

Spring 2014

# Reviving Implied Confidentiality

Woodrow Hartzog

*Stanford Law School, Center for Internet and Society; Samford University, Cumberland School of Law; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; [whartzog@samford.edu](mailto:whartzog@samford.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ilj>

 Part of the [Internet Law Commons](#), and the [Privacy Law Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Hartzog, Woodrow (2014) "Reviving Implied Confidentiality," *Indiana Law Journal*: Vol. 89: Iss. 2, Article 6.  
Available at: <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ilj/vol89/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School Journals at Digital Repository @ Maurer Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Indiana Law Journal* by an authorized administrator of Digital Repository @ Maurer Law. For more information, please contact [wattn@indiana.edu](mailto:wattn@indiana.edu).



**JEROME HALL LAW LIBRARY**

INDIANA UNIVERSITY  
Maurer School of Law  
Bloomington

# Reviving Implied Confidentiality

WOODROW HARTZOG\*

*The law of online relationships has a significant flaw—it regularly fails to account for the possibility of an implied confidence. The established doctrine of implied confidentiality is, without explanation, almost entirely absent from online jurisprudence in environments where it has traditionally been applied offline, such as with sensitive data sets and intimate social interactions.*

*Courts' abandonment of implied confidentiality in online environments should have been foreseen. The concept has not been developed enough to be consistently applied in environments such as the Internet that lack obvious physical or contextual cues of confidence. This absence is significant because implied confidentiality could be the missing piece that helps resolve the problems caused by the disclosure of personal information on the Internet.*

*This Article urges a revival of implied confidentiality by identifying from the relevant case law a set of implied confidentiality norms based upon party perception and inequality that courts should be, but are not, considering in online disputes. These norms are used to develop a framework for courts to better recognize implied agreements and relationships of trust in all contexts.*

INTRODUCTION .....	763
I. THE DEATH OF IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY (WHERE WE NEED IT MOST) .....	766
A. PRIVACY, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND THE DIGITAL AGE .....	767
B. THE LAW OF IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY .....	768
C. THE NEED FOR IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY .....	772
II. SEEKING ANSWERS IN THE LAW OF IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY .....	774
A. A THEORY OF CONTEXT FOR IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY .....	774
B. THE FACTORS IMPORTANT IN IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY DISPUTES .....	775
III. THE REVIVAL OF IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY .....	801
A. TOWARD A DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK .....	801
B. APPLICATION .....	802
CONCLUSION .....	806

## INTRODUCTION

Implied confidentiality is critical for meaningful and efficient communication in the digital age. Implied confidences can enable recovering substance abusers to

---

† Copyright © 2014 Woodrow Hartzog.

\* Assistant Professor of Law, Samford University's Cumberland School of Law, Affiliate Scholar, Stanford Law School's Center for Internet and Society. The author would like to thank Cathy Packer, Dan Solove, Neil Richards, Kirsty Hughes, Joel Reidenberg, Gavin Phillipson, Angus Johnston, Eric Goldman, Dan Hunter, Ryan Calo, Peter Swire, Patricia Abril, Anne Klinefelter, Ruth Walden, Paul Jones, Caroline Brown, Andrea Matwyshyn, Lucille Ponte, Jennifer Henderson, and the participants of the Fifth Annual Privacy Law Scholars Conference, the Second Annual International Privacy Law Conference and the Second Annual Internet Law Works-In-Progress Series. This research was supported by funding from the Cumberland School of Law and the Roy H. Park Foundation.

participate in online support groups, protect lovers who wish to be intimate using media, and allow Internet users to rely upon vague promises by websites to “protect their personal information.”<sup>1</sup> Online relationships like these involve a horde of implicit signals, cultural practices, power differentials, and shared assumptions that can reflect an unspoken confidence between the parties. Yet, when these digitally implied confidences are breached, Internet law provides surprisingly little guidance for the betrayed.

At best, the concept of implied confidentiality plays a negligible role in the developing doctrine surrounding modern privacy disputes.<sup>2</sup> Despite almost seventeen years of robust online social interaction,<sup>3</sup> fewer than ten publicly available opinions directly address the concept of implied confidentiality created via the Internet.<sup>4</sup> So what accounts for the absence of implied confidentiality in the digital era? Empirical evidence and logic do not support the contention that the only understandings of confidentiality between parties in online relationships are explicit.<sup>5</sup> Rather, a closer look at the doctrine reveals that implied confidentiality has not been refined enough to be a workable concept in many kinds of common social interactions, including online relationships. This Article demonstrates that although courts regularly consider numerous factors in deciding claims for implied confidentiality, they have failed to organize or canonize these factors.

---

1. See, e.g., *Anonymity and Privacy*, ONLINE INTERGROUP: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, <http://www.aa-intergroup.org/privacy.php>; Caitlin O’Hanlon, *Sexting Etiquette: What’s Cool and What’s Not*, 29 SECRETS, <http://www.29secrets.com/relationships/sexting-etiquette-whats-cool-and-whats-not>; *Privacy Promise*, CRRG, INC., <http://www.crrginc.com/privacy.html> (“We promise to honor and protect your privacy.”); Carrie Seim, *Sexting Do’s and Don’ts*, BETTY CONFIDENTIAL (Dec. 11, 2009), <http://www.bettyconfidential.com/ar/ld/a/Sexting-Dos-and-Donts.html>.

2. Of course, the broader concept of confidentiality is not completely absent from online disputes. Explicit confidentiality agreements have an undeniable presence in online privacy disputes in the form of claims for violations of privacy policies and the reliance on terms of use to justify refusals to disclose information about Internet users. But these agreements do not define the entire boundaries and expectations inherent in all online relationships. Indeed, given that virtually no one reads or understands online boilerplate, these agreements likely do not even scratch the surface of the true expectations and perceptions of Internet users.

3. See danah m. boyd & Nicole B. Ellison, *Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship*, 13 J. COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMM. 210, 214 (2008).

4. See *Pisciotta v. Old Nat’l Bancorp*, 499 F.3d 629 (7th Cir. 2007); *In re EasySaver Rewards Litig.*, 737 F. Supp. 2d 1159 (S.D. Cal. 2010); *Google, Inc. v. Traffic Info., LLC*, No. CV09-642-HU, 2010 WL 743878 (D. Or. Feb. 2, 2010.); *London v. New Albertson’s, Inc.*, No. 08-CV-1173 H(CAB), 2008 WL 4492642 (S.D. Cal. Sept. 30, 2008); *Best W. Int’l, Inc. v. Furber*, No. CV-06-1537-PHX-DGC, 2008 WL 4182827 (D. Ariz. Sept. 5, 2008); *Sw. Airlines Co. v. BoardFirst, L.L.C.*, No. 3:06-CV-0891-B, 2007 WL 4823761 (N.D. Tex. Sept. 12, 2007). It is worth noting that these cases all involve commercial, not social, disputes.

5. See, e.g., Patricia Sanchez Abril, *A (My)Space of One’s Own: On Privacy and Online Social Networks*, 6 NW. J. TECH. & INTELL. PROP. 73, 77 (2007); Andrew J. McClurg, *Kiss and Tell: Protecting Intimate Relationship Privacy Through Implied Contracts of Confidentiality*, 74 U. CIN. L. REV. 887 (2006).

This developmental failure has resulted in the practical death of implied confidentiality online. “Offline” confidentiality has the advantage of traditional notions of readily perceptible context. Those seeking to disclose in confidence in face-to-face relationships can close doors, speak in hushed tones, and rely on other signals to convey a trust in the recipient that has not been explicitly articulated. Yet, online relationships are frequently perceived by courts as missing the same implicit cues of confidentiality that are present in face-to-face relationships. The neglected state of implied confidentiality is a problem because courts are increasingly tasked with ascertaining the actual agreement or relationship between Internet users who regularly disclose sensitive information.

Courts have long validated implied confidential relationships and agreements.<sup>6</sup> Confidentiality often permeates contexts to such an extent that the obligations of the parties do not need to be verbalized or written down to be understood. In many instances, the articulation of specific confidentiality obligations could erode a relationship or impede its growth.<sup>7</sup> For example, requesting confidentiality might send a signal that the person requesting confidentiality does not trust the would-be confidant without an expressed confidence. Alternatively, such a request might signal an assumption that the would-be confidant is not perceptive enough to know that a confidence is necessary. It would stand to reason, then, that given the abundance of intimate information and complex relationships online, implied confidentiality would play at least a somewhat significant role in modern privacy law. Surprisingly, this is not the case.

The purpose of this Article is to confront the deficiency of implied confidentiality in the law of modern relationships with a proposed revitalization of the concept based on norms derived from previous cases. I argue that the concept of implied confidentiality has not been developed enough to be consistently applied in environments that often lack obvious physical or linguistic cues of confidence, such as the Internet.

Implied confidentiality must be refined if the true intentions of the parties are to be reflected in the law. Courts need to strive for a more nuanced recognition of signals and a better understanding of deceptively contextual relationships. To that end, this Article uses Helen Nissenbaum’s theory of privacy as contextual integrity as a lens to analyze implied confidentiality doctrine and help create a decision-making framework for courts.<sup>8</sup>

This framework is designed to help courts ascertain the two most historically important considerations in implied obligations of confidentiality: party perception and inequality. When courts are presented with an implied confidentiality claim,

---

6. See, e.g., Keene v. Wheatley, 14 F. Cas. 180, 192 (C.C.E.D. Pa. 1861) (No. 7644); Neil M. Richards & Daniel J. Solove, *Privacy’s Other Path: Recovering the Law of Confidentiality*, 96 GEO. L.J. 123 (2007).

7. See, e.g., G. Michael Harvey, Comment, *Confidentiality: A Measured Response to the Failure of Privacy*, 140 U. PA. L. REV. 2385, 2385 (1992) (“When an individual has disclosed such personal information to persons or institutions, she relies upon notions of trust and civility in social relations to ensure that it is not publicized.”).

8. HELEN NISSENBAUM, *PRIVACY IN CONTEXT: TECHNOLOGY, POLICY, AND THE INTEGRITY OF SOCIAL LIFE* (2010).

they should consider the relevant factors identified in Part II and ask the following questions, which correspond to Nissenbaum's framework:

- (1) What was the context surrounding the disclosure?
- (2) What was the nature of the information?
- (3) Who were the actors and what was their relationship?
- (4) What were the internal and external terms of disclosure?

This nuanced framework will better enable the application of implied confidentiality in online disputes than the currently vague articulation of the concept. Implied confidentiality could be the missing piece that helps resolve the problems caused by the disclosure of personal information on the Internet.

Part I of this Article explores the current diminished role of implied confidentiality in Internet-related legal disputes and the need for implied confidentiality in the unsatisfying body of online privacy case law. Part II examines the rich history of implied confidentiality in largely face-to-face relationships, extracting the most important factors for judges in determining whether an implied obligation of confidentiality exists. Based on these factors, Part III develops the proposed technology-neutral decision-making framework for courts in order to revive the concept of implied confidentiality on the Internet. This Article concludes that the law of implied obligations of confidentiality must be nimble, organized, and clear in order to effectuate the intentions of parties operating in rapidly changing online contexts.

#### I. THE DEATH OF IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY (WHERE WE NEED IT MOST)

In many ways, modern privacy law is a mess. The law inadequately or inconsistently protects individuals in a variety of contexts. The term "privacy" itself lacks a clear legal definition.<sup>9</sup> But much of the problem with online privacy disputes is the fact that the most likely publisher of personal information in the Internet age is the person herself.<sup>10</sup> The pervasiveness of electronically mediated communication, such as social media, has transformed many Internet users into their own worst enemies.<sup>11</sup> The rampant self-disclosure of personal information is a problem because courts have struggled to determine whether and to what degree self-disclosed information is private.<sup>12</sup> Lior Strahilevitz stated: "Despite the centrality of this issue,

---

9. See Daniel J. Solove, *Conceptualizing Privacy*, 90 CALIF. L. REV. 1087 (2002).

10. See Lauren Gelman, *Privacy, Free Speech, and "Blurry-Edged" Social Networks*, 50 B.C. L. REV. 1315, 1316 (2009); James Grimmelman, *Saving Facebook*, 94 IOWA L. REV. 1137, 1197 (2009); Daniel J. Solove, *The Slow Demise of Defamation and the Privacy Torts*, HUFFINGTON POST (Oct. 11, 2010, 4:52 PM), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-j-solove/the-slow-demise-of-defama\\_b\\_758570.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-j-solove/the-slow-demise-of-defama_b_758570.html).

11. See DANIEL J. SOLOVE, *THE FUTURE OF REPUTATION: GOSSIP, RUMOR, AND PRIVACY ON THE INTERNET* 196-97 (2007). It is a fact of modern life that individuals must disclose information that, if misused, could subject them to harm. For example, support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or dating services like Match.com are social by design but also involve the disclosure of sensitive information. Police reports and medical records, necessary for response and treatment, likewise require the disclosure of very personal information.

12. Lior Jacob Strahilevitz, *A Social Networks Theory of Privacy*, 72 U. CHI. L. REV. 919, 920-21 (2005).

the American courts lack a coherent, consistent methodology for determining whether an individual has a reasonable expectation of privacy in a particular fact that has been shared with one or more persons.”<sup>13</sup>

The law’s inability to consistently address online disclosure is why the law of confidentiality and the context in which information is disclosed might be increasingly important to Internet users. Implied obligations of confidentiality can protect people revealing harmful information when explicit promises of confidentiality were not obtained. Although the general concept of “offline” implied confidentiality has a rich history, it is doctrinally unorganized, conceptually underdeveloped, and bereft of a unifying theory.

A significant weakness of implied confidentiality doctrine is its tendency to rely on obvious cues of confidentiality that are unique to face-to-face relationships or are physical in nature. Patricia Sánchez Abril has observed the same problem in the tort of public disclosure of private facts.<sup>14</sup> The absence of obvious physical cues online brings the undeveloped nature of the concept into clear view. This unorganized and potentially misguided approach to the concept of implied confidentiality has crippled its application in new contexts such as the Internet. Instead of exploring the cues and relationships augmented by new technologies, courts are largely shying away and deferring to the explicit text in dense and unread boilerplate agreements.<sup>15</sup>

#### *A. Privacy, Confidentiality, and the Digital Age*

Privacy torts, once thought to adequately address most privacy harms, have proved too inflexible or limited to adapt to changing notions of privacy.<sup>16</sup> Privacy-related legislation is a patchwork of statutes that can often be easily circumvented by online user agreements that few read and even fewer fully understand.<sup>17</sup> Though,

---

13. *Id.*

14. Patricia Sánchez Abril, *Recasting Privacy Torts in a Spaceless World*, 21 HARV. J.L. & TECH. 1 (2007) (finding that online contexts lack the traditional privacy-preserving mechanisms of physical space, such as locked doors and hushed voices, to protect information). In addition to protecting privacy, such mechanisms can also serve as cues of implied confidentiality to recipients.

15. See, e.g., Woodrow Hartzog, *Website Design as Contract*, 60 AM. U. L. REV. 1635 (2011).

16. See Abril, *supra* note 14, at 4; Neil M. Richards & Daniel J. Solove, *Prosser’s Privacy Law: A Mixed Legacy*, 98 CALIF. L. REV. 1887, 1918 (2010); Solveig Singleton, *Privacy Versus the First Amendment: A Skeptical Approach*, 11 FORDHAM INTELL. PROP. MEDIA & ENT. L.J. 97, 112–14 (2000) (discussing the hesitancy with which courts have applied the tort of public disclosure); Eugene Volokh, *Freedom of Speech and Information Privacy: The Troubling Implications of a Right to Stop People from Speaking About You*, 52 STAN. L. REV. 1049, 1057–58 (2000) (explaining that parties who contract to maintain confidentiality have a reasonable expectation of privacy); Diane L. Zimmerman, *Requiem for a Heavyweight: A Farewell to Warren and Brandeis’s Privacy Tort*, 68 CORNELL L. REV. 291, 311–20 (1983).

17. See Jonathan K. Sobel, Karen J. Petrulakis & Denelle M. Dixon-Thayer, *The Evolution of Data Protection as a Privacy Concern, and the Contract Law Dynamics Underlying It*, in SECURING PRIVACY IN THE INTERNET AGE 55, 61 (Anupam Chander, Lauren Gelman & Margaret Jane Radin eds., 2008).

ultimately, many problems with the current regimes stem from our inability to articulate what information is “private.”

From a doctrinal perspective, the law of confidentiality offers many benefits that are absent from the common law privacy torts and current privacy statutes. Confidentiality, which is, according to one definition, “the state of having the dissemination of certain information restricted,”<sup>18</sup> focuses not on the nature of the information as public or private but rather on the nature of the relationship or agreement between parties. Even if self-disclosed information is not “private,” it could be disclosed in confidence. Under the law of confidentiality, courts can largely avoid the difficult question of whether information was private or offensive and focus instead on whether a trust was breached. Additionally, the law of confidentiality is less constitutionally suspect than the disclosure tort, which has significant First Amendment limitations.<sup>19</sup> Yet this area remains underdeveloped, particularly with respect to online communication. No scholarship has thoroughly analyzed the various factors relied upon by courts when they evaluate implied agreements of confidentiality.

This void has seemingly resulted in an assumption that courts will know an implied obligation of confidentiality when they see it. Implied confidentiality is found where it is “clear” that such an obligation would have been recognized by the parties to the disclosure.<sup>20</sup> This assumption is not helpful for those seeking to enforce obligations of confidentiality, particularly in an environment like the Internet that has yet to be fully explored by the courts.

### *B. The Law of Implied Confidentiality*

Although implied confidentiality has been touched upon by some scholars,<sup>21</sup> it has yet to be well conceptualized in the literature or doctrine. This Part will provide a brief review of the law of implied confidentiality and demonstrate its extensive development in the United States. The long history of implied confidentiality makes its absence in online disputes all the more surprising.

It is clear that obligations of confidentiality don’t have to be explicitly formed. They can be implicit parts of confidential relationships or created through implied agreements of confidentiality. These obligations can be inferred from customs, norms, and other indicia of confidentiality beyond explicit confidentiality agreements.<sup>22</sup> Yet no research has examined which specific contexts, if any, are

---

18. BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY 339 (9th ed. 2009). Ethicist Sissela Bok defined confidentiality as “the boundaries surrounding shared secrets and . . . the process of guarding these boundaries. While confidentiality protects much that is not in fact secret, personal secrets lie at its core.” SISSELA BOK, SECRETS: ON THE ETHICS OF CONCEALMENT AND REVELATION 119 (1982).

19. *See, e.g.*, Singleton, *supra* note 16; Volokh, *supra* note 16; Zimmerman, *supra* note 16, at 293. The Supreme Court ruled in *Cohen v. Cowles Media Co.* that the First Amendment does not bar an action for breach of a promise of confidentiality. 501 U.S. 663, 670 (1991).

20. *See infra* Part II.

21. *See, e.g.*, McClurg, *supra* note 5.

22. *See infra* Part II.

important to courts when inferring obligations of confidentiality online or offline. Given the uncertainty surrounding privacy in the digital era, it is more important than ever to understand how implied obligations of confidentiality are formed.

Obligations of confidentiality are found in multiple areas of the law, including contracts for confidentiality,<sup>23</sup> the undeveloped tort of breach of confidentiality,<sup>24</sup> evidentiary privileges regarding confidentiality,<sup>25</sup> procedural protections like protective orders to prevent the disclosure of embarrassing personal information in court records,<sup>26</sup> and statutes explicitly creating confidential relationships.<sup>27</sup> This Article will focus on implied agreements for confidentiality for specific disclosures and implied confidential relationships. The general test, which provides little guidance, is that courts will impose an obligation of confidentiality when an individual or other entity voluntarily assumes, promises, or agrees to confidentiality with respect to designated information or enters into a confidential or fiduciary relationship.<sup>28</sup>

### 1. Implied Confidentiality Agreements

Confidentiality agreements are binding agreements that prohibit the disclosure of information. These contracts are relied upon to protect anonymity,<sup>29</sup> information

---

23. See *infra* Part I.B.1.

24. See, e.g., Alan B. Vickery, Note, *Breach of Confidence: An Emerging Tort*, 82 COLUM. L. REV. 1426, 1428 (1982).

25. See, e.g., Richards & Solove, *supra* note 6, at 134.

26. See, e.g., FED. R. CIV. P. 26(c)(1) (authorizing protective orders “to protect a party or person from annoyance, embarrassment, [or] oppression”).

27. E.g., Fair Credit Reporting Act, 15 U.S.C. § 1681b (2006); Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 6801–6809 (2006); Video Privacy Protection Act of 1988, 18 U.S.C.A. § 2710(b)(2)(B) (West Supp. 2013); Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, 42 U.S.C. § 1320d-2 (2006).

28. See Susan M. Gilles, *Promises Betrayed: Breach of Confidence as a Remedy for Invasions of Privacy*, 43 BUFF. L. REV. 1, 15 (1995). Daniel Solove and Neil Richards succinctly summarized the law of confidentiality:

Confidentiality rules involve instances where one party has a legal duty not to disclose certain information it has acquired from another party. These rules include: (1) the breach of confidentiality tort, which imposes liability for disclosing another person’s confidential information if in breach of a duty of confidentiality; (2) the breach of an express or implied contract of confidentiality; (3) statutory provisions restricting the disclosure of confidential information; (4) protective orders preventing the disclosure of confidential information obtained during discovery; and (5) trade secret law restricting the disclosure of confidential information maintained by businesses. There are also other confidentiality rules not involving civil liability, such as criminal prohibitions on divulging certain kinds of confidential information, evidentiary privileges restricting testimony about confidential data, and statutory protections that limit the release of confidential information by certain companies or government agencies.

Daniel J. Solove & Neil M. Richards, *Rethinking Free Speech and Civil Liability*, 109 COLUM. L. REV. 1650, 1669 (2009).

29. See *McVicker v. King*, 266 F.R.D. 92, 97 (W.D. Pa. 2010) (denying motion to



in arbitration proceedings,<sup>30</sup> details of settlement agreements,<sup>31</sup> and trade secrets.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the contracts are used to protect sensitive information such as health information, sexual preference, intimate feelings, and other similar pieces of personal information.<sup>33</sup> Even quasi-contractual promises of confidentiality can be effective.<sup>34</sup>

Implied agreements can arise “in fact” and “in law.” Andrew McClurg stated: “Implied contracts that arise in law are also called ‘quasi-contracts.’ Implied contracts arising in fact are based on the apparent intention of the parties, whereas quasi-contracts are imposed by law without regard to the intentions of the parties to create or not create a contract.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, implied confidentiality agreements in fact arise when individuals *actually* objectively agree to confidentiality, but the understanding is implied in lieu of an explicit agreement. Implied confidentiality agreements in law are actually not “agreements” between the parties at all, but rather are impositions of confidentiality by the state “in order to do justice as a matter of public policy.”<sup>36</sup>

## 2. Confidential Relationships

In addition to agreements for confidentiality, an obligation of confidentiality may be created by entering into a special kind of confidential relationship known as a “fiduciary relationship.” The law of equity has traditionally designated certain relations as “fiduciary.”<sup>37</sup> Professor Susan Gilles wrote that “[w]here such a relation exists, a fiduciary is under a duty ‘to act for the benefit of the other party to the relation as to matters within the scope of the relation.’ This duty, often

---

compel disclosure of a website’s anonymous users’ identities); *Sedersten v. Taylor*, No. 09-3031-CV-S-GAF, 2009 WL 4802567, at \*3 (W.D. Mo. Dec. 9, 2009) (denying motion to compel disclosure of an anonymous poster’s identity from a news website).

30. See, e.g., Amy J. Schmitz, *Untangling the Privacy Paradox in Arbitration*, 54 U. KAN. L. REV. 1211 (2006).

31. See Gregg Stevens & Lorin Subar, *Confidentiality Is a Virtual Necessity*, GP SOLO, Nov.–Dec. 2012, at 24, 24, available at [http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/gp\\_solo\\_magazine/November\\_December\\_2012/gpsolo\\_november\\_december\\_2012.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/gp_solo_magazine/November_December_2012/gpsolo_november_december_2012.authcheckdam.pdf).

32. See, e.g., Pamela Samuelson, *Privacy As Intellectual Property?*, 52 STAN. L. REV. 1125, 1153–55 (2000).

33. See, e.g., *Hammonds v. Aetna Cas. & Sur. Co.*, 243 F. Supp. 793 (N.D. Ohio 1965); *Richards & Solove*, *supra* note 6, at 162.

34. In the case of *Cohen v. Cowles Media Co.*, the Minnesota Supreme Court affirmed that the equitable doctrine of promissory estoppel could be utilized when individuals justifiably rely on a promise to their detriment. 479 N.W.2d 387, 390 (Minn. 1992), *on remand from* 501 U.S. 663 (1991). Promissory estoppel is an equitable doctrine designed to enforce promises that are detrimentally relied upon even though the formal elements of a contract might not be present. Woodrow Hartzog, *Promises and Privacy: Promissory Estoppel and Confidential Disclosure in Online Communities*, 82 TEMP. L. REV. 891, 909 (2009).

35. McClurg, *supra* note 5, at 916.

36. *Id.*

37. Gilles, *supra* note 28, at 39.

characterized as the ‘duty of loyalty,’ includes an obligation not to reveal information.”<sup>38</sup>

Like confidentiality agreements, the existence of a confidential relationship is a question of fact.<sup>39</sup> Roy Ryden Anderson found that “confidential relationships have been labeled ‘fact-based’ fiduciary relationships to distinguish them from formal [fiduciary relationships].”<sup>40</sup> Of course, there is no bright-line test for determining confidential fiduciary relationships.<sup>41</sup> However, Gilles did identify some factors that courts consider in determining whether a confidential relation exists: “length of time of the reliance, a disparity in the positions of the parties, and a close relationship between the parties. It is ‘great intimacy, disclosure of secrets, entrusting of power, and superiority of position’ that evidence a confidential relation.”<sup>42</sup> As will be discussed, Gilles mentions just a few of the many factors relevant to courts in determining obligations of implied confidentiality. These duties are not imposed lightly, and not every relationship involving trust and confidence is a fiduciary one.<sup>43</sup> While confidential obligations *can* be created by

---

38. *Id.* at 39–40 (footnotes omitted). According to Roy Ryden Anderson:

The essence of a confidential relationship is fiduciary obligation. . . . Fiduciary obligation is the highest order of duty imposed by law. In the relationship with the principal, the *beneficiary* of the relationship, the fiduciary must exercise utmost good faith and candor, must disclose all relevant information, and must not profit from the relationship without the knowledge and permission of the principal. The fiduciary must make every effort to avoid having his own interests conflict with those of the principal, and, when conflict is unavoidable, the fiduciary must place the interests of the principal above his own. These principles are both basic and uncompromising.

Roy Ryden Anderson, *The Wolf at the Campfire: Understanding Confidential Relationships*, 53 SMU L. Rev. 315, 317 (2000) (emphasis in original) (footnote omitted).

39. Anderson, *supra* note 38, at 317.

40. *Id.*

41. See GEORGE GLEASON BOGERT & GEORGE TAYLOR BOGERT, *THE LAW OF TRUSTS AND TRUSTEES* § 482, at 284–86 (rev. 2d ed. 1978) (“Equity has never bound itself by any hard and fast definition of the phrase ‘confidential relation’ and has not listed all the necessary elements of such a relation, but has reserved discretion to apply the doctrine whenever it believes that a suitable occasion has arisen.” (footnote omitted)).

42. Gilles, *supra* note 28, at 41 (footnote omitted) (quoting BOGERT & BOGERT, *supra* note 41, § 482, at 281). The Supreme Court of Texas held that “[a]n informal relationship may give rise to a fiduciary duty where one person trusts in and relies on another, whether the relation is a moral, social, domestic, or purely personal one.” *Schlumberger Tech. Corp. v. Swanson*, 959 S.W.2d 171, 176 (Tex. 1997).

43. Anderson identified three limitations on establishing a fact-based fiduciary relationship:

First, the alleged relationship must be found to have existed prior to the transaction at issue. Second, the reliance by the aggrieved party that the other would act toward him as a fiduciary must not have been merely subjective. Third, the alleged confidential relationship may not be established solely by private agreement, but must arise *sui generis* from the nature of the relationship.

Anderson, *supra* note 38, at 324.

contract, fiduciary relationships require more than a contract.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, confidentiality agreements and fiduciary relationships can be simultaneously present.<sup>45</sup>

### C. *The Need for Implied Confidentiality*

The reluctance of courts to find implied confidentiality in informal relationships is problematic because those relationships are the most likely to implicitly share expectations of confidentiality.<sup>46</sup> The ascension of meaningful personal relationships online is one of the core parts of the social web. In intimate relationships, explicit contracts for confidentiality might be seen as inappropriate or unnecessary. Social norms and propriety might inhibit explicit requests for confidentiality in simple arms-length transactions, given the societal expectations that the recipient will keep disclosed information confidential.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, explicit contracts for confidentiality are simply too clunky for most social interactions where they would be useful.<sup>48</sup> Imagine trying to extract explicit promises of confidentiality via e-mail from friends before replying with a sensitive piece of information. Alan Garfield argued that a number of problems arise when parties try to use informal contracts of confidentiality to protect privacy interests.<sup>49</sup>

Eugene Volokh asserted that contracts, particularly implied obligations of confidentiality, are perhaps the only constitutional impositions of civil liability for

---

44. *Id.*; see also ETHAN J. LEIB, FRIEND V. FRIEND: THE TRANSFORMATION OF FRIENDSHIP—AND WHAT THE LAW HAS TO DO WITH IT 111 (2011) (“Certain categories of relationships are virtually always treated as fiduciary in nature. They include attorney-client, corporate director-shareholder, trustee-beneficiary, managing partner-partner, agent-principal, employee-employer, guardian-ward, and physician-patient.”).

45. In *Snepp v. United States*, the federal government successfully sued an ex-employee who published a book about his CIA experience for both breach of contract and breach of fiduciary duty. 444 U.S. 507, 507–08 (1980) (per curiam). The Supreme Court found that Snepp had “violated his trust,” *id.* at 511, by publishing his book, and the Court imposed a constructive trust on his profits, *id.* at 516.

46. See, e.g., Alan E. Garfield, *Promises of Silence: Contract Law and Freedom of Speech*, 83 CORNELL L. REV. 261, 272–73 (1998).

47. See *id.*

48. Cf. *id.* at 277 (“An informal contract of silence may be found to exist after one party casually shared information with another, and later claims that the other party understood that he or she gave the information in exchange for a promise not to disclose it.”). According to Garfield, the more problematic contracts of silence are the ones created informally, particularly oral contracts. *Id.* Garfield noted that the “basic elements of contract formation—offer, acceptance, and consideration—are unlikely to pose any problems for contracts of silence prepared in formal settings.” *Id.*

49. See *id.* at 277–84 (describing the potential lack of consideration, mutual assent, objective intent, definiteness, and evidence in such contracts); *id.* at 282 n.98 (“Of course, one has to distinguish between a social engagement between friends, which is unlikely to be enforceable, and a commercial transaction between friends, such as a loan of money, which will be enforceable. A commitment of nondisclosure one friend makes to another would seem to fall somewhere between these two extremes.”).

speech.<sup>50</sup> Andrew McClurg furthered this argument and noted that implied contracts of confidentiality might be effective for people in intimate relationships sharing information online.<sup>51</sup> McClurg stated the maxim that “[p]romises can be made orally or in writing, or can be inferred from conduct” and argued that “[n]o difference in legal effect between express and implied contracts exists. The only distinction lies in how assent to the contract is manifested.”<sup>52</sup>

McClurg’s central argument was that agreements of confidentiality in fact arise in intimate relationships because it is commonly understood in these relationships that certain information is to be kept between intimates.<sup>53</sup> McClurg proposed that mutual assent to the confidential agreement is created “as a matter of custom and common understanding from the decision to participate in an intimate relationship. It can be inferred from the course of dealing between the parties and the overall context of an intimate relationship, including the manner in which private information is conveyed between intimate partners.”<sup>54</sup>

Here, McClurg engaged in one of the few attempts to identify specific contexts that could give rise to implied obligations of confidentiality: “[T]hat private information is shared . . . between intimate partners outside the presence of others, often within homes behind closed doors and drawn curtains, lends support to the assumption that the tacit understanding of the parties is: ‘I’m sharing this with you because I expect you to keep it in confidence.’”<sup>55</sup>

50. See Volokh, *supra* note 16, at 1057. Volokh noted that implied contracts for confidentiality arise where “people reasonably expect—because of custom, course of dealing with the other party, or all the other factors that are relevant to finding an implied contract—that part of what their contracting partner is promising is confidentiality.” *Id.* at 1058 (footnote omitted). Volokh stated:

I tentatively think that a legislature may indeed enact a law stating that certain legislatively identified transactions should be interpreted as implicitly containing a promise of confidentiality, unless such a promise is explicitly and prominently disclaimed by the offeror, and the contract together with the disclaimer is accepted by the offeree.

*Id.* at 1060. According to Volokh: “The great free speech advantage of the contract model is that it does *not* endorse any right to ‘stop people from speaking about me.’ Rather, it endorses a right to ‘stop people from violating their promises to me.’” *Id.* at 1061 (emphasis in original).

51. McClurg, *supra* note 5, at 912.

52. *Id.* McClurg recognized:

The central features of an implicit promise of confidentiality, shared by all [intimate, fiduciary, and otherwise confidential] relationships, include: (1) confidentiality is reasonably expected as a matter of custom and general understanding; (2) people part with private information in reliance on this expectation (in many cases, detrimentally changing their position in doing so); and (3) trust in the confidentiality of private information is necessary to make the relationship function properly.

*Id.* at 913.

53. *Id.* at 917. McClurg argued that “[c]onsideration for the contract exists in the mutuality of the confidentiality agreement as well as in the broader emotional, physical, and other benefits each partner to an intimate relationship confers upon the other.” *Id.*

54. *Id.*

55. *Id.* Ultimately, McClurg still proposed the use of explicit confidentiality agreements

Online relationships are not devoid of confidentiality cues, but such signs might be subtle or as of yet unrecognized by courts, even if they are clear to Internet users. It can be difficult to articulate justifications for such trust. As such, implied confidentiality online might require a more thorough analysis by courts. Patricia Sánchez Abril has explored how courts might recognize online cues, such as privacy settings, as indicia of expectations of privacy.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, virtually any aspect of website design or online interaction could be considered relevant in a finding of implied confidentiality.<sup>57</sup> Yet no literature has sufficiently addressed the next logical question: *How* should courts determine *which factors* contribute to an implied obligation of confidentiality online?

## II. SEEKING ANSWERS IN THE LAW OF IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY

The relevant doctrine is unclear about specifically when an implied confidence has been created and should be enforced. While courts and scholars have developed general rules for finding implied confidentiality, such as whenever a reasonable person would conclude an agreement of confidentiality was implied or whenever a fiduciary relationship exists, there is little explicit guidance beyond these often circular principles.<sup>58</sup> Courts are largely left to their own devices and the facts of each dispute in determining whether a party was implicitly bound to confidence or whether an implied expectation of confidentiality was reasonable in any given circumstance.

This Part helps remedy this dearth of analysis by investigating judicial considerations of implied confidentiality norms in order to determine how implied obligations of confidentiality might be formed. Specifically, this Part examines implied confidentiality disputes to determine precisely what courts consider important in the creation of implied obligations of confidentiality. Because implied confidentiality is entirely dependent upon context, this Article uses Helen Nissenbaum's theory of privacy as contextual integrity to frame the analysis.<sup>59</sup>

### *A. A Theory of Context for Implied Confidentiality*

As a general rule, courts look to context when analyzing implied obligations of confidentiality, but this approach provides little guidance in specific disputes. A better framework is needed. This Article uses the emerging theory of privacy as contextual integrity as a lens to analyze courts' treatment of online and offline implied obligations of confidentiality. Because confidentiality is generally considered a type of privacy,<sup>60</sup> this lens for privacy analysis is well suited for analyzing questions about the context surrounding promises of confidentiality.

---

between intimates, *id.* at 931, because of the "difficulty of identifying the terms of an implied confidentiality contract between intimate partners." *Id.* at 929.

56. See Abril, *supra* note 14, at 42–43.

57. See, e.g., Hartzog, *supra* note 15.

58. See, e.g., Vickery, *supra* note 24, at 1456 ("A duty of confidentiality could arise whenever personal information is received from another in confidence.").

59. NISSENBAUM, *supra* note 8.

60. See Daniel J. Solove, *A Taxonomy of Privacy*, 154 U. PA. L. REV. 477, 479 (2006) (quoting Lillian R. BeVier, *Information About Individuals in the Hands of Government:*

In short, the theory of privacy as contextual integrity is the theory that privacy violations occur when “context-relative informational norms” are not respected during information sharing.<sup>61</sup> According to its creator, Helen Nissenbaum, the framework of contextual integrity provides that “finely calibrated systems of social norms, or rules, govern the flow of personal information in distinct social contexts (e.g., education, health care, and politics).”<sup>62</sup> Nissenbaum stated that these norms “define and sustain essential activities and key relationships and interests, protect people and groups against harm, and balance the distribution of power.”<sup>63</sup> Developed as a model of informational privacy, contextual integrity is defined by Nissenbaum as “compatibility with presiding norms of information appropriateness and distribution.”<sup>64</sup> Specifically, Nissenbaum posited:

[W]hether a particular action is determined a violation of privacy is a function of several variables, including the nature of the situation, or context; the nature of the information in relation to that context; the roles of agents receiving information; their relationships to information subjects; on what terms the information is shared by the subject; and the terms of further dissemination.<sup>65</sup>

Nissenbaum has also referred to these variables simply as (1) contexts, (2) actors, (3) attributes, and (4) transmission principles.<sup>66</sup> Nissenbaum posited that context-relative informational norms are characterized by these variables, which “prescribe, for a given context, the types of information, the parties who are the subjects of the information as well as those who are sending and receiving it, and the principles under which this information is transmitted.”<sup>67</sup> These four variables guide the analysis in this Article regarding when and how courts consider implied obligations of confidentiality.

### *B. The Factors Important in Implied Confidentiality Disputes*

Courts have decided a bevy of implied confidentiality cases. Yet they have left few explicit guidelines to show how they reached their decision and how future courts should analyze similar claims. The goal of this Part is to dig deeper into the case law to ascertain what courts consider important in disputes involving implied obligations of confidentiality. Utilizing Nissenbaum’s theory of contextual integrity as a guide, over 130 cases involving implied obligations of confidentiality were examined to determine how courts consider implied confidentiality norms in these disputes. The cases revealed that courts gave the most attention to context and the

---

*Some Reflections on Mechanisms for Privacy Protection*, 4 WM. & MARY BILL RTS. J. 455, 458 (1995)).

61. NISSENBAUM, *supra* note 8, at 3, 129.

62. *Id.* at 3.

63. *Id.*

64. Helen Nissenbaum, *Privacy as Contextual Integrity*, 79 WASH. L. REV. 119, 155 (2004).

65. *Id.*

66. NISSENBAUM, *supra* note 8, at 140–47.

67. *Id.* at 141.

terms of disclosure.<sup>68</sup> However, all four factors of informational norms were relevant to courts. These numbers reflect only cases in which a court expressly considered one of the factors and where the court's consideration was significant.<sup>69</sup> Each factor considered by the courts consisted of numerous smaller considerations. In aggregate, these considerations reflected trends in judicial decision making.

A few themes dominated the cases. First, the cases made it clear that the parties' perceptions of confidentiality were paramount in implied obligations of confidentiality. This could be seen most prominently in the courts' focus on industry customs, sensitive information, confidentiality indicators, and external terms. Courts found that the presence of all of these factors contributed to a finding of an implied obligation of confidentiality because their presence made it likely that such an obligation was or should have been perceived by the parties.

Additionally, after the perception of confidentiality, the most important factor for courts in finding an implied obligation of confidentiality was the inequalities between the parties. A disclosure involving parties that had similar resources, sophistication, or bargaining power was unlikely to be subject to an implied obligation of confidentiality. However, if the discloser of information was inherently vulnerable, had fewer resources, had less bargaining power, or was less sophisticated than the recipient, then an implied obligation of confidentiality was more likely than with similarly situated parties.

### 1. Context

The word "context" is defined as "circumstances in which an event occurs; a setting."<sup>70</sup> Because this definition is so broad, it is only minimally helpful when analyzing implied obligations of confidentiality. Nissenbaum defined contexts within her framework as "structured social settings characterized by canonical activities, roles, relationships, power structures, norms (or rules), and internal values."<sup>71</sup> However, this definition is also too broad for the purposes of this Article because it can overlap with other aspects of Nissenbaum's theory. A more specific definition is required to separate the term "context" from the other three factors in Nissenbaum's framework for contextual integrity. Thus, for the purposes of this Article, "context" is defined as (1) the relationship between the actors to a disclosure or (2) any external circumstance affecting the actors to a disclosure, the nature of the information disclosed, or the terms of disclosure. By focusing on relationships and external circumstances instead of the intrinsic aspects of the

---

68. *See infra* Part II.B.

69. In a number of excluded cases, it was possible that one of these four factors influenced the judges' opinions, but because these considerations were not apparent, the cases were not included in the analysis. Additionally, in other excluded cases, courts expressly mentioned one or more of the four factors, but the factors did not appear to play a significant role in the legal analysis. For example, courts often would describe the job titles of actors in disputes where the jobs held by the actors were largely immaterial to the implied confidentiality analysis. These cases also were not included in this Article's analysis.

70. THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 397 (Joseph P. Pickett ed., 5th ed. 2011).

71. NISSENBAUM, *supra* note 8, at 132.

actors, disclosed information, and terms of disclosure, the term “context” is different than the other three factors.

The cases revealed that courts routinely and explicitly rely on context when analyzing implied obligations of confidentiality. Over half of the cases analyzed considered context relevant in analyzing claims of implied confidentiality. This analysis of context occurred in many different types of disputes, including breach of contract;<sup>72</sup> the breach of confidentiality tort;<sup>73</sup> fraud;<sup>74</sup> negligence;<sup>75</sup> breach of trade secret;<sup>76</sup> patent infringement;<sup>77</sup> failure to properly disclose information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA);<sup>78</sup> and waiver of testimonial, evidentiary, and *Miranda* privileges.<sup>79</sup> All but a scant few of these cases involved offline instead of online disputes. Although an overwhelming majority of the cases were not related to the Internet, the courts’ logic and analysis of implied obligations of confidentiality could be applied to online disputes.

#### i. Relationship Between the Parties

The nature of the relationship between the parties is one of the most important contextual factors used to analyze a claim for implied confidentiality.<sup>80</sup> Courts consistently found that *long-standing, developed relationships* were likely to give rise to an implied obligation of confidentiality because a developed relationship likely involves trust and custom.<sup>81</sup> To courts, implied expectations of confidentiality were more plausible in developed relationships,<sup>82</sup> unequal

---

72. See, e.g., *Givens v. Mullikin ex rel. Estate of McElwaney*, 75 S.W.3d 383 (Tenn. 2002).

73. See, e.g., *Humphers v. First Interstate Bank of Or.*, 696 P.2d 527, 534 (Or. 1985) (in banc).

74. See, e.g., *In re Estate of Scott v. Kemp*, 316 A.2d 883 (Pa. 1974).

75. See, e.g., *Thomas v. State Emp’t. Grp. Benefits Program*, 2005-0392 (La. App. 1 Cir. 3/24/06); 934 So. 2d 753.

76. See, e.g., *RTE Corp. v. Coatings, Inc.*, 267 N.W.2d 226 (Wis. 1978).

77. See, e.g., *Diodem, LLC v. Lumenis Inc.*, No. CV03-2142 GAF (RCx), 2005 WL 6220720 (C.D. Cal. Sept. 16, 2005).

78. See, e.g., *Council on Am.-Islamic Relations, Cal. v. FBI*, 749 F. Supp. 2d 1104 (S.D. Cal. 2010).

79. See, e.g., *In re WBAI-FM v. Proskin*, 344 N.Y.S.2d 393 (N.Y. App. Div. 1973) (per curiam).

80. See, e.g., *Roth v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 656 F. Supp. 2d 153, 165 (D.D.C. 2009) (finding that “[c]ircumstances that may indicate implied confidentiality include . . . the informant’s relationship with the agency”) (citing *U.S. Dep’t of Justice v. Landano*, 508 U.S. 165, 179 (1993)).

81. See, e.g., *Meyer v. Christie*, No. 07-2230-JWL, 2007 WL 3120695, at \*4 (D. Kan. Oct. 24, 2007) (finding that a bank’s privacy policy promising confidentiality resulted in a binding contract where, among other things, the plaintiff “ha[s] a long-term banking business and banking relationship with [one of the defendants]”). Additionally, courts were more amenable to claims of implied confidentiality where the party requesting or relying on confidentiality did not have equal bargaining power with the recipient of the information. See, e.g., *L-3 Commc’ns Corp. v. OSI Sys., Inc.*, 283 F. App’x 830, 836–37 (2d Cir. 2008).

82. See, e.g., *Ecolaire Inc. v. Crissman*, 542 F. Supp. 196, 207 (E.D. Pa. 1982) (noting



bargaining power could inhibit the ability of vulnerable parties to explicitly request confidentiality,<sup>83</sup> and relationships formed in pursuit of a common goal required confidentiality to be effective.<sup>84</sup> The courts' keen attention to vulnerability has yet to be as rigorously applied in most online environments.

The Internet and social media have existed long enough for Internet users to form developed relationships, both with websites and with each other. Consider the average online community, such as a topic-specific message board or community weblog like the popular website MetaFilter.<sup>85</sup> Active since 1999, users of this tech-friendly community have developed long-standing relationships with each other and the website itself, which seemingly has no standard mandatory terms of use agreement.<sup>86</sup> Evidence of these developed relationships and the norms that govern them could be explored in disputes involving assertions of implied obligations of confidentiality.

## ii. Custom

One of the most important aspects of an implied obligation of confidentiality is that the discloser and recipient of information *knew or should have known* that the information was *disclosed in confidence*. For this reason, courts considered custom

---

in a trade secret dispute that an employee's position as vice president "gave him access to numerous pre-existing trade secrets" and, as a result, an implied duty of nondisclosure).

83. *See, e.g.*, Paul v. Aviva Life & Annuity Co., No. 3:09-CV-1409-B, 2010 WL 5105925, at \*9 (N.D. Tex. Dec. 14, 2010) (citing Martin v. State Farm Mut. Auto. Ins. Co., 808 N.E.2d 47, 52 (Ill. App. Ct. 2004)); Fischer v. Viacom Int'l, Inc., 115 F. Supp. 2d 535, 543 (D. Md. 2000) (noting the general rule that "an implied duty of confidentiality [exists] in circumstances where the parties deal on unequal terms, the transaction is more than an arm's length deal, and one party trusts and relies on the other"); Hogan v. DC Comics, No. 96-CV-1749, 1997 WL 570871, at \*5 (N.D.N.Y. Sept. 9, 1997) (citing case law stating "[a] confidential or fiduciary relationship exists between parties 'where the parties do not deal on equal terms and one trusts and relies on the other'" (quoting McGahn v. Ebersol, 608 F. Supp. 277, 285 (S.D.N.Y. 1985))).

84. *See, e.g.*, Cloud v. Standard Packing Corp., 376 F.2d 384, 388–89 (7th Cir. 1967) ("Where the facts show that a disclosure is made in order to further a particular relationship, a relationship of confidence may be implied . . ."); Fail-Safe LLC v. A.O. Smith Corp., 744 F. Supp. 2d 831, 861 (E.D. Wis. 2010) (observing that a joint business venture between the parties "by its very nature implie[d] that disclosures made in the context of such an arrangement were confidential"); Faris v. Enberg, 97 Cal. App. 3d 309, 323 (Ct. App. 1979) (stating that among the factors from which a confidential relationship can be inferred is "proof of a particular relationship such as partners, joint adventurers, principal and agent or buyer and seller under certain circumstances"); Carpenter Found. v. Oakes, 26 Cal. App. 3d 784, 789, 798 (Ct. App. 1972) (stating that "we have no difficulty in finding a fiduciary relationship established not only by reason of the agency created in the operation of the [non-profit's satellite branch], but also by virtue of the long, intimate, personal friendship" between the president of the corporation and the defendant, a former employee); RTE Corp. v. Coatings, Inc., 267 N.W.2d 226, 233 (Wis. 1978) ("[A] relationship of confidence may be implied when a disclosure is made solely for the purpose of advancing or implementing an existing special relationship . . .").

85. METAFILTER, <http://www.metafilter.com/>.

86. *See* Noor Ali-Hasan, *MetaFilter: An Analysis of a Community Weblog*, NOOR AT WORK (Apr. 20, 2005), [http://www.nooratwork.com/pdf/ali-hasan\\_metafilter.pdf](http://www.nooratwork.com/pdf/ali-hasan_metafilter.pdf).

a very significant factor in analyzing implied obligations of confidentiality.<sup>87</sup> If confidentiality was a regular and accepted practice in a given context, courts often found a discloser's reliance on that custom reasonable.<sup>88</sup> This reliance was reasonable because the common knowledge of a custom made it likely that the recipient of the information was aware of an expectation of confidentiality before the information was disclosed, or, in any event, the recipient should have known to keep the information confidential.

Courts found two types of customs important: (1) *party customs* and (2) *industry customs*. Courts were likely to find an implied obligation of confidentiality for parties if they offered or required confidences in previous, similar contexts.<sup>89</sup> Industry customs of confidentiality, most commonly found in intellectual property disputes, were important to courts if confidentiality was a commonly accepted practice in any given industry, though not necessarily the custom of the parties currently requesting or being charged with an obligation of confidentiality. A custom of confidentiality should be firmly established to be legally binding.<sup>90</sup>

---

87. See *Metrano v. Fox Broad. Co.*, No. CV-00-02279 CAS, 2000 WL 979664, at \*7–8 (C.D. Cal. Apr. 24, 2000) (recognizing that, if proven, the television industry's practice of implied confidentiality in all pitch meetings supported a plaintiff's claim for breach of confidence); *Bergin v. Century 21 Real Estate Corp.*, No. 98 Civ. 8075 (JGK), 2000 WL 223833, at \*2, \*4 (S.D.N.Y. Feb. 25, 2000); *Markogianis v. Burger King Corp.*, No. 95 CIV.4627 (JFK), 1997 WL 167113, at \*5 (S.D.N.Y. Apr. 8, 1997) (“Industry custom can create an implied-in-fact contract between the parties . . . .”); *Moore v. Marty Gilman, Inc.*, 965 F. Supp. 203, 213–17 (D. Mass. 1997) (detailing the importance of customs in implied confidential relationships that are necessary to protect a trade secret); *Prescott v. Morton Int'l, Inc.*, 769 F. Supp. 404, 410 (D. Mass. 1990) (holding that “a genuine issue of material fact exists as to whether the parties' conduct would lead a reasonable person in the industry to infer that Morton promised not to use the information in the design plans without authorization”); *Vantage Point, Inc. v. Parker Bros., Inc.*, 529 F. Supp. 1204, 1217–18 (E.D.N.Y. 1981).

88. See, e.g., *Markogianis*, 1997 WL 167113, at \*5.

89. See, e.g., *Moore*, 965 F. Supp. at 214 (citing *Burten v. Milton Bradley Co.*, 592 F. Supp. 1021, 1027 (D.R.I. 1984) (noting that in previous cases, a business's adherence to an industry custom of confidentiality was a key point in determining whether an implied confidential relationship existed)); cf. *MIT v. Harman Int'l Indus., Inc.*, 584 F. Supp. 2d 297, 304–05 (D. Mass. 2008) (finding no implied obligation of confidentiality where, among other things, the researchers “failed to support the notion that there is a ‘recognized culture that would preclude, or at least inhibit, most of the participants in the field tests from disclosing information . . . to others’”).

90. *Star Patrol Enters. v. Saban Entm't, Inc.*, 129 F.3d 127, 127 (9th Cir. 1997) (unpublished table decision) (finding that “[p]roper and competent proof of an industry custom and usage which created an obligation on the part of the defendants might form part of the [circumstances]” that can demonstrate voluntary acceptance of confidentiality); *Fischer v. Viacom Int'l, Inc.*, 115 F. Supp. 2d 535, 544 (D. Md. 2000) (observing that the “commonplace give-and-take between those who ‘pitch’ ideas and those who listen and consider” was not enough of a custom to give rise to a duty of confidentiality); *Markogianis*, 1997 WL 167113, at \*5 (“Industry custom can create an implied-in-fact contract between the parties, resulting in the requisite legal relationship needed to support a misappropriation claim.”).

The growth of e-commerce would seem to pave the way for industry and party norms of confidentiality and privacy. Indeed, some websites explicitly tout their common practice of never selling or sharing information with third parties.<sup>91</sup> Although these statements appear outside the language of the websites' privacy policies, it seems that such statements of company practices would count as evidence of a party custom (and in the aggregate, perhaps an industry custom) of implied confidentiality.

### iii. Negotiation

Courts have had varying opinions on how negotiations should impact an inference of confidentiality. Some courts opined that a lack of negotiation reflected an absence of the "meeting of the minds" necessary for true agreement between the parties.<sup>92</sup> Other courts looked to whether the parties were negotiating at "arm's-length," defined as "[o]f or relating to dealings between two parties who are not related or not on close terms and who are presumed to have roughly equal bargaining power; not involving a confidential relationship."<sup>93</sup> For courts, "arms-length negotiations" tended to serve as evidence of ample opportunity to explicitly request confidentiality, with the implication that the failure to exploit that opportunity meant that an implied obligation of confidentiality was unlikely.<sup>94</sup>

---

91. See, e.g., CBS News, *Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook: What's Next?*, 60 MINUTES, [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560\\_162-7108060.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560_162-7108060.html) ("We never sell your information. Advertisers who are using the site never get access to your information." (quoting Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg)).

92. *Meyer v. Christie*, No. 07-2230-JWL, 2007 WL 3120695, at \*5 (D. Kan. Oct. 24, 2007) (finding that "the terms of the manual were not bargained for by the parties" and "[n]o 'meeting of the minds' occurred").

93. BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY 123 (9th ed. 2009).

94. See, e.g., *Fischer*, 115 F. Supp. at 544 (finding that "[r]ather than establishing a relationship of trust and confidentiality . . . [plaintiff] merely contacted [defendant] . . . asked to keep 'the details of the series on file'" with no explicit promise of confidentiality). The court found it important to describe the fact that "[t]hese alleged facts describe the parties acting at arm's length, with no prior dealings, no promise of confidentiality, and no employment or personal relationship that could give rise to a duty of trust." *Id.*; see also *Ranger Enters., Inc. v. Leen & Assocs., Inc.*, No. 97-35077, 97-35078, 1998 WL 668380, at \*6 (9th Cir. Sept. 21, 1998); *Star Patrol*, 1997 WL 683327, at \*2 ("An action for breach of confidential relationship would necessarily fail because the arms-length business relationship between Star Patrol and the defendants is insufficient to impose fiduciary-like duties that arise from a confidential relationship."); *Vantage Point, Inc. v. Parker Bros., Inc.*, 529 F. Supp. 1204, 1218 (E.D.N.Y. 1981) (finding that the creation of a confidential relationship would be "unduly burdensome and unwarranted in policy where the sole contract between the parties has been the arms-length submission of an idea"). Failed negotiations for confidentiality were also relevant to some courts because they indicated that an implied obligation of confidentiality was likely. See, e.g., *L-3 Commc'ns. Corp. v. OSI Sys., Inc.*, 283 F. App'x 830, 836 (2d Cir. 2008) (finding that no obligation of confidentiality existed in an intellectual property dispute where the plaintiff could have, but failed to, insist upon "explicit contract terms providing that L-3 would act in a fiduciary capacity"); *Omnitech Int'l, Inc. v. Colorox Co.*, 11 F.3d 1316, 1331 (5th Cir. 1994) (finding that no confidential relationship existed in a trade-secret dispute where, among other things, the parties "had only

Boilerplate contracts used by websites are rarely open to negotiation. However, to the extent an actual agreement exists between Internet users, courts reviewing claims by those who are more likely to be negotiating at arm's length and who are not on close terms and have similar bargaining power would likely find these factors weigh against a finding of implied confidentiality. For example, users of the popular online classifieds on the website Craigslist are often strangers engaging in discrete or "one-time-only" transactions with each other and can easily negotiate for confidentiality as part of their agreement if they so desire.<sup>95</sup> Thus, if they fail to do so, a court might be hesitant to find that confidentiality was implied. A different analysis might apply to users who are on closer terms or involved in more developed relationships.

#### iv. Timing of the Disclosure

The timing of the disclosure of information was significant for courts, as they were loathe to imply confidentiality when disclosures *occurred before* a promise of confidentiality was made or before a substantive relationship was formed.<sup>96</sup> By

---

an arms-length business relationship" and "the parties vigorously negotiated the agreements ultimately executed"); *Fail-Safe LLC v. A.O. Smith Corp.*, 744 F. Supp. 2d 831, 860–61 (E.D. Wis. 2010) (finding no implied confidential relationship where the plaintiff "willingly agreed to a confidentiality agreement that clearly protected [the defendant's] proprietary information, but did nothing to protect [its own] information provided an obvious signal to [the defendant] that [the plaintiff] 'knew how to ask that information be considered confidential if it really thought the company's crown jewels were at risk'"); *Young Design, Inc. v. Teletronics Int'l, Inc.*, No. Civ.A. 00-970-A, 2001 WL 35804500, at \*5 (E.D. Va. July 31, 2001) (finding no implied confidential relationship where the plaintiff "did not require [the defendant] to sign non-disclosure agreement of any kind" and there was no evidence the plaintiff "probed . . . for any explicit commitment to keep the . . . technology confidential" after the defendant refused to sign a non-disclosure agreement during a business meeting).

95. See Jonathan Strickland, *How Craigslist Works*, HOW STUFF WORKS, <http://money.howstuffworks.com/craigslist.htm> ("All transactions are between the person who posted the ad and the person responding to it. Craigslist's employees don't get involved in any transactions or discussions unless someone reports a problem.").

96. See, e.g., *Smith v. Snap-On Tools Corp.*, 833 F.2d 578, 581 (5th Cir. 1987) ("Reliance on confidentiality, however, must exist at the time the disclosure is made. An attempt to establish a special relationship long after an initial disclosure comes too late."); *Hoeltke v. C.M. Kemp Mfg. Co.*, 80 F.2d 912, 923 (4th Cir. 1935); *Keane v. Fox Television Stations, Inc.*, 297 F. Supp. 2d 921, 942 (S.D. Tex. 2004) ("The idea man who blurts out his idea without having first made his bargain—whether in a so-called sales packet, Internet postings, or discussions with family members and callow undergraduate students—has no one but himself to blame for the loss of his bargaining power."); *Holloman v. O. Mustad & Sons (USA), Inc.*, 196 F. Supp. 2d 450, 460 (E.D. Tex. 2002) (finding that no confidentiality obligation existed where the plaintiff admitted to revealing a trade secret to others for testing purposes without first entering into nondisclosure agreements with those people); *Kleck v. Bausch & Lomb, Inc.*, 145 F. Supp. 2d 819, 824 (W.D. Tex. 2000); *Metrano v. Fox Broad. Co.*, No. CV-00-02279 CAS JWJX, 2000 WL 979664, at \*7 (C.D. Cal. Apr. 24, 2000) (finding that "[n]othing in the pleadings suggests that plaintiff communicated to defendant the requirement of confidentiality before the presentation"); *Learning Curve Toys, L.L.C. v. PlayWood Toys, Inc.*, No. 94 C 6884, 1998 WL 46894, at \*3 (N.D. Ill. Jan. 30, 1998) (referencing testimony that supported the fact that the parties "arrived at a confidentiality

focusing on timing, the courts seem to be trying to ensure that the recipient of the information had the opportunity to either decline confidentiality or refrain from entering into a relationship with confidentiality obligations. Courts will not infer confidentiality unilaterally. A promise of confidentiality or decision to enter into a confidential relationship must be voluntary by both parties.<sup>97</sup>

#### v. Purpose of the Disclosure

Courts regularly looked to the purpose of the disclosure of information to determine if an implied obligation of confidentiality existed.<sup>98</sup> Courts considered disclosures made in order to promote a common goal or further develop the relationship as evidence of an implied obligation of confidentiality.<sup>99</sup> Courts

---

agreement prior to sharing information with each other”); *Vantage Point*, 529 F. Supp. at 1217 (“[T]he mere voluntary act of submitting an idea to one with whom the plaintiff has had no prior dealings will not make the disclosure one in confidence, even if stated to be so. A person may not ‘by his gratuitous and unilateral act, . . . impose upon another a confidential relationship.’” (omission in original) (quoting *Official Airlines Schedule Info. Serv., Inc. v. E. Air Lines, Inc.*, 333 F.2d 672, 674 (5th Cir. 1964))); *Klekas v. EMI Films, Inc.*, 150 Cal. App. 3d 1102 (Ct. App. 1984); *Faris v. Enberg*, 97 Cal. App. 3d 309, 323–24 (Ct. App. 1979); *RTE Corp. v. Coatings, Inc.*, 267 N.W.2d 226, 233 (Wis. 1978) (finding that “[t]he contract clause came too late to protect the confidentiality of the drawing, which had been disclosed at an earlier time”). *But cf.* *Landsberg v. Scrabble Crossword Game Players, Inc.*, 736 F.2d 485, 490 (9th Cir. 1984) (finding that a disclosure might have been made in confidence even if the disclosure preceded any conduct on the recipient’s part indicating the existence of an implied-in-fact contract).

97. *See, e.g., Innospan Corp. v. Intuit, Inc.*, No. C 10-04422 WHA, 2011 WL 856265, at \*6 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 9, 2011) (“It is trickery to send an unsolicited business plan to someone the sender thinks is a potential business investor and then to foist confidentiality duties on that recipient without his agreement in advance.”); *Klekas*, 150 Cal. App. 3d at 1114 (“[T]he plaintiff must show: [among other things], that under all circumstances attending disclosure it can be concluded that the offeree voluntarily accepted the disclosure knowing the conditions on which it was tendered (i.e., the offeree must have the opportunity to reject the attempted disclosure if the conditions were unacceptable) . . . .”); *see also Star Patrol*, 1997 WL 683327, at \*1 (explaining that a valid implied-in-fact contract presupposes that the offeree was aware of the condition of confidentiality when the disclosure was imparted).

98. *See, e.g., Omnitech*, 11 F.3d at 1331; *Zippertubing Co. v. Teleflex Inc.*, 757 F.2d 1401, 1408 (3d Cir. 1985) (finding that an implied duty of confidentiality existed where, among other things, the only purpose of a disclosure of confidential information was to facilitate a business relationship and procurement of services); *Cloud v. Standard Packaging Corp.*, 376 F.2d 384, 388–89 (7th Cir. 1967); *Carpenter Found. v. Oakes*, 26 Cal. App. 3d 784, 798 (Ct. App. 1972) (finding that a fiduciary confidential relationship existed where, among other things, the purpose of the disclosure of sensitive information was clearly to advance a relationship in which the recipient was to inform a restricted group of students); *RTE*, 267 N.W.2d at 233 (“[I]t is true that a relationship of confidence may be implied when a disclosure is made solely for the purpose of advancing or implementing an existing special relationship . . . .”).

99. *See, e.g., MacDonald v. Clinger*, 84 A.D.2d 482 (N.Y. App. Div. 1982); *Doe v. Roe*, 400 N.Y.S.2d 688, 674–75 (Sup. Ct. 1977) (finding that in the dynamics of psychotherapy “[t]he patient is called upon to discuss in a candid and frank manner personal material of the most intimate and disturbing nature . . . [.] He is expected to bring up all manner of socially

seemed to recognize that if *confidentiality is necessary to encourage disclosure* or if it is *necessary for any given disclosure to be effective*, then an inference of confidentiality is more reasonable than it is in relationships where confidentiality seems unnecessary.<sup>100</sup>

There is no more paradigmatic example of this factor than disclosing deeply personal information for purposes of therapy or diagnosis. The relevant cases recognize this fact,<sup>101</sup> which is equally applicable online. Internet users regularly turn to websites and online disclosures as a way to seek therapeutic help from peers and professionals. For example, the Online Intergroup of Alcoholics Anonymous considers confidentiality imperative to its mission to help alcoholics recover through shared stories of their experiences and struggles.<sup>102</sup>

#### vi. Solicitation

Some courts analyzing a claim for implied confidentiality considered whether and how information was solicited, although no court considered this factor as solely determinative.<sup>103</sup> Instead, it was seen as one of many factors relevant in their analysis.<sup>104</sup> Courts seemed to deduce that solicited information was likely more

---

unacceptable instincts and urges, immature wishes, perverse sexual thoughts[—]in short[,] the unspeakable, the unthinkable, the repressed” (omission in original) (citation omitted)).

100. *See, e.g.*, Knapp Schenk & Co. Ins. Agency v. Lancer Mgmt. Co., No. Civ.A. 02-12118-DPW, 2004 WL 57086, at \*7 (D. Mass. Jan. 13, 2004); Sentinel Prods. Corp. v. Mobil Chemical Co., No. Civ.A. 98-11782-PBS, 2001 WL 92272, at \*12 (D. Mass. Jan. 17, 2001) (“[W]here the facts demonstrate that a disclosure was made in order to promote a specific relationship, *e.g.*, disclosure to a prospective purchaser to enable him to appraise the value of the secret, the parties will be bound to receive the information in confidence.” (citation omitted)).

101. *See, e.g.*, *Doe v. Roe*, 400 N.Y.S. at 674–75.

102. *Anonymity & Privacy*, ONLINE INTERGROUP: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, <http://www.aa-intergroup.org/privacy.php>.

103. *See, e.g.*, Meyer v. Christie, No. 07-2230-JWL, 2007 WL 3120695, at \*4 (D. Kan. Oct. 24, 2007); Jackson v. LSI Indus., No. 2:03CV313FVO, 2005 WL 1383180, at \*3 (M.D. Ala. June 9, 2005) (finding in a claim for breach of implied contract for confidentiality and a promise to pay for an idea that “[i]f Defendant is requesting that the Plaintiff disclose his idea, most Courts will find that such requests or solicitation implies a promise to pay for the idea, if the Defendant uses it” (citation omitted)); Moore v. Marty Gilman, Inc., 965 F. Supp. 203, 215 (D. Mass. 1997) (finding in a claim for breach of implied confidentiality that “[d]efendants did not solicit plaintiffs or do anything to foster the impression that it was their regular practice to seek out and buy the ideas of others”); Faris v. Enberg, 97 Cal. App. 3d 309, 323–24 (Ct. App. 1979) (“We do not believe that the unsolicited submission of an idea to a potential employee or potential business partner . . . presents a triable issue of fact for confidentiality.”).

104. *See, e.g.*, Phillips v. Frey, 20 F.3d 623, 632 (5th Cir. 1994); Smith v. Snap-On Tools Corp., 833 F.2d 578, 580 (5th Cir. 1987) (“When a manufacturer has actively solicited disclosure from an inventor, then made use of the disclosed material, the manufacturer may be liable for use or disclosure of the secret in the absence of any expressed understanding as to confidentiality.”); Research, Analysis & Dev., Inc. v. United States, 8 Cl. Ct. 54, 56 (Cl. Ct. 1985) (finding that although unsolicited data was disclosed, an implied-in-fact contract of confidentiality was formed on other factors such as preexisting laws governing confidential disclosure to the government); DPT Labs., Ltd. v. Bath & Body Works, Inc., No. CIV.SA-

sensitive than unsolicited disclosures and, as a result, this information was more likely to be seen as being implicitly disclosed in confidence. Or, perhaps courts felt more comfortable placing the onus of rebutting an inference of confidentiality on those who solicit information.<sup>105</sup>

This consideration is relevant online as a variety of merchants and software vendors solicit information, often for reasons unrelated to the purpose of their featured goods or services.<sup>106</sup> For example, if a gaming application for a smartphone asks to collect and use GPS location data, the fact that the information was solicited rather than voluntarily offered might play into whether the application developer is subject to an implied obligation of confidentiality.

#### vii. Public Policy

Some courts explicitly considered public policy when analyzing implied confidentiality disputes.<sup>107</sup> Public policy was less important in disputes involving implied-in-fact agreements for confidentiality than it was in what courts identified as implied-in-law agreements and fiduciary relationships.<sup>108</sup> Public policy was invoked when the dynamics of a particular relationship were such that justice demanded it, not when there was a mutual agreement of confidentiality between the parties.<sup>109</sup>

---

98-CA-664-JWP, 1999 WL 33289709, at \*6 (W.D. Tex. Dec. 20, 1999) (“Confidentiality may be implied when the recipient actively solicits the disclosure.”).

105. Those who solicit information as part of a transaction have the power to shape their offer and, as a result, are in a better position to explicitly dispel any notion of confidentiality. The absence of solicitation was also seen as a significant factor by courts. Courts typically found that unsolicited disclosures did not support a finding of implied confidentiality. *See, e.g., Smith*, 833 F.2d at 580 (finding no implied confidential relationship where the plaintiff “disclosed the invention of his own initiative” without discussing “pecuniary recompense for his suggestion”); *Rogers v. Desa Int’l, Inc.*, 183 F. Supp. 2d 955, 957 (E.D. Mich. 2002) (emphasizing the unsolicited nature of the disclosed information in rejecting a claim for implied confidentiality); *Moore*, 965 F. Supp. at 215.

106. *See* PRIVACYScore, <http://www.privacyscore.com/>.

107. *See, e.g., Alsip v. Johnson City Med. Ctr.*, 197 S.W.3d 722, 726 (Tenn. 2006).

108. *See, e.g., MacDonald v. Clinger*, 446 N.Y.S.2d 801, 803 (App. Div. 1982); *Doe v. Roe*, N.Y.S.2d 668, 677 (Sup. Ct. 1977); *Alsip*, 197 S.W.3d at 726 (observing that the covenant of confidentiality between physicians and patients “arises not only from the implied understanding of the agreement between patient and doctor, but also from a policy concern that such private and potentially embarrassing information should be protected from public view” (citing *Givens v. Mullikin*, 75 S.W.3d 383, 407 (Tenn. 2002))); *Ghayoumi v. McMillan*, No. M2005-00267-COA-R3CV, 2006 WL 1994556, at \*5 (Tenn. Ct. App. July 14, 2006).

109. *See Metrano v. Fox Broad. Co.*, No. CV-00-02279 CAS JWJX, 2000 WL 979664, at \*7 (C.D. Cal. Apr. 24, 2000) (holding that “[a]n action for breach of confidence ‘is not based upon apparent intentions of the involved parties; it is an obligation created by law for reasons of justice’ and ‘where in fact the parties made no promise.’” (quoting *Entm’t Research Grp., Inc. v. Genesis Creative Grp., Inc.*, 122 F.3d 1211, 1227 (9th Cir. 1997))). The court further specified that “a breach of confidence claim is not limited to circumstances where a fiduciary relationship exists between parties.” *Id.*

## 2. Nature of the Information

While all obligations of confidentiality involve the disclosure of information, not all information is of the same level of sensitivity. Some information is very sensitive, such as intimate sexual thoughts and health-related information. Other information is mundane and uninteresting, such as an individual's daily routine. Some information is completely public, like the price of goods and services. Other information is proprietary, secret, or both, such as a company's trade secrets. This Part analyzes how the nature of information, which can vary greatly, can affect the judicial analysis of implied obligations of confidentiality.

Within her framework, Nissenbaum sometimes refers to the nature of information as the "attributes of the information" or "information types."<sup>110</sup> According to Nissenbaum, the nature of the information concerns what the information was about, or, as James Rachels has put it, "the kind and degree of knowledge."<sup>111</sup> The concept of the nature of the information is expansive. It seems virtually impossible to create an exhaustive taxonomy for the category.<sup>112</sup> Thus, the goal of this Part is simply to identify which attributes had a noticeable impact on the courts' decisions.

The cases revealed that courts regularly and often explicitly relied on the nature of the information when analyzing implied obligations of confidentiality.<sup>113</sup> Judicial analysis of the nature of the information occurred in many different types of disputes, including suits involving banking relationships,<sup>114</sup> implied covenants of confidentiality in medical-care contracts,<sup>115</sup> trade secret misappropriation,<sup>116</sup> patent

---

110. NISSENBAUM, *supra* note 8, at 143.

111. *Id.* (quoting James Rachels, *Why Privacy is Important*, 4 PHIL. & PUB. AFF. 323, 328 (1975)).

112. Indeed, Nissenbaum did not even define the "nature of the information," stating: Those who may be expecting a precise definition of information type or attribute will be disappointed, for I rely throughout on an intuitive sense, assuming that it is as adequate for the explication of contextual integrity as for many important practices and polices successfully managed in society with nothing more. One need look no further than the endless forms we complete, the menus we select from, the shopping lists we compile, the genres of music we listen to . . . and the terms we submit to search engines to grasp how at ease we are with information types and attributes. . . . In general, attribute schemes will have co-evolved with contexts and not be readily accessible to fixed and finite representations.

*Id.* at 144–45. Nissenbaum noted this problem herself when she stated that the concept of the nature of the information "recognizes an indefinite array of possibilities." *Id.* at 143.

113. *See, e.g.*, *Resnick v. Resnick*, No. 85 CIV. 9026 (RJW), 1990 WL 164968, at \*7 (S.D.N.Y. Oct. 24, 1990).

114. *See, e.g., id.*; *Twiss v. State*, 591 A.2d 913 (N.J. 1991); *Graney Dev. Corp. v. Taksen*, 400 N.Y.S.2d 717 (Sup. Ct. 1978); *McGuire v. Shubert*, 722 A.2d 1087 (Pa. Super. Ct. 1998).

115. *See, e.g.*, *MacDonald v. Clinger*, 446 N.Y.S.2d 801 (App. Div.1982); *Doe v. Roe*, 400 N.Y.S.2d 668 (Sup. Ct. 1977); *Alsip v. Johnson City Med. Ctr.*, 197 S.W.3d 722 (Tenn. 2006).

116. *See, e.g.*, *Rogers v. Desa Int'l, Inc.*, 183 F. Supp. 2d 955 (E.D. Mich. 2002); *Daily Int'l Sales Corp. v. Eastman Whipstock, Inc.*, 662 S.W.2d 60 (Tex. App. 1983).



ownership and infringement,<sup>117</sup> requests for information under the Freedom of Information Act,<sup>118</sup> and general contract and business-related disputes.<sup>119</sup> Consistent with the courts' consideration of context, courts tended to find implied obligations of confidentiality in situations involving information that, if disclosed, could harm a vulnerable party. Courts also seemed to protect information that intrinsically could be expected to remain confidential, which is another trait of sensitive and proprietary information. Finally, courts seemed to recognize that an inference of confidentiality was much more reasonable when the disclosed information intrinsically evoked a heightened sense of *gravitas* in the recipient.

#### i. Secret Information

Courts placed great significance on whether the information disclosed was a secret. For the purposes of this analysis, a secret is defined as “[s]omething that is kept out of the knowledge or sight of others or is known only to oneself or a few.”<sup>120</sup> Many of the cases in which secrecy was a relevant factor in a claim for implied confidentiality were disputes involving trade secrets. Part of the reason courts considered secrets important in these disputes is that information must be generally unknown or the owner must have attempted to protect the information in order for it to be eligible for trade-secret protection.<sup>121</sup> In determining whether information was adequately protected, courts were often asked to determine if an agreement of implied confidentiality was reasonable in a given context.<sup>122</sup> This is

---

117. See, e.g., *Google, Inc. v. Traffic Info., LLC*, No. CV09-642-HU, 2010 WL 743878 (D. Or. Feb. 2, 2010); *FMC Corp. v. Guthery*, No. 07-5409 (JAP), 2009 WL 485280 (D.N.J. Feb. 25, 2009); *Diodem, LLC v. Lumenis, Inc.*, No. CV03-2142 GAF (RCx), 2005 WL 6220720 (C.D. Cal. Sept. 16, 2005).

118. See, e.g., *Council on Am.-Islamic Relations, Cal. v. FBI*, 749 F. Supp. 2d 1104 (S.D. Cal. 2010); *Wildearth Guardians v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 713 F. Supp. 2d 1243 (D. Colo. 2010); *Roth v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 656 F. Supp. 2d 153, 165 (D.D.C. 2009).

119. See, e.g., *Smith v. Dravo Corp.*, 203 F.2d 369 (7th Cir. 1953); *Faris v. Enberg*, 97 Cal. App. 3d 309 (Ct. App. 1979).

120. THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 1583–84 (Joseph P. Pickett ed., 5th ed. 2011). It is important to differentiate the concept of secrecy from the larger concept of privacy, which includes secrets as well as other concepts such as control over information, blackmail, and the right to make decisions about one’s body and family. In distinguishing between secrets and private information, the Supreme Court of Oregon stated in *Humphers v. First Interstate Bank of Oregon*, “Secrecy involves intentional concealment. ‘But privacy need not hide; and secrecy hides far more than what is private.’” 696 P.2d 527, 529 (Or. 1985) (in banc) (quoting SISSELA BOK, SECRETS: ON THE ETHICS OF CONCEALMENT AND REVELATION 11 (1983)).

121. See, e.g., *Keane v. Fox Television Stations, Inc.*, 297 F. Supp. 2d 921, 939 (S.D. Tex. 2004) (“The critical threshold requirement for pursuing [a claim for misappropriation of a trade secret or misappropriation of an idea] is secrecy/confidentiality.”).

122. See, e.g., *Diodem*, 2005 WL 6220720, at \*10 (analyzing how secret information was protected for purposes of an implied obligation of confidentiality in the context of a patent dispute); *Universal Reins. Co. v. St. Paul Fire & Marine Ins. Co.*, No. 95 Civ. 8436 (WHP), 1999 WL 771357, at \*10 (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 29, 1999); *Williams v. Coffee Cnty. Bank*, 308 S.E.2d 430, 432 (Ga. Ct. App. 1983).

particularly true when dealing with ideas that were pitched to potential investors or businesses.<sup>123</sup>

## ii. Highly Personal Information

Some courts considered the presence of highly personal information an important factor in the creation of an implied obligation of confidentiality. Highly personal information seemed to be most significant to courts when dealing with health-related information.<sup>124</sup> However, the courts' logic could extend to any personal information, such as intimate thoughts or conversations, embarrassing personal facts, or even financial information.<sup>125</sup>

It appears that when considering obligations of confidentiality that were implied-in-fact, courts looked at whether the sensitive nature of the information would serve as a signal to the recipient that the information was disclosed in confidence.<sup>126</sup> This is because implied-in-fact obligations are based on the understanding between the parties. Here, social norms can play a large role in determining whether an implied obligation of confidentiality was reasonable or likely.<sup>127</sup>

---

123. *See, e.g.*, *Torah Soft Ltd. v. Drosnin*, No. 00 Civ. 0676(JCF), 2001 WL 1425381, at \*5 (S.D.N.Y. Nov. 14, 2001) (finding no implied confidentiality where an idea was disclosed in a letter to others besides the alleged confidant).

124. *See, e.g.*, *Crippen v. Charter Southland Hosp., Inc.*, 534 So. 2d 286 (Ala. 1988); *MacDonald v. Clinger*, 446 N.Y.S.2d 801, 803–06 (App. Div. 1982); *Alsip v. Johnson City Med. Ctr.*, 197 S.W.3d 722 (Tenn. 2006) (recognizing an implied covenant of confidentiality in medical-care contracts between physicians and their patients due to the intimate nature of the information shared within the relationship).

125. *See, e.g.*, *Constitutional Def. Fund v. Humphrey*, Civ. A. No. 92-396, 1992 WL 164734, at \*6 (E.D. Pa. July 2, 1992) (“The general view . . . is that a bank has an implied contractual duty of confidentiality and can be held liable to its customer for disclosing information on the customer’s accounts without the customer’s consent or other justification.”); *Twiss v. State*, 591 A.2d 913, 919–20 (N.J. 1991) (recognizing that New Jersey has recognized an implied obligation of confidentiality in bank records); *Doe v. Roe*, 400 N.Y.S.2d 668, 674–75 (Sup. Ct. 1977) (observing that implied covenants of confidentiality are particularly important and necessary for the psychiatric relationship, “for in the dynamics of psychotherapy ‘[t]he patient is called upon to discuss in a candid and frank manner personal material of the most intimate and disturbing nature . . . [.] He is expected to bring up all manner of socially unacceptable instincts and urges, immature wishes, perverse sexual thoughts[—]in short, the unspeakable, the unthinkable, the repressed.” (omission in original) (citing Melvin S. Heller, *Some Comments to Lawyers on the Practice of Psychiatry*, 30 TEMP. L.Q. 401, 405–06 (1957))); *McGuire v. Shubert*, 722 A.2d 1087, 1090–91 (Pa. Super. Ct. 1998) (“Based on common law principles of contract and agency, a number of jurisdictions have held that a bank has an implied contractual duty, as a matter of law, to keep financial information concerning a depositor confidential.”); *Overstreet v. TRW Commercial Steering Div.*, 256 S.W.3d 626 (Tenn. 2008).

126. *See, e.g.*, *Wildearth Guardians v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 713 F. Supp. 2d 1243, 1266 (D. Colo. 2010) (“[T]he text of the emails undermine any implication that the documents were meant to be protected by [a confidential] privilege.” (citation omitted)).

127. Courts seemed to reason that sensitive information was more likely than nonsensitive information to have been disclosed according to an implicit promise of

Highly personal information is shared online for various purposes. Much of this disclosure is intended for a closed group and, although it leaves the discloser vulnerable, is shared for various benefits. Consider the online community Veterans' Children, a group for the children of war veterans whose purpose is to "serve as a resource for healing and a forum for sharing stories."<sup>128</sup> It is likely that much of the information shared within this community is highly personal, which would likely be part of a court's calculus in determining whether the other members of the community were bound to an implied obligation of confidentiality.

### iii. Proprietary or Useful Information

Some courts considered the proprietary and useful nature of information when determining whether implied obligations of confidentiality existed.<sup>129</sup> Proprietary information is information individuals and businesses consider to be their property. Useful information is any information that had a utility for individuals and organizations and is typically commercial in nature. Much like with sensitive information, the disclosure of proprietary information can serve as a signal to recipients of the information that the disclosure is expected to be confidential. Specifically, in commercial settings, courts seemed to hold that proprietary and useful information was likely to be disclosed via an implied obligation of confidentiality.<sup>130</sup>

---

confidentiality. The rationale for this logic is that the recipient would or should have realized that sensitive information is routinely disclosed in confidence; thus, an express promise of confidentiality need not be made. Instead, as a matter of course, it is reasonable to expect and rely on implied confidentiality when disclosing sensitive information.

128. VETERANS' CHILDREN, <http://www.veteranschildren.com/wordpress/>.

129. See, e.g., *Lehman v. Dow Jones & Co.*, 783 F.2d 285, 300 (2d Cir. 1986) (finding that "New York law implies a requirement that 'when one submits an idea to another, no promise to pay for its use may be implied, and no asserted agreement enforced, if the elements of novelty and originality are absent'" (quoting *Downey v. Gen. Foods Corp.* 31 N.Y.2d 56, 61 (1972))); *Research, Analysis, & Dev., Inc. v. United States*, 8 Cl. Ct. 54 (Cl. Ct. 1985) (referencing the propriety nature of the plaintiff's information in finding that an implied-in-fact contract existed prohibiting the Air Force from disclosing the plaintiff's proposal regarding aerospace research and development); *Sentinel Prods. Corp. v. Mobil Chem. Co.*, No. Civ. A. 98-11782 PBS, 2001 WL 92272 (D. Mass. Jan. 17, 2001) (finding that an implied confidential relationship could exist where one business received information about a product from a potential seller with knowledge that the product was eligible for patent protection and reason to know that the seller was disclosing a trade secret); *Kleck v. Bausch & Lomb, Inc.*, 145 F. Supp. 2d 819, 827 (W.D. Tex. 2000) ("[T]he great weight of authority requires that an idea be novel before it will be protected under a breach of confidence or other quasi-contractual theory."); *Prescott v. Morton Int'l, Inc.*, 769 F. Supp. 404, 410 (D. Mass. 1990) (finding that a genuine issue of material fact existed as to whether an implied-in-fact contract of confidentiality existed where the discloser of information made the proprietary nature of the information clear to the recipients).

130. See *Hoeltke v. C.M. Kemp Mfg. Co.*, 80 F.2d 912 (4th Cir. 1935); cf. *Desny v. Wilder*, 299 P.2d 257, 270 (Cal. 1956) ("The law will not imply a promise to pay for an idea from the mere facts that the idea has been conveyed, *is valuable*, and has been used for profit; this is true even though the conveyance has been made with the hope or expectation that some obligation will ensue." (emphasis added)).

Many of these courts focused on, among other things, the signaling effect of the valuable and proprietary nature of the disclosed information in order to find an implied obligation of confidentiality.<sup>131</sup> The courts seemed to reason that because the information was valuable, it should be obvious that individuals would not disclose it to the potential recipients without restrictions on its use. Thus, it was reasonable in some contexts to find an implied obligation of confidentiality.

#### iv. Information Exposing Discloser or Subject to Physical Harm

Some information is kept confidential because revealing it could subject the discloser or subject of the information to physical harm from a third party.<sup>132</sup> For example, the identity of police informants and related pieces of information often are kept confidential because if they were to be made public, criminals implicated by the informant might seek to harm them. Courts considered this factor significant in the cases in which the courts were called upon to determine if an implied obligation of confidentiality existed between the discloser and recipient of information. All of these cases involved disputes under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). In these cases, requests were filed for the identities and other information concerning confidential government informants. The agencies responded to the requests by invoking a FOIA exemption to disclosing the information. The agencies claimed an implied obligation of confidentiality between the government and their confidential sources.

Courts justified their finding of implied confidentiality under the rationale that disclosure of the requested information would likely cause substantial harm to the sources who disclosed information to the FBI.<sup>133</sup> Courts seemed to reason that the threat of harm to the discloser of information was so great that it was reasonable to

---

131. See, e.g., *Research*, 8 Cl. Ct. 54.

132. See, e.g., *U.S. Dep't of Justice v. Landano*, 508 U.S. 165 (1993); *Council on Am.-Islamic Relations, Cal. v. FBI*, 749 F. Supp. 2d 1104 (S.D. Cal 2010); *Skinner v. U.S. Dep't of Justice*, 744 F. Supp. 2d 185, 212–13 (D.D.C. 2010) (recognizing that an implied grant of confidentiality for confidential sources has been recognized with respect to the cocaine trade, gang-related murder, methamphetamine trafficking operations, and other violent acts committed in retaliation for witnesses' cooperation with law enforcement); *Richardson v. U.S. Dep't of Justice*, 730 F. Supp. 2d 225, 237–38 (D.D.C. 2010) (“The nature of the crime investigated and informant’s relation to it are the most important factors in determining whether implied confidentiality exists. . . . In determining whether the source provided information under an implied assurance of confidentiality, the Court considers ‘whether the violence and risk of retaliation that attend this type of crime warrant an implied grant of confidentiality for such a source.’” (quoting *Mays v. Drug Enforcement Admin.*, 234 F.3d 1324, 1329 (D.D.C. 2000))); *Roth v. U.S. Dep't of Justice*, 656 F. Supp. 2d 153 (D.D.C. 2009); *Rugiero v. U.S. Dep't of Justice*, 234 F. Supp. 2d 697, 704 (E.D. Mich. 2002) (observing that “implied assurances of confidentiality existed here because the information given by the DEA’s informants related to crimes that inherently involve violence and risk of retaliation”); *Coleman v. FBI*, 13 F. Supp. 2d 75, 82 (D.D.C. 1998) (finding that plaintiff’s conviction for “numerous violent crimes” including murder, rape, and kidnapping, as well as “the relation of the witnesses thereto is precisely the type that the implied confidentiality exemption expressed in *Landano* is designed to encompass”).

133. See *Council*, 749 F. Supp. 2d at 1121–22.

infer that disclosure *would not have occurred without an obligation of confidentiality*. Thus, even if a promise of confidentiality was not explicit, it must have been implied.

#### v. Information that is Likely to Be Shared

Some courts that were called upon to determine if an implied obligation of confidentiality existed simply considered if the disclosed information was inherently the kind of information that would be shared with others.<sup>134</sup> This kind of information was less likely to be subject to an implied obligation of confidentiality than information that is traditionally kept confidential. Whereas the other types of information contributed to the creation of an obligation of confidentiality, this type actually detracted from implied obligations of confidentiality. This type of information was not a neutral or “catch-all” category. Rather, some courts expressly discussed how information that is likely to be shared eroded the likelihood of an implied obligation of confidentiality.<sup>135</sup>

### 3. Actors

Often, assumptions of confidentiality are not based on the circumstances surrounding a disclosure of information or on the nature of what is being disclosed, but rather, on who is sending, receiving, or is the subject of the information. Every disclosure of information involves actors, and the attributes of these actors can affect implied obligations of confidentiality.<sup>136</sup>

Actors play a large role in developing the contextual integrity of information. Within her framework, Nissenbaum stated that “[i]nformational norms have three placeholders for actors: senders of information, recipients of information, and information subjects.”<sup>137</sup> Nissenbaum held that “[i]n specifying an informational norm, it is crucial to identify the contextual roles of [the sender, recipient, and subject] to the extent possible; that is, the capacities in which each are acting.”<sup>138</sup>

---

134. *Google, Inc. v. Traffic Info., LLC*, No. CV09-642-HU, 2010 WL 743878, at \*3 (D. Or. Feb. 2, 2010) (finding no implied duty of confidentiality where the discloser should have reasonably anticipated, and perhaps intended, that disclosed information would eventually be disclosed to third parties).

135. *Id.*

136. *See* NISSENBAUM, *supra* note 8, at 129–30.

137. *Id.* at 141. According to Nissenbaum, the sender and recipient can be single individuals, multiple individuals, or collectives such as organizations and companies. However, since privacy is an inherently personal concept, Nissenbaum believed that only people, not entities like corporations, could be the “subjects” of information under her theory. *Id.* at 141–42.

138. *Id.* at 141–42. Nissenbaum gave the healthcare context as an example. She stated that “there are numerous informational norms prescribing information sharing practices where the subjects and senders are patients themselves, and where the recipients are physicians. . . . Other norms apply in cases where the recipients are receptionists, bookkeepers, nurses, and so forth.” *Id.* at 142. The importance of actors also can be seen after the initial disclosure of information, that is, in the “downstream” disclosure of confidential information to third parties. For example, Nissenbaum noted that different

Our sense of privacy in disclosed information is almost always at least somewhat affected by the attributes and roles of the sender, subject, and recipient of information. As Nissenbaum stated, “Usually, when we mind that information about us is shared, we mind not simply that it is being shared but that it is shared in the wrong ways and with inappropriate others. . . . [M]ost of the time these requirements are tacit and the states of all parameters need not be tediously spelled out . . . .”<sup>139</sup>

This Part identifies which actor attributes had a noticeable impact on the courts’ decisions. The cases revealed that vulnerability and an imbalance of power or sophistication were the most significant actor-related factors for courts analyzing obligations of confidentiality.<sup>140</sup> Some disclosers of information were seen as inherently vulnerable, such as the infirm and elderly, while others were vulnerable because they were significantly less sophisticated or had fewer resources than the recipient of information.

#### i. Vulnerability or Sophistication

If one party to a disclosure of information was more sophisticated than the other, courts seemed to find that there was an imbalance between the parties and that the less sophisticated party was more vulnerable to harm.<sup>141</sup> Additionally, some individuals were seen as inherently vulnerable—such as minors, the elderly, the feeble-minded, and the infirm. Courts found that vulnerable disclosers of information increased the likelihood of an implied obligation of confidentiality.<sup>142</sup>

Additionally, courts seemed to find sophisticated recipients more likely than unsophisticated recipients to understand that their obligation of confidentiality was implied in a given context because sophisticated parties were more likely to be cognizant of norms of confidentiality in which information is disclosed.<sup>143</sup> The

---

norms apply when a physician shares a patient’s information with fellow practitioners, insurance companies, and the physician’s spouse. *Id.*

139. *Id.* at 142. Nissenbaum maintained that “it is relevant to know whether the actors are government or private, and in what capacity they act, among an innumerable number of possibilities.” *Id.* at 143.

140. Courts most often merely mentioned an actor’s job title or level of sophistication, which seemed to indicate that the court at least recognized that attribute. Obvious examples of implied confidentiality based on the profession of a party included claims of implied confidentiality based on a specific evidentiary privilege, such as the attorney-client privilege. In *Wildearth Guardians v. U.S. Forest Service*, the U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado denied a claim of implied confidentiality based on the attorney-client privilege where an e-mail was “shotgunned” to more than ten recipients, “only two of whom were attorneys.” 713 F. Supp. 2d 1243, 1266 (D. Colo. 2010); *see also* *Union Pac. R.R. Co. v. Mower*, 219 F.3d 1069, 1073 (9th Cir. 2000) (recognizing that employees categorically owe an implied duty of confidentiality to employers to protect their trade secrets and confidential information).

141. *See infra* note 144 and accompanying text.

142. To reiterate, in all of the cases analyzed that involved personal information, the discloser and the subject of the information were the same person. All of the sensitive personal information revealed in the cases had been self-disclosed.

143. *See, e.g.,* *Smith v. Snap-On Tools Corp.*, 833 F.2d 578, 580 (5th Cir. 1987).

recipient's awareness of the need for confidentiality with vulnerable parties<sup>144</sup> could be the basis for an implied-in-fact confidentiality agreement or confidential relationship, but it also could subject the recipient to an obligation of confidentiality that was created by courts in the absence of an understanding between the parties.<sup>145</sup> The attributes of actors in implied obligations of confidentiality were most significant in the healthcare context.<sup>146</sup> Courts considered sophistication and vulnerability in relation to the other party, as opposed to in isolation.<sup>147</sup> If both parties are equally vulnerable, or equally sophisticated, then it appears that courts are less likely to find an implied obligation of confidentiality than in relationships where the discloser is more vulnerable or sophisticated than the recipient.<sup>148</sup>

## ii. Resources

Courts also found that an imbalance of resources between the parties contributed to a finding of an implied obligation of confidentiality. This was demonstrated in the practical distinction between individuals and corporate or group actors. No court explicitly analyzed individuals under different standards than corporations or groups in disputes involving implied obligations of confidentiality.<sup>149</sup> However, in

---

144. See, e.g., *Sharma v. Skaarup Ship Mgmt. Corp.*, 699 F. Supp. 440, 449 (S.D.N.Y. 1988) ("New York recognizes an implied duty of confidentiality between a bank and its depositors, but not between a bank and its borrowers. Information about the status of a borrower's loan is 'not information that the borrower would normally expect would be kept confidential.'" (quoting *Graney Dev. Corp. v. Taksen*, 400 N.Y.S.2d 717, 720 (Sup. Ct. 1978))); *McGuire v. Shubert*, 722 A.2d 1087, 1091 (Pa. Super. Ct. 1998) ("It is inconceivable that a bank would at any time consider itself at liberty to disclose the intimate details of its depositors' accounts. Inviolable secrecy is one of the inherent and fundamental precepts of the relationship of the bank and its customers or depositors.").

145. See, e.g., *Alsip v. Johnson City Med. Ctr.*, 197 S.W.3d 722, 726 (Tenn. 2006) ("[T]he covenant of confidentiality arises not only from the implied understanding of the agreement between patient and doctor, but also from a policy concern that such private and potentially embarrassing information should be protected from public view."); *Overstreet v. TRW Commercial Steering Div.*, 256 S.W.3d 626, 634–35 (Tenn. 2008).

146. See, e.g., *Biddle v. Warren Gen. Hosp.*, No. 96-T-5582, 1998 WL 156997, at \*12 (Ohio Ct. App. Mar. 27, 1998) (finding that in confidential relationships between physicians and patients "there is no indication that patients bargain for confidentiality; rather, it is assumed"); *Humphers v. First Interstate Bank of Or.*, 696 P.2d 527, 534 (Or. 1985); *Overstreet*, 256 S.W.3d 626.

147. See, e.g., *Harold ex rel. Harold v. McGann*, 406 F. Supp. 2d 562 (E.D. Pa. 2005).

148. While this logic was seemingly employed by most courts, it was often countered by other factors. For example, in *Smith v. Snap-On Tools Corp.*, the Fifth Circuit reversed a finding of implied confidentiality by the district court where a "relatively unsophisticated individual," with little education, submitted an invention to a large corporation. 833 F.2d 578, 580 (5th Cir. 1987). The district court accepted the plaintiff's argument that "[u]nder the circumstances . . . the manufacturer should have known that he, as the inventor, expected compensation [or confidentiality] even if he did not request it." *Id.* In reversing, the Fifth Circuit found that because the plaintiff disclosed his idea before requesting confidentiality, the court found no implied confidentiality existed. *Id.* at 581.

149. Some courts did note that commercial entities were less likely to need

practice, corporate or group entities typically had access to more resources than individuals, and in some cases, courts seemed to take this factor into consideration.<sup>150</sup> For example, a focus on availability of counsel demonstrates how equality in resources can diminish the likelihood of an implied obligation of confidentiality between the parties. This seems particularly true when the parties are engaged in complex business negotiations instead of simple verbal exchanges.<sup>151</sup>

### iii. Bad faith

A few courts considered whether an actor was acting in bad faith.<sup>152</sup> Bad-faith recipients of information were more likely to be subjected to implied obligations of confidentiality than recipients acting in good faith.<sup>153</sup> According to these courts,

---

confidentiality than individuals. *See, e.g.*, Council on Am.-Islamic Relations, Cal. v. FBI, 749 F. Supp. 2d 1104, 1122 (S.D. Cal. 2010) (noting that while it is possible for the government to claim an exemption to the Freedom of Information Act based on an implied promise of confidentiality to entities, that exemption “is claimed sparsely with regard to commercial institutions”).

150. *See, e.g.*, Omnitech Int’l, Inc. v. Clorox Co., 11 F.3d 1316, 1331 (5th Cir. 1994) (finding that that no confidential or fiduciary relationship existed because, among other things, “the record in this case is replete with evidence that Omnitech and Clorox had only an arms-length business relationship, including undisputed testimony that . . . both sides were represented by competent counsel in the drafting and consummation of the agreements”). The court also found that no fiduciary relationship existed because the parties vigorously negotiated the terms of their proposed agreement and Omnitech concealed much of its financial information from Clorox, which would seem to indicate that Omnitech did not view Clorox as a confidant. *Id.*

151. *See, e.g.*, Formex Mfg., Inc. v. Sullivan Flotation Sys., Inc., Nos. 91-1469, 91-1471, 1992 WL 131161 (Fed. Cir. June 16, 1992) (Neis, J., dissenting) (arguing against the majority’s decision that no implied duty of confidentiality existed because the parties were simply two businesses negotiating at arm’s length with no preexisting contracts).

152. *See, e.g.*, Phillips v. Frey, 20 F.3d 623 (5th Cir. 1994) (finding an implied obligation of confidentiality apparently arising out of the potential purchaser’s actions taken in bad faith to convince plaintiff to disclose information); Flotec, Inc. v. S. Research, Inc., 16 F. Supp. 2d 992, 1006 (S.D. Ind. 1998) (observing that a jury can find an implied obligation of confidentiality “in view of evidence tending to show the defendant had not been sincere in its interest in buying the business and had used the negotiations merely as a guise for obtaining the secret manufacturing process”).

153. *See, e.g.*, Bartell v. Onbank, Onbank & Trust Co., No. 95-CV-1807 (FJS), 1996 WL 421189, at \*4 (N.D.N.Y. July 19, 1996) (“New York law does not appear to recognize an implied duty of confidentiality, a fiduciary duty, or any other duty of care between a bank and its borrowers, absent a showing of malice or bad faith.” (citing Graney Dev. Corp. v. Taksen, 400 N.Y.S.2d 717, 720 (Sup. Ct. 1978))). In *Bartell*, the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of New York dismissed claims of breach of fiduciary duty and breach of an implied duty of confidentiality against a bank because the plaintiffs failed to allege any malice or bad faith on the part of the bank. However, it refused to dismiss the same claims against an individual employee of the bank who was the bank’s agent because it found that the employee acted with malice and ill will toward the plaintiff in obtaining the plaintiff’s loan request documents and distributing the materials at a mergers-and-acquisitions seminar as a demonstrative aid. *Id.* at \*1, \*4.



acting in bad faith to gain information—for example, by pretending to be interested in business negotiations—demonstrated that the information was not freely obtainable otherwise; thus, the information was likely disclosed in confidence.<sup>154</sup>

#### 4. Terms of Disclosure

Terms regarding the disclosure of information are naturally present in express confidentiality agreements. However, terms can also shape an implied agreement of confidentiality. For example, a stamp of “confidential” on documents, by itself, is not sufficient to form an express confidentiality agreement. However, it might serve as evidence of an implied agreement of confidentiality. Often, terms of disclosure conflict with each other. Other times, external laws or codes of conduct regarding the disclosure of information can serve as “terms” that can create (or abolish) an implied obligation of confidentiality.

Within her framework, Nissenbaum defines “terms” as constraints “on the flow (distribution, dissemination, transmission) of information from party to party in a context.”<sup>155</sup> She also refers to terms as “transmission principles.”<sup>156</sup> According to Nissenbaum, “The transmission principle parameter in informational norms expresses terms and conditions under which such transfers ought (or ought not) to occur.”<sup>157</sup> While terms could be explicit, Nissenbaum found that they usually were implied.<sup>158</sup> She stated, “The idea of a transmission principle may be the most distinguishing element of the framework of contextual integrity; although what it denotes is plain to see, it usually goes unnoticed.”<sup>159</sup> Nissenbaum held that terms could stipulate many things: they could dictate that information could be shared freely. Alternatively, terms could stipulate that information can only be used if the subject of the information knows about the use (“notice”), or if the subject gives her permission for the use (“consent”).<sup>160</sup>

Terms of disclosure can be explicit in, or inferred from, a virtually limitless number of contexts. Yet scholars have not analyzed exactly how courts consider the terms when analyzing implied obligations of confidentiality. No framework for such an analysis has been adopted by the courts. Thus, the goal of this Part is to determine which terms courts explicitly recognized as significant in implied confidentiality disputes. The cases revealed that courts typically tried to locate the true understanding of the parties by looking at terms within and outside of disclosure relationships. Courts placed the most emphasis on any term (statement, action, symbol, etc., indicating a preference regarding disclosure) that would have been apparent to the other party.

---

154. *Id.*

155. NISSENBAUM, *supra* note 8, at 129, 145.

156. *Id.* at 145.

157. *Id.*

158. *Id.*

159. *Id.*

160. *Id.*

## i. Confidentiality Indicators

Courts often looked for what I refer to as “confidentiality indicators,” that is, signals, statements, or actions that indicate either a desire for confidentiality or that the disclosed information would be kept confidential.<sup>161</sup>

*Terms Indicating a Desire for Confidentiality.* Unsurprisingly, one of the most important terms of disclosure to courts was a desire or request for confidentiality by the discloser of information. A simple request for confidentiality does not, by itself, constitute a binding agreement between the parties. However, courts were significantly more likely to find an implied obligation of confidentiality when the discloser of information displayed a desire to restrict the flow of information than when the discloser showed no interest in confidentiality.<sup>162</sup> Conversely, the absence of an indicator or signal of confidentiality by the discloser was relied upon by courts to find that no implied obligation of confidentiality existed.<sup>163</sup>

---

161. *See, e.g.*, *Grayton v. United States*, 92 Fed. Cl. 327 (Fed. Cl. 2010); *Rogers v. Desa Int'l, Inc.*, 183 F. Supp. 2d 955, 957 (E.D. Mich. 2002) (finding that a claim of implied confidentiality is without merit where, among other things, the plaintiff “did not indicate on the video tape he sent [to the defendant], either in the video itself or on an outside label, that the information contained therein was confidential”); *Nilssen v. Motorola, Inc.*, 963 F. Supp. 664, 679–82 (N.D. Ill. 1997) (finding that no obligation of confidentiality existed for any disclosure not explicitly marked as “confidential” under a pre-existing agreement regarding use of disclosed information within a business relationship); *Klekas v. EMI Films, Inc.*, 150 Cal. App. 3d 1102, 1114 (Ct. App. 1984); *Niemi v. Am. Axle Mfg. & Holding, Inc.*, No. 269155, 2007 WL 29383 at \*4 (Mich. Ct. App. Jan. 4, 2007) (finding no implied obligation of confidentiality where, among other things, plaintiffs “did not make any concrete efforts to preserve the confidentiality of the designs provided to defendants” nor did they “mark the documents as confidential, or require an express agreement of confidentiality”); *Daily Int'l Sales Corp. v. Eastman Whipstock, Inc.*, 662 S.W.2d 60, 63 (Tex. Ct. App. 1983) (finding no implied obligation of confidentiality where, among other things, “[n]o documents were stamped or labeled with the word ‘confidential’ or like warnings”).

162. *See, e.g.*, *Knapp Schenk & Co. Ins. Agency, Inc. v. Lancer Mgmt. Co.*, No. Civ.A. 02-12118-DPW, 2004 WL 57086 (D. Mass. Jan. 13, 2004); *In re WBAI-FM v. Proskin*, 42 A.D.2d 5, 9–10 (N.Y. App. Div. 1973) (per curiam) (“[T]he very scheme adopted for communicating the letter reveals a deliberate intention not to reveal the author’s personal identity. All these circumstances yield but one possible conclusion: that the author of the letter did not want his personal identity revealed and, therefore, that the letter was communicated under an implied understanding of confidentiality.”).

163. *See, e.g.*, *Grayton*, 92 Fed. Cl. 327; *Fail-Safe LLC v. A.O. Smith Corp.*, 744 F. Supp. 2d 831, 860 (E.D. Wis. 2010) (finding no implied duty of confidentiality existed where the plaintiff provided “no indication” to the defendant that the information provided by plaintiff was intended to be kept in confidence); *FMC Corp. v. Guthery*, No. 07-5409 (JAP), 2009 WL 485280, at \*5 (D.N.J. Feb. 25, 2009) (“Here, the Court is not convinced that Guthery provided confidential information . . . [W]hen he produced [documents] he did not request that they be marked ‘confidential.’”); *MIT v. Harman Int'l Indus., Inc.*, 584 F. Supp. 2d 297, 304 (D. Mass. 2008) (finding that no implied obligation of confidentiality existed where “[n]o record evidence shows either that the researchers gave any instructions to keep any information that drivers gathered while using the Back Seat Driver system confidential”); *Young Design, Inc. v. Teletronics Int'l, Inc.*, No. Civ.A. 00-970-A, 2001 WL 35804500, at \*5 (E.D. Va. July 31, 2001) (“There is no evidence in this record that plaintiff

These terms were created many different ways. Some terms were symbols or single words, such as a “confidential” stamp on documents.<sup>164</sup> Other terms were vague assertions, such as “this is between us.”<sup>165</sup> Other factors of contextual integrity—context, actors, and the nature of the information—served as evidence of an implied term of confidentiality in a relationship.<sup>166</sup> Expressions of confidentiality are so important because they can provide evidence that the party “knew or should have known” that the disclosed information was confidential, a key question asked by the courts.<sup>167</sup> One of the ways this knowledge is transmitted to the recipient of information is through terms of disclosure.

Some of the confidentiality indicators identified by courts were signals, statements, or actions that indicated to recipients a desire by the discloser for confidentiality, or an assumption or expression that the disclosed information was confidential.<sup>168</sup> The importance of a discloser’s communication of a desire for confidentiality also is reflected in some courts’ requirement that the recipient of the information be notified of the desire for confidentiality before the disclosure is

---

took any other efforts to create a confidential relationship with defendant. There were no proprietary use warnings on invoices, no letters or emails reminding defendant about confidentiality obligations, and no evidence of oral discussions with any other of defendant’s employees.”).

164. *See, e.g.*, *Research, Analysis, & Dev., Inc. v. United States*, 8 Cl. Ct. 54 (Cl. Ct. 1985).

165. *E.g.*, *Lee v. State*, 12 A.3d 1238, 1250–51 (Md. 2011) (“Detective Schrott’s words, ‘This is between you and me bud. Only me and you are here, all right? All right?’ on their face imply confidentiality . . . . No reasonable lay person would have understood those words to mean anything other than that the conversation, at that moment and thereafter, even if not before, was ‘between’ only Detective Schrott and Petitioner.”).

166. *See, e.g.*, *Diodem, LLC v. Lumenis Inc.*, No. CV03-2142 GAF (RCx), 2005 WL 6220720, at \*10 (C.D. Cal. Sept. 16, 2005) (finding an implied obligation of confidentiality could exist from a totality of the circumstances, where, among other things, none of the recipients of information had any basis for inferring the information was disclosed for free and unrestricted use) (citing *Moleculon Research Corp. v. CBS, Inc.*, 793 F.2d 1261 (Fed. Cir. 1986)); *Hollomon v. O. Mustad & Sons (USA), Inc.*, 196 F. Supp. 2d 450, 460 (E.D. Tex. 2002) (finding no confidential relationship where the plaintiff failed to present any evidence that he informed the defendant his designs were being disclosed in confidence); *Young Design*, 2001 WL 35804500, at \*5 (recognizing that indicators such as reminders about confidentiality obligations, oral discussions about confidentiality, or warnings on communications designating the information as confidential could demonstrate efforts to create a confidential relationship).

167. *See, e.g.*, *Fail-Safe*, 744 F. Supp. 2d at 857 (“None of the letters or data . . . beared [sic] any symbol denoting that the information contained therein was confidential. Moreover, there is no evidence that FS even told AOS that the Colorado company considered the information in question confidential.”); *Rockwell Graphic Sys., Inc. v. DEV Indus., Inc.*, 925 F.2d 174, 177 (7th Cir. 1991); *Sentinel Prods. Corp. v. Mobil Chem. Co.*, No. Civ.A. 98-11782-PBS, 2001 WL 92272 (D. Mass. Jan. 17, 2001); *Flotec, Inc. v. S. Research, Inc.*, 16 F. Supp. 2d 992 (S.D. Ind. 1998); *Faris v. Enberg*, 97 Cal. App. 3d 309 (Ct. App. 1979); *Furr’s, Inc. v. United Specialty Adver. Co.*, 385 S.W.2d 456, 459–60 (Tex. Ct. App. 1964) (“Confidential relationship is a two-way street: if the disclosure is made in confidence, the ‘disclosee’ should be aware of it. He must know that the secret is being revealed to him on the condition he is under a duty to so keep it.”).

168. *See supra* note 161.

made. Courts were hesitant to enforce an implied obligation of confidentiality if the recipient did not have the opportunity to reject the proposed confidentiality agreement.<sup>169</sup>

*Terms Indicating Confidence Will Be Kept.* Courts also looked to see if the recipient of information gave some indication the information disclosed would remain confidential than when such an indicator by the discloser was absent.<sup>170</sup> Terms recognizing that disclosed information was confidential also fulfilled the requirement that the recipient knew about the implied confidentiality.<sup>171</sup> An assurance of confidentiality might seem counterintuitive to the concept of an implied obligation of confidentiality because the most obvious examples of assurances of confidentiality are explicit, for example, “I promise not to tell a soul.” However, not all assurances of confidentiality are express or clear. A potential recipient’s vague reassurances to the discloser that the information will be protected could form an implied obligation of confidentiality. This is true even if confidentiality was not expressly agreed upon otherwise. A wide range of statements, conduct, and symbols (“indicators”) could demonstrate an implied willingness to keep the confidence of information.<sup>172</sup> Conversely, terms that indicated that the recipient did not intend to keep information confidential could decrease the likelihood of an implied obligation of confidentiality.<sup>173</sup>

---

169. *See, e.g., Faris*, 97 Cal. App. 3d at 324 (“One could not infer from anything Enberg did or said that he was given the chance to reject disclosure in advance or that he voluntarily received the disclosure with an understanding that it was not to be given to others. . . . Only in plaintiff’s response to summary judgment is there reference to his own thoughts from which one might infer that he felt there was a confidence. But he never, so far as we can tell, communicated these thoughts to Enberg, and nothing of an understanding of confidence can be inferred from Enberg’s conduct.”). Of course, not all courts found that confidentiality indicators contributed to an implied obligation of confidentiality. *Innospan Corp. v. Intuit, Inc.*, No. 10 C 10-04422 WHA, 2011 WL 856265, at \*6 (N.D. Cal. Mar. 9, 2011) (stating that “[a] rote stamp [claiming confidentiality] cannot, in and of itself, create an implied-in-fact contract”); *see also Google, Inc. v. Traffic Info., LLC*, No. CV09-642-HU, 2010 WL 743878, at \*1 (D. Or. Feb. 2, 2010) (finding that an e-mail marked “confidential” did not, by itself, create an implied obligation of confidentiality).

170. *See, e.g., Research, Analysis, & Dev., Inc. v. United States*, 8 Cl. Ct. 54 (Cl. Ct. 1985); *Moore v. Marty Gilman, Inc.*, 965 F. Supp. 203, 213 (D. Mass. 1997) (finding no implied or express obligation where, among other things, “Coach Moore did not request, and Gilman did not give, assurances of confidentiality”).

171. *See, e.g., Faris*, 97 Cal. App. 3d at 324 (“[E]vidence of knowledge of confidence or from which a confidential relationship can be implied is a minimum prerequisite to the protection of freedom in the arts. . . . [N]othing of an understanding of confidence can be inferred from [defendant’s] conduct.”).

172. *See, e.g., Kashmiri v. Regents of the Univ. of Cal.*, 156 Cal. App. 4th 809, 827 (Ct. App. 2007) (“The terms of an express contract are ‘stated in words,’ while the terms and existence of an implied contract are ‘manifested by conduct.’”); *Research, Analysis, & Dev., Inc.*, 8 Cl. Ct. 54; *Sentinel Prods. Corp. v. Mobil Chem. Co.*, No. Civ.A. 98-11782-PBS, 2001 WL 92272 (D. Mass. Jan. 17, 2001); *Flotec, Inc. v. Southern Research, Inc.*, 16 F. Supp. 2d 992, 1006–07. (S.D. Ind. 1998).

173. *See, e.g., FMC Corp. v. Guthery*, No. 07-5409 (JAP), 2009 WL 485280 (D.N.J. Feb. 25, 2009); *Chief of Staff v. Conn. Freedom of Info. Comm’n*, No. CV 980492654S, 1999 WL 643373 (Conn. Super. Ct. Aug. 12, 1999).

## ii. External Terms

Sometimes the terms of an agreement were not offered by the parties or did not originate within the relationship between the parties. Instead, they were supplied by reference to external laws, organizational codes, policies, and external arrangements and agreements. These “external terms” were often not expressed in the agreement between the parties, but they still contributed to an implied obligation of confidentiality. For example, in cases involving a physician’s implied obligation of confidentiality to his or her patient, courts looked to external laws, such as a state’s professional licensing requirements, statutes, and the Hippocratic oath to affirm the implied obligation.<sup>174</sup>

These external terms increased the likelihood of an implied obligation of confidentiality. Disclosers of information are more likely to rely on implied confidentiality when external terms apply to the disclosure than when they do not. For example, most patients likely know that their physicians take the Hippocratic oath, which requires that doctors respect their patients’ confidentiality.<sup>175</sup> Thus, a

---

174. See, e.g., *Hammonds v. Aetna Cas. & Sur. Co.*, 243 F. Supp. 793, 801 (N.D. Ohio 1965); *Biddle v. Warrant Gen. Hosp.*, No. 96-T-5582, 1998 WL 156997 (Ohio Ct. App. Mar. 27, 1998); *MacDonald v. Clinger*, 446 N.Y.S.2d 801, 803–05 (App. Div. 1982) (citing several statutes and regulations requiring physicians to protect the confidentiality of patients’ information in finding that physicians impliedly promise to keep patients’ information confidential as a matter of, among other things, contract); *Doe v. Roe*, 400 N.Y.S.2d 668 (Sup. Ct. 1977); *Humphers v. First Interstate Bank of Or.*, 696 P.2d 527 (Or. 1985) (looking to external sources such as professional regulations to find a physician’s nonconsensual duty of confidentiality to his or her patient); *Overstreet v. TRW Commercial Steering Div.*, 256 S.W.3d 626 (Tenn. 2008) (looking to state statutes, such as the Patients’ Privacy Protection Act and the Workers’ Compensation Act, that convey a public policy favoring the confidentiality of medical information in order to support an implied-in-law covenant of confidentiality between a patient and a doctor); *Alsip v. Johnson City Med. Ctr.*, 197 S.W.3d 722, 726 (Tenn. 2006) (citing multiple sections of the Tennessee Code in finding an implied covenant of confidentiality in medical-care contracts between treating physicians and their patients, which, according to the Supreme Court of Tennessee, “are indicative of the General Assembly’s desire to keep confidential a patient’s medical records and identifying information”); *Givens v. Mullikin ex. rel. Estate of McElwaney*, 75 S.W.3d 383 (Tenn. 2002) (finding an implied obligation of confidentiality via a contract between a patient and physician based on, among other things, statutes requiring the physician to respect the patient’s confidential information); cf. *Suarez v. Pierard*, 663 N.E.2d 1039, 1043 (Ill. App. Ct. 1996) (finding that the state’s Pharmacy Practice Act does not create an implied contract of confidentiality between pharmacists and their patients because, among other reasons, the relevant provision was not in effect when the alleged contract was made); *Ghayoumi v. McMillan*, No. M2005-00267-COA-R3CV, 2006 WL 1994556, at \*4 (Tenn. Ct. App. July 14, 2006) (“[T]here can be no covenant of confidentiality, implied or agreed, because the relationship between Plaintiff and Defendant resulted from a court order that necessitated disclosure of Defendant’s communications with Plaintiff and his family members and mandated disclosure of his evaluations, report and recommendations to the Court and parties.”).

175. E.g., *Hammonds*, 243 F. Supp. at 801 (“Almost every member of the public is aware of the promise of discretion contained in the Hippocratic Oath, and every patient has a right to rely upon this warranty of silence. . . . Consequently, when a doctor breaches his duty of

patient's inference of confidentiality is likely reasonable. External terms also increase the likelihood that the recipient of information knew or should have known of his or her obligation of confidentiality.

Courts looked to various laws, organizational codes, policies, and external arrangements and agreements to shape their analysis of implied obligations of confidentiality.<sup>176</sup> The common theme of all these cases was that if the discloser of information knew, or should have known, that the recipient was bound by some law, organizational code, policy, or external arrangement or agreement to keep the information confidential, then the law, policy, or regulation could be considered an external term regarding the disclosure of information and could create or dispel an implied obligation of confidentiality.

### iii. Conflicting Terms

Often, a relationship can involve conflicting terms about whether certain information is confidential. Even if the parties have a previous agreement, implied confidentiality can be created or dispelled by terms that conflict with that previous agreement. When faced with conflicting terms, most courts looked at the most recent term regarding the disclosure of information to determine whether an implied obligation of confidentiality existed. A notable exception was in instances where explicit terms prohibited implied agreements of confidentiality.<sup>177</sup> In such cases, courts typically refused to find an implied obligation of confidentiality. This research suggests that an implied obligation of confidentiality can be created by terms even if the parties are otherwise bound by a contract with no reference to confidentiality.<sup>178</sup>

---

secrecy, he is in violation of part of his obligations under the contract.”).

176. *See, e.g., Suarez*, 663 N.E.2d at 1044 (recognizing that “existing laws and statutes become implied terms of a contract as a matter of law”); *United Am. Fin., Inc. v. Potter*, 667 F. Supp. 2d 49 (D.D.C. 2009) (stating that the Inspector General Act (IGA) helped create an implied obligation of confidentiality in submitted complaints because the IGA provides that such complaints are to be anonymous to the public at large); *Grayton v. United States*, 92 Fed. Cl. 327 (Fed. Cl. 2010) (acknowledging that a restrictive legend added pursuant to an administrative regulation could help form an implied obligation of confidentiality); *Biddle*, 1998 WL 156997 (referencing the Hippocratic oath and the confidentiality required to maintain a physician's license in recognizing the tort of breach of confidentiality); *Alsip*, 197 S.W.3d at 726.

177. *See, e.g., Knapp Schenk & Co. Ins. Agency, Inc. v. Lancer Mgmt. Co.*, No. Civ.A. 02-12118-DPW, 2004 WL 57086 (D. Mass. Jan. 13, 2004); *DPT Labs., Ltd. v. Bath & Body Works, Inc.*, No. Civ.SA-98-CA-664-JWP, 1999 WL 33289709, at \*6 (W.D. Tex. Dec. 20, 1999) (stating that implied confidentiality can co-exist with express confidentiality agreements for similar disclosures in certain situations and, in the present case, that “the limitation on [Bath & Body Works]’s actions is not determined solely by the specific terms of the confidentiality agreements”); *Prescott v. Morton Int’l, Inc.*, 769 F. Supp. 404, 410 (D. Mass. 1990) (stating that where the contractual agreement between the parties “does not memorialize their entire relationship[, a] separate implied-in-fact contract governing the dissemination of information between the parties would not be contradictory”).

178. *See, e.g., DPT Labs.*, 1999 WL 33289709. Terms of disclosure also could dispel an obligation of confidentiality, even if such an obligation was previously implied. *See, e.g., Anderson v. Century Prods. Co.*, 943 F. Supp. 137, 151 (D.N.H. 1996) (“[A]n implied

## iv. Explicitness

Courts held that terms that purportedly create implied obligations of confidentiality must be clear and definite enough for the promises and required performances of each party to be reasonably certain.<sup>179</sup> When courts were presented with terms regarding the disclosure of information, they looked to the reasonable expectations of the parties at the time the terms were offered.<sup>180</sup> The expectations of the parties are typically determined by examining “the totality of the circumstances” and may be “shown by the acts and conduct of the parties, interpreted in the light of the subject matter and of the surrounding circumstances.”<sup>181</sup> Part of this analysis looks to how explicit the representations at issue are.<sup>182</sup> Highly specific terms dispelled any implied obligation of confidentiality in several of the cases analyzed.<sup>183</sup> Courts would only infer a term of confidentiality between the parties only if it was abundantly clear that the parties intended to be bound to confidentiality.<sup>184</sup> Vagueness of terms, however, was not

---

confidential relationship can be defeated if the parties, by agreement, expressly disclaim any such relationship.”); *cf.* *Med. Store, Inc. v. AIG Claim Servs., Inc.*, No. 02-80513-CIV, 2003 WL 25669175 (S.D. Fla. Oct. 17, 2003) (holding that subsequent agreements can imply modifications but not contradictions to previously existing confidentiality agreements).

179. *See, e.g.,* *Watson v. Pub. Serv. Co. of Colo.*, 207 P.3d 860, 868 (Colo. App. 2008); *Moore v. Marty Gilman*, 965 F. Supp. 203, 213 (D. Mass. 1997) (finding that, based on a number of contextual factors, the phrase “between you and I” was not explicit enough to create an implied obligation of confidentiality); *Faris v. Enberg*, 97 Cal. App. 3d 309 (Ct. App. 1979) (refusing to find an implied confidential relationship and no implied-in-fact contract where the plaintiff failed to specifically communicate his thoughts from which one might infer that the plaintiff felt there was a confidence).

180. *See, e.g.,* *Kashmiri v. Regents of the Univ. of Cal.*, 156 Cal. App. 4th 809, 832 (Ct. App. 2007).

181. *Foley v. Interactive Data Corp.*, 765 P.2d 373, 388 (Cal. 1988) (quoting *Pugh v. See’s Candies, Inc.*, 116 Cal. App. 3d 311, 329 (Ct. App. 1981)).

182. *See, e.g.,* *Sanchez v. The New Mexican*, 738 P.2d 1321, 1324 (N.M. 1987); *Tecza v. Univ. of S.F.*, No. C 09-03808 RS, 2010 WL 1838778, at \*4 (N.D. Cal. May 3, 2010) (dismissing a claim for breach of an implied-in-fact contract of confidentiality because the plaintiff failed to “specify any particular conduct” that would reflect the existence of the basic elements for such a claim); *Goldthread v. Davison*, No. 3:06-0805, 2007 WL 2471803, at \*5-7 (M.D. Tenn. Aug. 29, 2007); *Jackson v. LSI Indus., Inc.*, No. 2:03CV313FWO, 2005 WL 1383180 (M.D. Ala. June 9, 2005) (finding that merely asking for a faxed sketch of an idea was not specific enough to warrant an implied promise to pay or keep the idea confidential).

183. *See, e.g.,* *Watson*, 207 P.3d at 868; *BDT Products, Inc. v. Lexmark Int’l, Inc.*, 274 F. Supp. 2d 880, 894 (E.D. Ky. 2003) (“Because it is undisputed that the parties repeatedly entered into confidentiality agreements that expressly and unambiguously disclaimed any restrictions on Lexmark’s use of information provided by BDT, it is axiomatic that no express or implied duty restricting Lexmark’s use of such information can be found here.”).

184. *See, e.g.,* *Learning Curve Toys, L.L.C. v. PlayWood Toys, Inc.*, No. 94 C 6884, 1998 WL 46894, at \*3 (N.D. Ill. Jan. 30, 1998) (“PlayWood offers a vague assertion that because a confidentiality agreement existed, there was an intention to be bound. But PlayWood does not specify what the parties were bound to. . . . Thus, there is no evidence that there was a ‘meeting of the minds’ . . . .”); *Bakare v. Pinnacle Health Hosps., Inc.*, 469 F. Supp. 2d 272 (M.D. Pa. 2006); *Bergin v. Century 21 Real Estate Corp.*, No. 98 Civ.

always a bar to an implied obligation of confidentiality.<sup>185</sup> According to some courts, a certain amount of vagueness is tolerated so long as the obligations and expectations of the parties can be ascertained.<sup>186</sup>

### III. THE REVIVAL OF IMPLIED CONFIDENTIALITY

Notwithstanding the myriad of factors used to analyze implied obligations of confidentiality, no unifying framework has been adopted by the courts. Instead, courts seem to haphazardly highlight various facts that either contribute to or detract from a finding of an implied obligation of confidentiality. The relevant cases revealed that courts implicitly utilize considerations that fall within Nissenbaum's four factors of context-relative informational norms: context, actors, nature of the information, and the terms of disclosure. Given this utilization, the theory of contextual integrity can help create a much-needed decision-making framework for courts analyzing implied obligations of confidentiality.

#### *A. Toward a Decision-Making Framework*

This Article proposes a framework that is designed as a test with four distinct factors. These factors are to first be analyzed independently, then collectively to determine if an implied obligation of confidentiality existed in a given dispute. Due to the importance of context, courts should engage in a case-by-case analysis of the factors, with no explicit preference for any particular factor.

This framework is designed to help courts ascertain the two most important considerations in implied obligations of confidentiality according to the themes arising from its own analysis: party perception and inequalities. To that end, when courts are presented with a claim of an implied obligation of confidentiality, they should ask the following questions and consider the relevant factors discussed in Part II, which correspond to Nissenbaum's framework:

- (1) What was the context surrounding the disclosure?
- (2) What was the nature of the information?
- (3) Who were the actors and what was their relationship?
- (4) What were the internal and external terms of disclosure?

---

8075(JGK), 2000 WL 223833 (S.D.N.Y. Feb. 25, 2000) (denying a claim for breach of implied-in-fact contract for, among other things, confidentiality because the agreement between the parties was too vague and lacked essential terms such as payment); *Graney Dev. Corp. v. Taksen*, 400 N.Y.S.2d 717 (Sup. Ct. 1978).

185. *See, e.g.*, *Copley Press, Inc. v. San Diego Cnty. Super. Ct.*, 278 Cal. Rptr. 443 (Ct. App. 1991).

186. *See, e.g.*, *Lee v. State*, 12 A.3d 1238, 1250–51 (Md. 2011) (“Detective Schrott’s words, ‘This is between you and me bud. Only me and you are here, all right? All right?’ on their face imply confidentiality . . . . No reasonable lay person would have understood those words to mean anything other than that the conversation, at that moment and thereafter, even if not before, was ‘between’ only Detective Schrott and Petitioner.”). Regarding explicitness, courts generally acted consistently with Nissenbaum’s holistic approach, which incorporates other factors besides the terms of disclosure in implied obligations of confidentiality.



Courts would ask each question individually and then analyze their answers as a whole to determine if an implied obligation of confidentiality existed. Each question would seek to identify the judicial considerations explored in Part II that would be applicable in a given factual scenario. Ultimately, this framework requires an equitable balancing, which while somewhat indeterminate, would seem to provide more direction than the current approach.

This framework will not completely eliminate uncertainty from the law surrounding implied obligations of confidentiality. The concept of implied confidentiality is too dependent upon specific facts for a completely consistent application of the law. However, the adoption of this decision-making framework can increase clarity and minimize uncertainty by asking the same questions in every dispute.

### B. Application

This decision-making framework is necessary if the concept of implied confidentiality is to be clearly and consistently applied where it is most needed—on the Internet. The framework should be applied to online cases the same way it is applied to offline cases. Given the technology-neutral nature of the framework, there is no reason to systematically alter implied confidentiality analysis for online disputes.

Consider the plight of Cynthia Moreno.<sup>187</sup> Moreno published a missive about her hometown, titled “Ode to Coalinga,” on the journal section of her personal profile on the social network site MySpace.com. Roger Campbell, the principal of Coalinga High School, read the Ode before it was removed and forwarded it to the local newspaper, the *Coalinga Record*, which published the Ode in the newspaper’s letters-to-the-editor section. The Coalinga community reacted violently to the publication of the Ode, threatening Moreno and her family and ultimately causing the Moreno family to close its twenty-year-old family business.<sup>188</sup> Moreno filed suit against Campbell alleging invasion of privacy and intentional infliction of emotional distress, ultimately losing on both claims. For the sake of exposition, assume Moreno also alleged breach of an implied obligation of confidentiality against Campbell, who presumably originally accessed Moreno’s post.<sup>189</sup>

Under the proposed framework, first, the court would attempt to ascertain the context of the disclosure. There is some debate as to whether customs of confidentiality exist in social network sites.<sup>190</sup> This is a factually specific inquiry,

---

187. See *Moreno v. Hanford Sentinel, Inc.*, 172 Cal. App. 4th 1125, 1128 (Ct. App. 2009); Pablo Lopez, *Coalinga Grad Sues Principal Over MySpace Rant*, FRESNO BEE (Sept. 19, 2010), <http://www.fresnobee.com/2010/09/19/2084251/jury-to-decide-on-coalinga-grads.html>.

188. *Moreno*, 172 Cal. App. 4th at 1128–29.

189. *Id.* at 1128. Note that the claim here is against an audience member, not an intermediary. Had MySpace itself disclosed her poem to a third party, this analysis would be different.

190. See, e.g., Abril, *supra* note 5, at 77; Emily Christofides, Amy Muise & Serge Desmarais, *Information Disclosure and Control on Facebook: Are They Two Sides of the Same Coin or Two Different Processes?*, 12 CYBERPSYCHOL. & BEHAV. 341 (2009); McClurg, *supra* note 5; Zeynep Tufekci, *Can You See Me Now? Audience and Disclosure*

particularly because customs vary by site and user. However, given that seemingly no persuasive evidence was introduced at trial to support the notion that a custom of confidentiality existed on MySpace, this factor does not favor a finding of implied confidentiality. The disclosure was not made in the process of ongoing negotiations, nor was the disclosure solicited by Campbell. The Ode was simply a gratuitous post for friends to read. Indeed, there was no purpose for the disclosure other than to vent. Thus, the context weighs against a finding of an implied obligation of confidentiality.

Next, the court would look to the nature of the information. Here, the information was arguably personal. The Ode was a confessional that divulged raw emotions and personal histories with classmates. Additionally, the information subjected Moreno and her family to potential physical harm as bricks were thrown at her house. However, it is debatable whether Campbell either knew or should have known this would be the result of his disclosure. Unlike revealing the identity of a government informant, it does not necessarily follow that disclosing an angry blog post will lead to physical violence against the blogger. Additionally, the confessional addressed Moreno's adversaries in the second person, which might implicate a desire for them to read it. Thus, this factor cannot be seen as overwhelmingly in favor of an implied obligation of confidentiality. Any support for confidentiality should be seen as marginal.

Third, the court would identify the attributes of the actors and their relationship to each other. Here, there is no evidence Campbell acted in bad faith to access the information. There does not appear to be any inequality between the parties. Both Moreno and Campbell seem to be relatively sophisticated parties with no advantage of resources or bargaining power over one another. Additionally, the parties have no history together. Indeed, it would appear that Moreno and Campbell were strangers. This factor weighs against a finding of an implied obligation of confidentiality.

Finally, courts would seek to identify any internal or external terms of disclosure. Internally, there appear to be no confidentiality indicators. The court's opinion did not indicate that Moreno utilized privacy settings to restrict access to her post, which might have indicated the confidential nature of her Ode. For the sake of analysis, assume her post was accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.<sup>191</sup> Nor did Campbell give any indication that he was going to keep the information confidential. Moreno could have created a small group for disclosure of the Ode and premised invitations to the group upon an indication the group members would keep the information disclosed within confidential, but she did not.

However, there was one external term that might weigh in favor of an implied obligation of confidentiality. The MySpace terms of use prohibit "publicly post[ing] information that poses or creates a privacy or security risk to any person," violating "the privacy rights, publicity rights, [or] copyrights . . . of any person," or "using or distributing any information obtained from the Myspace Services in order

---

*Regulation in Online Social Network Sites*, 28 BULL. SCI. TECH. & SOC'Y 20 (2008).

191. *Moreno*, 172 Cal. App. 4th at 1130. It should be noted that Moreno claims she did use privacy settings. Eric Goldman, *Cynthia Moreno Guest Lecture to My Internet Law Course*, TECH. & MKTG. LAW BLOG (Apr. 18, 2013, 11:35 AM), [http://blog.ericgoldman.org/archives/2013/04/cynthia\\_moreno\\_1.htm](http://blog.ericgoldman.org/archives/2013/04/cynthia_moreno_1.htm). If true, this would alter the analysis to slightly increase the likelihood of an implied confidence.

to harass, abuse, or harm another person or entity, or attempting to do the same.”<sup>192</sup> Thus, by accessing the Ode subject to these terms, Campbell was potentially legally bound to confidence via an agreement with MySpace. However, the facts do not indicate that this term was relied upon or even known by Moreno. Few, if any, users actually read the fine print. This matters because the courts focus on the perception of the parties. Nor do the facts indicate that Campbell intended to harm Moreno by redistributing the post. Ultimately, this factor weighs against a finding of an implied obligation of confidentiality.

Looking at the factors as a whole, a court would likely conclude that Campbell was not bound by an implied obligation of confidentiality. Three of the four factors weigh against such a finding, and the sole factor that favored an implied confidentiality did so only marginally. This analysis demonstrates how the framework might be applied online.

Contrast the Moreno case with a similar dispute that might have a different result under the framework: *Pietrylo v. Hillstone Restaurant Group*.<sup>193</sup> In this case, the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey was asked to determine the privacy interest in information contained on a “closed” webpage on MySpace.com. A waiter at a local restaurant called Houston’s, Brian Pietrylo, created a group for him and his fellow employees to vent about their employer “without any outside eyes spying in on [them].”<sup>194</sup> Pietrylo stated on the group’s page that “[t]his group is entirely private, and can only be joined by invitation.”<sup>195</sup> The court noted that the icon for the group, which was Houston’s logo, “would appear only on the Myspace profiles of those who were invited into the group and accepted the invitation.”<sup>196</sup>

Because each member accessed her or his own profile by entering in a username and password, Pietrylo effectively restricted the website to authorized users in possession of an invitation to the group and a password-protected MySpace profile.<sup>197</sup> Under pressure at a party one night, a Houston’s greeter disclosed her password to her managers. Pietrylo was then fired for creating the group, which resulted in a lawsuit alleging that the managers violated the group’s privacy. The court found that “[p]laintiffs created an invitation-only internet discussion space. In this space, they had an expectation that only invited users would be able to read the discussion.”<sup>198</sup> Ultimately, a jury found that Houston’s managers had violated the Stored Communications Act and the New Jersey Wire Tapping & Electronic Surveillance Act.<sup>199</sup> However, the jury did not support Pietrylo’s claim for invasion of privacy.<sup>200</sup>

---

192. *Myspace Services Terms of Use Agreement*, MYSPACE, <https://myspace.com/pages/terms> (last updated June 10, 2013).

193. No. 06-5754 (FSH), 2008 WL 6085437 (D.N.J. July 25, 2008).

194. *Id.* at \*1.

195. *Id.*

196. *See id.*

197. *Id.*

198. *Id.* at \*6.

199. *Pietrylo v. Hillstone Rest. Grp.*, No. 06-5754 (FSH), 2009 WL 3128420, at \*1 (D.N.J. Sept. 25, 2009).

200. *Id.*

Suppose the fired employees brought a claim for breach of an implied obligation of confidentiality against the hostess, or, for that matter, against the managers for inducement to breach confidentiality.<sup>201</sup> The first factor of the framework—context—would likely weigh in favor of an implied obligation of confidentiality. Like in *Moreno*, the facts do not reveal that access to the group was solicited by the hostess. However, unlike in *Moreno*, these disclosures were made for a specific purpose: to vent “without any outside eyes spying” on the members of the group.<sup>202</sup> Thus, confidentiality was seemingly necessary to further the purpose of the group.

The second factor—the nature of the information—also favors a finding of implied confidentiality. Like in *Moreno*, the information disclosed here was personal in nature because it revealed the negative thoughts of the employees toward their manager. While the information might not inherently expose the discloser to physical harm, it certainly exposes the discloser to some form of retaliation, as evidenced by the fact that Pietrylo was fired for creating the group.

Regarding the third factor—the attributes of the actors and their relationship to each other—there is no evidence the hostess acted in bad faith to receive an invitation to the group. Additionally, there does not appear to be any inequality between the parties. The hostess and the waiters who created the group were all employees of Houston’s of relatively the same status with no apparent advantage of resources or bargaining power over one another. Unlike in *Moreno*, however, the parties likely had at least a partially developed relationship. Ostensibly, the parties worked together and got to know each other at least slightly before the invitation to join the group was sent out. This factor weighs in favor of finding an implied obligation of confidentiality.

The final factor—terms of disclosure—is applied the most distinctly from *Moreno*. The website in *Pietrylo* explicitly stated that “[t]his group is entirely private, and can only be joined by invitation.”<sup>203</sup> The website also provided that the icon for the group, which was the restaurant’s trademarked logo, “would appear only on the Myspace profiles of those who were invited into the group and accepted the invitation.”<sup>204</sup> The fact that the privacy settings were used to restrict access to the group also served as a confidentiality indicator. Although the word

---

201. Additionally, under some theories of the breach of confidentiality tort in the United States and England, a claim for inducement of breach of confidentiality could be successful against the managers. *See, e.g.*, *Attorney-Gen. v. Observer Ltd.*, [1990] A.C. 109 (H.L.) 268 (appeal taken from Eng.); *Campell v. MGN Ltd.*, [2002] EWCA (Civ) 1373, [2003] Q.B. 633 [662] (Eng.); PAUL STANLEY, *THE LAW OF CONFIDENTIALITY: A RESTATEMENT 1–5* (2008); *see also* Patricia Sánchez Abril, *Private Ordering: A Contractual Approach to Online Interpersonal Privacy*, 45 *WAKE FOREST L. REV.* 689 (2010); Richards & Solove, *supra* note 6, at 178 (“[A] third party can freely disclose private facts about a person as long as the third party did not learn the information from a confidant.”).

202. *Pietrylo v. Hillstone Rest. Grp.*, No. 06-5754 (FSH), 2008 WL 6085437, at \*1 (D.N.J. July 25, 2008) (“Pietrylo stated in his initial posting that the purpose of the group would be to ‘vent about any BS we deal with out [sic] work without any outside eyes spying in on us. This group is entirely private, and can only be joined by invitation.’ Pietrylo then exclaimed ‘[I]et the s\* \*t talking begin.’”).

203. *Id.*

204. *Id.*

confidential was apparently not used, the confidential nature of the group postings was indicated throughout the website and invitation. This factor weighs heavily in favor of an implied obligation of confidentiality for every member of the group.

Thus, three of the factors weigh in favor of an implied obligation of confidentiality, and one is neutral. Observing the factors as a whole, it is likely that a court would find an implied obligation of confidentiality under this framework. The *Moreno* and *Pietrylo* cases demonstrate the various ways the framework for implied obligations of confidentiality could be applied online in the same way it would be applied to offline cases.

#### CONCLUSION

Internet users often have implicitly shared expectations of confidentiality. Yet the law has failed to reliably recognize this reality. Because of this failure, the law of online relationships remains incomplete. Meanwhile, the doctrine of implied confidentiality is languishing. The concept has not been developed enough to be consistently applied in environments that often lack obvious physical or linguistic cues of confidence, such as the Internet. Courts have left little explicit guidance shaping the concept in their relevant opinions. However, there are enough clues in the case law to revive implied confidentiality with a unifying decision-making framework.

The framework proposed in this Article would help courts ascertain the two most common and important judicial considerations in implied obligations of confidentiality—party perception and party inequality. The framework will better enable the application of implied confidentiality in online disputes than the currently vague state of the concept. The Internet need not spell the end of implied agreements and relationships of trust. Courts need only dig deeper into the nuances of our relationships.