INTRODUCTION

Twenty-six years ago, while documenting the decline of America's social life, the political scientist Robert Putnam remained cautiously optimistic about the internet. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam explained that the passive consumption of mass media – especially television – had displaced America's once-remarkable tapestry of associations: civic and fraternal groups, religious organizations, and even the bowling leagues from which the book takes its name.[1] By contrast, Putnam saw the internet as a more "active" and "social" medium.[2] Like other early optimists, he believed that the internet would allow a "magnitude more speakers" to participate in the same "conversation," providing a vibrant alternative to the "deep-fried dough" of television.[3] Ultimately, Putnam hoped that the internet would not only facilitate new and exciting forms of community but also that "computer-mediated communication [would] turn out to complement, not replace, face-to-face communities."[4]

Today, one generation after *Bowling Alone*, Americans spend an average of 6 to 10 hours a day staring at a screen.[5] Even before the COVID pandemic, they were already spending about

[1] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[2] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 193.

[3] These quotes come from Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 213, 375.

[4] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 193.

[5] Simon Kemp, "Digital 2025: Global Overview Report," *Data Reportal*, February 5, 2025, www.datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-global-overview-report, finds that the global daily time spent using the internet is 6:38 hours, and over 7 hours for 16 to 24 year olds. In its last public pre-COVID report, Nielsen finds that U.S. adults spend 11:45 hours a day consuming media, or 10:03 hours without counting radio. See *The Nielsen Total Audience Report: September 2019* (New York, NY: The Nielsen Company, 2019).

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25 hours per week on recreational screen time alone.[6] Most of the time on "social media" is not spent participating in vibrant communities or having enlightened conversations, but passively consuming content on large platforms. A Pew Research Center study of Twitter found that "the most prolific 10% [of users] create 80% of tweets" on the platform.[7] For the remaining 90%, Twitter is little more "active" than television was, save for the repetitive movement of their finger as they scroll from one post to the next.[8] Similarly, on Facebook, the vast majority of time that users spend on the platform is dedicated to "passive following."[9] Some parts of the internet come closer to Putnam's ideal, as when users create group chats among friends or when platforms such as Reddit and Discord empower their users to act as "moderators" in their own "servers."[10] But these spaces remain unrepresentative of the passive posture of consumption that dominates most of our time online. For every hour we spend building a dynamic community on Discord, we spend vastly more scrolling on TikTok or Instagram.[11] And this is no coincidence: as we will show,

[6] Brooke E. Wagner, Amanda L. Folk, Samantha L. Hahn, Daheia J. Barr-Anderson, Nicole Larson, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, "Recreational screen time behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S.: A mixed-methods study among a diverse population-based sample of emerging adults," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 9 (2021): 4613. Notably, the survey "only provided response options of 0 [hours] to 5+ [hours]" for daily recreational screen time, "which limit the ability to capture excessive screen time of 6+ [hours] that some participants may have experienced."

[7] See Stefan Wojcik and Adam Hughes, "Sizing up Twitter users," *Pew Research Center*, April 24, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/04/24/sizing-up-twitter-users/.

[8] Along these lines, Derek Thompson argues that social media has acquired many of the qualities of television. The rise of "televisual media on every screen" means that "beds and couches [have] replaced bedrock communities and parasocial life has eclipsed social life." Derek Thompson, "Why are men so bad at making – and keeping – friends?," *Derek Thompson* (Substack), June 3, 2025, https://www.derekthompson.org/p/americas-real-social-crisis-is-the.

[9] Stella Giagkou, Zaheer Hussain, and Halley M. Pontes, "Exploring the interplay between passive following on Facebook, fear of missing out, self-esteem, social comparison, age, and life satisfaction in a community-based sample," *International Journal of Psychology & Behavior Analysis* 4, no. 2 (2018): 149.

[10] On the social infrastructure of platforms such as Reddit, see Jennifer Forestal, *Designing for Democracy: How to Build Community in Digital Environments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 97–137.

[11] For evidence on a sample of young people, see, for example, Cebrail Karayigit and Jose Parlade, "Social media use among U.S. college students attending a Midwestern university," *Journal of Educational Technology & Online Learning* 6, no. 2 (2023): 329–341. For a broader report on platform usage internationally, see Simon Kemp, "Digital 2026:

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platforms have every incentive to undermine the formation of robust associations on the internet.

The argument of this book is that the internet of the status quo, dominated by vast platforms, is uniquely ill-suited to the formation of robust associations – online and offline. Most of our time online is spent in porous "networks" that have nothing in common with the associations that Putnam envisioned – associations capable of making collective decisions, allocating power, undertaking projects, governing attention, and forming boundaries of information and membership.[12] In some sense, that's precisely what makes platforms attractive in the first place. On the internet, we can consume content and meet others without the burdens and "inefficiencies" of "real life." We don't have to go somewhere in person or spend time getting to know each other. We don't have to organize meetings or do the everyday work of building community. Instead, individuals can exit at any point and choose whom to "follow" or whom to "block." They can curate their own "feed" with unprecedented precision. Yet, these choices seldom empower us to become active participants in, let alone co-creators of, our digital lives. Everything seems seamless because, behind the scenes, platforms choose the terms of our interactions on our behalf. Today, digital platforms undermine our ability to exercise collective action online *and* offline. This book explains how they do so, why current regulations fail, and what we can do about it.

Our emphasis on associational life may sound counterintuitive. In popular discourse on digital technology, we often think of the internet as a space where new communities emerge and flourish. If anything, critics sometimes claim that not only do we participate in a wide variety of subcultures online, but we might have access to *too many* communities, some straying dangerously far from the mainstream. Yet the "echo chambers" to which we belong online are by no means "associations" in the strong sense of the term.[13] On Facebook or Instagram,

2 in 3 people on Earth now use social media," *DataReportal*, October 15, 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-global-overview-report.

[12] On the difference between digital "networks" and "communities," see Jennifer Forestal, *Designing for Democracy*, 36, 82–90.

[13] Amy Ross Arguedas, Craig T. Robertson, Richard Fletcher, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, "Echo Chambers, Filter Bubbles, and Polarisation: A Literature Review," *University of Oxford and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, January 19, 2022, www.reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/echo-chambers-filter-bubbles-and-polarisation-literature-review.

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our posture is not one of active participation in a group with clear membership, boundaries, rules, and objectives, but one of passive consumption of content that the algorithm tailors to suit our views and biases. Digital platforms do generate antagonism and conflict, but also passivity and uniformity. Far from fragmenting into self-governing communities, our experiences online tend to converge.[14] In fact, the more time we spend online, the more our preferences in movies, songs, catchphrases, and content become the same.[15] What can feel like "echo chambers" often amounts to a subtler form of homogeneity that flattens our behavior, habits, projects, and tastes.

This sinister combination of passivity and homogeneity would not matter if the digital world were a minor part of our otherwise vibrant social lives. Over the past two decades, however, more and more of our *offline* activities and interactions have come to be dominated by digital platforms. Friendship and romance have become untethered from institutions like churches and social clubs, while political parties and civic groups have been "hollowed out."[16] The psychologist Sherry Turkle has shown that we now expect more from digital interactions than from face-to-face ones.[17] Even our conception of childhood, as

[14] In the words of Axel Bruns, "we cluster, but we do not segregate" – we are constantly pulled in multiple directions, but never in a way that establishes true boundaries. Despite the "personalized" recommendations of the algorithm, for example, scholars have shown that the same news-sources recur when we look for information on Google, YouTube, Facebook, or X. See Axel Bruns, *Are Filter Bubbles Real?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019), 59–61; Efrat Nechushtai, Rodrigo Zamith, and Seth C. Lewis, "More of the same? Homogenization in news recommendations when users search on Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter," *Mass Communication and Society* 27, no. 6 (2023): 1309–1335.

[15] For an excellent introduction to the phenomenon, see Kyle Chayka, *Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2024). For a more empirical treatment, see William Chopik, Kim Götschi, Alejandro Carrillo, Rebekka Weidmann, and Jeff Potter, "Changes in need for uniqueness from 2000 until 2020," *Collabra: Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2024): 121937; Katy Tam and Michael Inzlicht, "People are increasingly bored in our digital age," *Communications Psychology* 2 (2024): 106.

[16] Michael Rosenfeld, Reuben Thomas, and Sonia Hausen, "Disintermediating your friends: How online dating in the United States displaces other ways of meeting," *PNAS* 116, no. 36 (2019): 17753; Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, *The Hollow Parties: The Many Pasts and Disordered Present of American Party Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024). On the hollowing out of civic groups, see Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

[17] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

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the psychologist Jonathan Haidt documents in *The Anxious Generation*, has been reconfigured in the image of the digital world.[18] Schools struggle to prepare children for democratic citizenship because social media erodes their authority from within. Membership in political parties has been reduced to "receiving emails soliciting campaign contributions or following candidates on social media."[19] Universities struggle to produce knowledge because students are glued to their phones.[20] Each of these spaces is being remade in the image of the digital world, on the terms of vast digital platforms, often in ways that undermine their *raison d'être*. For a growing number of people, especially younger generations, meeting a romantic partner, finding a job, participating in politics, and consuming entertainment have become unthinkable without digital mediation. And yet, despite all these opportunities to meet people on the internet, Americans "are now spending more time alone than ever."[21] Nearly half of Americans now report having three or fewer close friends.[22] In 2017, Mark Zuckerberg announced Facebook's new mission, "Building Global Community."[23] Almost a decade later, if surveys are to be believed, never have our communities been weaker, online *and* offline.

In sum, contra Putnam, the internet has not reversed but *accelerated* the twentieth-century trend toward passivity and isolation. Digital life has replaced or reshaped offline socialization to such an extent that we can no longer consider online platforms as "complements,"

[18] Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

[19] Didi Kuo, *The Great Retreat: How Political Parties Should Behave and Why They Don't* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025), 16. See also Tabatha Abu El-Haj and Didi Kuo, "Associational party-building: A path to rebuilding democracy," *Columbia Law Review Forum* 122, no. 7 (2022): 127–176.

[20] As the *New York Times* reported, "When [students] do show up for class, they are focused on their devices, and are reluctant to speak out." Anemona Hartocollis, "Harvard students skip class and still get high grades, faculty say," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/10/06/us/harvard-students-absenteeism.html.

[21] Derek Thompson, "The anti-social century," *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2025, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/american-loneliness-personality-politics/681091/.

[22] Daniel A. Cox, "The State of American Friendship: Change, Challenges, and Loss," Survey Center on American Life, June 8, 2021, https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/.

[23] Emily Dreyfuss, "The community Zuck longs to build remains a distant dream," *Wired*, May 28, 2017, www.wired.com/2017/05/community-zuck-longs-build-remains-distant-dream/.

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"supplements," or even "alternatives" to "face-to-face communities." What began as a complement has become a substitute. The digital world has become "our predominant means of conveying meaning," one that comes with "a kind of environment, an atmosphere of resonances and operative assumptions, a state of mind – a lens as inconspicuous as water is to fish."[24] Turning to the recent past, we explain how digital platforms have transformed and amplified the trends that Putnam identified in the twentieth century, hoping to learn from the failures of the past to find an alternative path in the future.

We join a growing body of criticism of digital technology. Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* and Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* have documented the damage that screens inflict on our social lives.[25] The writers Derek Thompson and Kyle Chayka have penned more than a dozen viral essays targeting the power of platforms for *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*.[26] Polls consistently show that Americans are becoming skeptical of digital technology.[27] Yet, this intellectual movement, despite its popular appeal, has only begun to translate into meaningful policy reforms. With a few important exceptions – such as efforts to ban cell phones in school – legislatures and other institutions in the United States are yet to pursue ambitious reforms to address the social pathologies of digital life.[28] Critics lack a comprehensive legal framework to turn their

[24] Antón Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 24.

[25] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).

[26] See, for example, Kyle Chayka, "Why the Internet isn't fun anymore," *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2023, www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/why-the-internet-isnt-fun-anymore; Derek Thompson, "The anti-social century," *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2025, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/american-loneliness-personality-politics/681091/.

[27] See, for example, Brooke Auxier, "64% of Americans say social media have a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in the U.S. today," *Pew Research Center*, October 15, 2020, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/10/15/64-of-americans-say-social-media-have-a-mostly-negative-effect-on-the-way-things-are-going-in-the-u-s-today/.

[28] Internationally, we have seen ambitious attempts to introduce blanket social media bans for children. For reasons we explore in Chapter 5, we are cautious about the ability to achieve collective action at such a scale, and the empirical evidence thus far remains mixed. See Leonardo Bursztyn, Angela Duckworth, Rafael Jiménez-Durán, Aaron Leonard, Filip Milojević, Christopher Roth, and Cass R. Sunstein, "Why bans fail:

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ideas into reforms, while legal scholars who actually work on technology regulation are only starting to engage with their critique. This book offers a new approach to technology regulation to fill this gap. Our challenge is to build robust associations online *and* offline, without sacrificing the larger-scale connection that the internet enables. Connection cannot come at the cost of community, just as "networks" cannot come at the cost of stronger associations. To find a middle path requires nothing less than rebuilding the infrastructure of our social life.

Unfortunately, not only do current regulations fail to protect or recreate robust associations, but the kind of regulation that *would* suffice might seem far beyond the bounds of current conversations. We champion an agenda that includes proposals to empower schools, institutions of art and culture, and other organizations against the technological threats we describe. Our proposals also attempt to give groups of users the ability to modify some of the core features of social media platforms. These proposals are designed to withstand legal scrutiny. But we also entertain local "digital Sabbath" policies that coordinate time away from technology altogether. Some of these more ambitious proposals would not withstand constitutional scrutiny in the United States, and we harbor no illusions about their likelihood of coming into effect anytime soon. Nonetheless, by defending these proposals, we attempt to show just how far we need to go to protect associational life as digital technology infiltrates into ever more domains of human experience. In the status quo, defending political groups, religious organizations, universities, and other existing spaces seems sufficient. But if current trends persist, these associations might prove incapable of resisting the encroachment of digital life. We might soon reach the point past which the only way to control our relationship to technology, both as individuals and as societies, is to carve out times and spaces for us to experience alternatives to digital mediation *together*. By taking bolder proposals seriously, we hope to change how we think about technology regulation and expand the bounds of our political imagination.

Tipping points and Australia's social media ban," Becker Friedman Institute, Working Paper (April 2026). In addition, as we explain in Chapter 4, such measures would likely be viewed as unconstitutional in America.

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I.1 ASSOCIATIONAL LIFE, DEMOCRACY, AND EXPERTISE

Our primary objective is to offer a new way to think about digital technology regulation. We focus on associational life because associations enable collective action, but also because they cultivate social goods like trust, solidarity, and loyalty. Institutions of art and culture need autonomy to pursue aesthetic experimentation. Religious organizations need solidarity and loyalty to foster shared practices and traditions. Advocacy groups need their members' commitment to influence policy. Universities need independence from outside pressure to produce knowledge. It has become commonplace to say that the internet deprives us of "community," "privacy," "civility," and other much-contested abstractions. In what follows, we argue that these goods depend on robust associations to remain meaningful. As we will show throughout, academic and popular discourse on themes as varied as "misinformation," "community," "AI ethics," and "civility" suffers from a lack of attention to social infrastructure – online and off. By focusing on specific features of social associations, we attempt to redirect the conversation toward the homogenizing effects of platforms on our lives. In doing so, we hope to provide an alternative to dominant theories of technology regulation, most of which fall into two broad categories.

I.1.1 The Managerial Approach

The first of these dominant theories of technology regulation is what we call the "managerial" approach. In Chapters 3 and 4, we trace and criticize this growing tendency to ask experts – private-sector engineers, public-sector bureaucrats, and judges – to "manage" the production of social goods like trust or loyalty without (re-)constructing the social infrastructure that makes these goods both possible and meaningful. For instance, regulators and academics often lament the state of public discourse online: the abundance of misinformation, the exacerbation of polarization, and the impossibility of reflective deliberation. But we hope to show that these trends stem directly from platformization itself. In a pre-digital world, encounters with people on the other side of the political spectrum were mediated by associations.

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Robust associations offered competing spaces with behavioral rules of their own, enabling the cultivation of qualities that public deliberation at large presupposes.[29] Moreover, these associations created social bonds that, as social scientists have shown, enabled meaningful deliberation.[30] Within these private spaces, people found respite from public life, developed shared habits of civility, and structured their own interactions to pursue ends as varied as education, economic gain, and social intimacy.[31] In the absence of this mosaic of intermediaries or digital equivalents, conflict must occur at scale, from the top down. In other words, the absence of "civility" or "meaningful deliberation" online is not a feature-specific issue at the margins of platforms, but a direct result of their tendency to strip away the social infrastructure that mediates conflict through the establishment of rules and meaningful boundaries.

Nonetheless, today's dominant approaches to technology regulation do not even attempt to reconstruct these boundaries or cultivate the capacity for self-governance that makes the bottom-up creation of such boundaries possible in the first place. Instead, private companies empower "content moderators," regulatory agencies empower bureaucrats, and nonprofits put pressure on both content moderators and bureaucrats to regulate the norms of public discourse at scale.[32] In every case, experts "manage" the terms of public discourse from the top down, attempting to produce the social goods that platforms threaten in the first place. Instead of re-creating the conditions under which these goods emerge organically and pluralistically, we empower managers to maintain the *illusion* of civility by means of top-down control. Predictably, these attempts not only breed legitimate frustrations among users but also a meaningful loss in collective agency. To

[29] Robert C. Post, "Between democracy and community: The legal constitution of social form," in *Nomos*, vol. 35, *Democratic Community* (1993), 179.

[30] For a recent example, see David E. Campbell, "Social capital in a divided America: The relationship between economic bridging and affective polarization," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 708, no. 1 (2024): 102–120.

[31] Post, "Between democracy and community," 179. On the pluralism of associational life, see Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[32] For a powerful critique of content moderation, see Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

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the extent that discourse happens online – as it must in the absence of alternatives – it does so on terms set by the managers of an otherwise dysfunctional public square.

"Civility" and "deliberation" are far from the only goods that we approach from a managerial perspective. Even initiatives to "build community offline" tend to treat "community" itself as another good that experts can engineer and bring to the people, rather than something communities must create for themselves. In 2023, for instance, the United States Surgeon General released a report on "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation."[33] For all its value, the report's medicalization of the "problem of community" points to this tendency to treat "community" as a technical problem that can be solved from the top down. In other words, even when we try to foster "community," we do so in a managerial way. At some of our universities, "federal regulations and funds have created an alternative bureaucracy… that is devoted, not to the core academic mission of teaching and research, but to improving the social climate of university life."[34] Countless empirical studies demonstrate that all these efforts have failed, but their failure has by no means acted as a wake-up call.[35] If anything, we tend to respond to the failure of managerialism by doubling down on more expertise, more mediation, and more top-down control. Even if successful on their own terms, however, managerial reforms fail to confront the reality that digital technology has reconstituted our social order. At best, these reforms may reduce some of the harms of platformization, but they fail to restore robust associations that allow people to act together on their own terms.

[33] Office of the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

[34] Neil Gilbert, "Institutionalized Discontent," *Society* 53 (2016): 391–397. For a classic treatment, see Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), especially 65–96.

[35] For a recent study on the persistence of mental health issues among university students that includes a literature review on the topic, see Xinqiao Liu and Jingxuan Wang, "Depression, anxiety, and student satisfaction with university life among college students: A cross-lagged study," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11 (2024): 1172. For a more accessible overview of the data on Harvard students, see Aden Barton, "How Harvard students got so stressed," *The Harvard Crimson*, November 30, 2023, www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/11/30/barton-harvard-student-stress/.

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I.1.2 The Democratic Approach

At another pole of this debate, academics and progressive reformers frame the pathologies of digital life as a problem of democratic governance. They focus on the way large companies monopolize the future of AI and the internet more broadly, advocating for ambitious measures to bring control back into the hands of users. This democratic approach generally takes one of three forms.

In its more mainstream iteration, the democratic approach takes the form of antitrust efforts to break up technology companies. In his influential book *The Curse of Bigness*, for instance, the legal scholar Tim Wu explains that we live in a "new gilded age" in which technology companies, the feudal lords of the twenty-first century, no longer face meaningful competition.[36] In a series of provocative proposals, Wu calls for antitrust regulators to embrace "stronger remedies, including a return to breakups" to "restore" antitrust "as a check on private power necessary in a functioning democracy."[37] As with similar proposals in the antitrust literature, Wu envisions economic competition as the most effective response to the disproportionate influence of digital platforms on our social and political life. In a market with more choices, citizens-as-consumers can use their ability to exit as a tool of (indirect) accountability over firms that need users to survive. This "market democracy" acts as a check on private power, allowing us to voice our concerns as both consumers in the marketplace and citizens at the ballot box. Broadly compatible with the status quo, this antitrust approach frames capitalism – in its best form, that is, open and fair competition in the market – as a potential answer to the question posed by digital technology.

More radical scholars, on the other hand, argue that the undemocratic pathologies of the internet stem from the profit motive of technology companies, and that true democratic control requires overthrowing private ownership entirely. Since the publication of Daniel Schiller's *Digital Capitalism* and Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, scholars of "digital capitalism" have blamed the economic structure of

[36] Tim Wu, *The Curse of Bigness: Antitrust in the New Gilded Age* (New York, NY: Columbia Global Reports, 2018).
[37] Ibid., 18–19.

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the internet for perpetuating its worst defects.[38] Ben Tarnoff, one of the most prominent representatives of this approach, puts it bluntly:

> The root [problem] is simple: the internet is broken because the internet is a business. While the issues are various and complex, they are inextricable from the fact that the internet is owned by private firms and is run for profit… And an internet run for profit is one that can't guarantee people the things they need to lead self-determined lives. It's an internet where people can't participate in the decisions that affect them.[39]

For Tarnoff, as for others in this tradition, more capitalist competition cannot change the most destructive features of digital platforms. Consumers might have access to ten social media sites instead of five, but all these sites will still have every incentive to foster engagement at the expense of everything else. Platforms will continue to harness our data and encourage us to spend as much time as possible in front of a screen because these are the only ways for them to maximize profit. Antitrust measures and regulations might limit the damage, but nothing short of a revolution in ownership can address the "root problem." The goal should not be "to create a more competitive or more rule-bound version of privatization, but to overturn it."[40] To borrow a provocative phrase from the journalist Cory Doctorow, these theorists argue that users should "seize the means of computation."[41]

Tarnoff rightly criticizes antitrust scholars for overestimating the effects of competition on the behavior of platforms. But his own proposals, while considerably more ambitious, do not address the various ways in which digital platforms have erased valuable boundaries and appropriated social infrastructure, thereby undermining our capacity to create meaningful alternatives to digital life. Tarnoff's analysis

[38] Daniel Schiller, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019). For a helpful overview, see Jonathan Pace, "The concept of digital capitalism," *Communication Theory* 28, no. 3 (2018): 254–269.

[39] Ben Tarnoff, *Internet for the People: The Fight for Our Digital Future* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2022), xii.

[40] Ibid., xv.

[41] Cory Doctorow, *The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2023).

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takes these transformations as a given, treating the digital mediation of our social life as inevitable, and then proposes policies from within the confines of this new world. In contrast to this approach, which focuses solely on the economic and political structure of platforms, our argument centers on the transformations in *social* structure that these platforms have produced. Scholars of "digital capitalism" often presuppose that we must accept digital mediation as a given; we presuppose not only that social goods depend on the existence of competing, dynamic, and differentiated communities, but also that robust associations can offer genuine alternatives to the current pathologies of digitally mediated life. Giving users more power and ownership over platforms, while valuable, falls short of envisioning a world where we recreate the variety of robust associations that once structured a flourishing social life. As the political theorist Jennifer Forestal puts it, "an emphasis on ownership and control alone is insufficient for developing robust democratic communities in algorithmically curated digital environments" because "it does little to help users form and sustain communities on the platforms it draws from."[42]

A third strand of the democratic approach, which pays closer attention to questions of social structure, comes from the work of political theorists such as Forestal herself. In *Designing for Democracy*, Forestal claims that "democracy is an activity that can, and should, extend to all areas of our lives."[43] The digital world is no exception: platforms should offer a "built environment" that lends itself to the formation of democratic associations. Drawing analogies between the physical world and its digital counterpart, Forestal argues that "for [platforms] to support democratic politics, they must balance three characteristics: *boundaries*, which afford recognition; *durability*, which affords attachments; and *flexibility*, which affords experimentalism."[44] It is not enough for platforms to enable the formation of robust, self-governing associations; these associations must also be *democratic*, that is, egalitarian and oriented toward "variety and malleability."[45] Digital groups must "facilitate the development of what John Dewey calls the 'experimental habit

[42] Forestal, *Designing for Democracy*, 144.
[43] Ibid., 3.
[44] Ibid., 28.
[45] Ibid., 28.

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of mind','' which means ''host[ing] a variety of perspectives and experiences'' while encouraging contestation and debate.[46] For Forestal, this ''experimental'' spirit is a ''necessary, though insufficient, characteristic of democratic spaces,'' without which our associations descend into ''static and stagnant'' spaces that participate in harmful forms of exclusion.[47] Platforms have a responsibility, if not a moral duty, to foster associations in which ''variety and malleability'' reign supreme. The task of reformers is to turn Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms into a digital extension of the democratic public square.

We share many of Forestal's intuitions and recommendations. Our own account of ''boundaries'' is heavily indebted to her work, and some of our proposals go in her direction. But our approach differs from hers in two key respects. First, we do not believe that democracy should always or necessarily ''extend to all areas of our lives.'' Indeed, we argue that associations should be free to adopt a variety of norms and structures for specific purposes.[48] Our aim is not to make way for noxious forms of discrimination, but rather to recognize that some associations cannot maintain their character or fulfill their function without falling short of Forestal's democratic ideal. For example, ballet companies are seldom ''democratic'' in Forestal's sense, but that's not because ballet companies necessarily engage in invidious exclusion or bigotry. Rather, their purpose – the cultivation of a specific form of excellence that demands remarkable discipline – lends itself to a more hierarchical structure. Similarly, most religious organizations do not always cultivate ''variety and malleability.'' On the contrary, their purpose is sometimes to defend ''static and stagnant'' practices against an increasingly ''experimental'' world – and those who find religious organizations valuable often do so *because* of this less ''experimental'' spirit. From our perspective, Forestal's emphasis on ''experimentalism'' disqualifies valuable associations on which the

[46] Ibid., 99.
[47] Ibid., 100.
[48] For a work of democratic theory that is closer to our conception of associational life, see Danielle Allen, *Justice By Means of Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), especially 101–128. For an attempt to apply this view to the digital context, see E. Glen Weyl, Audrey Tang, and Community, *Plurality: The Future of Collaborative Technology and Democracy* (self-published, 2024), 88–131.

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social fabric of our communities depends. Our aim is to defend associational life in full, that is, without imposing too demanding a standard on the structure and purpose of associations.

Second, while Forestal focuses on building democracy in the digital world, we focus on the relationship between offline and online associations. We agree with many of Forestal's proposals to reform the architecture of platforms. But we are also interested in defending offline associations against the encroachment of digital life, a commitment that reflects a difference in emphasis. Forestal attempts to restructure the internet around democratic rules and practices. She begins with a theory of democracy, and then applies it to the digital world. By contrast, we are first and foremost interested in the production of goods such as loyalty, trust, and friendship. Our account of associational life, which animates our critique of the status quo, puts these goods front and center. Yet, there is considerable evidence suggesting that, everything else being equal, offline associations are more conducive to the cultivation of long-lasting communities than their digital equivalents. To defend associational life, we therefore attempt to change the "built environment" of platforms *and* ensure that their reach does not extend into every part of our lives. To this end, we dedicate most of our proposals to the protection of offline associations – universities, religious organizations, institutions of art and culture, etc. – from platforms, rather than stopping at the architecture of platforms themselves.

Ultimately, our emphasis on robust associations contrasts with both the managerial approach and the democratic approach. Dominant in the status quo, the managerial approach actively contributes to the homogenization of our social life, enshrining the very trends it claims to combat. More utopian, at least in its most radical form, the democratic approach provides a valuable but insufficient diagnosis of the internet's pathologies. Unlike the managerial approach, the democratic approach is not a target of this book. Nonetheless, our emphasis on associational life is meant to show that democratization, even in its more radical form, can fail to alter the reality of digital hegemony over our social life. Simply put, a socialist or "democratic" internet could prove every bit as homogenizing as the capitalist internet of the status quo. Both approaches neglect the importance of shielding social

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spaces from the ever-expanding reach of platforms. And this difference in theoretical emphasis translates into a stark difference in policy recommendations: instead of empowering experts or redistributing decision-making power over platforms, we propose a set of tools to protect associations from platforms and coordinate time away from technology altogether.

I.2 THE ARGUMENT

Our argument proceeds in five chapters, the first of which focuses on the features of robust associations. We argue that social associations, to remain functional, ought to retain three core features:

1. *Boundary power*: the ability to carve out self-administered spaces that separate members (and their information) from nonmembers.
2. *Medium power*: the ability to structure interactions among members within these spaces.
3. *Agenda power*: the ability to choose a common pursuit around which to organize.

These three "powers" make associations robust by demarcating them from the outside world. First, boundaries – physical, informational, or social – enable associations to shield themselves from society at large. Separating members from nonmembers, associations create a distinct "we" with which to identify. Second, to foster unique experiences, associations develop internal hierarchies, norms, and practices. These are the rules and rituals that define the culture of the association. Third, to emerge and sustain themselves, social associations must serve specific functions: activities or goods around which people coalesce, from knowledge production to religious devotion. These three intuitions translate into boundary power, medium power, and agenda power, respectively. Boundary power determines *who* participates, medium power determines *how* participants interact, and agenda power determines *why* participants come together in the first place. As we attempt to show, each power depends on the other two to persist. Boundaries create the possibility of distinct social spaces; institutional structures make these spaces autonomous and cultivate group identity;

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and specific functions motivate their continued existence. When any part of this chain breaks down – when boundaries become permeable, when institutional autonomy erodes, or when distinct functions collapse into homogeneity – the entire edifice begins to crumble.

In Chapter 1, we trace the importance of these three "powers" in a variety of contexts: among the earliest settler societies, among Freemasons in pre-liberal societies, in nineteenth-century America, and in the philosopher Jürgen Habermas's account of European coffeehouses. We also draw on empirical work by psychologists, sociologists, and economists to show why these three powers matter. And as a preface to the following chapters, we point to the specific means of communication that make the exercise of the three powers both possible and attractive – emphasizing the role that technology plays in enabling collective action.

In Chapter 2, we argue that the platformization of our social order – the process by which digital platforms appropriate the infrastructure of our social life – is fueled by three "structural trends." Online and off, platforms have come to mediate our social life, subjecting our interactions to rules over which we have little say. We draw on a variety of scholarship to show that the architecture of platforms and the qualities of digital speech undermine our ability to exercise collective action both online and offline. More precisely, we argue that digital platforms undermine our associations in three interrelated ways:

1. *Network scaling*: Digital platforms rely on network effects that subsume human activities, imposing opportunity costs on those opting out.[49]
2. *Context collapse*: Digital platforms appropriate communicative infrastructure at scale, removing the boundaries of membership and information on which intermediary associations depend.[50]

[49] Our account of network scaling is heavily indebted to the foundational work of David Grewal in *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

[50] Our account of context collapse is heavily indebted to danah boyd, who originated the concept. See danah boyd, "Taken out of context: American teen sociality in networked publics" (PhD dissertation, University of California Berkeley, 2008). For a complementary account, see Helen Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

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3. *Managerial control*: Platform managers exercise the competencies that once justified the authority of independent, self-fashioning associations. As a result, platform managers control the structure of online interactions, leaving users with an impotent and illusory sense of ownership over their digital lives.

By itself, none of these "structural trends" need imperil collective action. Our challenge comes from the way in which these structural trends *interact* with each other, a relationship that we attempt to untangle. If digital platforms could have huge network effects (1) without arrogating communicative infrastructure (2), then they would amplify our voice without threatening intermediary associations. Alternatives would continue to exist offline. Similarly, if the internet could turn into a multitude of microcommunities, each in control of its own rules, robust associations could persist in another form. Without managerial authority (3), alternatives would reconstitute themselves online, with the same powers as traditional associations. But all three phenomena reinforce and depend on each other. Platforms only have network effects (1) *because* of the way they structure interactions (2). Only by removing boundaries can platforms unite millions of users around the same conversation, pursuit, or activity. Similarly, network effects (1) and arrogated communicative infrastructure (2) demand managerial governance. If the internet splintered into a multitude of microcommunities in which users do everything themselves, digital platforms would no longer offer either seamless interactions (2) or network effects (1). And without 1 and 2, these platforms lose their *raison d'être*. In short, the architecture of the platform (1), the way in which the platform structures interactions among users (2), and the enormous power that platform managers wield over the medium (3) all go hand in hand. Each strengthens the other in turn, and all simultaneously undermine social associations.

Considered as one, the three structural trends form a self-reinforcing cycle: We let platforms subsume our activities, which undermines our ability to self-organize, which, in turn, makes us outsource more and more activities to an army of invisible, unaccountable managers tasked with making every aspect of our lives more efficient. On paper, our communications become more frictionless than ever. But convenience comes at a cost. Platforms appropriate

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more and more social infrastructure for themselves. As this transfer of function accelerates, it undermines organizational competence, which, in turn, demands more transfer of function – a process that reaches its logical conclusion with platforms that leave no place for intermediary institutions at all. What begins as a complement eventually becomes a substitute.

In Chapter 3, we trace the origins of the "managerial approach" to technology regulation. We show that it first emerged in response to technological developments – the telegraph, the radio, and later the television – which, as early twentieth-century reformers hoped, would enable better deliberation without predatory intermediaries. Yet these technologies, designed to amplify our ability to self-organize, undermined it in practice. Supposed to encourage participation at scale, mass media instead empowered a rising class of managers who monitored people's day-to-day interactions. Citizens and local groups gradually lost control of their own associations. Instead, America's once-vibrant associations were subjected to technological mediation, losing local control over boundary power, medium power, and agenda power. Mass media displaced the need for local associations to enforce boundaries of membership or information (boundary power); professional managers came to dictate associational rules from the top down (medium power); and national organizations replaced local goal-setting (agenda power). The bases of self-organization were weakened and obscured, to the point where even the greatest critics of technology came to argue for *more* expertise, *more* managers, and *more* mediation of social life.

Unfortunately, along the way, this approach was enshrined in law. Over the course of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, the Supreme Court has increasingly extended robust First Amendment rights to mass media companies, paving the way to an emerging status quo in which digital platforms themselves are "protected speakers" because they "select and shape other parties' expression into their own curated speech products."[51] Radically constraining the scope of technology regulation, courts have strengthened the authority of private managers over the terms of social life. The modern First Amendment, which once protected the autonomy

[51] *Moody v. NetChoice, LLC*, 603 U.S. 707, 717 (2024).

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of robust associations in the public sphere, has come to do the exact opposite: protect the forces of homogenization that undermine robust associations. If First Amendment doctrine continues to develop in this direction, we run the risk of entrenching this trend. Meanwhile, even private actors risk offending the rights of platforms when they attempt to build third-party applications – known as middleware – that interoperate with dominant platforms to empower users to modify platform features.[52] The terms of service of platforms and the interpretation of laws like the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA) reinforce what James Grimmelmann calls the "technical power" of software: "whoever controls the software makes the rules."[53] If the modern First Amendment appears to tie the hands of the state, platforms wield the law to tie the hands of everyone else.

In Chapter 4, we turn to the contemporary manifestations of the managerial approach. To the extent that we view digital technology as a problem, we tend to think of it as a problem with managerial solutions. In other words, we tend to believe that the right experts, in the right institutions, focusing on the right questions, could make the harms of digital technology disappear. Some want to erect new administrative agencies or private "oversight boards" to govern digital life; some want to empower courts to address the "addictive" features of social media; others prefer to use NGOs to put pressure on technology platforms themselves. In each of these cases, reformers call on private or public managers to resurrect the goods of robust associations without defending the three powers on which that social order depends. In other words, we define the managerial approach with two propositions:

1. The managerial approach does not acknowledge – or take into account – the relationship between social structure (boundary power, medium power, and agenda power) and social goods (trust, solidarity, loyalty, etc.).

[52] For a comprehensive treatment of middleware and its policy and legal challenges, see Francis Fukuyama, Barak Richman, Ashish Goel, Marietje Schaake, Roberta R. Katz, and Douglas Melamed, "Report of the working group on platform scale," *Stanford Cyber Policy Center*, November 17, 2020, www.cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/publication/report-working-group-platform-scale; Daphne Keller, "The future of platform power: Making middleware work," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2021): 168–172.

[53] James Grimmelmann, "Anarchy, status updates, and utopia," *Pace Law Review* 35, no. 1 (2014): 135–153.

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2. Instead of (re-)constituting the social structure that makes social goods possible or meaningful, the managerial approach empowers experts to "manage" the production of social goods on behalf of *individuals* without altering the underlying social structure.

We then show that seemingly disparate efforts to address "digital addiction," fight the "loneliness epidemic," combat "misinformation," regulate AI development, and reimagine "privacy" all fall into this same trap. These are misguided attempts to respond to problems better understood and addressed as the consequences of a social order in which intermediary associations lack the three powers.

In Chapter 5, we propose an alternative approach that begins with the conviction that the task of technology regulation is to (re-)build robust associations both online and offline. On our view, only by returning boundary power, medium power, and agenda power to intermediary associations can we create a world in which we no longer need therapeutic "help" to secure basic goods. And only by empowering individuals to choose the terms of their encounters with one another – as opposed to managers who choose the terms on our behalf – can we live up to the liberal promise that every individual should be free to chart her own path in life. In short, the pursuit of social agency should animate all of our efforts to reform the digital realm. In this spirit, we propose a three-tiered policy agenda:

1. *Setting the terms of online life*: Measures to change the design of digital platforms to empower users to erect boundaries of information, membership, and authority among themselves. To this end, reformers should legally empower the production of "middleware," third-party software that interoperates with dominant platforms to let users change the rules of social interaction and content moderation. Associations of users could use middleware to choose whether their messages and posts disappear over time, whom their content reaches, whether their "likes" or "follows" are public, which moderation rules apply to shared spaces, and how content is prioritized or recommended within their communities. When such groups of users form, platforms should be incentivized to outsource control over both membership and information to them.

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2. *Enabling institutional coordination offline*: Measures to help intermediary associations assert control over both digital and physical spaces. Drawing inspiration from business organizations that have retained authority over the boundaries between online and offline life, we explain how clubs, schools, institutions of art and culture, religious spaces, and other social associations can resist the pull of platformization. We consider smartphone bans in schools, a "right to disconnect" outside the workplace, and even subsidies for institutions of art and culture that restrict the use of technology within their walls. We also consider device-level mechanisms, from phone pouches to default features, that enable intermediary associations to exercise control over the use of technology within their walls. From purpose-built software to private law contracts that enforce boundaries of information, we explore the full range of tools that intermediary associations can use to create genuine alternatives to platformization.
3. *Social coordination away from digital mediation*: More radical measures to carve out coordinated times and spaces away from technology. These include local "digital Sabbath" policies that (totally or partially) restrict internet usage for a limited, recurrent period.

These measures seek to empower individuals and their associations against the encroachment of digital platforms. The first category of reforms allows users to reconstruct boundaries online, reclaiming distinctions that platforms erase. The second category allows social spaces to assert their independence from digital mediation, recapturing communicative infrastructure within their walls. The third category offers more radical solutions which, though impractical in the status quo, might become necessary as digital technology penetrates ever more deeply into our lives.

For now, in the United States, the Constitution restricts the scope of regulatory action, preventing top-down mandates that would compel individuals or communities to spend time away from their devices. In the absence of top-down intervention, *only* intermediary associations can take their future into their own hands. The government cannot provide definite solutions, but it can enable other institutions to fight for themselves. We therefore face a paradoxical situation whereby the only recourse to action against digital platforms – intermediary

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associations – is the very one that digital platforms weaken in the first place. Since Tocquevillian institutions have been dwindling for almost a century, pessimists might argue that the prospect of civic renewal seems dubious. Perhaps the same vicious cycle, whereby more managerialism begets more managerialism, will simply continue until nothing remains but managers all the way down – in which case our more radical proposals would seem more plausible. In the meantime, these doubts cannot be answered with theory alone. Without triumphant optimism, we attempt to provide tools that will empower us to reshape our social order from the bottom up, knowing that the more realistic options may not suffice.

I.3 REBUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF SOCIAL LIFE

Whether our proposals would suffice to regain control over the terms of our social life remains uncertain. What is certain, however, is that current approaches fail to address the social harms of digital technology. No administrative agency, however astute, no amount of content moderation, however extensive, no public oversight, however careful, can address the erosion of social associations without redefining our relationship to technology itself. We thus find ourselves at an inflection point. In a few years, if a whole generation grows up without knowing what proper eye contact looks like, what listening to music without Spotify sounds like, what dating without a dating app feels like, or what thinking without AI entails, how will we re-habituate them away from the world as they know it? The stakes, which only grow more momentous as negative trends accelerate, justify an unapologetic defense of proposals that go far beyond the bounds of current conversations. Practical or not under the current status quo, we will have to *make* drastic solutions practical if we are to answer the fundamental questions that technology poses – or risk losing both our social fabric and the possibility of restoring it at all. In the meantime, managerial remedies will not solve the problem, and neither will "self-help." To paraphrase a quip from the philosopher Benjamin Constant, everything is unpredictable about individuals but everything is predictable

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about masses.[54] At the individual level, we might change each other's habits for good. But it remains naïve to expect society-wide reversals in generation-shaping trends that have been accelerating for more than a decade. Structural pathologies require structural remedies.

This book should not be seen as an attempt to "return" to premodern ways of life. While we sometimes use the language of restoration or revival to emphasize the gravity of the situation, ours is not a nostalgic enterprise. We do not stand in opposition to technological progress, or to boundless connection beyond local communities. If anything, the opposite attitude motivates this project: to redefine our relationship with technology such that our Promethean will to discover, to experiment, and to push the frontiers of the possible no longer clashes with our ability to live vibrant lives. Far from obdurate Luddites, at no point do we deny the value that digital technology has brought to the world. But these advancements cannot come at the cost of our social fabric. Agency constitutes a necessary feature of human flourishing, one that cannot be sacrificed in the name of a higher aspiration, no matter how attractive. The internet should not open up new worlds by flattening ours, submitting what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin calls the "wild dance" of life to stifling uniformity.[55] Throughout, our aim is not to prove that digital technology cannot be reconciled with robust associations. On the contrary, by reframing the problem, we hope to point to an untrodden path. To (re-)construct a better social order, we must first understand the infrastructure that makes it possible. Only then can we diagnose and address the harm accurately. Our focus on associational life allows us to isolate the specific features that make digital platforms dangerous, charting a middle course between Luddite pessimism and naïve optimism. Ultimately, the point is not to stand "for" or "against" the internet, but to transform it to empower individuals and communities to control their own fate. Faced with the promise and perils of digital life, we attempt to find a way to impose limits without rejecting progress altogether.

[54] See Tzvetan Todorov, *A Passion for Democracy: Benjamin Constant* (New York, NY: Algora Publishing, 1999), 71.

[55] Isaiah Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, edited by Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 392.

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