mentioned above.

F. The Recommended Approaches Applied

This section provides two hypotheticals to illustrate a working model of the recommended approach.

1. The Clear and Convincing Evidentiary Standard Applied to Social Media

The “clear and convincing” evidentiary standard is best illustrated by a hypothetical involving a Mr. Green. Mr. Green likes to use his Facebook profile to post videos of himself doing unorthodox or humorous activities. Most of these videos draw little attention. One day Mr. Green posts a particular video on his Facebook profile that only Mr. Green’s eight hundred

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280 A good example of a loudspeaker profile would be a corporation’s page on Twitter. Corporations, like CNN, set their privacy settings to give the profile complete accessibility, even to non-social media users who can access the profile through a Google search. "Twitter Privacy Policy, supra note 11 ("[Y]our public Tweets are searchable by many search engines and are immediately delivered via SMS and our APIs (http://dev.twitter.com/pages/api_faq) to a wide range of users and services."). A loudspeaker profile would also extend to Facebook profiles which non-social media users have complete access to because the privacy settings have been turned off. "Sharing and Finding You on Facebook, FACEBOOK.COM, http://www.facebook.com/about/privacy/your-info-on-fb#controlprofile (last visited Mar. 11, 2012) ("Choosing to make something public is exactly what it sounds like. It means that anyone, including people off of Facebook, will be able to see or access it.").
friends can access. Another user then mocks Mr. Green, harming his reputation in the process. As a result, Mr. Green sues this individual for defamation.

Under the current formulation of the public figure test it is unclear whether Mr. Green is a public figure. A court may find that Mr. Green acted voluntary when he accessed the social media platform. On the other hand, a court might find that posting the video constitutes voluntary activity. If applied universally, however, both of these definitions convert almost every social media user who utilizes a social media feature into a public figure. Because of this consequence, a court may avoid finding that Mr. Green acted voluntarily. Nevertheless, a court may define Mr. Green as an involuntary public figure. A court could rationalize that Mr. Green had greater access to the media because he has considerably more than 245 friends, a Facebook user’s average amount of friends.281 It would be unclear, however, that Mr. Green’s additional friends gives him greater access to the media. After all, the greater number of friends or contacts on a social network does not exactly correspond with greater access to media to rebut a claim.282

Under the recommended approach, however, a court would find Mr. Green is a private figure. Mr. Green has not acted voluntarily because he failed to place information within a publicly available forum. After all, Mr. Green’s profile is defined as a mailbox, as opposed to a loudspeaker profile, because his privacy settings limited his profile’s visibility to only his friends. Thus, if Mr. Green is a public figure, he can only be found an involuntary public figure.

At this point a court can only find Mr. Green to be an involuntary public figure if the defendant

281 Hayley Tsukayama, Your Facebook Friends Have More Friends than You, WASH. POST (Feb. 3, 2012), http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/your-facebook-friends-have-more-friends-than-you/2012/02/03/glQAuNULmQ_story.html (“The average Facebook user has 245 friends.”).
282 O’Connor, supra note 17, at 526, 527 (“While certainly a person posting on the news feeds of his 800 Facebook friends may be well-known within that group, that is hardly grounds to require him to prove New York Times actual malice the moment he is defamed; this is even more evident on Twitter, where a relatively unknown individual can drum up followers numbering in the thousands, many of whom may not even know the user's real name. . . . Communicating constantly through social networking and other Internet service providers has become so much a regular and routine practice of private individuals that there is not an assumption of receiving widespread attention from those communications.”)
can prove beyond a “clear and convincing” standard that Mr. Green has greater access to the media than other users on the plaintiff’s social media network. In Mr. Green’s case, the defendant cannot meet this burden when Mr. Green’s access to the media only consists of his eight hundred friends. One person having a drastic amount of friends or contacts, such as several thousand, may meet the clear and convincing standard for greater access to the media. However, as mentioned earlier, a greater number of friends or contacts than average does not necessarily mean that Mr. Green has greater access to the media.\textsuperscript{283} Moreover, Mr. Green has no access to the media outside the social media platform, which would certainly satisfy this burden. As a result, the defendant cannot rebut the presumption that social media users have relatively equal access to the media. Based on this evidence, a court should find the defendant failed to satisfy his burden of proof. Accordingly, the court should conclude Mr. Green is a private actor, and he need not show the defendant acted maliciously in order to recover.

2. The Voluntariness Approach Applied to Social Media

The voluntary approach is best demonstrated by applying the Mr. Smith hypothetical described at the beginning of this Comment.\textsuperscript{284} With the public controversy at issue involving animal rights, Mr. Smith would only be a limited-purpose public figure if he acted voluntarily. However, it is unclear whether Mr. Smith is a public figure under the current public figure doctrine. Similar to the Mr. Green hypothetical, a court may find that Mr. Smith’s access or postings constituted voluntary activity. However, line-drawing problems arise when determining when Mr. Smith’s behavior actually became voluntary. Moreover, if a court chose to apply the limited-purpose public figure test, courts would also have to determine if Mr. Smith entered a public controversy. Defining a public controversy as a situation that is likely to draw publicity

\textsuperscript{283} Id.

\textsuperscript{284} See supra INTRODUCTION.
would essentially create a public controversy when a social media user uses any social networking feature. After all, a single social media post from a little-known user can result in international attention.\textsuperscript{285}

The recommended approach provides a straightforward framework for determining Mr. Smith’s public figure status. The public visibility of Mr. Smith’s profile page determines the voluntariness of his action. If Mr. Smith’s page has no visibility restrictions, the frequency of Mr. Smith’s postings about animal cruelty could be evidence that Mr. Smith uses his social media profile as a “loudspeaker” to voluntarily place information into a public forum. Based on these facts, a court would conclude Mr. Smith is a limited-purpose public figure and he must prove Ms. Jones acted maliciously in the context of the controversy. However, if Mr. Smith has limited the visibility of his profile, it is more likely he used his profile as a “mailbox” and merely sharing an issue he felt very strongly about with his defined social network. Under these circumstances, a court would conclude Mr. Smith is a private figure and he does not need to show Ms. Jones behaved with actual malice.

CONCLUSION

As social media expands and online defamation suits continue to increase, courts face with the dilemma of how to properly apply the public figure doctrine to social media users without violating the principles underlying \textit{New York Times, Gertz}, and their progeny. To best uphold these principles, courts should require a social-media-user defendant to prove certain elements of the public figure doctrine according to a clear-and-convincing evidentiary standard. To prove a social media user is an involuntary public figure, the defendant must provide clear and convincing evidence that a social media user plaintiff has greater access to the media than

\textsuperscript{285} Lyall, \textit{supra} note 217, at A8 (recounting how a Twitter user’s social media posting catapulted him into the national spotlight in England).
other users on the plaintiff’s social media network. However, to prove the social media user is a general public figure, the defendant must provide clear and convincing evidence that the user has general notoriety or notoriety within the social media platform. Moreover, when applying the limited-purpose public figure test, courts should adopt the presumption that social media is an extension of an individual’s private life. Only then can courts apply a legal test that not only upholds *Gertz* but also avoids grave policy implications.