# BEYOND THE FREEDOM LINE:

# ANALYSING LIBERTARIAN DIGITAL COMMUNITY IN POLAND

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PHD 2024

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# COMMUNITY IN POLAND

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A Thesis Submitted In Partial

Fulfilment Of The Requirements Of

Manchester Metropolitan University

For The Degree Of Doctor Of Philosophy

*Department Of History, Politics And Philosophy*

*Manchester Metropolitan University*

2024

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the virtual libertarian community in Poland has adapted and evolved in relation to technological advancements in a digital society. Drawing upon the contextual framework of the 20th and 21st centuries digital revolution, this doctoral thesis focuses on individual experiences and the broader implications for the community, as perceived by its members. Employing Episodic Narrative inquiry (ENI) for data collection and thematic analysis bolstered by auto-ethnographic elements for data interpretation, this study uncovers common trends and themes across interviews.

It contributes to a deeper understanding of online socio-political activities within the virtual libertarian community in Poland, moving beyond the examination of their philosophical beliefs. In doing so, it also allows for a unique, as it is the first of its kind, insight into the virtual dimension of libertarianism. It contributes to drawing new perspectives on virtual social groups and their impact on society.

Key findings include the integral role of technology in shaping the real-life experiences of those individuals, the dichotomy of online and offline experiences they shared, and the transformative impact of increased connectivity and access to information they underlined. The study not only offers valuable insights into the experiences of Polish virtual libertarians but also illuminates the transformative potential of digitally driven social groups. By exploring the complex dynamics between technology, individual experiences, and collective engagement, this study paves the way for future research on the societal impact of technological advancements in the digital age as well as on the virtual character of libertarianism.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## FOREWORD

The modem at my dad's office made a loud and unusual noise. It went *beep, beep, bloop…whirr* – reminiscent of the sound made by old computer or radar machines from the Cold War period that I had seen in movies on public television in the mid-1990s.

I was filled with excitement. My dad turned on his computer and moved the mouse around to show me something that was called *the Internet*. He sent my sister to the other room so she could *surf it* as well. It took a few minutes to load the main page of *Wirtualna Polska*[1], which was the website that my dad knew about and typed in the browser for me. After a while, he left me alone too, as he started to look for some documents around the office. The page was loading slowly as I stared at the computer screen.

When it was finally fully loaded, I couldn't take my eyes off it. There were no flashing ads on this site, nor a friendly user-interaction system that was to lead me through the content. There were no social media widgets, no discussion forums, or chats; no additional windows popped up after hovering over random site elements. In fact, it looked much like a Word document, only opened in the *web browser*. There were plenty of textual links, a few graphics, and simple banners on top. I felt excited because it was completely *new*. Sure, we already had a computer at home – with a slightly broken monitor and a greenish screen – but it wasn't intended to offer the fully immersed virtual experience yet. *Our* computer ran various programs, including basic games of the time (with my siblings, we mainly played Minesweeper, known as *Saper* in Poland), but not much more than that. I remember that one of my daily distractions on it was quite amusing from the perspective of the second decade of the 21st century – I was opening some applications at random, just to see how they worked. This was my initial foray into *understanding the technology*.

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[1] *Wirtualna Polska* (The Virtual Poland), is the oldest Polish Internet portal, founded in 1995. See: Our history [Online] [Accessed: 20th April 2023] https://holding.wp.pl/en/history

In such a reality, the Internet seemed to be something completely unknown, and so much more fascinating. In my view, such was the level of computer and Internet literacy among plenty of my peers – if not even *slightly lower*.

The Internet of the time, or rather the interface of *what's known* as the Internet, acted like the *old media* – like television, radio, or the press. It was simply transmitting information from the creators of the site directly to me: one of many internauts, the receiver of their communication. A time for the co-created, or rather co-curated, content was yet to come. Nevertheless, it was still a special moment for me; or so I keep telling myself years later. Loading a single webpage – this seemingly trivial activity from today's point of view – was for me a real technical miracle of the mid-1990s, just like the Eiffel Tower was to be a technical miracle for the people of the *fin de siècle* era.

At that time, it was ambitious to assume that the virtual world would become not so much of an alternative reality, but rather an overlay on what is *real* in the physical sense; and that it will largely redefine the lives of my contemporaries. Today, in these few minutes that back in the 1990s took so long to load a single page, I can perform multiple tasks at once. I can open several, if not hundreds, of pages. I can make a music recording, perform photo editing, download a movie, or just spend some time on social bonding. Back then, the page took as long to open as it takes me today to download a 100-hour console game. The prior miracle is a current commodity. Not only because the technology has changed the speed and ease of Web access, but rather because it affected the nature of the connection itself. If in the past I needed an expensive and very loud modem to connect to the virtual world, today I can perform virtual operations from the level of the device in my pocket, or even a watch on my wrist.

It resulted in several social adaptations, of which perhaps the most important is the way we perform human contact. In earlier years, the short distance – more intimate and direct in essence – was the dominant mode of human communication. of course, this was dependent on the culture, as brilliantly researched by Hall (1966) amongst others. Yet, with the advancement of such *virtual networking*, contact with other people gained seemingly contradictory characteristics: both universal

and indirect in form. Today, such interaction is largely performed through various devices that act as an *extension* of what *feels natural* for the human body and mind.

Accessing the Internet is highly personalised. There is an individual approach to everything in this realm, including bonding, communication, or something as complicated as the process of community-making. And, while we are seemingly stripped of intimacy due to the ubiquity of these connected devices in our everyday lives, we are also able to *hide behind* the screen of virtuality, if we *really want to*. Even though we are being exposed to potentially hundreds of contacts with other people daily, we are also able to purposefully select which ones are worthy of our time.  Such a revolution in contact-making resulted in a change in the understanding of various sociological macro-concepts, including community, society, mobility, and possibly even... *humanity*.

A quarter of a century has passed since my first attempt to log in to the Internet. I grew up, graduated from universities and worked towards co-creating the Internet of *the future* (which turned out to be the Internet of... *the now*). I have familiarised myself with the world of technology. It was all connecting *to* and *via* the Internet. I have been making simple websites already back in the 2000s and became a Wikipedia contributor around that time. I've learned basic digital skills, become a digital media professional, and finally a digital consultant. I watched the development of the Internet and technology, as I was part of it. At some point, I accessed foreign content sources, thanks to which I became acquainted with the intellectual legacy of thinkers from outside of what was known (thus popularised) in Poland.

In such a way I encountered the libertarian worldview. I read Robert Nozick's 'Anarchy, State, and Utopia' (1974) first, followed by some other online publications on this philosophy. Finally, I reached out to other people who have discussed these ideas on IRC channels and within emailing groups. I was more of a *lurker*[2] than a contributor, having not had much to say at that age. It turned out

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[2] *Lurker* is a person who uses forums, chats, and other virtual media but does not participate in their activities (Nonnecke and Preece, 2001).

that libertarian ideas were known in the Anglo-Saxon world, but they did not reach too widely in other areas of the Globe. Smaller communities of this type did exist in places like Poland, but access to them was difficult, if only because they required knowledge of the *term itself* – and it was a concept relatively unknown even among those with a keen interest in political philosophy until the late 2000s and beyond.

The history of this community inspired me to rethink how technology supports the development of various human clusters. How virtuality – a concept that is not so new, as it has been discussed for decades now – has expanded the possibilities of transmitting information, establishing contacts, building both individual and group co-responsibilities, but also *real* emotional ties. I found it even more fascinating that it did not become a popular theme in academic writing. Reflections that would touch on this part of virtuality are the domain of bloggers, consultants, futurologists, and Internet historians. Rarely, however, are these deliberations even hooked on an academic nature. It seems that this study may allow for drawing and further explaining a whole new plane of virtual community studies: the community's self-analysis in terms of the impact of technological advancements on its creation.

This thesis is the result of this thorough research and my reflection as both a Polish libertarian virtual community member and a researcher. It is also a testimony to the experiences of individual representatives of various generations of Internet users who have integrated themselves into the virtual world in the last three decades. I treat this work largely as a gateway that opens many threads in the context of virtual group research. It provides insights into a unique group that has been forming on the Polish Internet for three decades. It allows us to understand how the philosophy that its users share affects both their professional and private lives, but also how their adherence to this community influences them over time. It outlines an important look into the division of virtual groups into virtual communities and virtual social movements as groups that seem to largely amalgamate in the virtual world. Such a multifaceted approach – looking at sociological, political, psychological, but also technological issues – allows a better understanding of the individual experience of Internet users. That, in turn, opens

many doors for future research. In addition, it is the first work to study virtual libertarians in Poland. The abundance of data obtained during the interviews has made it possible to outline the history of this community in the eyes of these selected interlocutors, address the various interactions within its structures, but also to understand the socio-political needs of the interlocutors on both political and social levels.

When browsing the Internet for the first time, it never occurred to me that it could become something more than a form of interactive play for a six-year-old. Yet, it became my workplace, the object and focus of my academic research interests, a space in which I am maintaining my daily interactions. It is my treasure trove of knowledge seeking, but also a hell of repetitive, time-wasting activities, to which we are all addicted.

The playground has indeed become a space that I want to be able to explain and make clearer for others.

And that is also the aim of this work.

*Manchester, Barcelona, and many places in-between, 2019-2024*

# CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

## Overview

This doctoral thesis is a unique narrative project that focuses on understanding the impact of technological changes on members of the virtual libertarian community in Poland. As the first study of its kind, it seeks to deepen our understanding of their activities in both online and offline realms and, above all, the role of technology in shaping these processes. This work contributes to the growing body of literature on the intersection of digital technologies and digitally driven social phenomena, particularly concerning the emergence of virtual communities.

To begin with, let me introduce the phenomenon at the core of this study. The digitisation of society has transformed various aspects of human existence, contributing greatly to the emergence of *virtual* communities. This, in turn, enabled the popularisation of political ideas that were largely inaccessible to audiences outside narrow, and often academic, circles. One such concept was libertarianism which emerged as a philosophical idea after the Second World War and gained popularity in the Anglo-Saxon world (Hamowy, 2008). It was largely the product of the intellectual work of Murray Rothbard, a disciple of Ludwig von Mises – one of the leading exponents of the Austrian School of Economics and a 20th-century continuator of the thought of classical liberalism. Libertarianism – which, at least in its early form, combined an Austrian approach to the economy and a classical-liberal set of views – essentially became the successor of the classical-liberal heritage in the post-war era (Juruś, 2012)[3]. Despite its initial American-centric focus, libertarianism has evolved into a more universal philosophy that has gained a foothold in various intellectual markets around the world, based on a fundamental commitment to individual liberty and limited government intervention in the economic and social spheres. It remains an influential and widely discussed philosophy in the contemporary intellectual landscape (i.e., Miąsik,

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[3] It is important to note that libertarianism initially focused primarily on American society and its political and economic structures. The philosophy only gained international traction when its aspect of virtuality, or rather opportunities to reach a wider audience through virtual means, was brought to the fore (Thierer and Szoka, 2009).

2010). On the back of these two processes – the emergence of the online realm and the blossoming of libertarians' ideas in other countries – a community of virtual libertarians in Poland has begun to emerge. This study aims to explore the experiences of the Polish virtual libertarian community members in such contexts.

This chapter will focus on outlining the research problem and providing a discussion on its significance as well as on the articulation of research questions. I will focus on presenting the overview of the philosophy of libertarianism, the Polish virtual libertarians, and the technological advancement of the last couple of decades that are crucial for this work. Finally, the overview of the research plan will be presented.

## Research Problem and Significance

The digital revolution of the 20th and 21st centuries has transformed how humanity processes information and interacts with the world. From the advent of personal computers and the Internet to the rise of artificial intelligence and big data, this revolution has reshaped industries, birthed new forms of communication, and redefined the boundaries of possibility. Throughout these transformative years, there have been notable milestones: the ubiquity of smartphones, the growth of social media, and the development of cloud computing, to name a few. Each innovation has not only altered the landscape of technology but also influenced the cultural, social, and economic fabric of societies globally. This has universally been referred to as the 'digitisation' phenomenon (Popkova, et al. 2021). Many scholars have argued that technological advancements have led to important changes in social and political life (Castells, 2009; 2010; Turkle, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013). According to Castells (2010), the advancement of digital technologies has significantly altered social dynamics by enabling communication and interactions on a global scale. It has changed the way people interact and communicate (Rheingold, 2000; Boyd, 2014). This has led to the emergence of virtual communities – groups of people who share common interests or goals and communicate primarily through digital channels. Virtual communities have become increasingly prevalent and have been shown to have both positive and negative effects on their members (Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Hampton et al., 2011; Carpenter and McEwan, 2016). Even though virtual communities have been studied

in various contexts, such as online consumer behaviour (Kozinets, 2015) and political activism (Bimber, 2012), there is still a noticeable gap in the literature examining self-conscious decisions of individuals to enter and remain in a particular community in the context of various ongoing life and technological changes.

Additionally, other scholars argue that digital technologies have facilitated the emergence of online social movements that challenge traditional modes of political engagement (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). They suggest that the ability to mobilise quickly and efficiently through digital channels has led to a democratisation of political action, which plays an important role in some groups seeking more decentralised ways of political activities. The Internet has provided a platform for social movements to form and organise (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Shirky, 2011). Digital technologies play a role in the formation of transnational social movements and the challenges they pose to traditional political structures (Juris, 2012).

The Polish virtual libertarian community exemplifies a group that emerged in the context of the phenomenon outlined above. In a nutshell, libertarianism is a political philosophy that emphasises individualism, self-responsibility, and a far-reaching critique of the State – in some cases including a proposal to replace state institutions with their private counterparts, a market devoid of government interference (in libertarian view, a truly free market) and a concept of ownership as an extension of individual rights (i.e., Rothbard, 1978; Hayek, 2005; Nozick, ibid.; Friedman and Friedman, 1982; Boaz, 1998; Doherty, 2007). A critical element in these considerations is the fact that, whilst libertarianism has been extensively studied in the literature, less attention has been paid to its virtual dimension (i.e., Thierer and Szoka, ibid.; Barlow, 1996; Mueller, 2017).

## Polish Experiences with State(s) Since the End of the 18th Century

This section aims to clarify Poland's historical and socio-economic development since the end of the 18th century when it lost its independence. It is organised into three key stages, each highlighting significant changes in governance and socio-economic policies. This analysis helps contextualise two particular issues: firstly, the

Polish people's attitudes towards the concept of a state, especially in reaction to the oppressive regimes that have governed since the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; and secondly, the role of media in reinforcing state-driven narratives since the mid-19th century. Over the last two centuries, except for brief periods of journalistic freedom, the media in Poland has largely been used by various powers to limit public discussion on political, socio-economic, and cultural topics. This context explains the rapid rise and extensive Internet reach in post-communist Poland, marking it as one of the first media platforms to offer unrestricted information access, significantly affecting public engagement and information dissemination.

Decline of the state and the birth of oppression: 1795-1918

In the late 18th century, the territories, people, and cultural heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were annexed by neighbouring powers: the Kingdom of Prussia, Tsarist Russia, and the Habsburg Empire (Halecki, 1963). The decline into partitions was due to a weakening political system that was unable to reform and resist the expansionist pressures from surrounding empires. Efforts to assimilate Poles through 'Russification' in Russia and 'Germanisation' in Prussia saw the Polish language relegated from official status, with Poles becoming marginalised as second-class citizens (Grzywacz, 2012). Conversely, in the Habsburg Empire, Poles played a more active role in governance, although they remained subordinate to central authorities. It is worth noting that some authors said that by 1918, the region of Galicia became 'almost a junior partner in the monarchy (Wandycz, 1967).

The partition and division of Poland among different political spheres led to markedly uneven development across the regions. In Prussia, integrating Polish territories into the wider economy was a priority, with significant infrastructure developments like railways and telegraph lines enhancing both economic and military control (Davies, 2005; Clark, 2006). Agrarian reforms redistributed land to create a class of German peasant proprietors, significantly altering the rural landscape at the expense of Polish landholders and culture (Blanke, 1993). Effectively, the economic modernisation under Prussian rule, although bringing about industrial growth, did so at the cost of significant Polish cultural dilution.

The Russian Empire's approach was characterised by economic neglect and exploitation. Infrastructure development was minimal and focused more on military needs than civilian benefits. This neglect stunted economic development, exacerbated by Tsar Alexander II's view of Poles as a direct threat to Russian stability (Weeks, 1996). The suppression of consequent Polish uprisings led to increased tsarist control, including mass deportations and restrictions on the Polish language, and curtailing the Polish bourgeoisie's entrepreneurial activities (Davies, ibid.). The continuation of serfdom until the late 19th century further hindered advancement.

The Habsburg monarchy's governance in Galicia and Lodomeria was comparatively lenient, promoting agricultural development and cultural and linguistic tolerances that maintained a stronger Polish identity (i.e., Davies, 2023.; Berend, 2003). However, this region was notably poorer than other parts of the former Commonwealth and the Habsburg territories, with per capita income barely half that of Hungary and very high taxation levels (Davies, ibid.), leading to its pejorative nickname *Golicja* and *Głodomeria*, translating to 'the naked and the famished.'

These historical legacies, as explored by scholars like Davies (ibid.), have shaped contemporary Poland's political and social landscape. Electoral trends still show clear differences between regions, with former Russian and Eastern-Austrian territories favouring conservative and nationalist parties and anti-European Union tendencies, while those from the Prussian and Western-Austrian partitions show a preference for more liberal and pro-European Union representatives (i.e., Applebaum, 2012).

Short unification period: 1918-1939

The restoration of independence in 1918 marked Poland's re-entry into the geopolitical landscape of Europe. The interwar years were characterised primarily by significant efforts to unify the country's long-separated regions, alongside early industrialisation and attempts to achieve economic stability amid the increasingly militarised European environment of the 1920s and 1930s (Koryś, 2015). Despite these efforts, the period did not fully reflect the principles of a liberal democracy.

Under Józef Piłsudski and his Sanation regime, which seized power after the May Coup in 1926, Poland adopted a mild-authoritarian stance, reflecting similar trends across several European nations during this time (Davies, 2005). The government restricted political opposition and curtailed press freedoms, often justifying such measures as necessary for state security and political stability (Wandycz, 2001). Despite its initial popularity, Piłsudski's administration increasingly faced criticism for its undemocratic practices, including the persecution of political adversaries and minority groups, and the imposition of policies that suppressed political pluralism (Davies, ibid.). During this era, trust in the government was not universally held, with substantial portions of the population remaining sceptical of the state's intentions and wary of its centralising policies (Davies, ibid.). However, this scepticism did not equate to a lack of support for an independent Polish state or for Piłsudski himself, who was often mythologised as the father of the Polish rebirth. Nevertheless, Suchodolski (2015) argued that the Polish state was constructed ineffectively, focusing on large-scale projects and imposing high taxation rates, which were estimated to be 70-100% higher than those in Western countries. Consequently, Poland lagged behind other local economies at the onset of the Second World War.

Decline of the oppression and the birth of the new state: 1939 to 1990

Poland's independence, restored in 1918, was abruptly halted with the onset of the Second World War, initiated by the invasion of Poland first by Nazi forces on 1 September 1939, and subsequently by the Soviets on 17 September 1939. This sequence of events was a direct outcome of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, which pre-designated Poland as the boundary between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Post-war arrangements made at the Yalta Conference, contrary to the assurances given to Polish leaders, led to Poland being carved up once again, placing it under the sphere of the newly formed Eastern Bloc (Quinn, 2020). The country underwent a Soviet military occupation, accompanied by manipulated elections that installed a puppet regime. Simultaneously, the state police carried out arrests and sham trials of opposition groups, especially the remaining war

officers associated with the *Armia Krajowa*[4]. Quinn (ibid.) details a significant incident: on 28 March 1945, leading members of the Polish resistance, including the Commander of the Polish Home Army, General Okulicki, were arrested by the Soviets, tortured, and forced into confessing to anti-Soviet activities, coinciding strategically with a conference on Poland's governance. Thus, socialism was established in Poland. It lasted in various forms until 1989.

The imposition of socialism in Poland radically transformed the economic landscape. The Soviets prioritised heavy industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture, sidelining consumer goods and economic efficiency. A centrally planned economic model was adopted, leading to inefficiencies and stifling innovation by focusing on meeting arbitrary production quotas instead of responding to market demands. Private property was abolished, and all industries were nationalised, embedding Poland's economy deeply within the Eastern Bloc's economic system, characterised by unequal trade dynamics with the USSR, focusing on exporting (at discounted prices) raw materials to the USSR and importing (at inflated prices) finished goods (Wróbel, 2013). Those policies culminated in some of the largest social protests in the Eastern Bloc, lasting intermittently from 1976 to 1989 (ibid). Additionally, an alternative economy flourished, notably in the form of a robust black market and underground publishing (Kochanowski, 2017), as citizens sought to circumvent state controls and shortages.

Free to choose: Poland after 1989

The most recent period in Polish history, continuing to the present day, began with the restoration of political independence following the events of 1989, including the Round Table Talks (Okrągły Stół) and the subsequent democratic elections in 1989 and 1990. Unlike the interwar period, this era marked the emergence of Poland as a leading economy in the region. This resurgence not only signified the reclamation of political and economic sovereignty but also paved the way for substantial economic and cultural transformations. The economic liberalisation

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[4] *Armia Krajowa* – the Home Army, one of the largest underground resistance movements of the 1940s.

that characterised this period involved opening up trade and privatising state-owned enterprises, actions that were instrumental in integrating Poland into the global economy and attracting foreign investment. These changes fundamentally reshaped the economic landscape, establishing Poland as a major economic player in the region (Piatkowski, 2018). Culturally, the period after 1989 witnessed a renaissance of national identity, which had been stifled under communist rule. This renewal of Polish culture was deeply linked with the adoption of a broader European identity, especially after Poland acceded to the European Union in 2004. Joining the EU not only furthered Poland's cultural rejuvenation but also aligned its cultural and political orientations more closely with Western Europe.

<u>Shaping of the political communication and media in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries</u>
This section provides a concise overview of the history of political communication and media since the partitions – a division that lasted for decades and has significantly impacted contemporary Poland. The media landscape during this period was profoundly shaped by the governing policies of Prussia, Russia, and the Habsburg Monarchy, each reflecting their broader administrative goals and cultural norms.

Under Prussian rule, both the media and the education system were utilised as instruments of Germanisation, promoting German language and values. This strategy effectively integrated the Polish territories both economically and culturally into the Prussian state framework (Davies, ibid.). Conversely, the Russian Empire implemented heavy censorship and restricted the operation of Polish language media as part of its Russification efforts, significantly stifling Polish cultural expressions and limiting public discourse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Davies, ibid.). Meanwhile, the Habsburgs facilitated a more pluralistic media landscape. Despite some censorship, they permitted a certain degree of linguistic and cultural freedom, allowing the use of the Polish language in publications and cultural activities, which contributed to a more vibrant public sphere in this region (Judson, 2016).

The differences in media freedom and the role of communication across these partitions not only shaped national consciousness during this period but also left a

lasting imprint on the region's subsequent development. In territories once controlled by Prussia, the assimilation policies and German-centric media contributed to a complex identity landscape, where the Polish language and traditions had to be consciously preserved against dominant German influences (Bjork, 2008). Regions under Russian control experienced a resurgence of Polish cultural and national identity as a direct response to Russification—revival efforts significantly mediated through underground publications and clandestine educational efforts (Davies, ibid.). The relatively liberal media policy in Habsburg territories fostered the flourishing of Polish cultural expressions and the growth of a Polish public discourse, crucial during the nation's later struggles for independence. Yet, the territory was also characterised by an extremely low literacy rate, and effectively, the press only reached intelligentsia circles.

During the interwar-independence, the media landscape in Poland thrived under the newfound freedom of the press, although some books continued to be censored at the publishing level, evident from visible white spaces in texts crossed out by state censors (Kawalec, 2016). This era saw the emergence of various publications like *Gazeta Warszawska* and *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny*, which actively participated in shaping the national discourse and identity.

The 1939 invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany significantly curtailed this period of media richness, imposing full censorship and severely limiting the freedom that the Polish media had previously enjoyed. The occupation aligned the press with the occupiers' propaganda, shut down many outlets, or forced them underground. Soviet influence later deepened this control, as the USSR sought to integrate Poland into its ideological framework, using the media as a tool to shape public opinion and suppress dissent (Miłosz, 1990). They exerted strict control over the media in Poland, establishing a censorship system that restricted the flow of information and enforced a narrative conducive to Soviet interests.

Post-1989, the media and communications landscape in Poland underwent significant development again. The end of state media monopolies led to a vibrant and diverse media environment, coinciding with the evolution of civil society. That may be why the Internet has been adopted in the country so quickly, as it

revolutionised access to information and connectivity. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, as internet penetration increased, it gave Poles unprecedented access to the global community, opening a critical window to the West during Poland's transition, and providing access to a wealth of information inaccessible for over two centuries.

The historical trajectory of Poland since the late 18th century provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the context in which the research on the Polish virtual libertarian community takes place. This history reveals a pattern of oppression by various state powers, from the Partitions through Nazi occupation and Soviet domination, with Poles repeatedly falling victim to authoritarian regimes abusing their power over society. This pattern, far from being unique to the Soviet era, had been firmly established in this area for a total of over 170 years – between 1795 and 1918 and again between 1939 and 1989. Such prolonged experiences with oppressive states have profoundly shaped Polish society's attitudes towards centralised authority and government power which was reflected in the Polish culture of the period, especially in literary works. One of the best-known examples in the English-speaking world was Czeslaw Milosz's 'The Captive Mind' (1990), for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The state interference with the freedoms of Poles extended to the realm of information circulation, with media consistently used as tools for controlled dissemination by those in power. Whether through Germanisation, Russification, or limited cultural freedoms under Habsburg rule during the Partitions or through strict censorship and propaganda during the Nazi and Soviet eras, for over two centuries, most media in Poland provided only a limited service, functioning as means of controlled information circulation. The emergence of the Internet marked a radical departure from this pattern, offering, for the first time, limitless and borderless access to information. This shift is particularly significant when considering the changes that digital media have brought to human interaction and community formation. In a society with such a long history of struggles against abusive states, the advent of unrestricted digital communication platforms holds high importance. It has allowed for the emergence of virtual communities, like the libertarian group studied in this research, which can

now form, grow, and evolve without the historical constraints that limited such associations in Poland. Thus, the study of how the virtual libertarian community in Poland has adapted to technological advancements gains additional significance, offering insights into how a society deeply impacted by a history of oppression responds to and utilises new technologies that promise freedom of information and association.

## Digitisation

The emergence of the Internet has substantially influenced society since the 1990s (i.e., Giannelis, 2022). It offered access to diverse modes of communication and a plethora of information, making it a pivotal tool for the modern exchange of knowledge and experiences. Such a process has heavily influenced the creation of *virtual* communities (i.e., Siuda, 2008). It is worth pondering upon the way the introduction of new technologies in Poland initiated these changes and asking what the future holds for such communities. Understanding this phenomenon from the perspective of those involved, i.e., the members of this community, seems to be even more interesting in such reflections. It is important to study it both in objective form – that is, as a kind of technological process taking place in the world in recent decades; and its subjective form, experienced individually by virtual libertarians.

Let me start with a historical outline of technological advancement. In the 1980s, personal computers (PCs) were starting to be perceived not so much as a vision of the distant future, but rather as the announcement of a coming decade. Yet, no one could have guessed how far-reaching changes first the PC, followed by the virtual network, and then the World Wide Web, would entail. Indeed, technological changes were enthusiastically received by some, but they were taken with a grain of salt by the public at the time. To illustrate the then discourse, it's worth looking at some comments of the leading technology executives of the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, Ken Olsen – the president of DEC, the leading computer company at the time – noted that there is no reason why computers should or would become a *personal* domain (Schofield, 2011). For many people at the time, the computer did not seem to be a tool that could improve the lives of the average person. It was perceived as a working tool used to *compute* numbers used in solving mathematical

or engineering problems. Crucially, the Internet was also underestimated. Even Robert Metcalfe, the inventor of the Ethernet, a fundamental component of the Internet boom, forecasted its decline in the mid-to-late 90s (Strohmeyer, 2008). On the contrary, the PC and the Internet have become the dominant elements of our everyday life in the 1990s. The Internet became a *mass* medium as early as the late 1990s. PC became accessible to the public even earlier, but its sales blossomed with lower prices and higher availability in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The World Wide Web (the Web or WWW) has been functioning since the early 90s and became practically a commodity for more advanced markets already in the late 2010s. This context is, against all appearances, very important. It should be noted that Poland underwent a political system change at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. In previous years, under the communist regime (1944-1989), computers were the domain of public institutions and the military. Private computers, with the opening to the international market, began to popularise in Poland much later than in the United States, only in the early 1990s. However, the Internet, which gained its popularity worldwide in the mid-1990s, became more widespread in Poland as it coincided with the PC-market explosion. Over a decade and a half, Poland caught up with technological access. From a country that in the late 1980s had only a few state-owned television channels, state-owned radio stations and a few state-owned newspaper titles, it became a country where Internet access became a norm amongst wider access to other types of media.

The evolving digital market has earned an academic periodisation within the literature. This periodisation seems quite important, as it shows the degree of change in the context of the average Internet user. The most popular is the classification of web development, which takes as its object of categorisation the way that the user interacts with the content and the form of content delivery itself. The read-only assumption of Web 1.0 was related to the available programming languages at the time. Most information on individual websites during this period still referred to its database (Algosaibi, et al., 2017). It was known as a *static-page period*. Users were factual recipients of the content created by the site's authors. Interactivity happened on the basic IRC and forum platforms, through e-zines sent

across the network of emails, etc. (Viswanathan, et al., 2010). This was also the stage when the first virtual communities began to grow, including those based on emailing discussion boards. In turn, Web 2.0 was to be *a read-write* type of site, with communities being formed around chatrooms, private sites and first blogs, as well as newer versions of forums – often based on phpBB. What started in the second phase of Web development became the axis of the third phase. While earlier technology was still dependent on human action, in the third, so-called, *semantic phase*, computers have become one of the three centres that participate in the information exchange process (*read-write-execute* through software-to-software communication), which led to improved information sharing between users and sites (i.e., Sayre, 2010; Isaias and Kommers, 2015; Burke, 2016; Ugarte, 2017). Virtual communities during this period formed mainly around social media, which became the axis of their interaction.

The term Web 2.0 was coined in early 1999 but became a popular concept a few years later, around 2004 (DiNucci, 1999; Strickland, 2007; 2008). Ironically, at this time it has been used as a catchy slogan for the Internet conference that Tim O'Reilly was organising, only to become a leading concept of Web periodisation in later years (Strickland, 2008). The interactive aspect seems to be the key change in that period. Websites have become more of an interactive platform of communication. Consequently, both users and the Web began to affect each other to an unobservable extent (Isaias and Kommers, ibid.). The significance of the change is sometimes overlooked. Users influenced their decisions on the way websites were shaped, and in consequence, they also influenced associated technologies. Indeed, this period – sometimes called the Social Web – has become a major contribution to the online boom of the late 2000s (i.e., Isaias and Kommers, ibid.; Strickland, 2007). Examples of this process were blog sites – a type of site commonly run by one author – that were to become one the most important elements of the Web in the late-2000s. In the first phase of the Web, they resembled classic diaries simply transferred to the virtual space, with basic-to-no interactivity components implemented across the site. However, their popularity increased exceptionally over time, and simultaneously their operational framework

advanced. Instead of a classic diary-like way of posting, blogs became the platform of interactive content distribution for individuals. In the second phase, especially in the late 00s and forward, blogging platforms, and blogs as a medium, became one of the most dominant aspects of Internet communication. Platforms like Twitter (initially intended to be a micro-blogging space) have also become increasingly popular, changing how news media function in the 2010s. often, blogs were effectively private sites where authors published content and communicated it directly to their audiences. One could say that they have become synonymous with the interactive nature of the network itself. Blogs have also contributed to the development of a network of private media channels of so-called influencers – bloggers, vloggers, and podcasters, who in turn form the communication axis of Web 3.0.

The third phase brought new interaction levels to the table. The concept of blockchain was to become a crucial component of Web interactivity (Figure 1). Simultaneously, computerised applications were to analyse historical users' – often consumers – behaviour on and across the Web. Based on these data, they served fitted results to the end-users, whilst constantly improving their services and offerings. Such a Web has also become largely interdependent on large content-platform owners. While in Web 2.0 they could not compete with large media entities (including virtual ones), in Web 3.0 their influence on end users grew and is growing to this day. It is they who have had and continue to have a major impact on the way end users get their information; in effect, taking over the role of the old media in content distribution.

There are a few authors who disagree with such periodisation. In their view the Internet itself hasn't changed that much besides the introduction of new technology; hence we cannot say that the Web/Internet has changed in some purposeful manner. For them, there was no turning point between Web 1.0 and 2.0 at all. For instance, Ankerson (2015) points out that some of the technologies usually associated with Web 2.0 were functional and in use as early as the mid-90s. Berners-Lee (2006), himself a creator of the Web 1.0 concept, advocated the use

of the term Web 3.0 but heavily criticised the current understanding of Web 2.0 virtual reality.

Although this work does not endeavour to provide a more refined or superior approach to periodising the evolution of the Internet, it does strive to enhance our comprehension of how those alterations have influenced the personal experiences of users and their corresponding social interactions. By doing so, this undertaking not only contextualises those deliberations concerning personal experience but also facilitates the comprehension of them on a more personal level.

## Libertarianism

Libertarianism constitutes a family of beliefs and views that accentuate individual freedom and strong individual responsibility as the protector of such freedoms (van der Vossen, 2023). Libertarian theory focuses on the role and position of the individual in the social realm and assumes as the core of its considerations the *private property*. As Juruś (2012:10) notes, 'libertarians maintain that the property right is a fundamental human right' and that it is 'the foundation of (libertarian) thinking about man and the state'. Also because of that, the individual is self-owned, and self-determined (Nozick, ibid.). Everyone is perceived as free if they do not infringe on the individual's property, and independent; fully responsible for self, yet also limited by the freedom of others – these stem precisely from the notion of private property and the idea of self-ownership. Libertarians follow a moral obligation known as the *non-aggression axiom* or the *anti-coercion principle* – an ethical belief that aggression, or forceful extortion, is inherently wrong, and leads to one's right for forceful defence in case of its violation (Zwolinski, 2016). The freedom of an individual is defined by its ability to fully decide upon its fate for as long as it doesn't impose aggression on other individuals. Initialising any form of aggression is, therefore, inseparably connected with the individual responsibility of the aggressor (Boaz, 2008). Those logical assumptions influence negative libertarians' take on several seemingly natural political concepts, including *politics itself*. This is also reflected in their criticism of the state, which they believe is based on forced social order and imposed means of controlling such order *via* licensed organisations of violence, i.e., the army and police. On a political and economic

ground, libertarianism once more orbits around individual freedom and private property, whilst assuming that the market economy is the most efficient and ethical result of a human economic organisation (Hamowy, ibid.).

The most important virtue for libertarians, in an economic sense, would be private property and fully voluntary market relationships among individual agents (van der Vossen, ibid.). Libertarians draw the concept of individualism from the Scottish Enlightenment, particularly from the likes of John Locke, Adam Smith, and David Hume. They follow the idea that the liberty of an individual is a precondition for a valid and functional human organisation (ibid.). Interactions between people, therefore, become the product of such thinking. For libertarians, the basic assumption of human relations starts with Isaiah Berlin's concept of negative liberty. Berlin introduced the distinction between positive ('*freedom to*') and negative ('*freedom from*') liberties in his "Two Concepts of Liberty" (Berlin, 2002). The two concepts are usually associated with specific social orders – positive liberties form a key political credo for the democratic and soc-democratic ideologies, whilst negative liberties form the axis of libertarian and classic-liberal ideas. Libertarians fully reject positive liberties as they perceive them as artificial and unjust (Rothbard, 1978; 2009; Rand, 2005), and factually an effect of an imposed order. Libertarians assume that the state, and the government as its product, are unjust, immoral, and even tyrannical (Rothbard, 2009; Konkin, 2006). Some of them also believe that existing governments might cease to exist at some point in history. They propose various strategies that were to lead to it: from limitation and concurrent cease of the state's functionalities (i.e., Rothbard, ibid.), constructing alternative market solutions with resulting state-controlled markets failure (i.e., Konkin, ibid.), to limitation of the existing state and concurrent creation of the minimal state (i.e., Boaz, ibid.). In economy, most of the libertarians are proponents of the absolute free market as proposed by the Austrian school thinkers (von Mises, 1998; Rothbard, ibid.), although there are also representatives of other free-market economic schools (i.e., Friedman, 2014; Graham, 2005).

On a psychological ground, libertarians tend to have a 'strong endorsement of individual liberty at the expense of other moral considerations' and a 'robust

relationship between libertarian morality, a dispositional lack of emotionality, and a preference for weaker or less-binding social relationships' (Iyer, et al., 2012, p. 4). They share disapproval for authority and universalism, but also have relatively low scores on elements of both individual morality (i.e., emotions towards victimised groups) and group-level morality (i.e., loyalty and tradition), as they could feel that those virtues might constitute a hidden attack on individual liberties. They do, however, score higher on measures of economic and lifestyle liberty (Iyer, et al., ibid.).

There is a clear academic gap regarding the virtual character of libertarianism. Even though some researchers study products of libertarian communities such as cryptocurrencies (Sotirakopoulos, 2017), or unrestricted Internet usage (called sometimes cyber- or cypher-libertarianism) (i.e., Thierer & Szoka, ibid.); there are practically no studies on the character of libertarian virtual communities, and virtual libertarianism itself. One reason for this may be a misunderstanding of the concept of libertarianism and its frequent identification with groups that partly overlap with libertarian views - in the literature often being linked primarily to far-right communities. This is an important aspect to study, given that the Internet has been crucial in spreading libertarian popularity in recent years (Short et al., 2022). Even more intriguing is to capture the dynamics of group interactions within the libertarian community, specifically within this project. After all, libertarians are thoroughly imbued with individualism. Their guiding rule for group functioning is, in its essence, individualistic, which – in the context of community studies – gives this research a new and deeper character. Libertarian *communities* can indeed exist, manifesting as *fractal and heterodox* virtual entities. These communities challenge conventional notions of group dynamics by embracing fully decentralised and adaptive structures that reflect libertarian principles. They thrive in digital spaces, utilising online platforms for collaboration and idea-sharing while maintaining fluid membership and situational leadership. This unique framework allows for the preservation of individual autonomy alongside community engagement, effectively bridging the apparent paradox between libertarian individualism and collective action. The *fractal* nature of these communities

ensures that smaller units mirror the larger whole and their *heterodox* character accommodates non-mainstream perspectives.

## Polish Virtual Libertarian

Until the late 1990s and the creation of Yahoo groups, it was difficult to speak of an organised group of libertarians in Poland, and even more so, the virtual libertarians. Initially, Polish libertarians were part of the wider Polish anarchist milieu, clustered around underground periodicals, such as *Mać Pariadka*[5], and *An Arche!*[6] (Miąsik, 2010). Some virtual libertarians admit that they learned about the idea from other underground sources, if only from interviews with alternative or punk musicians (ibid). The actual virtual libertarian organisation started in the late nineties with two emailing discussion groups *parked* on the Yahoo mailing lists – *'libertarianizm'* and *'Libertarianie'.* Around 2001 they were combined into one group named *'Libertarianizm_PL'* (ibid.). With the establishment of the latter, the number of users interested in discussing libertarianism began to grow, and in effect – and partially also due to problems with the Yahoo mailing list – they have created a modern libertarian forum. It was followed by the creation of a few libertarian sites *parked* on the same server and domain, most notably *libertarianizm.pl*. Together, it was called *Libnet,* and under that name, the project began to gain considerable popularity among Polish Internet users (Ibid.). To this day, *Libnet* is a vital part of the libertarian community, which largely forms its own, rather self-contained (that is, participating in internal conversations and rarely contacting other libertarian groups) environment. In recent years, in addition to the forum and the individual pages (at this point, largely inactive), *Libnet* users have also started to use the Discord platform[7].

In the mid-2000s, other free-market media also began to emerge, centred around free-market politicians (above all Janusz Korwin-Mikke and a forum of his

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[5] *Mać Pariadka* (Mother of Order), founded in 1990 by Krzysztof Galiński, was a pioneering Polish online magazine, often referred to as a *zine*. It was the oldest publication of its kind in Poland but ceased publication in the early 2000s. See: archived issue from December 2002 [Online] [Accessed: 20th April 2023] http://jawsieci.eu/mac-pariadka/opismie/index.htm.

[6] *Gazeta An Arche! (*An Arche! Magazine) was a notable Polish zine that emerged during the 1990s and continued its publication into the 2000s.

[7] [Online] [Accessed: 20th April 2023] https://discord.com/invite/v5Znwh2

supporters), and intellectuals and activists (above all the Polish *Instytut Misesa*[8]). From the outset, their popularity was relatively high, as demonstrated by the large number of users engaged in discussions on these platforms. As time passed, the function of these libertarian communication spaces was gradually overtaken by social media, particularly Facebook. According to libertarian media owners, it was largely the people associated with these former platforms who made up the first wave of libertarian social media users.

With time, other important free-market organisations were established on and *via* Facebook (i.e., *Fundacja Wolności i Przedsiębiorczości*[9], and *Stowarzyszenie Libertariańskie*[10]). The platform not only provided space for organisations but also for individuals who promoted pro-libertarian ideas. Publishers, bloggers, vloggers, and podcasters such as *Agent Tomasz* – Tomasz Agencki, *Antistate* – Rafał Trąbski, Jacek Sierpiński, Stanisław Wójtowicz, Jacek Gniadek, *Liberte!* – and even musicians like *Kelthuz* and *Libertaryat* – gained popularity from the 2010s onwards. To this day, each of these pages or profiles has tens of thousands of followers, even if their content is not always strictly libertarian.

This popularity has also translated into political interest. In the 2019 elections, a few candidates and then MPs of the *Konfederacja* party declared libertarian-like views, including Jakub Kulesza, Dobromir Sośnierz, Konrad Berkowicz and Artur Dziambor[11]. However, some libertarians believe that this was not a representation of libertarianism itself, but merely a political ploy aimed at winning votes from

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[8] *Fundacja Instytut Edukacji Ekonomicznej im. Ludwiga von Misesa* (Polish Mises institute of Economic Education, IM) is the oldest Austrian School and libertarian non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Poland. Established in 2003, the institute is dedicated to promoting the teachings of the Austrian School of economics, which emphasises the principles of free markets, individual liberty, and limited government intervention.

[9] *Fundacja Wolności i Przedsiębiorczości (*Freedom and Entrepreneurship Foundation, FWiP/FEF) is one of the oldest libertarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Poland. It was established in 2012 with the mission to promote and defend the principles of individual freedom, free markets, and entrepreneurship.

[10] *Stowarzyszenie Libertariańskie* (Polish Libertarian Association, SL) is one of the oldest libertarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Poland. It was established in 2013 with the aim of promoting libertarian principles and advocating for individual liberty, limited government, and free markets.

[11] See: party's website with a list of MP candidates before the 2019 elections [Online][Accessed: 20th April 2023] https://web.archive.org/web/20220121194153/https://wolnosc.pl/poslowie-korwin/ [*Retrieved via Wayback Machine*]

supporters of the idea (Sierpiński, 2019). Nevertheless, Polish virtual libertarians' activity was not limited only to digital communication but moved to social activities that happen in the physical setting. Polish libertarians organise cyclical meetings and conferences[12], and with time, also charity[13], social[14], and even political activities[15]. Still, the axis of their communication and belonging remains in the digital world.

To date, no works have been published that address the phenomenon of this group. Moreover, there are no similar studies in the wider international context of virtual libertarians. This space holds tremendous significance in the context of the Internet's influence on the formation of social and political beliefs among its users. Its importance demands not only this but also further studies in the field.

## Research Aims and Objectives

The fundamental phenomenon explored in this thesis is defined as the advancement of the Internet, and other related technologies that have profoundly transformed human existence, the process that is universally recognised as the "digitisation" or digital revolution of the 20th and 21st centuries (Popkova, et al., ibid.). This phenomenon serves as a contextual framework for examining the experiences of members of the virtual libertarian community, who have encountered it in various aspects of their virtual and physical existence. Additionally, it is relevant to the broader community of libertarians in Poland, which they are a part of. The study will consider both their individual and shared experiences in such contexts.

This work acknowledges and explores the diverse and complex nature of digital phenomena, which surpasses the traditional framework of social research.

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[12] i.e., *Weekend Kapitalizmu* (Capitalism Weekend) is Poland's largest free-market conference with accompanying events. [Online] [Accessed: 20th April 2023] https://weekendkapitalizmu.pl/

[13] I.e., Charity activities, *Stowarzyszenie Libertariańskie, 'Pomóż 13-latce walczącej z rakiem!'* (Help a 13-year-old battling cancer!). [Online] [Accessed: 20th April 2023] https://slib.pl/pomoz-13-latce-walczacej-z-rakiem/

[14] i.e., *Laissez-Fest Festival* is a Polish libertarian music and arts festival. [Online] [Accessed: 20th April 2023] https://laissezfest.pl/

[15] I.e., *Nie dla ACTA w Polsce* (No to ACTA in Poland) is a social movement opposing the European Union's proposed regulation of the Internet [Online] [Accessed: 20th April 2023] https://www.facebook.com/nieACTA/

Technological factors play a crucial role in the investigated processes, further highlighting the need to extend its boundaries. The primary objective of this study is to explore the interplay between the phenomenon, as explained above, and the concurrent growth of the Polish virtual libertarian community, as recounted through the personal narratives of its members. By doing so, the primary research question – which pertains to the way community members experienced technological transformation and the significance they attach to it – can be investigated. Additionally, it will facilitate an examination of the impact of technological progress on the entire community, as perceived by the narrators. The contexts in which the findings are situated will be utilised to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and interpreting the results, allowing for identifying patterns and insights into the impact of technological progress on the interviewees and the community.

Hence, the research questions that become the research axis of this thesis are as follows:

1. How do members of the community experience technological change, and what significance do they attribute to it?
2. What impact, according to the community members, this technological advancement had on the whole community?

## Outcomes of Study

This unique narrative project embodied the voices of members of an influential digital community of libertarians in Poland, contributing to understanding their online social and political activity. Most importantly, it aimed to shed light on the evolving social structure of the digital world, which has undergone significant changes with the advent of digital technologies and the rise of virtual communities. By examining the dynamics of the virtual community of Polish libertarians and its manifestation in the digital realm, this study sought to uncover the transformative processes at play. Specifically, it focused on how the community evolved, adapted, and shaped itself within the digital landscape, as it was experienced by its members. Through this exploration, I aimed to gain insights into the profound shifts occurring

in the social fabric of the digital world and provide a clearer understanding of the changing nature of virtual communities. The research simultaneously introduced and analysed various factors that explained the characteristics of members of this community, whilst providing a unique and unprecedented glimpse into the composition of the group they belong to. By doing so, it paved the way for future analyses of similar online groups. It was also the first research to explore the virtual dimension of libertarianism, going beyond the mere examination of libertarians' philosophical beliefs, which had been the focus of most research in this area. Moreover, this work aimed to provide some insight into the changes occurring in the social structure of the digital world. It highlighted the potential for virtual communities to transform into politically motivated social movements, achieving their defined political goals, and then reverting to purely social functions. Whilst this attempt did not intend to provide hard proof of such a process, it was a step towards a better understanding of the boundary between virtual communities and online social movements. This study helped address this gap and contributed to a new perspective on how we perceive these social groups in virtual contexts.

It also introduces the idea of fractal and heterodox communities. It is a virtual community that deviates from mainstream norms, political and economic ideologies, and practices, often challenging established paradigms. It is characterised by a decentralised and adaptive structure, operating through networks of interconnected individuals or small groups, each functioning autonomously but reflecting the overall ethos and goals of the larger community. Leadership within these communities is fluid and situational, allowing for rapid adaptation to changing circumstances without more rigid hierarchical structures at play. These communities heavily utilise digital platforms and tools as central infrastructure for connection, idea-sharing, and collaboration. Membership is also fluid and dynamic, with individuals joining and leaving based on evolving interests and needs, contributing to the community's resilience, and responsiveness to internal and external changes. Drawing parallels with heterodox economics, these communities embrace diverse perspectives outside mainstream thought and often transcend conventional political alignments. Finally, the findings of this thesis

allowed for grounding individual experiences of technological change in the context of technological advancement and its impact on society, by outlining the ways virtual communities could engage politically and diffuse their political ideas.

## Research Plan

This dissertation comprises seven chapters that collectively contribute to our understanding of the virtual libertarian community in Poland and the role of technology in shaping their experiences. The first chapter introduces the main phenomenon of interest and explains the basic concepts at play. The second chapter explores the relevant literature that focuses on the concepts of digital advancement and its impact on the individual, virtual community and social movements, as well as digital activism. It also analyses the foundations of the fractal and heterodox communities.

Such a background helps in drawing the theoretical model to be employed in further chapters of this thesis. The third chapter discusses the methodology adopted in the study. It begins by acknowledging the qualitative nature of the research and bringing the focus on gathering subjective accounts from community members. Various methods, including mixed methods and digital ethnography, were considered before selecting Episodic Narrative Inquiry (ENI) as, in my view, the most suitable approach. The chapter further discusses the use of thematic analysis and the inductive approach to coding, thus introducing a mixed-method component to the research. This chapter emphasises the importance of both the contexts and human experience in analysing the data and provides a foundation for understanding the subsequent analysis of the interview data.

In the next chapter, I explore the origins of the interviewees within the community, their initial experiences with the digital realm as well as their intellectual journeys towards libertarianism. I introduce sub-categories of interviewees, including *proto-libertarians, activists, intellectuals,* and *libertarians of the social media era*, analysing the pathways that led them to join the virtual libertarian community. The fifth chapter focuses on their sense of belonging to this community. It also analyses the societal and cultural influences that fostered a desire for libertarian self-

identification among them. The chapter explores themes such as family influence, educational experiences, and the role of networking in creating connections within the community. All those components are crucial in understanding not only their pathways towards libertarianism, especially its virtual realm but also in exploring the concept of the virtual community as the extension of their *real* lives. The sixth chapter focuses on the technological aspects that enabled and supported the virtual libertarian community. It discusses the Internet, media, and information accessibility, the influence of different media platforms – particularly Facebook – and the demarcation between the virtual and real worlds as experienced by community members. I have employed the funnel approach, in which many of the threads analysed in this chapter have their roots in the previous two chapters. This approach helps the reader contextualise the data and consequently to better understand the experiences of my interviewees.

Finally, in the seventh chapter, I offer a synthesis of the findings, discussing their implications and providing concluding remarks. The chapter examines the significance of technological change in shaping community members' experiences and perceptions, as well as the broader impact of technology on the community. It also concludes the main findings, highlights contributions to the understanding of virtual communities and technology's role in shaping social dynamics, and suggests space for future research.

## Research Methods

This study is grounded in qualitative research. It was conducted via interviews with members of the virtual libertarian community in Poland. I have adopted a pragmatist paradigm as the overarching theoretical perspective, aiming to explore the way that community members navigate and make sense of technological change in their social and political activities within the virtual libertarian community. This paradigm acknowledges the practical consequences of knowledge and emphasises understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which knowledge is produced and applied. Ergo, it provides a framework for understanding the interplay between technology, human experiences, and the broader social and cultural contexts.

To effectively capture and analyse the personal narratives of community members and focus on a specific phenomenon, I have selected Episodic Narrative Inquiry (ENI) as, in my view, the most suitable method for this study. I considered alternative mixed methods and digital ethnography, before deciding on ENI. While some other mixed-methods research approaches would have allowed for a broader exploration of those threads by combining qualitative and quantitative data, my focus is on gaining an in-depth understanding of community members' *experiences* and *perceptions*. I also considered digital ethnography, which involves observing and analysing online communities and their interactions. However, ENI emerged as the most optimal method as it enables a more comprehensive exploration of the way that community members understand and perceive technological change. By using ENI, I can uncover the rich and subjective experiences of individuals, providing insights into their unique perspectives and the broader social dynamics of the community. Further elaboration on these methodological choices will be presented in the Literature Review (Chapter 2) and Methodology (Chapter 3) chapters, offering a detailed understanding of the research design and its alignment with the research questions.

# CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

This chapter explores how the Internet and its surrounding technologies have redefined social living by ascribing virtuality to its core, and how it has collectively reshaped ways in which individuals form identities, build relationships, and ultimately, engage with the world. It explores new technologies facilitating continuous, accessible, and multilayered communication, thus transforming social interactions, human integrations, political engagement, and even cultural dynamics. It focuses on the emergence of new technologies and the resulting hybridisation of communication systems. It follows up with the formation of virtual communities and movements, but also focuses on the idea of digital activism. Through this exploration, I seek to understand the broader implications of living in an era where the digital and the real are inextricably linked, shaping new paradigms of human integration in which new forms of communities emerge. I will investigate how these changes have led to the creation of fractal and heterodox communities, characterised by their fluid, decentralised nature and their resistance to traditional hierarchical structures. A theoretical model resulting from these considerations will also be presented.

## Individuals and the Media

The shape of today's media has been largely determined by the development of two parallel technological planes of the last three decades, the Internet and mobile technologies. Each offered an innovative mode of communication, enabling people to interact more freely and to integrate further into society. The Internet has evolved from a closed-circuit network intended for sharing information between research and military centres to a complex ecosystem of global real-time communication for any agent, that supports – amongst millions of other digital tools – interactive media and instant communication channels (i.e., Banks, 2008). Simultaneously, mobile technologies have progressed from digitised telephone and telegram functionalities – like calling and texting on the go – to sophisticated smart devices providing access to the Internet everywhere we go (i.e., Lengacher, 2015).

Alongside this, other technologies and tools were developing, which allowed the digital world to get increasingly integrated into our daily lives – be it the AR/VR attempting to recreate the multi-sensory experience of physical interaction with the world (i.e., Cipresso et al., 2018). All those changes have made communication in the 21st century continuous, accessible, and multifaceted, allowing users to engage in social activities, manage work, and access entertainment all from the same device(s); anytime and anywhere. Schroeder (2016) even says that there is 'an increasing interpenetration between media and two areas of social life: politics and culture' and that 'digital media have extended the reach of media into everyday life'. Ergo, these changes impacted our consumption and exchange of information, the interactions we carry, and finally, how we integrate with the world and its structures.

This interpenetration would not be possible without the synergy of *potentials* offered by different types of media in a process known as *hybridisation.* Such *hybrid media* have thus become a key phenomenon of the communication shift. The hybrid media system is characterised by the interplay between traditional media forms (i.e., TV, press) and new digital platforms, integrating their respective operational logics. This system significantly affects the creation, distribution and consumption (Chadwick, 2017). The 21st-century individual lives in an interconnected world where digital is ingrained in the physical, essentially, digitally fuelling the integration of different aspects of life (i.e., Klimmt et al., 2018). Various media played unique roles in such a digital integration. Most of them focused on building – or rather *providing building toolsets for* – digital interactions.

Social media are the pinnacle of such a media system, focused on social interactions and developing social ties. With the advancement of the Internet, platforms were created, that offered aggregation of all types of digital interactions, i.e., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok, etc. (i.e., McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Amongst such interactions, one could think of basic connecting and conversing with others in real-time (*agora*-like networking), sharing and consuming information, collaborating on projects, or engaging in discussions and debates (i.e., Hopkins, 2016). Such *affordances* of social media play a crucial role in altering

various groups' socialisation processes and knowledge sharing; and even play its part in power balancing (i.e., Majchrzak, 2013). By finding newer and newer ways to imitate, enhance or even replace types of non-digital interactions, these features enabled the construction of a *global social network*. How we perform digital interactions shifted from active participation to almost pervasive connectivity. We might even say that engaging through social media is now seen as a fundamental aspect of our daily social – not only digital – interactions (i.e., Van Dijck, 2013).

One of the key affordances of social media, aligning with the previous points, is the ability to bridge geographical and temporal gaps, allowing individuals to connect and interact in real-time, irrespective of their physical locations (i.e., Jost et al., 2018). This feature has led to the rise of global communities and digital movements, with individuals from different corners of the world coming together to share experiences, support causes, and mobilise for various social and political initiatives (i.e., Stacey, 2015). Often these groups emerge in environments that don't feel *natural* for them – be it, the American-oriented philosophy getting traction in Europe or Asia. Social media have facilitated the democratisation of information sharing, enabling users to consume information from a diverse range of sources and to participate actively in creating and promoting content (i.e., Ahmed et al., 2019). Lou (2021) points out that social media have transformed contemporary society, impacting *identity formation* and even *social norms*. The participatory nature of social media platforms has empowered individuals to voice their opinions, share their stories, and contribute unprecedentedly to public discourse, especially on the reach level. Expressing an opinion can now echo in the closest circles of friends and rapidly reach the other side of the globe. This amplifies the potential for social and political activism and impacts users' perceptions and subscriptions to democratic and civic activities (i.e., Vromen, 2016).

One another important point is that social media allow users to create and curate their digital identities, allowing them to present themselves in a way that aligns with their desired image, which significantly enhances the self-identification processes – something that was coined *personal brand* (i.e., González-Larrea & Hernández-Serrano, 2020). This has fundamentally altered the way individuals present

themselves to the world, blurring the lines between public and private spheres and shaping new forms of self-representation and expression. One aspect of such self-identification is to define oneself more clearly and freely politically (i.e., Lange et al., 2021). Besides personal impact, these platforms also enable users to collaborate freely on various tasks – they can now work on projects, organise events and participate in discussions and debates, no matter the space, place and time they dedicate to such activities (i.e., Singh et al., 2018). The collaborative aspect of social media has transformed the dynamics of teamwork and collective action, allowing for a more seamless exchange of ideas and coordination of activities across various groups and communities. Again, this change has key resonance in the context of political activism, allowing for more efficient organisation and propagation of political messages. As noted by Treem and Leonardi (2013), the visibility, persistence, editability, and association provided by social media showcase the potential to transform the *organisational aspect* of social living. It has implications for how information is shared, how power is exercised, and how individuals engage with one another within group contexts.

The psychological effect of the influence of social media on the average individual is also important. Chayko (2020) focuses on the role of these platforms in facilitating hyper-connected communities. She emphasises that social media does not only enable but actively structure social interactions in novel ways that blend the digital with the everyday physical experiences, leading to what she terms 'super-connectedness'. Chayko's analysis extends the understanding of social media beyond the functional features of platforms and investigates the psychological and socio-cultural impacts these digital environments foster. She points out that super-connectedness influences users' cognition and actions, suggesting that constant digital interactions can alter their attention span, emotional responses, and even the depth of interpersonal communications. Alongside this notion, Desai et al. (2014) found that social media influence within some communities is largely determined by content creation and its dissemination rather than traditional hierarchies, such as the organisational status of a content provider, which suggests that digital interactions can redefine notions of authority

and expertise. This, in turn, affects how identities are formed and expressed, with social media acting as both a mirror and a mould shaping both public and private *personas* (Lane et al., 2021). Users therefore have greater freedom to create their virtual profiles without considering the pressure of their inner circles, be they family or social circles. These platforms cultivate what Chayko (ibid.) refers to as a 'portable social environment', in which users carry their social contexts with them, navigating between different social settings seamlessly. However, it is also at the potential cost of deeper, more meaningful community ties. It should also be noted that external pressures – like media scrutiny – can shape the social dynamics within digital platforms. For instance, Habib and Nithyanand (2021) explore the effects of such media influence on community moderation strategies on Reddit. Their findings suggest that media attention can inadvertently amplify problematic behaviours within online communities, despite administrative interventions aimed at curbing such behaviours. This indicates that certain behaviours or attitudes that belong outside the mainstream media may be of interest to some users and that the same media may influence the deepening need to build self-identification outside the media's adopted model of the world. Effectively, digital technologies have enabled the rise of online movements that disrupt conventional forms of political involvement (i.e., Bennett et al., ibid; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012).

The exploration of individuals' decisions to engage politically and their experiences within diverse virtual communities remains a slightly overlooked theme in the existing literature. One perspective suggests that digital technologies have a positive impact on it, by providing individuals with greater access to information, enabling them to participate in online communities and social movements, and creating new opportunities for political action (i.e., Bimber et al., 2012, Shirky, 2011). Another argues that digital technologies may hinder political engagement by creating echo chambers, where individuals only interact with like-minded individuals and are less exposed to diverse perspectives and ideas (i.e., Cinelli, ibid.). Besides, the spread of misinformation and fake news through digital technologies may lead to political polarisation and a lack of trust in political institutions (i.e., Guess et al., 2019). Other scholars argue that the impact of digital technologies on

political engagement is shaped by individual characteristics, such as age, education, and political ideology (Wattenberg, 2002; Xenos & Moy, 2007). For example, younger and more educated individuals may be more likely to use digital technologies for political engagement while those with more conservative beliefs may be more likely to use digital technologies to reinforce their existing beliefs (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). Ohme's (2018) exploration focuses on how digital media platforms not only serve as tools for political engagement but also as catalysts for redefining the political framing of an individual. His findings underscore the complexity of digital media's role in modern political systems, suggesting that these platforms can empower individual participation or foster collective action, depending on the types of media engagement. Particularly for younger generations, who have been socialised within a 'completed' digital media environment, these platforms shape political behaviours and expectations significantly, as the first media of contact. Langer and Gruber (2020) explore how legacy media while integrating new digital functionalities, continue to influence community sentiments and political agendas significantly. Such a system co-constructs the structure of political discourse and the mechanisms of community formation. It also facilitates the dissemination and amplification of political content and impacts power dynamics by allowing non-traditional actors to participate more actively in the political sphere (Chadwick, et al., 2018). There are plenty of high-profile examples. For instance, it allowed a Polish Internet celebrity and *pato-streamer*[16] Krzysztof Kononowicz (known for his election slogan *'Niczego nie będzie'* ('there will be nothing')) to achieve a degree of popularity and consequently run in local elections.

Besides, it is crucial to underline the role of the third agents, such as algorithmic social bots, that may exploit these dynamics to influence political narratives (Duan et al., 2022). Such activities can serve as a tool for political manipulation and even hybrid warfare between states (i.e., de Faveri et al., 2023). They also allow for

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[16] *Pato-streamer* – a term used in the Polish Internet language to describe a video streaming showcasing pathological behaviours, such as alcoholic consumption, vulgarities, and domestic violence.

unverified and potentially biased information, misinformation and fake news to be spread across the public. In turn, it can create new echo chambers where individuals only engage with like-minded people, reinforcing existing beliefs and deepening societal divisions (i.e., Cinelli et al., ibid.). Effectively, the current media system may contribute to a more fragmented and polarised political discourse. The point is made also by Davis et al. (2020), who believe that the hybrid media has paradoxically facilitated both greater public participation in democratic processes and an increase in political polarisation and misinformation. Törnberg (2022) underscores the role of hybrid media in enhancing *affective polarisation*, a phenomenon where political divisions are not only ideological but deeply emotional, driving significant social divides. He highlights how algorithmic personalisation on digital platforms fosters partisan sorting. Individuals are increasingly exposed to and engage with content that aligns with their political beliefs, which is, in effect, reinforcing and intensifying these beliefs. This sorting mechanism contributes to the formation of highly polarised echo chambers, reducing exposure to diverse viewpoints and escalating partisan hostility. Thus, we could perceive the media evolution as a double-edged sword. It enhances engagement through easy access to information and participatory platforms, while simultaneously fragmenting the public discourse through echo chambers and algorithmically curated content.

Nonetheless, the hybrid media system also plays a crucial role in community formation, particularly through the enhanced capabilities for networking and mobilisation. Chadwick (2017) emphasises this intermingling, suggesting that the system is shaped by adaptation and response strategies among media actors, aimed to maintain influence within this diversified media ecology. This system is not solely shaped by adaptation and response strategies among media actors, but also by external pressures and market forces, such as advertising revenue and the demand for sensationalised content. This personalisation, while empowering on one level, also complicates the public discourse by allowing individuals to circumvent traditional informational gatekeepers, thereby increasing exposure to misinformation and biased content. In his view, this shift not only affects individual

cognitions and perceptions but also has broader societal impacts by intensifying polarisation and social stratification. He might, however, overemphasise the autonomy and agency of individuals in curating their media environments. Algorithms designed by platforms like Facebook and YouTube significantly shape users' experiences, often prioritising engagement over accuracy, which can exacerbate the problems of misinformation and echo chambers without users' conscious choice (Sirbu et al., 2019).

Foust and Hoyt (2016) argue that while digital platforms can help bypass traditional media gatekeepers and reach wide audiences quickly, they also require new strategies to combat the fragmentation and rapid cycles of news and political attention inherent in these media environments. To illustrate the problem, it is worth focusing on how hybrid media system extends into completely new territory, such as artificial intelligence (i.e., Goode, 2020). After all, AI might not merely be a passive tool but rather an active participant in the cultivation of algorithmic bias, i.e., nationalism or collectivism. This form of political strategy, facilitated by AI's capacity to analyse and manipulate large data sets, can amplify ideologies by embedding biases within the algorithms themselves. One can imagine not only non-democratic countries feeding a particular political narrative through the media, but also democratic organisations using this mechanism to 'educate the citizenry' along the lines of those currently in power. Such capabilities enable AI to play a significant role in shaping universal political narratives, which aligns with how the hybrid media system uses technology to influence community sentiments and political agendas. Several researchers also argue that digital technologies are eroding privacy and creating new forms of surveillance (i.e., Lyon, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). On the positive side, they also enable individuals to exercise greater control over their personal data and online identities (i.e., Floridi, 2016; Nissenbaum, 2010).

Within the context of this work, it is crucial to highlight the role of digital innovations - most notably the Internet and mobile technologies - in the process of community formation. This section highlights how these technologies have evolved from basic communication tools to complex platforms that integrate deeply into daily life. Social media, a significant aspect of this evolution, facilitates global, real-

time interaction, enhancing social connectivity and allowing users to engage in diverse activities from anywhere at any time. The media system also deeply affects how information is created, shared, and consumed. Various platforms customise content for users, impacting how people interact and what they experience in the virtual realm. A hybrid media environment plays a big role in how we engage with politics. These platforms influence social norms and political engagement and empower users to craft and manage their digital identities. It makes it easier to spread information quickly and get people involved, but it also introduces significant challenges such as misinformation, privacy erosion, and increased surveillance. Importantly, there is a high potential for an AI to act as a powerful agent shortly, not only in broadcasting content, but also in reinforcing, or challenging, existing power dynamics through the subtle calibration of data-driven and politically biased narratives, as well as the perpetuation of biases under the guise of objectivity. Already at this point, the hybrid media system is instrumental in shaping political narratives and community sentiments, simultaneously facilitating engagement and social and political polarisation.

## Virtual Community

Historically, the scholarship on communities focused mostly on their physical and geographical foundations. Researchers traditionally defined communities as groups of people living close, sharing common cultural or social attributes, and were looking for tangible interactions within small, and most often localised settings. Belonging to such communities, stemmed from imposed affiliations or limited choices (i.e., Kelman, 1958; Festinger, 1957). Since the mass media boom, this perspective has shifted dramatically, leading to the formation and further development of what Weber (1978) termed 'community without propinquity' – non-localised communities, where bonds are formed through shared interests rather than physical proximity. Anderson (2006) further examined this transformation by illustrating how media fostered a shared sense of community among dispersed individuals, paving the way for the emergence of pan-regional and virtual communities. These communities are formed not by geographic location but through shared narratives and common goals, enabled by the media landscape.

Such virtual communities are evolving into 'nomadic, highly mobile, emotional, and communicative' entities (Delanty, 2010). Virtual communities are increasingly personalised and interest-driven, evolving from public to more private and even mixed public-private spheres, creating virtual and personal communities (i.e., Siuda, 2015; 2019). Williams (2011) observes that virtual communities often revolve around shared symbolic systems underpinning their beliefs, values, and behaviours. Individuals with similar mindsets converge around specific ideologies, thus creating online arenas where these philosophies can be nurtured and promoted (Gelder, 2007). Typically, these communities have global – or rather non-local – character, yet they also have locality elements *within* them. Castells calls this process *glocalisation* (Castells, 2009). Such change in a dynamic of community foundation often leads to cross-cultural assimilation and progress (i.e., Jenkins et al., 2016). These communities support integration and self-expression and allow the forming of emotional bonds that transcend traditional social frameworks (i.e., Turkle, 1997; Kapralska, 2014).

Virtuality *integrates with* rather than *separates from* the physical world (i.e., Hine, 2005). This ongoing integration yet again reflects a broader societal shift where virtual and physical realities complement each other. Jurgenson (2012) and Castells (2010) describe a fully immersive virtual experience that extends even when users are offline, suggesting that virtual communities are as substantial as physical ones. In a way, they are extensions of offline reality, where technological access and social norms continue to influence participation (i.e., Prodnik, 2012). Building on the understanding of digital transformations, Kozinets (2015) and subsequent scholars have underlined the role of shared practices – such as specialised language and adherence to common norms – in fostering a sense of identity and belonging within such communities. These practices define membership and cultivate collective meanings and experiences crucial for community cohesion. Trust emerges as a fundamental element in these settings, creating a *safe environment* for expression and collaboration, which is essential for the sustainability of these communities. These changes not only redefine the spatial context of communities. They also redefine traditional concepts by making the sense of *virtual belonging*

more flexible and adaptive. Users can easily adjust their community affiliation or at least part of it. This flexibility reflects a broader cultural shift where community membership is increasingly seen as a choice, akin to consumer behaviour in the marketplace. For instance, platforms like social media enable individuals with shared interests and goals to connect and maintain interactions. They provide critical infrastructure (space and tools) for any movement to spread information and facilitate action. This has benefited many groups, particularly smaller, worse organised and less popular, who can now use digital spaces to mobilise support and coordinate actions without former constraints. The result is a dynamic landscape where individuals have greater autonomy in selecting and participating in communities, paralleling the increased personalisation seen across other digital interactions (Obst and White, 2006). Traditional geographical limitations are replaced by the need for technology access to participate in virtual communities. This shift allows individuals unprecedented freedom to join communities based on shared interests, yet it also introduces new limitations, such as the necessity of technological access (Powell et al., 2010).

Such groups are dynamic, ever-evolving entities, influenced by their internal and external interactions. This fluidity, magnified by the Internet's media landscape, paves the way for *hybrid communities*, a characteristic unique to the current stage of the digital age (i.e., Mosconi et al., 2017). The key point is that the Internet and mobile devices fundamentally transform human interactions. While in its essence, interaction has remained an action in which two or more individuals mutually affect each other, it has been enriched with an element of virtuality; therefore, it can be carried out by employing non-body communication vehicles. Everyday activities, such as making calls or searching for information on the move, demonstrate how various devices have become extensions of our physical selves (i.e., Chan, 2022). This simplification of communication removes the need for physical proximity, allows for new forms of community engagement and impacts the spatial aspect of human contact (i.e., Tillander, 2014; Sobel-Lojeski, 2015). In effect, social and technological realms influence each other, reflected on both those planes simultaneously (i.e., Burgess & Green, 2018). In other words, interactions have

evolved from traditional – geographically bound, and purely physical – forms of mutual impact, to modalities where contact is initiated and sustained through physical and digital means, either separately or simultaneously.

Consequently, researchers observed a significant decline in non-digital social interactions, particularly among adolescents and young adults, who now spend substantially fewer hours engaging in face-to-face interactions (Twenge and Spitzberg, 2020). Individuals who spend more time using digital media, report lower psychological well-being, with heavy users experiencing more stress, lower life satisfaction, and higher rates of depression and anxiety (Twenge, 2019). Besides, as digital platforms become extensions of our physical selves, enabling seamless engagement across various spheres of life, they also blur the lines between public and private, often at the expense of deeper, more meaningful interpersonal connections (Chayko, 2020). Brennen (2019) provides a critical counterpoint by discussing the growing trend of *opting out of digital media*. Her analysis highlights a significant countertrend where individuals, concerned about the pervasive connectivity – such as compromised privacy, increased stress, and a dilution of authentic social interactions – choose to *disconnect*. This act of *opting out* might be seen not just as a personal choice but as a crucial societal commentary on the sustainability of constant digital engagement. Brennen herself argues that this resistance is indicative of a deeper need to reclaim personal space and mental health, which are often compromised by the demands of continuous digital presence While digital media can enhance connectivity and democratise information, they also compel a re-evaluation of the costs associated with such deep digital integration.

In this section, I explored how community concepts have shifted from traditional, physically-based groups to virtual communities that connect through shared interests and digital interactions, rather than geographic proximity. This shift is largely due to the rise of mass media and digital platforms, which allow for the formation of 'communities without propinquity'. These virtual communities are increasingly personalised and mobile, evolving beyond public spaces (such as public chatrooms and forums) into more private or mixed spaces (such as private forums,

but also social media, especially their micro-communal features, i.e., Facebook Groups). I subscribe to the idea that these virtual groups blend virtual and physical realities, creating immersive experiences that persist even when participants are offline. This integration signifies a broader cultural shift, transforming community membership from a fixed status into a flexible, choice-driven engagement that resembles any other consumer behaviour in any market. This flexibility is particularly empowering for smaller or less organised groups, enabling them to mobilise support and coordinate actions without traditional constraints. However, this shift to digital interaction has its downsides. The review indicates a decrease in face-to-face interactions, particularly among younger demographics, correlating with declines in psychological well-being mentioned in the previous sections. Digital platforms, while enhancing connectivity, blur the lines between public and private life and can diminish deep, meaningful interpersonal connections. Despite these challenges, the digital age has redefined human interaction, merging physical and digital communication to create hybrid forms of community engagement.

## Virtual Movements

There is a debate about whether technology has a democratising effect on the widening reach of political ideas, or whether it reinforces existing power structures. Some argue that digital technologies provide greater access to information, enable greater participation in the political process, and simplify the distribution of political ideas and the mobilisation of political movements (i.e., Shirky, 2011; Castells, 2000; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). However, some scholars question the extent to which technology is responsible for such a popularisation process. They argue that political ideas have always spread through various means and that technology – or virtuality – is simply one of many tools that can be used to spread ideas (Bimber, et al., 2012). Others, like Kaun and Uldam (2017), warn that the impact of digital technologies on political mobilisation is indeed complex, as it can both enable and constrain civic engagement depending on the specific political and social contexts. Kaun and Uldam also criticise much of the existing research for its ahistorical approach and tendency towards digital universalism. These approaches 'risk failing to address the significance of the interrelations between digital media, on the one

hand, and political and civic culture, on the other' they say (ibid.). One of the most thought-provoking aspects of those considerations stems from the idea of boundaries that are binding virtual communities. There is an academic discord about what some of the virtual groupings should be categorised as, and how purposeful their online, and often offline, behaviour is. Presumptively, there is a large stretch of space in which both concepts of virtual community and social movement unintentionally coincide. These groups exhibit some characteristics of traditional virtual communities, such as shared interests, communal interactions, and a sense of belonging among members. However, they also display attributes commonly associated with virtual social movements, including collective action, political mobilisation, and a shared goal of effecting social change. Differences between virtual communities and social movements are often distinct, the latter being essentially written in various communities' definitions. Besides, many of the social movements have their roots in such communities. In this fluid and hybrid space, virtual online groups often emerge around specific issues, causes, or ideologies that unite individuals who are passionate about effecting change or advocating for political or social objectives. These groups harness the power of digital platforms and communication technologies to connect like-minded individuals, facilitating the exchange of ideas, resources, and strategies for collective action. They enable individuals to rally around shared goals, coordinate efforts, and engage in activities aimed at influencing public opinion, policy-making, or changing societal norms. Several researchers explained how they became more organised and purposeful, essentially enhancing social movements (i.e., Ginsburg & Weisband, 2004; Kozinets, 1999).

Charles Tilly's seminal definition of social movements (1978) identifies three fundamental components: collective actions, events associated with the movement's agenda, and the ideas that unify the group. Tilly argues that understanding these three aspects is essential for significant research into social movements. Building on Tilly's work, Mario Diani (2000) describes social movements as 'networks of informal interactions between individuals and organisations engaged in collective action based on a shared identity'. This concept

emphasises the importance of the relationships and informal structures within these networks. According to Diani, the primary unifying characteristic of a social movement is its network of interactions. A critical but underemphasised aspect of Diani's definition is the shared identity that drives collective actions, which serves as a link between the community and the social movement. The main distinguishing feature of a social movement is its type of collective action, particularly political activity. For example, a church community would not typically be considered a social movement unless it engaged in religious activism. Paul Saunders (2007) further elaborates that social movements generally aim to influence national politics through both direct and indirect means. Although some social movements do not specifically seek policy change, the close theoretical relationship between pressure groups and social movements often makes them indistinguishable. Probably the best explanation of such networks is that of Willson (2010: no pagination), who says:

> 'These depictions of the networked individual (with multiple personal social networks) fit neatly with work on new social movements, affinity groups, and issue-based politics where allegiances and participation are aligned around temporally prominent issues rather than broader ideology or loyalties to collective associations.'.

Indeed, recently social media has emerged as a crucial platform for coordinating the operational framework of social movements, while the Internet—and more specifically, the technology of digitalisation and rapid connectivity expansion—plays a central role in their creation and maintenance (i.e., Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005). Equally important are the evolving characteristics of these movements, which now feature a smooth, technology-based structure. Contemporary social movements are more individualised and personalised, requiring less structuring than before (i.e., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bennett et al., 2014). However, it is not accurate to claim that social movements operate solely in the virtual realm. While technology has significantly transformed their organisation and operations, most activities of social movements remain focused on offline engagements. Many well-known social movements in recent years, such

as those during the Ukrainian Maidan and the Arab Spring, originated online but are renowned for their offline gatherings and impacts (i.e., Dolata, 2017). Despite the absence of formal structures in virtual social movements, many researchers agree that they exhibit patterns of unofficial organisation or organised informality (Dolata, ibid.). Willson (2010: no pagination) adds an even more important layer here:

> 'Individuals are represented as free-floating and seemingly autonomous agents, able to form or connect to numerous networks at will, as long as they fit network rules, protocols, and functions. If they don't fit the network, they are dropped. Likewise, if the network doesn't meet an individual's needs, the individual drops it.'

Many authors are indicating that users who are engaged in civic activities on the Internet are the ones most often involved in similar activities in the offline world (Banaji and Buckingham, 2010; Brady, et al., 2009). For instance, Wellman, et al. (2001) claim that the more involvement individual has in their online life, the more likely they are to be active in offline reality. In turn, Machackova and Serek (2017) claim that the Internet does not have any impact on offline civic society. The distinguishing factor of these virtual online groups is their ability to balance the social cohesion and sense of community typically associated with virtual communities, with the mobilisation and collective action characteristic of virtual social movements. While they may lack some of the formalised structures and hierarchical organisation commonly found in traditional social movements, they exhibit a degree of coordination and activism that extends beyond casual social interactions. Members of these groups actively participate in political discussions, engage in advocacy efforts, and collaborate on initiatives aimed at achieving specific outcomes.

Most of the researchers underline the role of an individual approach in online community success, for instance, Ellison et al. (2007) point out the social capital generated by heavy users of Facebook. Several online communities share with libertarians the basic prioritisation of self-development and self-ownership. Grace-

Farfaglia, et al. (2006) explain how active participation in virtual communities can display an individual`s values. Other characteristics of community members are non-important in a reality that does not overvalue age, gender, education, etc (Bisgin, et al. 2010). Such values are a mix of the local/regional culture of individuals, together with an Internet-impacted value, for instance, the libertarian credo. It is the individual that is a key element of the social structure, such as community – in fact, the online community is a grouping of like-minded individuals (McPherson, et al. 2001). Individualism is one of the key factors that bring communities online together (Nancy, 1991; Casalo, et al., 2007). The individuals are trying to fit in the online community of their choice, such a process consists of observation and copying of some well-perceived behaviour of other members. Dennen (2014) believes it is one of the most important aspects of online community creation. Most of the researchers underline the fact that those groups are factually inseparable in many cases (Diani, 2000).

This section helps us understand how digital technologies have revolutionised the spread of political ideas and the formation of political movements. Scholars have pointed out that digital platforms have given rise to new kinds of social movements that challenge traditional political engagement by enabling networks that can mobilise and coordinate action more broadly and efficiently. However, there's an ongoing debate about the actual impact of technology on this spread, with some arguing that while technology offers tools, other factors like social networks and cultural context play a more crucial role. One interesting aspect I've explored is the blending of concepts between virtual communities and social movements. These online groups often share characteristics like communal interactions and a sense of belonging, but they also engage in collective actions aimed at social change, blurring the lines between mere communities and active movements. This has led to a new kind of participatory environment where individuals are empowered to act on issues they care about, often bypassing traditional organisational structures. This indicates a complex relationship where digital tools enhance the reach and efficiency of movements but do not replace the need for physical actions. Moreover, the flexibility of digital platforms allows individuals to engage in politics

in more personalised and direct ways, potentially reshaping how political mobilisation and engagement are understood and executed in the digital age. To understand these processes more clearly, we need to focus on one more element that binds people together in their online political and social activities – the concept of *digital activism*.

## Digital Activism

Digital activism has emerged as a powerful and immediate form of social engagement in recent years. To some extent, it grew in response to the reflections of the previous two subsections, and the need to understand the fluidity of online groups with more depth. With the increasing political polarisation and declining trust in traditional media (i.e., Coster, 2023), digital activism provides a new platform environment for everyone, including marginalised voices, facilitating the spread of alternative narratives amongst various groups. It does not require structural affiliation or strong political profiling. Unlike traditional activism, which relies on physical presence and significant resources, digital activism leverages the Internet and social media to create broad-reaching and impactful campaigns with relatively low barriers to entry (i.e., George and Leidner, 2019). Effectively, it empowers individuals and communities to bypass traditional gatekeepers, thus enabling more inclusive and participatory forms of social and political activism.

Karatzogianni (2015) examines the evolution and impact of digital activism and proposes four distinct phases of its development. The first phase (1994–2001) saw the origins of digital activism with the emergence of the World Wide Web and the influence of hacker culture and knowledge communities, exemplified by events like the Zapatista movement's digital shift and the Seattle anti-globalisation protests. The second phase (2001–2007), marked by the post-9/11 era and conflicts like the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, highlighted the internet's growing role in political mobilisation, including anti-war protests and the Ukraine Orange Revolution. In the third phase (2007–2010), digital activism became more mainstream, significantly influencing politics through events like Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and Iran's Green Movement. The fourth phase (2010–2014) saw digital activism

permeate mainstream politics, with high-profile events such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Snowden revelations, alongside significant protests worldwide. She argues that digital activism has continually transformed in the last three decades, becoming an integral part of our political life. Even though it was initially marked by symbolic and mobilisation qualities, it is now part of 'politics as usual', potentially losing its exceptional qualities due to normalisation and mainstreaming by governments and corporations (ibid.).

Digital activism encompasses a variety of activities that can be broadly classified by the level of engagement they require from the user. There are various ways to classify those activities (i.e., Majchrzak et al., 2013), although I found George and Leidner's (ibid) categorisation the most optimal. In their view, minimal effort activities include *clicktivism/slacktivism*, *meta-voicing*, and *assertion*. Clicktivism/slacktivism involves simple online actions like liking, upvoting, or following a cause on social media. Although considered low commitment, clicktivism can help build legitimacy and support for a movement. Meta-voicing includes sharing, retweeting, reposting, and commenting on social media posts (i.e., Majchrzak et al., ibid., George and Leidner, ibid.), serving as an echo chamber that amplifies messages within social networks. Assertion refers to creating original content, such as posts, videos, or digital communications to inform and engage others (i.e., Lovejoy et al., 2012). The next-level activities that require moderate effort and resources include *political consumerism*, *digital petitions*, *botivism*, and *e-funding*. Political consumerism involves aligning purchasing habits with political beliefs, often facilitated through apps and websites (i.e., Copeland and Boullianne, 2022). Digital petitions allow citizens to formally request government action on issues via online platforms, such as the anti-ACTA petitions in Poland and Czechia (i.e., Matthews and Žikovská, 2013). Botivism uses automated bots to promote causes, engage with followers, and counteract opposing views (i.e., George and Leidner, ibid.). E-funding leverages digital platforms for fundraising, including direct donations, crypto contributions, and online benefit auctions (i.e., Janze, 2017). Finally, the high-effort activities directly aim to enact change. They include *data activism*, *exposure*, and *hacktivism*. Data activism promotes greater individual

control over data and involves activities like open data initiatives, data philanthropy, and data rescue efforts (i.e., Neves et al., 2020). Exposure refers to the non-authorized dissemination of confidential information, often facilitated by platforms like Wikileaks (i.e., Cammaerts, 2013). Hacktivism involves using hacking techniques to achieve social or political objectives, targeting governments, organisations, or individuals (i.e., Goode, 2018). All the above form an asymmetrical landscape of online activism (Freelon et al., 2020), which means the simultaneous occurrence of these activities among many Internet groups, often even conflicting with each other in form and message. Not all digital activism contributes equally to public discourse, with disparities in resources and visibility leading to what can be termed 'false equivalencies' (Freelon, ibid.). Nevertheless, content amplification is a key mechanism of digital activists, whereby – through digital platforms – activists can amplify messages, creating emotional and cognitive impact.

One key area for this research is data activism. It can be seen as a subset of digital activism focused on data usage to promote social change (i.e., Gutierrez, 2018). Data activists utilise data infrastructures to generate alternative public spheres where individuals and groups can exchange information and respond to crises more efficiently. Proactive data activism, which involves the deliberate use of data for mobilising people and fostering change, combines elements of journalism and advocacy, creating a form of analytical and emotive activism (ibid.). This form of activism is crucial in generating new public spheres and facilitating equal participation, aligning with the communicative ideal formulated by Habermas (1991). The primary challenge of digital activism is the idea of the *digital divide*. Access to the internet and digital tools is not uniformly distributed globally, sometimes leaving marginalised communities without the resources necessary to engage with a given problem. This disparity can work against various social groups, as those with access to digital platforms can amplify their voices more effectively than those without. Therefore, a key aspect that amplifies the effectiveness of political action, including digital activism in particular, is access to information and the physical connection to the internet itself (i.e., Shandler et al., 2019). Another significant challenge is the risk of surveillance and repression. Authoritarian

regimes and even some democratic governments can monitor online activities, potentially identifying and targeting activists (i.e., Gerschewski & Dukalskis, 2018). This surveillance can lead to harassment, arrests, or worse; thereby stifling dissent and discouraging participation in such activism. This largely reflects the restriction of media access in earlier authoritarian regimes, compounded by the possibilities of modern technology. Additionally, the spread of misinformation and fake news on social media platforms can undermine digital activists' credibility and effectiveness. (i.e., Fernandez et al., 2021). The virality of false information can detract from legitimate causes and create confusion among the public, making it harder to mobilise for real change.

This section showcases that digital activism has become a significant and immediate form of social engagement in recent decades. The core of digital activism lies in its ability to democratise socio-political participation. Thanks to its inherent simplicity, and its low barrier to entry, digital activism enables both the socio-political activists' messages to reach out more widely and the processes to be managed more efficiently. It enriches the previous discussion on virtual social communities and movements by demonstrating what kind of activities functionally connect people in the digital age. This allows individuals to engage in activism flexibly and personally, often bypassing traditional organisational frameworks. Nevertheless, despite the prominence of virtual realms, offline actions remain an integral component of the activist framework, which proves the *multidimensional* nature of contemporary activism. This blend of online and offline efforts highlights the evolving strategies of social movements.

## Right, Left and Heterodox

Right-wing and libertarian virtual communities, while often grouped in scholarly discussions, exhibit distinct characteristics. Central to this piece will be an understanding of the differences between extreme virtual communities, which also show the place of libertarians on the map of such a categorisation.

Let me start with the extreme right-wing virtual communities that typically align with conservative ideologies, emphasise traditional values, and nationalistic

sentiments, and often have a hierarchical view of social organisation (i.e., Baele et al., 2023). While they share a common ideological foundation, the interpretation and emphasis of these beliefs can vary significantly. Some factions may focus on cultural preservation and identity politics, while others prioritise economic nationalism or anti-globalisation sentiments. These communities may support authoritarian measures and resist social changes that conflict with traditional norms. Similarly to most political communities, they are highly heterogeneous on a demographic matrix (age, education, motivations, etc.), and operate within a complex and dynamic online ecosystem, utilising a range of platforms from traditional websites to fringe social media and encrypted messaging services (Baele et al., ibid.). This diversity allows them to leverage major social media platforms as crucial vectors for promoting conservative content.

In contrast, extreme left-wing virtual communities often align with their (often radical) opposition to capitalism, liberal democracy, and various forms of social inequality (i.e., Zuquete et al, 2023a, Gui, et al., 2020). They encompass a range of ideologies, including Marxism-Leninism, anarchism, and radical environmentalism. While unified by core principles, the expression and prioritisation of these values can differ widely. Some groups may concentrate on gender and sexual equality, advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and feminism, whereas others might prioritise climate action, anti-capitalism, or anti-racism efforts (Zuquete, 2023ab.). While there are concerns about violent demonstrations and confrontations, large parts of the far-left movement reject violence, focusing instead on prefigurative politics and community support initiatives (van Dongen, 2021). The psychological dimensions of left-wing extremism focus on emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment (Zuquete et al., 2023b). Modern left-wing virtual communities often leverage digital platforms for organisation, communication, and mobilisation (Zuquete et al., 2023ab).

Facebook, the largest social network, is used extensively amongst both factions. Public pages serve as hubs for content distribution, which then trickles down to public groups allowing interaction, and private groups facilitate coordination. These groups employ ideologically neutral content to attract wider audiences, gradually

introducing them to extremist ideologies (i.e., Davey and Ebner, 2017). On the right-wing side, prominent examples include the Finnish group Soldiers of Odin and the U.S.-based Boogaloo Bois (i.e., Kotonen and Sallamaa, 2023). Kaufmann (2023) focus on various phenomena on the left-wing side of extremism, for instance, the extreme *cancel culture.* Twitter serves as a key platform for extremist activities, with hashtags creating online communities around specific topics, and non-verified users being more prompt to propagate extremist ideas (i.e., Maarouf et al., 2024). Notable content categories on far-right Twitter include pro-Trump, white nationalist, and anti-immigrant rhetoric, among others. On the far-left Twitter, those might be groups supporting communist dictatorships, anti-capitalism and anti-liberalism themes (i.e., Freelon, 2019). Besides, Reddit has long hosted extremist communities, but increased moderation has led to the migration of users to fringe platforms like the "Chans" and Slug. It is used by both extreme groups (i.e., Balcı et al., 2023). Other platforms – including Gab, Telegram and Discord – offer safe havens for extremists due to their minimal moderation policies.

Some authors focus on the digital manifestations of communities and their usage of specific social media platforms (i.e., Shane et al., 2022; Peeters et al., 2023). They highlight how extensively these communities use social media, forums, and alternative media websites to connect, organise, and promote their beliefs. Digital platforms provide a sense of anonymity and community for individuals who share these ideologies. Tuters and Hagen (2020) address the role of meme culture and online humour within these communities. They emphasise how memes are used as a tool for conveying views. They argue that memes serve as both a form of political expression and a means of community building. The use of irony and satire in memes allows those users to engage in political discourse in a way that is both accessible and that is resonant with younger audiences. Such a *meme culture* creates a shared language and set of symbols that strengthen group identity and solidarity. However, these online spaces often serve as echo chambers, reinforcing and radicalising the beliefs of their members through constant validation and affirmation. Other scholars examine how different aspects of digital tools influence and shape the identity, communication practices, and mobilisation of online

groups. For instance, Forchtner's et al. (2018) provide valuable insights into the narratives and symbolic constructions of right-wing political communities. Forchtner and Lubarda (2023) explore how some Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) construct narratives of influence and change. Their work reveals that the discourse is not uniformly sceptical of anthropogenic climate change but often criticises the methods and policies used to address it. Forchtner et al. (2018) also explore far-right climate change communication in Germany, identifying a continuum of scepticism and acceptance within this side of the political spectrum. His research underscores the need to understand the ideological basis that shapes far-right environmental narratives.

In contrast, libertarian virtual communities usually advocate for minimal government intervention, emphasising individual freedom and autonomy. Their ideology is rooted in the principles of free-market capitalism, personal liberty, and limited governance. Libertarians champion the protection of individual rights and often promote a deregulated and decentralised approach to both economic and social issues. The conflation of libertarians with right-wing extremists in academic and popular discourse likely stems from their shared scepticism toward government control and regulation[17]. However, this surface-level similarity belies deeper ideological divergences, particularly concerning issues of social hierarchy, moral values, and the extent of freedom in economic and personal domains. Libertarians quite often use a narrative that would fit both sides of the extremist spectrum.

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[17] A detailed and lengthy explanation of the political spectrum categorisation, especially the simplified metacategories of the Right-wing/Left-wing, is beyond the scope of this thesis. This categorisation could indeed form the basis of a fully developed thesis on its own. The purpose of this section is to highlight libertarianism as a heterodox ideology that does not fit neatly into the traditional dichotomy. While it is acknowledged that libertarianism shares some commonalities with right-wing politics, particularly in the emphasis on individual liberties and limited government of some of the Right-wing factions, it also diverges significantly in its advocacy for social freedoms, individual-focused social system and decentralised governance models. Therefore, this thesis posits that libertarianism should be understood as a distinct and complex political philosophy rather than being simplistically categorised along the traditional political spectrum alongside conflicting Right-wing or Left-wing ideas.

The digital tools and platforms used by libertarian communities often reflect their ideology. They prefer decentralised platforms and encryption technologies that safeguard individual privacy and reduce the potential for government surveillance or censorship (Baele et al., ibid.). Libertarian virtual communities typically foster a discourse that revolves around rational debate and philosophical discussions on rights, governance, and economics. This contrasts with the often emotive and identity-focused discourse prevalent in other extremist communities (i.e., Breeze, 2020). The philosophical grounding influences libertarians' advocacy strategies, policy preferences, and community norms, distinguishing them from the more traditionally conservative and often statist right-wing groups, or full-on progressive and often collectivist left-wing groups. While right-wing groups may focus on maintaining traditional social structures, libertarians usually advocate for a broader acceptance of diverse lifestyles if they do not infringe on the rights of others. This includes support for policies like drug legalisation and opposition to government-imposed moral standards. On the other hand, they do not recognise collective and imposed considerations in a top-down model. These communities allow for organic ideologisation and fluid community dynamics, distinguishing them from more centrally coordinated extremist groups. One could say that a libertarian online community does not have leadership *per se,* but rather that they have a polycentric leadership model with multiple centres providing competing influences over the groups. It aligns with the fractal leadership model, as proposed by Karatzogianni and Matthews (2023).

In such a model, leaders emerge situationally and must continually prove their worth, ensuring that leadership remains fluid and adaptable to changing circumstances. The organisation of such communities is therefore divided into smaller, self-similar units or *fractals*. Each fractal operates semi-autonomously but adheres to the overall vision and goals of the community. This mimics natural patterns, such as the branching of trees or the formation of snowflakes, where each part reflects the whole. Importantly, it means that the power distribution in the group is scattered, effectively forming decentralised networks with distributed power. Each fractal part of the community might have its leaders, who can be

recognised by other parts of the community as well but have no authority over most of the community whatsoever. Ergo, the leadership of such communities is fluid and situational, and might as well be rejected if it conflicts with the members' perspectives. Both extremist groups, right and left-wing ones, often feature more static leadership and hierarchical structure.

Libertarians could also be perceived as a type of a non-mainstream, or rather *heterodox* community. The term *heterodox* originally stems from the economic field. It denotes schools of economic thought that do not conform to mainstream or orthodox theories, such as neoclassical economics (Lee, 2009). Heterodox economics embraces diverse perspectives from the Marxian to the Austrian school, incorporating various methodologies and theoretical frameworks that challenge established norms. The only thing they agree on is that their explanation of the economic reality is not fitting in with the mainstream theories. The concept is particularly valuable in community studies as it allows for the exploration of groups that do not fit neatly into conventional societal, political, or economic categories (often one-dimensional, i.e., left-right politics), thereby enriching our understanding of various digital groups. Heterodoxy can describe social or political groups that are outside the conventional classifications. These communities often exhibit unique characteristics that mainstream theories do not fully explain or acknowledge, for example, aligning with the characteristics of groups in ideological conflict with each other or being largely 'unclassifiable'. Virtual libertarians exemplify such a heterodox community. As introduced in the previous sections, traditionally, libertarianism advocates for minimal government intervention, emphasising individual freedom and free-market principles. Within the digital realm, libertarians extend these principles into cyberspace, advocating for privacy, digital freedom, and resistance to centralised control, but often also for info-anarchism and other forms of anti-authoritarian aims (i.e., Thierer and Szoka, 2009). They operate outside the standard classifications of political and economic positions, forming a complex network of individuals united by their resentment towards the government and central authority, but also towards violence or various forms of xenophobia. The fractal nature of these communities is evident in their

organisational style—leadership and structure are fluid, emerging based on specific aims and projects rather than hierarchical positions.

In the final section of this chapter, I explore the complex spectrum of right-wing, left-wing, and libertarian virtual communities, highlighting their distinct characteristics and the underlying ideological dynamics that differentiate them. Right-wing virtual communities often emphasise conservative values, nationalism, and a hierarchical social structure. They use a range of online platforms to promote content and foster a sense of community among those with similar ideological leanings. In contrast, left-wing virtual communities typically align against capitalism and social inequality, advocating for a range of progressive causes from environmentalism to social justice. Libertarian virtual communities, often discussed alongside right-wing groups, advocate for minimal government intervention and maximum personal freedom. They prioritise individual rights and often utilise decentralised digital platforms to avoid government surveillance and censorship. Despite their alignment on some issues with right-wing groups, libertarians distinctively advocate for personal freedoms that might align more closely with some left-wing ideals, such as drug legalisation. These virtual communities, whether right, left, or libertarian, not only reflect but also actively shape political discourse through digital platforms. They leverage these platforms to organise, communicate, and mobilise, with each group using digital tools that align with their specific agendas and communication styles.

Additionally, the concept of fractal communities becomes particularly relevant in understanding the organisational structure of these virtual groups. Fractal communities are characterised by a lack of centralised leadership and a fluid, adaptable organisational structure, where leadership and roles emerge based on specific needs and projects rather than a fixed hierarchy. This model might be especially prevalent in libertarian communities, which emphasise individual autonomy and resistance to centralised control. In these communities, power and decision-making might be distributed across a network of individuals who operate semi-autonomously, reflecting the libertarian ethos of self-governance and personal freedom. This fractal nature allows for a dynamic and responsive

community structure that can quickly adapt to new challenges and opportunities, embodying the principles of decentralisation and individual empowerment that are central to libertarian philosophy.

## Individuals and the System

One prominent current in the scholarship that well suits this conversation is the actor-network theory (ANT). It suggests that the modern world relies on an artificial distinction between what is perceived as 'natural' and 'societal', and that the *real* world is based on mixed human and non-human networks (Latour, 2007). From this viewpoint, individuals gain their ability to influence events not by themselves, but through their interconnected relationships with other elements of the system (i.e., social media and algorithms). Importantly, technology does not inherently possess political power; instead, it acquires significance and influence within a network of relationships that can amplify or diminish its effects. These networks are not centrally orchestrated but are emergent properties of the interactions *within* them. Sayes (2014) also emphasises the agency of non-human actors, suggesting that it is essential to consider algorithms and technological infrastructures' influence on social living. These non-human actors play a significant role in shaping the behaviour and interactions of individuals within the network. For instance, social media platforms utilise algorithms to personalise content and recommendations for users, thereby shaping their online experiences and interactions (i.e., Perra and Rocha, 2019). To some extent, one could therefore interpret this theory as an expression of a certain entanglement of the technological and social worlds. An individual that is functioning in the modern world, is always complicit in technological processes because without them his social life could be difficult or even impossible to sustain. Technology is part of a tangled system of relationships and a significant element in that, because it has, to some extent, its *own* agenda. In this context, the concept of entangled political economy, advocated by Richard Wagner (2014), comes to mind. In his view, economic and political actions are deeply interconnected, influencing and shaping the other to their core. Wagner also highlights how these realms are *entangled* and cannot be understood in isolation. He details how these entanglements create an economy that should be

recognised as a *process* rather than a clearly defined structure. The Wagnerian insight in this conversation could be read to mean that the individual operates in parallel on many social planes (economic, political, and cultural), and none of them should be read as a *separate entity*. So, the individual operates in the market, which influences his political decisions, and the two planes are increasingly largely intertwined also because of the totality of experience made possible by technology.

ANT and Wagner's entangled political economy suggest a common theme: reality is complex and eludes simple explanations. These theories encourage a recognition of the interconnectedness of actions and their effects, advocating for a more holistic view that considers continuous and dynamic interactions among all system elements. Despite the valuable insights these theories offer into the complexity of systems, they should also face criticism because of their potential to underemphasise *individual agency* by focusing excessively on *systemic* or *network* effects. Effectively, these approaches can lead to some forms of determinism that see all outcomes as inevitable products of systemic interplay, rather than an effect of individuals' actions on the market arena.  At this stage, it would be worth underlining that I have a different view. The purpose of my reflections is to try to understand the *individual* experience in the context of a specific social phenomenon (technological development). It may therefore seem worthwhile to consider the theoretical model also from a macro level, even if only in developing my perspective. I am basing my argument on the scholarship initiated by Ludwig von Mises in 'Human Action' (1949) and continued by Friedrich August von Hayek in 'The Use of Knowledge in Society' (1945). They both noted that the role of the individual in market action is crucial and that observing individuals' activity will allow us to understand wider economic and social processes. The idea of *spontaneity* is crucial here. Hayek argues that complex structures in society arise from the interactions of individuals each pursuing their interests, rather than from deliberate design (Hayek, ibid.). Hayek's view focuses on how decentralised processes lead to the emergence of order from what appears to be chaos, asserting that the most effective interactions are those that are governed by a set of rules but not dictated by a central authority. Such a view focuses on assessing

phenomena by focusing on the activity of individual agents and their interactions with the outside world – including non-human agents operating in that world that can significantly influence its decision-making.

In the context of the technological changes of recent decades, however, it seems fair to emphasise the importance that non-human actors (actants) play in shaping social processes. To a large extent, they are man-made and they usually play the role assigned by their creators, but – following Hayek's understanding of unintended consequences (Hayek, ibid.) – they often play roles that are *decidedly different* from those originally assigned and have outcomes vastly *exceeding* initial assumptions. Their influence on social processes is significant (i.e., algorithmic influences on shaping decision-making, Bogert et al., 2021), and should be seen as key elements of the interaction system. Like ANT, Hayek's spontaneous order acknowledges the unpredictability and non-linearity of outcomes when multiple agents interact within a set framework of rules or norms. However, by focusing on individual actions and interactions, researchers can gain insights into the *organic development of norms*, and the evolution of digital groupings *from within*, whilst uncovering *individual causes* of such processes[18].

This section is an important introduction to my understanding of the role of the individual in the chaotic and complex concept of virtuality. This is because most of the existing scholarship focuses on a macro-centric approach, which observes large-scale changes occurring at the level of entire platforms or even the Internet as a whole. I am interested in focusing on why an individual, functioning in a technology-dependent society, makes the decisions they do. This, together with the process of technological change observed above, constitutes the outer layer of the theoretical model adopted in this thesis. ANT highlights the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors within networks and reveals how individuals both influence and are influenced by their digital environments. This aligns with

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[18] Although methodological individualism, as advocated by Hayek, emphasises the actions and motivations of individuals as the primary units of analysis, it does not preclude the consideration of structural factors (i.e., Di Ioirio, 2016). While methodological individualism prioritises individual agency, it can coexist with structural analyses by examining how structures shape and are shaped by individual actions.

Wagner's depiction of deeply intertwined economic and political actions, where the boundaries between individual agency and collective (be it political and economic) activities blur, making the economy and politics emergent rather than static structures. Hayekian and Misesian visions add a crucial dimension by focusing on how spontaneous order arises from individuals acting within the contexts and according to their localised knowledge. This notion is particularly relevant in digital spaces where decentralised processes dominate and order emerges from the chaos of uncountable interactions, governed by shared but ever-evolving rules and norms. This theoretical framework is pivotal for studying how individuals within virtual communities not only respond to but also shape the media landscapes and social structures they engage with. It helps in understanding the formation of digital cultures and norms, and how these, in turn, influence broader socio-economic and political processes. It provides insights into the organic development of virtual communities and the emergent properties characteristic of these complex systems.

## Theoretical model

The theoretical model I employ posits that the rapid development of technology over the past 30 years has fundamentally altered how individuals perceive the social world and interact within it. The potential that has emerged with the development of technology has enabled the formation of a range of communities, including those beyond the mainstream concept of the political axis. They can take the form of fragmented organisation and leadership and adaptive structures, which is even more in keeping with the fractal community model. I call them *fractal heterodox communities* and assume virtual libertarians to subscribe to it. Central to this transformation is the Internet and supporting mobile technologies, alongside various other innovations that have created technology-assisted spaces deeply influencing daily interactions, perceptions, and psychological states of individuals.

The initial assumption is that technological advancements have revolutionised communication by providing continuous connectivity and facilitating multifaceted interactions that span all social, economic, political, and cultural domains. They have led to the development of spaces where digital and physical realities

amalgamate, influencing how individuals perceive their relationships with both the world as well as other individuals. These changes have influenced the emergence of a new information vehicle system - hybrid media, representing the convergence of traditional and digital media, and providing integrated functionalities that accompany individuals throughout their daily lives. It is precisely this integration that creates a state of 'super-connectedness' in which members of virtual communities are ingrained. The advancements in technology have also expanded the spaces available for social interaction, allowing virtual communities to transcend any geographical boundaries. The digital environment fosters the formation of communities based on shared interests, needs, and goals, ranging from hobbyist groups to politically active organisations and cultural collectives. The dynamics within these communities are shaped by the digital tools and platforms they utilise, with socio-political engagement and activism increasingly realised *through* virtual means. Ergo, virtual activists and social movements leverage digital platforms to mobilise support and advocate for change.

An additional assumption is that virtual communities often transcend conventional political alignments (left-right) and embody heterodox approaches. Heterodox communities are those that deviate from mainstream or conventional norms, ideologies, and practices. They are often formed around alternative viewpoints and challenge established paradigms in various domains, including politics, economics, culture, and social organisation. These communities draw parallels with heterodox economics, which encompasses diverse schools of thought outside the mainstream. Besides, the fluid nature of digital sociality allows for the emergence of new organisational structures and power distributions, supporting dynamic interactions and the continuous evolution of community needs and goals. Such *fractal communities* are characterised by their decentralised and adaptive structures. Unlike traditional hierarchical organisations, fractal communities operate through networks of interconnected individuals or small groups, each functioning autonomously but reflecting the overall ethos and goals of the larger community. Leadership and organisational roles are fluid and situational, allowing for rapid adaptation to changing circumstances.

Ergo, digital platforms and tools are central to the formation and evolution of fractal heterodox communities. Social media, forums, and other online spaces provide the infrastructure for individuals to connect, share ideas, and collaborate without the constraints of physical proximity or rigid organisational structures. Membership in these communities is often fluid and dynamic, with individuals joining and leaving based on their evolving interests and needs. This adaptability allows fractal heterodox communities to remain resilient and responsive to changes and inner and outer dynamics. Such an approach will guide the subsequent analysis and discussion, providing a structured foundation for exploring the broader implications of digital integration for society and individual behaviour.

The concept of fractal heterodox communities draws from various strands of literature, each contributing to its overall theoretical framework. The literature on digital and hybrid media systems provides the technological context, explaining how these communities form and operate in the digital space. Research on virtual communities and digital activism offers insights into the dynamics of online group formation, interaction, and mobilisation. Studies on heterodox economics lend the conceptual basis for understanding communities that deviate from mainstream ideologies. The literature on right-wing, left-wing, and libertarian virtual communities help in contextualising these groups within the broader political landscape while highlighting their unique characteristics. Actor-network theory and the concept of entangled political economy contribute to understanding the complex interplay between human and non-human actors in digital ecosystems. Finally, the Hayekian and Misesian perspectives on spontaneous order and individual (human) action provide a framework for analysing how these communities emerge and evolve without central planning components.

## Chapter conclusions

This chapter explores how virtual developments have redefined reality by integrating virtuality at its core, significantly reshaping how individuals form identities, build relationships, and engage with the world. It highlights the transformative impact of new technologies on continuous, accessible, and

multifaceted communication, altering social interactions, political engagement, and cultural dynamics. The focus is on the hybridisation of media systems, and the expansive influence of social media. The chapter provides an analysis of digital media platforms' evolution and the complexities of the hybrid media system. It underscores the implications of living in an era where digital and real are intertwined, fostering a new paradigm of human integration. Per the initial takes, digital and mobile technologies have significantly influenced media, transitioning from basic communication tools to sophisticated ecosystems facilitating real-time, global interactions. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become fundamental in building social interactions, enabling global communities to engage in various social and political activities. These platforms have democratised information sharing and allowed individuals to create and curate digital identities, altering traditional socialisation processes and knowledge sharing. The hybrid media system, characterised by the interplay between traditional and new media, significantly affects information creation, distribution, and consumption. The influence of algorithms and technological infrastructures shapes user behaviour and interactions, presenting both opportunities and challenges. I analyse the psychological effects of social media, highlighting the concept of 'super-connectedness' where digital interactions blend with physical experiences, impacting cognition, attention spans, and emotional responses of the users.

I shift from the level of the media to that of the communities created within it, dealing with the concept of virtual communities. The evolution of such communities from geographically bound groups to 'communities without propinquity' has led to the advancement of personalised, interest-driven, and often global communities. These communities, supported by digital tools, facilitate new forms of community engagement and social interaction, challenging traditional definitions of community. The chapter also addresses the decline in non-digital social interactions, particularly among adolescents and young adults, highlighting the psychological impacts of heavy digital media use. I then follow with the concept of virtual activism that has emerged as a powerful form of social engagement,

leveraging the Internet and social media to create impactful campaigns with low barriers to entry. Challenges such as the digital divide, surveillance, and misinformation are discussed, and, in a way, it draws the context for the activities of many contemporary internet users. The chapter concludes with an examination of right-wing, left-wing, and libertarian virtual communities, highlighting their distinct characteristics and digital strategies. Right-wing communities often focus on traditional values and nationalistic sentiments, while left-wing communities emphasise opposition to capitalism and social inequalities. Libertarian communities advocate for minimal government intervention and personal freedom, *de facto* posing as heterodox communities, with fluid and decentralised structures. The concept of fractal communities, also characterised by *fluid* leadership and a scattered organisation model, is explored, demonstrating how these virtual communities resist traditional hierarchical structures and embody the new paradigm of human integration facilitated by digital technologies. Finally, the theoretical model is designed, based on those deliberations.

# CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

The objective of this section is to reflect on a methodology selection and the journey that guided me to it. I primarily aimed to gather the participants' personal narratives about their technological experiences within the libertarian community. Additionally, I sought to understand how technology influenced their affiliation with this group. While developing the analysis, I got the impression that the work was, in large part, like a construction of a spider's web that has spread over these conversations and linked them into an intricately constructed story of virtual libertarians in Poland. While this study does not claim to encompass *all* members of the Polish virtual libertarian community or provide a conclusive answer to questions about its overall characteristics, it does serve as a pioneering source of insight into this group, along with other virtual communities established in Poland since the 1990s.

This chapter will therefore first focus on the analysis of narrative methods and how they fit into this work, then follow the selection of the relevant tools and the resulting research process assumptions. At the outset, I also addressed the demographics and introduction to my interview group.

## Demography

### Overview

in general, the recruiting process required careful navigation to strike a balance between meeting the specific criteria and ensuring a representative sample within the group. As a member of the group with an insider status, the recruitment process presented both easy and challenging aspects. On one hand, being part of the group allowed me to leverage my connections and personal knowledge to identify potential interviewees who met the specific criteria I had set. The challenge was in identifying a specific cohort within the cohort consisting of individuals with seniority and influence within the group. In this regard, I took on the responsibility of approaching and selecting interviewees based on their seniority and the level of influence they have in the group. In turn, one of the hard aspects of the process

was the group's mainly male-dominated nature which made it difficult to achieve a balanced gender representation among the participants. I must also emphasise that due to the constraints caused by the pandemic, the interviews were conducted via virtual software.

Overall, I recruited a group of 36 interviewees following the principle of saturation. The interviewees ranged in age between 19 and 50 and lived in large and medium-sized cities (N = 36, $n^1$ woman = 4 [11%], $n^2$ men = 32 [89%]). Every interviewee had at least a lower degree, a *licencjat* (BA level), or was about to finish it. Thirteen (36%) of them also had a *doktorat* (PhD*)* or were in the process of obtaining it. Ten (28%) of the interviewees were recruited as seniors of the community. The remaining 26 interviewees (72%) I recruited through general inquiry posts on libertarian social media and forums.

## Education and Work Status

A large proportion of interviewees acknowledge that their professional skills overlap with their contribution to the community. Thus, some of my interviewees provide graphics to various free-market organisations and think tanks, others administrate or create websites for them, and some provide professional editing and composition of books or electronic books. They have a high level of digital literacy, due, in part, to the fact that they have built their professional lives using the digital market. Most interviewees mentioned that they had an easy time with new technologies, be it computers or new Internet tools. Their digital experiences allowed them to achieve an adequate level of digital literacy at an early stage, as indicated by stories that often relate to the early years of their online presence (Chapter '*Origins*'). That, in turn, influenced the later development of digital skills, that come in handy in their daily work.

Only a few of them mentioned financial problems in their remarks, and that was rather a part of memories, for example of a time they were students. One could even sense from these interviews that they have a stable living situation at the point of interviews. This applies not only to the senior members but also to the youngest interviewees, including students. For instance, one of these interviewees (WP) said

that at the beginning of her master's studies, she was working part-time for NGOs rather than off student loan or family help.

In the context of education, my interviewees acknowledged in their interviews that they had at least a bachelor's or master's degree, and more than a third even doctorates, or are in the process of finishing one[19]. Higher education seems to be a natural stage for my interviewees, which is reflected in the professions they undertook.

## Gender Structure

Even though some interviewees acknowledge that the gender structure of the community has changed over time, most of my interviewees were men between the ages of 30 and 40. MC mentions that, at least in the earlier stages of its development, the group was dominated by men. '*In those days*' – he said – '*there were only a few women in the community*'. Also, the specific nature of Facebook which, as a medium, has a predominance of male users – 56.6%-man vs 43.4%-woman as of January 2022 (Dixon, 2022) – may have had an impact on the number of women participating in this community. For this reason, when recruiting for interviews, I had problems reaching more than 10% of the female interviewees. Nevertheless, some of them mentioned to me, before the official interview, that there might only be a few women in the movement, but that the trend is increasing[20]. This is largely because, as one of those interviewees put it, other women may identify with someone who is already participating in group activities, but this type of change requires more time.

The senior voices that were mentioned above, were intended to help explore the stories related to the community's beginnings in more depth, to then compare their experiences with those of more junior members of the community. In the process

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[19] According to the Central Statistical office of Poland, nearly 50% of individuals in the age group of 25 to 34 have a university degree. This statistic positions Poland's population in the median range when compared to other European countries.

[20] Over a year since the interviews took place, the Ladies of Liberty Alliance (LOLA), an organisation comprising exclusively of women with free-market ideologies, has been established in Poland. As of the current date, the organisation boasts an active membership count exceeding a few dozen individuals. [Online] [Accessed on 7th June 2023]
https://www.facebook.com/ladiesoflibertypoland/

of analysing the data, it became apparent that the seniors attached greater importance to the community-shaping process and based their stories around it. In turn, the younger members of the group focused primarily on their technological experiences and the relationship of the technology to the community already in place, as well as on the interpersonal contacts they made through these tools.

My interviewees are most often associated with the digital market, the third sector organisations and academia. Most are between 30 and 40 and are predominantly male. They live in large cities and enjoy a rather stable financial status. They often reutilise skills acquired through professional activities supporting organisations formed around the community. As a side note, and as a research curiosity for those interested in the field of virtual communities, among my interviewees were people who have formed long-term relationships with people they met through this community. Several of them are now even legally married.

## Interviewees

I dedicate an entire section in the methodology chapter to introduce my interviewees. The reason behind this is that I wanted to give my interviewees a voice and a tangible presence in this research. By providing a more detailed close-up view of their backgrounds, and characteristics, I aimed to *humanise* them and honour their individuality and unique perspectives. Rather than being treated as the sole components of the data collection, they are an integral part of the entire research – *the reason* for it.  It was important for me to showcase the depth and richness of their stories, allowing readers to connect with them on a personal level and gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics within the virtual libertarian community. This decision to offer such detail in the demographic chapter was driven by my commitment to presenting a comprehensive and inclusive portrayal of the participants, ultimately enhancing the credibility and validity of this research.

TP is a man in his early 30s. He works as a programmer and lives in one of Poland's largest cities. He is making an interesting observation about the virtual libertarian community in Poland*: 'It is probably* (…) *a nature of the libertarian movement in*

*Poland that many people are in some ways related to the IT industry'. In*deed, many of my interviewees are directly connected to the digital industry – be it in IT (programming, admin network), graphics, marketing, Internet consultancy, etc. This shows that most of them are very familiar with the online environment and not only treat it as a tool for communication but also, in many cases, as a platform that allows them to *earn a living*. For instance, TP in his story says that he works for an IT company and has been working with programming and creating websites for years. It was through those skills that he was willing to help the community grow, by building sites for the free-market organisations. He was effectively doing so by carrying out his job.

JS is a man in his fifties. He lives in one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country and works as a system admin. His experience played a big role in the creation of certain communication platforms (electronic magazines or *e-zines/zines*), especially in the early years of the community, when the Internet access rate and literacy were still very limited in Poland. This was heavily influenced by his experience of working with computers. His voice is echoed by MM, whom himself made a career in game development in the 1990s and 2000s. He lives in Warsaw, although he devotes a large part of his story to the period when he lived in Krakow. He still works in games, teaches at a university, and sits on the supervisory boards of several public-listed companies. MM is also in his mid-50s. He is cheerful, throws jokes around and uses the language of a decidedly younger Internet user. One can sense the confidence, but also the sense of amusement associated with the stories of this community. MM admits that thanks to his success in his industry, he had no problems shouldering the maintenance of websites and an online forum for Polish virtual libertarians. Even more so, it was quite easy for him to administer these topics, due to his professional experience with online businesses. There are several other voices in the study that mention their job status, and most of them, if they mention their working life at all, underline their career in the digital sector. Among them are ZS – a guy in his mid-20s who works as a programmer and lives in a medium-sized city in the south of the country, TM – a 30-year-old programmer from Gdańsk, one of the most cheerful among

interviewees, RG, a 30-something male from one of the country's largest cities, also a programmer, and MT — in his mid-30s, living abroad and working as a programmer. MG is about 30 years old, also lives abroad and works as a graphic designer, while BS, a twenty-something from a large city in the west of Poland, is currently self-employed, and works in digital design and programming. MA — nearing 40 from a medium town in central Poland works in the consultancy sector, and MD, a female interviewee around her mid-30s, works for a marketing company.

Several of my interviewees work in the academic world although they often admit that they have other jobs in addition, such as working for the NGO sector or consulting. Among them are AC, a 30-something living in Wroclaw, working for a large consulting firm but also in the NGO and consultancy sector, IS, also a 30-something from a large agglomeration in the south of the country, working at university, and JBW a nearing 40 academic, living in Wroclaw. In addition to them, a 30-something MB, LA and LS, are all working at a university, and all contributing to the third sector. Also, ML from a large town in northern Poland, works for a research institute and presides over one of the largest libertarian third-sector organisations. SG, in his 50s, is an assistant professor at a university in Kraków. SW, nearing-40, also worked at a university in Poznań before. Some interviewees devoted themselves entirely to the third sector. 30-something TD lives in Krakow, and works for an NGO, nearing-40 MC from Krakow is co-running a large NGO together with JSP, also nearing-40 from Wroclaw. LB, in his early 30s, presides over another large non-governmental organisation. Also, EP, a 30-something, lives in Warsaw and works for NGOs at the European institutions level. Two of the interviewees work as journalists. NG — a 30-something interviewee from Warsaw and SS, also a 30-something interviewee from the east of Poland. Among the interviewees are also representatives of other professions. Entrepreneurs, such as AR — an over-30-year-old from Warsaw who runs a few businesses and presides over a third sector organisation, BG — an almost 40-year-old entrepreneur from Poznan, GB — in his mid-30s from southern Poland, running a publishing business, and TG — 30-something woman entrepreneur from southern Poland. There are also

a few students: UD and MS from central Poland, NS and WP from Warsaw, and PJ from northern Poland, currently living in Warsaw; all in their early-to-mid 20s.

## Narrative Research

The choice to employ narrative methods in this research stems from the recognition of the unique power of storytelling in capturing *individual* perspectives – something that seems to be important and natural for libertarians who are the axis of this study. Narrative methods offer a deeper understanding of the community members' journeys, beliefs, and interactions, allowing for the exploration of their identities and shared values. By giving voice to the individuals who shape and are shaped by the community, such methods enable a more nuanced examination of the community's dynamics and its impact on the lives of its members.

Narrative research – as both a methodology and an evolving method (Clandinin, 2007) – utilises the personal stories of individuals as its foundation. The researcher's role is to construct a narrative that incorporates these stories while balancing between an evaluation or appraisal of them and an exploration of their context within the broader social, cultural, or institutional framework (Clandinin, 2013). The narratives of the participants may encompass threads from multiple temporal dimensions, and the researcher must arrange and contextualise them chronologically (Czarniawska, 2004), thereby highlighting the importance of this approach for constructing a timeline of events. The narrative research was used in various qualitative studies across multiple disciplines, including psychology (Lieblich, et al. 1998), management (Czarniawska, ibid.), and sociology (Cortazzi, 1993). often the approaches differed, depending on the researchers' needs (Chase, 2018). There are various interpretations of narrative methods, such as thematic analysis (what was told), structural analysis (the nature of the story and its telling), performance analysis (the way that the story is told), or even visual analysis of the images (Polkinghorne, 1995, Riessman, 2008). Said analysis focuses on the significant statements, meanings, and descriptions of the story that can be defined as its essence. Building a narrative as a research method focuses on a story told by, and through, individuals (Chase, ibid.; Clandinin & Connolly, 2000). Those narrators

share a recollection of events they were witnessing or experiencing. Such a story may be fully told by the individual but can also be co-constructed by the researcher. Narrative research is often perceived as being inherently collaborative due to the interaction and, in many cases, dialogue between the researcher and participant. This is especially the case when multiple interviews are conducted, and the researcher must build a collective narrative incorporating the stories shared by all participants. Chase (ibid.) further develops the collaborative form of the analysis of narratives and proposes the presentation of many interactively composed voices in the form of an individual voice building upon the previous stories. Such a group of narratives will be then organised and constructed into one narration by the researcher.

## Episodic Narrative Inquiry

In considering the use of narrative methods to examine individual experiences, I initially encountered challenges in aligning the phenomenon of my investigation with the technical structure of this approach. At its core, standard narrative research presupposes two key components that appeared, to me, to be insufficient or even incongruent with my research objectives. Firstly, it assumes that the researcher must not interfere in any manner with the story constructed by the narrator, regardless of the context of the study, even if the story takes an unexpected form (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). This, in turn, excludes the possibility of establishing a certain framework, context, or phenomenon that the researcher would like to focus on. Secondly, in the narrator-researcher relationship, a researcher is – in essence – an interlocutor directly receiving the narrator's story (ibid.) Theoretically, the researcher is to remain as impartial as possible. I should not interfere with the content of the narrative in any way, whilst the interviewees assume that I don't know both the story its context and the borders of the story setting (ibid.)

In this study, however, I acted as an *insider*; one of the members of the community. I might have, but might have not, been fully aware of some of the details of the stories told by my interlocutors. I possessed a significant amount of understanding about the workings of the entire group, including information that may be deemed

irrelevant by the participant and not need to be mentioned. This altered the narrator-researcher relationship. In theory, my insider status in the community should have allowed me to build a quick rapport with the interlocutors, reflected in the way we communicated. The interview might have taken a less formal and more conversational form. It should not require building a new relationship, since we met as members of a single community. In turn, this required a different approach that allowed me to adapt to this type of situation: to care for the well-being of the interlocutors but also to conduct effective research.

I think it is worth emphasising that I am a pragmatist. I believe that modification of existing solutions may allow us to open the way to meaningful, ethically safe research. As explained above, the main problems of standard narrative methods are the inability to embed the phenomenon as a theme of the conversation, and the rather rigid role of the researcher.

After getting acquainted with several variations of narrative methods, I decided that, for the study, I would use a slightly modified Episodic Narrative interview (ENI) methodology as proposed by Robin Mueller (2019). The ENI method is based on a fusion of several other qualitative methods. Mueller assumed that it is possible to focus on a specific problem in the narrative study by assuming certain principles borrowed from other qualitative research (i.e., semi-structural research). Its main assumption is to shift the burden of narration to a specific phenomenon – a subject of the researcher's interest. The narrative in this method becomes slightly controllable, allowing the researcher to direct the interlocutors to the definition of the phenomenon under study.

> 'The purpose of an episodic narrative interview is to better understand a phenomenon by generating individual stories of experience in the context of that phenomenon. As such, an episodic narrative interview participant provides nested narrative accounts of their experiences with a social phenomenon, within the context of a bounded situation or episode' (Mueller, ibid.). (Figure 2)

While Mueller defines herself as a critical realist, she emphasises that this type of research can be used by other philosophical currents as well.

My understanding of this method presupposes a philosophical foundation of the pragmatist, such as the need to define the context in research while emphasising the central role of human experience. While the narrative assumptions are preserved in this model, the way of building the focus of the interlocutors' stories changes. Above all, this method assumes that there is a way to properly modify the interview process, in which the researcher has a chance to interfere with the narrative within a specific set of modifiers. It allows the researcher to build the context of the conversation – focused on the researched phenomenon – by introducing a *multi-phase narrative interview* (Mueller, ibid.). Mueller's fusion method assumes a six-stage process of building a narrative (See: Figure 3). In the beginning, the researcher identifies a phenomenon that will be studied through the narratives. Then the interlocutor is introduced to the formal assumptions of the method. The interview begins with the definition of a phenomenon by the participants themselves. After the introduction of the definitions, a narrative interview begins. The main story is preceded by the narrative episodic story – an excerpt from the interlocutor's life that has some connection with the phenomenon. After the episodic introduction, the interlocutor is asked to draw the narrative towards the phenomenon, bearing in mind the episodic fragment. The episodic context allows the interlocutor to reduce the barrier of entry, especially for those interlocutors who have difficulty building a continuous narrative. After completing the narrative, an interlocutor should be able to interfere with the story and add any possible supplements or amendments, whilst helping the researcher with the sensemaking of the story told.

In the context of this study, interviewees were asked to describe or define the impact of technology on the virtual libertarian community, so that they could determine for themselves if, and to what extent, it was a definable problem. This, of course, took a central position in the study; becoming the phenomenon, around which the narratives are to be built. Then the interviewees were asked to share an episode from their life that happened in the context of the community. This could

have been anything, as far as it was told after indicating what is the intent of this episodic narration. It might have been the first physical or the first social media contact with the community, funny or dramatic moments experienced in it, or some other excerpt from the history of this community. It was the interlocutor's decision and their story. It allowed to place the narrative in the shared episode context. As Mueller points out, the intended focus is to 'deeply understand participant's experiences with a particular social phenomenon' (Mueller, ibid., no pagination). Such a setting allowed it. The final fragment that allowed for changes or modifications in the written content – which resulted from the assumption made by Flick (2000) – is worth emphasising because it was a way for interlocutors to support the sensemaking process. It allowed the interlocutor to complete the elements of the story that they considered important (Figure 3).

In this method, my role was limited to helping the narrators when they lost the thread or asked specifically for help. Importantly, I did not intervene and did not influence the stories told by my interviewees. Considering the previously mentioned insider status, the auto-ethnographic narrative was used to fill the gaps in the narratives of other participants. Muncey (2010), defines autoethnography through psychological layers that create the personal history of the author and reveal the cultural setting of the story. Such a method can be written and/or recorded by the researcher who is also a subject of the study (Ellis, et al. 2010). The researcher collects personal recollections of events (Plummer, 1983) that may, or may not, focus on a specific context (i.e., Czarniawska, ibid, Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). It's important to underline that the author can use interviews to recall the events and confront their subjective recollections with others (Delany, 2004). Ellis, et al. (2010:4-5) summarise that auto-ethnographers 'retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity'. The same authors add that auto-ethnographers should produce 'evocative thick description of personal and interpersonal experience' (ibid.).

## Analysis

This research project employs the Episodic Narrative inquiry (ENI) approach to explore the experiences of technological change and its significance within a virtual libertarian community in Poland. While the initial aim was to capture unique individual experiences using ENI, the analysis revealed recurring themes and patterns within the participants' narratives. These thematic consistencies shed light on shared experiences and collective perspectives that emerged within the community and across my interviewees' stories. Despite the individuality of each participant's narrative, the identified themes provided valuable insights into the broader dynamics and experiences of the virtual libertarian community.

Consequently, I have chosen the thematic analysis to analyse the collected data and uncover the underlying patterns and commonalities within participants' accounts. Thematic analysis is a widely used method of qualitative data analysis that allows the identification and categorisation of emerging interviews' patterns and themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). I adopt an inductive approach to coding, which involves identifying and defining themes directly from the data (ibid). The themes are then interpreted considering the research questions and existing literature to provide a deeper understanding of the research questions (ibid.). The identification of these recurring themes added depth and richness to the analysis, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the community's experiences considering technological change. By using ENI and thematic analysis, this project contributes to the growing body of research that explores the complex nature of human experiences, beliefs, and values in the context of technological change. The inductive approach to coding is a widely used qualitative data analysis technique that allows the researcher to develop codes and categories based on the data itself, without preconceived categories or frameworks (Charmaz, 2006). This approach is particularly useful when the research is exploratory and aims to generate new insights and understanding from the data (Braun, et al., ibid.). Such an approach allows for the emergence of themes and patterns that might not have been anticipated at the outset of the research (Boyatzis, ibid.). While the inductive approach to coding has been criticised for being subjective and potentially leading

to the development of idiosyncratic themes (Braun, et al., ibid.), it can also lead to more nuanced and complex understandings of the data (Charmaz, ibid.). Moreover, an inductive approach can be particularly useful in the early stages of a research project when there is limited prior knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation (Guest, et al., 2006) – as it is with this thesis.

## Coding and Structure

I began with a close reading of the interviews, looking for patterns and relationships among different data points (Guest, et al., ibid.). After reading through the interviews a few times, I have developed initial codes that captured these patterns and grouped them into three broader categories relating to experiences in outer-phenomena (historical, socio-cultural), and purely inner-phenomenon (technological) contexts. After a few more close readings, I was able to identify themes, which I used to create the following thematic categories: *origins in the community [**Origins**]*, *belonging to the community [**Belonging**]*, and *enabling the community [**Enabling**]* (Figure 4)*. I also focused on reviewing themes and assessing their relevance to the study before continuing (Figure 5). Finally, I focused on creating a thematic map that shows the relationships between the themes (Figure 6). It is very important to point out that the first category serves not as a theme *per se*, but as an introductory phase establishing the historical context for the later stages of analysis. It operates as a conduit for the generation of initial codes. Whilst this stage is key to generating initial codes, the comprehensive analysis and interpretation of these codes are reserved for later chapters of the study.

These thematic categories serve as scaffolding for the analysis, providing a broader context and ensuring a systematic approach to understanding the subjective experiences of the interviewees. These early codes not only serve as instruments for understanding the emerging patterns and themes within these categories but also pave the way for the subsequent phenomenon-centred analysis in the last category. This progression enables a coherent narrative to emerge from the data while simultaneously upholding the individual complexities and idiosyncrasies of each interviewee's experiences.

The '*Origins*' serve as a foundational piece that encapsulates the genesis of my interviewees in the community, as well as their initial foray into the virtual realm. It forms the crucial first step in the investigative funnel, establishing the groundwork necessary for an in-depth exploration and comprehension of the overarching themes that emerge in the latter stages of this research. The '*Belonging*' forms a second-tier analytical layer, focusing on the community's sense of belonging and the significance of technology in establishing and preserving this feeling. Both those categories, arising in the initial phase of analysis, provide a comprehensive and multi-faceted groundwork for understanding the interviewees' shared experiences.

However, their utility extends beyond their respective categories. These codes contribute to the complex task of disentangling the relationship between technology and experience, which lies at the heart of the '*Belonging*' section. By illuminating how the community's origins and sense of belonging intertwine with technology, these early codes serve as critical interpretive tools for later analysis. They help to uncover the processes through which technological changes are experienced, understood, and even narrated (even though, as already underlined, it focuses on themes *within* narratives rather than *the* narratives*)*, providing a vital basis for the subsequent examination of technology's enabling role in the community's evolution and growth. Finally, the *Enabling* category is pivotal to this study as it delves into the heart of the research question – the significant impact of technology on the virtual libertarian community's members. Unlike the previous categories, it is focused primarily on the technological phenomena, analysing how technology has fostered the growth and evolution of the community and profoundly influenced the members' lives. It represents the narrowest part of the funnel, capturing the most specific and central aspect of the investigation. The research draws on the information gathered in previous phases and applies it to an exploration of technology's role in creating and sustaining the community's sense of belonging and identity, among my interviewees.

Consequently, the thematic analysis of this research project operates within a dynamic coding framework, where codes generated in the initial phases both illuminate their respective categories and act as critical interpretive tools for

subsequent analysis of the phenomenon of interest. In this sense, the coding process serves as a mechanism for enriching the analysis by fostering interconnectivity between themes and categories, while simultaneously providing a clear structure to guide interpretation. It is through this recursive coding and thematic analysis that the research project succeeds in crafting a nuanced and comprehensive portrait of the members of the virtual libertarian community's experiences in the technological contexts.

<u>Origins</u>

Against this background, the first category is not formed by distinct themes but rather by one large historical theme. Building a context is crucial for comprehending both the words of the interviewees and the unique characteristics of this community. It pertains to the origins of the interviewees within both the libertarian community and the virtual realm and is consistent with the literature on the role of cultural values and historical context in shaping attitudes towards technology (i.e., Bijker et al., 1987). It is essential because it sets the foundation for understanding the personal stories and backgrounds of each interviewee, shedding light on the conditions and influences that led them to join the virtual libertarian community. It does not focus on a specific theme or overarching topic in the way that subsequent categories do. Instead, it functions as a launching pad, or a top-level of the investigative funnel, providing the necessary context to deepen the understanding of the subsequent thematic categories. This category, therefore, sets the stage for a more profound understanding of the themes that emerge later in the research and effectively bridges the gap between individual narratives and collective experiences within this unique virtual community.

For text clarity and organisation, I have categorised those experiences into four groups of interviewees, who had largely similar experiences with their beginnings in the virtual libertarian world – *the proto-libertarians, the activists, the intellectuals,* and *the libertarians of the social-media era*.

- The **Proto-libertarians** (the most senior interviewees, with many years of non-digital experience before the emergence of virtual communities)

- The **Activists** (interviewees who entered the community at fairly early stages of its development and who largely focused on strands of activism in their stories)

- The **intellectuals** (interviewees who entered the community at fairly early stages of its development and who largely focused on the threads of intellectual development and intellectual promotion of libertarianism on the Internet)

- The **Libertarians of the social-media era** (interviewees who only entered the community during the advancement of social media)

Themes that are grouped in this category, offer a unique perspective on both the community's history and the members' individual experiences with such-outlined history, which is a valuable addition to the existing literature. It also provides insight into how the experiences of different generations influenced their emerging views and feelings towards technology and how this correlates with their approach to interacting with other members of the community. In addition, this chapter allows for a deeper consideration of the characteristics of this community in the context of the academic discussions mentioned in the previous chapter and considered most important in the context of this work.

The code-matrix A (*Figure 7)* used in this phase consists of **CODE** (specific patterns identified), **THEME** (broader categories to which the codes belong), **CATEGORY** (the specific category within each theme), **PARTICIPANT** (which interviewee the code relates to), and **SAMPLE** (a quote or example illustrating the code).

Belonging

I then moved to the centre of the funnel, to further use the metaphor. The second category of themes examines the feeling of belonging. It provides insights into the interviewees' journey towards becoming libertarians and their experiences within the evolving community. It aligns with the literature on the impact of technology on social life, suggesting the social and cultural implications of technological developments (i.e., Pinch & Bijker, 1984). In this category, I identified several sub-themes grouped into two main themes:

- **Socialisation** (impact of families [*Family*], public schools and the education [*Schools*]) and political attitudes [*Political_Attitudes*]
- **Binders** (networking [*Networking*], integration-drivers [*integration*]).

The first two (families and public schooling/education) suggest that the community's values were, at least partially, passed down through generations and reinforced through experiences with educational institutions. They influenced the formation of political beliefs to a large extent (political attitudes). The integratory elements (networking, integration drivers) suggest that social networks and shared values played a role in integrating members into the community and shaping their attitudes towards technology. Those themes align with the literature on the social shaping of technology, which also suggests that technology is not a neutral or deterministic force but is factually shaped by social and cultural factors (i.e., MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999). This category of themes, therefore, shows the mutual influences between technology and the socio-cultural aspects of belonging that my interviewees observed and experienced. This chapter, in conjunction with the preceding one, significantly contributes to contextualising the findings of this research within the discussions presented in the previous chapter and the broader academic debates surrounding virtual communities.

The second level builds on the first level by analysing the initial codes identified in the Origins phase and incorporating new codes that emerge from the data at this level. This phase explores the sense of community belonging and the impact of technology on this sense of belonging. The code-matrix B (*Figure 8)* used in this phase consists of **PARTICIPANT** (the interviewee), **CATEGORY** (the broader category of themes), **THEME** (each identified theme), **DESCRIPTION** (a detailed description of the theme or phenomenon), **INFLUENCE** (how the theme influences the interviewee's decisions), and **SAMPLE** (an example or quote illustrating the theme).

Enabling

Finally, I focused on the end of the funnel, i.e., the centre of the identified phenomenon that was enabling the community to exist. While the previous two categories focused on historical and socio-cultural experiences, this third category

focused primarily on technology – the phenomenon that made these experiences possible. This category of themes is consistent with the literature on the social and economic impacts of technology (Castells, 2000; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). I have identified four main thematic groups here:

- **Access** (Internet *[Internet_Access],* mobile *[Mobile_Access]* and information *[information_Access]),*
- **Platforms** (old media *[Old_Media],* pre-social media platforms *[Pre_Social],* and sharing platforms *[Sharing_Platforms]),*
- **Facebook** (Groups *[Facebook_Groups],* network effect *[Network_Effect],* and risks *[Risks]),*
- **Offline vs Online** (virtual and non-virtual space *[Online_Offline]).*

The first group highlights the importance of access to information and communication technologies, which is a well-established factor in the digital divide literature (Warschauer and Matuchniak, 2010). The second group aligns with the literature on the social and political impacts of media (Chadwick, 2017), while the third aligns with research on the social implications of social media (Boyd, 2014). The last group suggests that the community's use of technology was not limited to the virtual realm, which is consistent with the literature on the blurring of boundaries between physical and virtual spaces (Gordon and Silva, 2011). This technology-driven world seamlessly blends with the real world, leading to interconnected interactions.

This phase draws on insights from the previous phases and analyses all the codes related to the technological impact. The code-matrix C (*Figure 9*) used in this phase consists of **PARTICIPANT** (the interviewee), **CATEGORY** (the broader category of themes), **THEME** (each identified theme), **DESCRIPTION** (a detailed description of the theme or phenomenon), and **SAMPLE** (an example or quote illustrating the theme).

Summary

Taken together, these themes (*Figure 10*) align with the existing literature on the social and cultural shaping of technology and provide a deeper understanding of

the impact of technological change on the community. By using an inductive approach to coding and analysis, it was possible to identify these themes and gain insights into the complex interplay of social, cultural, and technological factors that shape the community's experiences of technological change.

## Chapter conclusions

This section reflects on the methodology selection and process followed in the study. The focus was on gathering subjective accounts of participants regarding their experiences within the virtual libertarian community and the influence of technology on this affiliation. The study acknowledges its limitations in representing the entire community and providing definitive answers about its characteristics but serves as an insightful source for this group and other virtual communities in Poland. The chapter discusses narrative research as a methodology that utilises personal stories, explores various narrative analysis approaches, and introduces the Episodic Narrative interview (ENI) method used in the study. The ENI method allows for a modified approach where the researcher can interact with the narratives while focusing on a specific phenomenon. The method's outlook concludes by emphasising the importance of context and human experience in research.

The data collected from interviews are analysed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying and categorising patterns and themes that emerge from the data. The research project adopts an inductive approach to coding, allowing themes to be derived directly from the data. The three thematic categories identified are '*Origins*', which focuses on the interviewees' access to the community; '*Belonging*', which examines the sense of belonging and socialisation within the group; and '*Enabling*', which explores the impact of technology on the community's growth and development, as perceived by my interviewees. These thematic categories provide insights into the complex interplay between social, cultural, and technological factors in shaping the interviewee's experiences within the community. The demographic characteristics of the participants include a predominantly male group, aged between 19 and 50, with a high level of digital literacy and education, including many with advanced degrees. The research

project contributes to understanding the multi-faceted nature of human experiences and the role of technology in shaping communities. The chapter also captured a brief outline of my interviewees.

# CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS: ORIGINS OF THE POLISH VIRTUAL LIBERTARIANS

## Overview

This chapter explores the external factors that shaped the historical pathways through which my interviewees entered the virtual libertarian community. It focuses on the initial experiences of my interviewees with the community as well as the beginning of an intellectual path leading to this community. These experiences are often similar, which has led me to coin a special sub-categorisation of interviewees for this chapter and to call them *proto-libertarians, activists, intellectuals,* and *libertarians of the social media era.* This section serves as an entryway to the subsequent stage, going deeper into the examination of the processes that form the essence of being part of that community. It also addresses the challenges associated with the concept of community and digital communities. By examining the initial online experiences of the interviewees and their intellectual journey towards the community, this chapter establishes a foundation for further exploration of the processes and mechanics that define their participation in the community.

## Background

In the late early 1990s, the Internet did not yet have the visual splendour we are accustomed to. The Worldwide Web, created by Tim Berners-Lee, was still mainly a network of interconnected terminal-like computers at CERN – the idea of *visual networking* was not yet met. The exchange of information was the domain of the *old* media – the press, radio, and television. In fact, at that time, only the first European Internet centres in London and Norway got access to the network, followed by other major European Internet pioneers in later years. In Poland, the first connection was made at the end of 1990 whereas universal access was opened only in 1994, although still barely for a handful of recipients (Malik, 2011). The world of virtual communities was still blooming, not only in Poland but rather globally.

in those days, Poland had limited access to international sources of information altogether. The door to their availability was yet to open. This was due to the political position of the country after the Second World War. Poland remained dependent on the intellectual censorship initiated by the USSR authorities and continued by the communist authorities in Poland between the 1940s and 1980s (Jastrzębski and Krysiak, 1993). The socialist-realist state employed censorship as a part of the control over the society. It meant that access to foreign sources – international newspapers, books, and music – was not only challenging but in most cases severely limited. For many Poles, this status was so problematic that a network of smugglers quickly developed to deliver banned materials to Poland (Kochanowski, 2017). The black market has become the norm in the country. Copied books, magazines, music records, and movies, circulated in the underground until the late 1980s.

Around 1987-1989, the censorship rules were becoming loose and allowed for many international titles to be fully published in the country as soon as 1989 and 1990. In such a way, not only did masterpieces of world literature fall into the hands of Poles – often for the first time – but also books on politics, socio-political and economic reportages, and political commentaries; in a word, all the books that were previously banned by the government, and which often presented a vision of the socio-political order that differed from the state-imposed one. Amongst such content, seminal works of the anarchists and classic liberals reached Poland. Various political dissidents took over and distributed these materials in their circles, the most prominent of whom, perhaps, was the former president of the European Council, Donald Tusk (Kaleta, 2016). Eventually, new groups have emerged, with ideas that run counter to the state message; most notably *Ruch Społeczeństwa Alternatywnego* (RSA)[21], followed by *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa* (PA), an anti-communist underground social movement that decided to fight the system through

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[21] *Ruch Społeczeństwa Alternatywnego* (The Alternative Society Movement, RSA) was founded in the early 1980s and centred around the magazine *Gilotyna* (Guillotine). This community played a pivotal role in the formation and consolidation of the main anarchist movements in the country.

humour, pastiche, absurdity, and nonsense[22]. It was also members of these organisations who formed the nucleus of anarchist movements in later years (Antonów, 2004). First, *Międzymiastówka Anarchistyczna* (MA) was founded in 1988; a year later renamed *Federacja Anarchistyczna* (FA)[23]. Two of my interviewees – JS and SG – attended meetings of the latter in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Before moving to their stories, however, let me clarify how libertarian thought found its way into the consciousness of the Polish audience. Whilst already in the 1980s, academics, intellectuals and political dissidents in Poland were dealing with some of the classic liberal and libertarian ideas, i.e., with underground translations of the F.A. von Hayek' and M. Friedman's books and articles in Gdansk anti-governmental circles (Kaleta, ibid.), it was not until the mid-1990s that the first Polish more thorough studies on American libertarianism were published (Miklaszewska, 1994; Legutko, 1994)[24]. Importantly, those sources were explaining American philosophy and its most important theorists, rather than attempting to produce local texts with similar approaches to socio-political and economic realms. The Polish contribution to the development of libertarian thought began only in the late 2000s and early 2010s with texts of the likes of Jakub Bożydar Wiśniewski (at the time, the University of Cambridge and King's College London, currently University of Wroclaw)[25], and some Austrian economics scholars, i.e., Mateusz Machaj (University of Wroclaw)[26]. The foundation of a community associating itself with the socio-political and economic spectrum of libertarianism was laid only in the same decade. I call those first libertarians in the country the Polish *proto-libertarians* because there was no direct predecessor in Poland. Even if isolated individuals in the country had been exposed to libertarian ideas before the 1990s,

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[22] *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa* (The Orange Alternative, PA) was a Polish alternative and anti-communist social movement that emerged in the 1980s. This movement played a significant role in challenging the oppressive regime through creative and non-violent means. The anarchist movement in the country later emerged from the foundations laid by the PA.

[23] *Federacja Anarchistyczna* (Anarchist Federation, FA) is a Polish anarchist organisation that was established in 1988 and officially named FA in 1989. It evolved from its predecessor, the *Międzymiastówka Anarchistyczna* (Polish intercommunal Anarchists, MA). With its formation, the FA became a prominent force within the anarchist movement in the country.

[24] Apart from a single article published in the late 1980s (Rybczyńska, 1987).

[25] See: J. B. Wiśniewski, '*Free Will and Preactions*', Libertarian Papers, vol. 1, art. No. 23, 2009

[26] See: M. Machaj, '*in Counterfactuals we're all dead*,' Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics, vol. 15/4, 2012

it would have been difficult for a community centred around this intellectual movement to exist before the 1980s or even the mid-1990s. Thus, the narrations of *proto-libertarians* are crucial for outlining the history of the movement as perceived by the participants in these events. In its essence and to my knowledge, their recollections are the first of their kind in the field. The publishing activities of *proto-libertarians* built up an audience that was to become the first self-identifying libertarian group on the Polish Internet, of which some of my interviewees were members.

The second group I singled out for this chapter were the *activists.* Those interviewees indicated links to the conservative-liberal political circle of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, which, however, quite quickly turned into resentment towards both the leader and the political project itself. The focus is not so much on their political activities, but above all, on the unique social circle that has developed around (former) proponents of this politician. This is also a theme that introduces later reflections on the political attitudes of part of this community.

A third group differs from the previous primarily in the way they approached libertarianism. These interviewees, largely today's academics, point to Western academic publications as their sources of libertarian knowledge. It was *the intellectuals*, as I call them, that focused on explaining libertarian issues to those seeking answers on the Internet. They subscribed to and moved between, the first Internet forums and Facebook groups and were focusing on building the intellectual background of the community. They were also largely the creators of the first wave of Polish academic libertarian content, initially in the form of online content and then *via* peer-reviewed articles.

Finally, a group of younger interlocutors joined the community having already had access to many of the communication platforms on which libertarians operated, especially Facebook. I call them *libertarians of the social media era*. In this thread, I will show what it was like for these interviewees to enter the community and what factors they pointed to as being key in this aspect.

This division will not necessarily translate into narratives in subsequent chapters. It will merely serve to organise the historical narratives due to similarities of experiences between interviewees. It will maintain a certain level of neatness, if you like, in the presentation of these experiences.

## Proto-libertarians

My first interviewee was JS. A man in his 50s, talkative not in an excessive way, but more as someone eager to share the history of a community he cherishes. Because he has been a libertarian for more than 30 years, the stories are longer and contain more detail than those of many younger interviewees I spoke with. In his vision – even though he places his first memories of meeting other libertarians back in the early 1990s – only when he moved from the offline to the online world and began discussing libertarianism with others, he noted the formation of the *community*. But his story goes deeper in time. He begins by recalling his beginnings among Silesian *Federacja Anarchistyczna (FA)* in the late 1980s. He started attending meetings of this organisation, including the one at which the federation was officially founded because he believed that they were sharing his socio-political ideas. JS, as well as other anarchists, did not like the idea of an Omni-government of a People's Republic (PRL) government in the late-1980s; nor the constituting political alternatives of the Third Polish Republic of the early-1990s. The Polish party scene after the change of the system was overflowing with dozens of parties of minimal or medium importance, which competed for post-communist and post-*Solidarność* (Solidarity) voters. The FA's meetings were to allow him to get to know other critics of the system.

Shortly, he was joined by his schoolmate, SG, also a student at the time. SG gives the impression of a very calm man, yet one can sense the fondness in his voice when he talks about those times. His stance was far less conversational than JS's. He also stresses from the outset that he has slightly cut himself off from the community over time and only participates sporadically in their interactions at this point. He underlines that this may have affected his commitment to the topics. SG remarks that both he and JS noticed at some point that their views did not match those of the rest of the anarchists in the federation, especially about the role of the

market. Unlike the rest of the group (Antonów, 2004), these two Silesians, were viewing anarchism as a way of promoting individualism and respect for the laws of the market. It was to be an idea in which people have no tyrant of authority over them; but also, in which individuals can act for themselves on the market. Not surprisingly, the internal philosophical clash with other people in the movement occurred. In SG's view, the attitude of the rest of the group was a decidedly more left-wing anarchist, with a focus on the value of the *interdependent* group, known as *the collective*. The later dislike of anarchists for libertarians, who rejected the collectivist principle and instead focused on individualism, may also have stemmed from this (ibid.). After several months in the anarchist's ranks, both JS and SG found out, that there was political philosophy compatible with their beliefs, which went by the name *libertarianism*. In JS's words, they must have been libertarians even before that, but they found appropriate nomenclature for their views only with access to foreign literature. JS points out especially a book by Dr Mary Ruwart *'Healing Our World: in the Age of Aggression'*. The self-identification of the two friends changed. They started calling themselves libertarians, which, however, met with some sort of self-objections at first. According to SG, this was due to unfamiliarity with the terms used by American libertarian theorists, but also due to cultural objections – *libertarianizm* (libertarianism), for Polish speakers, sounded like *libertynizm* (libertinism)[27]. It is therefore not surprising that both JS and SG had initial objections to such self-defining. Nevertheless, it was this moment that could be described as the formation of a *libertarian consciousness* amongst these Silesian anarchists.

Both interviewees believe that libertarians were a rare finding in Poland at that time. They mention only a few figures who were also interested in this thought amongst their peers. According to them, this was to change with time. JS in his story, remarks how, in the middle of the 1990s, he focused on publishing and

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[27] Libertinism refers to an extreme form of hedonism that was popular in France, the United States, and England during the 16th to 19th centuries. It was characterised by a rejection of traditional moral and social norms, emphasizing personal freedom and indulgence in sensual pleasures. Libertines were known for their pursuit of pleasure, often engaging in promiscuous behaviour, disregard for societal conventions, and a libertine philosophy that rejected religious and moral constraints.

promoting libertarian values through two home-published zines, which in later years became the nucleus of the online anarchist and libertarian *zines – Mać Pariadka*, and *An Arche!,* the latter being published by JS himself. Both these titles were first printed and sent to subscribing addresses around Poland by post, but with time, they went online. In JS's words, the zines were like a newspaper or rather *'a printed discussion forum'* with *'articles, polemics, and some announcements',* and groups of regular followers formed around them. Even though they weren't hitting high volume numbers, they were reaching a few dozen houses in Poland. JS also mentions that around this time, the discussion mailing groups on Yahoo servers were created. It helped him, and his colleagues, realise that other people wanted to read through such content and reach beyond the readership of the zins. In his view, the members of these discussion groups and followers of those magazines were the first nuclei of the community. JS's articles, together with other content that he was publishing in traditional press (i.e., *Najwyższy Czas*[28]*, Zielone Brygady*[29]*, Rojalista Pro Patria*), constituted the first content of his personal webpage *sierp.libertarianizm.pl.*

Around the turn of the century, SG started focusing on his academic career more than the community itself; unlike JS, who was one of the most active users in the mailing group until its further transformations. MM, who worked in the gaming industry in the 1990s and continues to mark his name in that industry, was also a member of this group. MM shared JS's words and called the mailing group *'the first such community'*. He also underlines that they were limited in scope and that soon new ways of exchanging opinions emerged that were set to change the way they interacted online. According to my interlocutors, the first iteration of such a new space – the libertarian forum – was created in the early 2000s and served for some time to the former users of email discussion groups. As with most of such forums around the period, MM mentions that they were experiencing some technical

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[28] *Najwyższy Czas!* (About Time!) is a Polish news magazine that represents conservative viewpoints. At the time, it was advertised as conservative-liberal, indicating a combination of conservative values with some liberal perspectives.

[29] *Zielone Brygady. Pismo Ekologów* (Green Brigades. The Magazine of Environmentalists) was a Polish magazine dedicated to environmentalism. It was published from 1989 to 2008 and served as a platform for environmentalists to discuss and promote ecological issues in Poland.

problems with this medium. Eventually, he used his budget to buy and maintain both the server and the domain for a new forum – *Forum Libertarian* known since as the *Libnet*. According to MM, it quickly became one of the leading platforms for the community's daily interactions. The words of both more senior interviewees in this group (such as JS or MC) and younger ones (such as AR or BS) also point to the continuing popularity of this space. SW goes as far as to call it a space in which *'the desire to be in a community was fulfilled more than a desire to gain knowledge'*. Besides the forum, JS's site mentioned above, was also *parked* on the same server – together with some other libertarians' sites. As MM admits, this was to create a community space where people like JS or himself could collect texts and articles published in other media. Noteworthy, JS's private website reached high numbers of hits quickly, which, as MM points out, should not be surprising given his popularity among libertarians at the time. Its status as a popular and important libertarian medium is also confirmed by BG.

Moving libertarian interaction from email mailing lists to a forum based on phpBB technology has changed the way my interlocutors interacted. The mailing lists were largely based on non-live interactions. Sometimes, there were days, or even weeks, when people were not responding. MM remarks that the forum, because of its visual and functional simplicity, has improved and pushed forward the communication between users. This, in turn, encouraged them to have longer discussions, and, in a way, also led to the exchange of opinions on non-political topics. Eventually, all these processes led to building lasting relationships outside the Internet. According to MM, *Libnet* users started to organise *zlot forumowiczów* (forum meetups) in the *real* world in the mid-2000s. Interviewees who recall this forum, add that at the time it was the largest such platform on the Polish Internet. Not surprisingly, some people had other opinions, often contrary to those represented by the administrators and moderators. MM stresses that the main thrust of the forum was the substance of the discussions, which in the long run helped the forum to survive as a social networking initiative. He said that *'it was*

*never meant to be LOLcontent[30] forum. It was supposed to be a serious forum, not like JBWA[31]'*. It is worth noting that MM brings the latter Facebook group with a palpable irony in his voice. I will focus on this thread later in this text when analysing the statements of my other interlocutors.

MC, who joined *Libnet* in his 20s and is a decade younger than the previous interviewees, highlights that the forum's popularity decreased over time due to the emergence of new technologies. Additionally, he notes that the forum's main purpose of interactive social networking was gradually replaced by Facebook groups. MA and some of the interviewees mentioned that it was difficult for them to continue some of their friendships after the social media boom, as they didn't personally know the people behind the nicknames and could not find them in the reality of de-anonymised social media. Ergo, the emergence of social media, and the consequent de-anonymisation of these platforms changed the online communication of this group of my interlocutors.

Summary

Stories brought by JS and SG highlight the significance of the online world in the formation of the community and recall the transition from offline to online interactions as the catalyst for the community's emergence. The opinion is shared by other proto-libertarians. They say that it facilitated and intensified interactions around libertarian thought, bringing like-minded individuals together. The formation of email discussion groups played a crucial role in further strengthening the bonds within the community. Their account not only sheds light on the historical context, and the formation of the community, but also highlights the generational differences and the evolution of ideas within the community.

In this context, it is important to mention the role of technological advances that have influenced these changes. The transition from mailing lists to the forum

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[30] *Śmieszkujący content* (LOLcontent) refers to a type of content that is intended to be humorous and provoke laughter.

[31] *Jak będzie w Akapie* (What Would An-Cap Be Like, JBWA*)* is a Facebook community created initially as an anarcho-capitalist group. Over time, however, it has evolved into openly expressing anti-libertarian views. The word *JEBAWKA*, derived from the acronym JBWA, has gained popularity among Polish Internet users and is still used in the context of this group. It can be translated as 'fuckery' and is used as a slang term to describe various forms of online mischief or absurdity.

marked a significant shift in the way the community members interacted. The mailing lists primarily relied on non-live interaction, sometimes resulting in delays of days or even weeks before receiving responses. The introduction of the forum with its visual and functional simplicity improved communication among users and encouraged longer discussions. Additionally, it led to the exchange of opinions on non-political topics, enhancing the forum's social aspects. The evolution of the forum and the community's interactions eventually extended beyond the digital realm. In the mid-2000s, Libnet users began organising meetups in the real world, allowing for face-to-face interactions. The forum garnered popularity during this time, becoming the largest platform of its kind in Poland. Although there were dissenting opinions within the community, the forum's primary focus was on substantive discussions, which contributed to its longevity as a social networking initiative. As new technologies emerged, the forum's popularity gradually declined, and interactive social networking shifted to Facebook and especially to its Groups feature. This transition coincided with the advent of social media, which significantly altered online communication for all interviewees. The de-anonymisation that occurred on social media platforms posed challenges for maintaining existing contacts, as individuals struggled to identify the real identities behind the previously anonymous forum nicknames. However, with the rise of social media platforms, the dynamics of online communication shifted again. The explosion in popularity of social media caused a decline in the popularity of the forum and altered the nature of interactions within the community.

The section provides insights into the historical context and formation of the virtual libertarian community, laying the foundation for understanding the subsequent sections and chapters focusing on different pathways and experiences of community members (Figure 12). The problem of access – both to content [*Information_Access*], and to the information delivery technology itself [*Internet_Access*] – was the subject of several interviewees' memories. These notions, together with the history of the platforms used by the community members before the social media boom [*Pre_Social*], form the axis of further reflection on the role of technology in enabling information gathering and

interaction maintenance. My interviewees point out that those changes affected the integration processes within the community. Prolonged conversations, often touching on users' private lives, allow for the building of bonds with other community members [*Integration*] [*Networking*]. With the changing characteristics of virtual media and the increased role of social media, the way of integration and pre-integration into the community [*Facebook_Groups*] was also changing.

## Activists

Soon after the political transformation of the early 1990s[32], the situation in Poland began to change. A cluster of small political parties emerged in the Polish political realm, because Poles were able to form their political organisations for the first time since the Second World War, and because of the party system adopted in the new political set-up. In the following years, youth organisations began to form. Among them were groups with vocally liberal and even free-market inclinations. One of the most popular was the *Unia Polityki Realnej* (UPR)[33] with its leader, Janusz Korwin-Mikke – a rather controversial free-market politician, but also one of the main Polish free-market oppositionists of the 1980s (Kaleta, ibid). He is an ambiguous figure for the interviewees I spoke with, to say the least; yet an important one. According to several of them, Korwin's thought has crossed their lives at least for a moment. Some, like GB, say that he was an author with a good writing style, at least in the 1990s and early 2000s, and that reading him was refreshing in the context of other mainstream journalists. Perhaps my interlocutors found it easier to read Korwin because he was one of the few people in Polish media who was openly writing with free-market ideas in mind. Others, including MC,

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[32] Between 1989 and 1992, Poland underwent a significant set of economic reforms known as the 'Balcerowicz Plan' or Polish Shock Therapy. This plan aimed to rapidly transition the country from a state-controlled and state-owned market to a capitalist system. Overall, the Balcerowicz Plan is widely regarded as successful in achieving its goals. However, it is important to note that there were also negative consequences, particularly the increase in unemployment in rural areas of Poland. Some politicians used this as evidence of the reforms' inefficiency, leading to a shift in the implementation of most of the free-market strategy after only a few months.

[33] *Unia Polityki Realnej* (Real Politics Union, UPR) is a conservative political party in Poland. Originally established as a society in 1987 and later transformed into a political party in 1990, UPR has been closely associated with its founder, J. Korwin-Mikke. However, over the years, the party has experienced a decline in popularity, and – after Korwin-Mikke left it – it is currently of marginal significance in Polish politics.

stress that this interest appeared to fade rather quickly when Korwin's flaws reached the surface. This is the reason why many libertarians I have spoken to, describe themselves humorously as *'ex-kuce'*[34], that is, former supporters of Korwin. Others, when referring to this period of fascination with his thought, describe it as *'ukąszenie korwinowskie'* (Korwin's sting)[35] that was supposedly wearing off with intellectual maturation. Perhaps it was because Korwin and his supporters, in addition to a set of liberal economic views, espoused publicly a very conservative social vision, often downright racist, misogynistic, and chauvinist. Some of his statements were on the edge of eugenics (Kuros, 2020). Remarkably, even given his many very pro-market remarks, he was simultaneously calling for a variety of anti-market policies. He has gone so far as to announce his support for any government action (including interference in the market) if the government were to introduce nationwide censorship of LGBT views (Sierpiński, 2019). For most of my interviewees, such political behaviour conflicted with their beliefs. Yet, several of them remarked that it was approaching Korwin that encouraged them to penetrate further into the free-market ideas, and consequently learn about libertarianism, to mention TM or MS. When my interlocutors got to the sources of Korwin's thought – that is, both classical-liberal and libertarian sources of it – they were quite quick to point out inconsistencies between what Korwin publicly said and wrote, and what the key liberal and libertarian thinkers proposed. In many regards – just to mention two cases of MA and BG – the ability to speak English fluently came in handy. Both were able to check the sources and confront them with Korwin's interpretation, because they knew English fluently, and could access non-translated books and articles, or follow discussions on foreign Internet forums. Once they figured out that Korwin was providing contradicting – from the classic liberal and libertarian standpoint – statements, the fascination *'faded rather*

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[34] *Kuc* (a ponytail). It is used as a derogatory term by opponents of Janusz Korwin-Mikke to refer to his sympathisers or followers. The term is associated with those who support Korwin-Mikke's ideologies and political views. However, it is worth noting that some individuals also use it jokingly as a form of, often former, self-identification.

[35] *Ukąszenie korwinowskie* (Korwin's sting) refers to a period of fascination or being captivated by the ideas and ideologies of Korwin-Mikke. It implies a time when individuals are deeply influenced or attracted to Korwin's political views and may actively support or advocate for them. Many interviewees use this expression when talking about a period of fascination with Korwin's ideas. By implication: a moment when one is becoming fascinated by Korwin-Mikke's ideas.

*quickly'*, to reuse MC's words. This was the conclusion reached by *all* my interlocutors who were influenced by Korwin at any point. It's best put by BS who said that '*we were all stung by Korwin's ideas. But it goes away at some point. 'The libertarian worldview is still instilled, but the rest is gone'* he adds*.

My interviewees admit that this period has passed them by and today they want nothing to do with Korwin. JS goes as far as believing that it was Korwin who influenced a rather negative view of a portion of the public on libertarian ideals. To quote him: '*Korwin has been the reason how libertarianism is perceived in the wider public, but it was a distorting mirror of sort'.* He observes that people started to associate whatever Korwin was saying publicly with libertarianism. '*For many people, libertarianism and the views expressed by Korwin – or politicians associated with parties like the UPR, KNP[36] or later the Partia Korwin[37], all of them not necessarily libertarian – are the same.'.* This is dangerous for some of my interviewees, who believe that this association is preventing a wider public approval rate for libertarian or classic liberal proposals. One of the interlocutors said at the beginning of the interview that he can't '*hide the fact that for many years, the influence of technology on the life of a young "kuc", were videos of Korwin "massacring the leftists"[38],* and that '*you grow out of it. Some people remain faithful to* (his) *idea, and they are still Korwinists, only without Korwin; but some reject all the legacy he left behind.* He sums it up by saying that '*I can say that I became a libertarian only after I left Korwin aside' (BG).* It is symptomatic that as quickly as the interviewees got to the source of Korwin's thoughts, they changed their views.

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[36] *Kongres Nowej Prawicy* (Congress of the New Right, KNP) is s a Polish conservative political party that was founded in 2011 by Korwin-Mikke. The party initially gained attention and support due to Korwin-Mikke's charismatic leadership and his promotion of peri-libertarian and conservative ideas. However, Korwin-Mikke was later expelled from the party in 2015 following controversial remarks and actions that were deemed indecent. Despite this incident, KNP continues to exist as a political party, though its influence and popularity have diminished over time.

[37] *Konfederacja Odnowy Rzeczpospolitej Wolność i Nadzieja (*Confederation for the Renewal of the Republic Liberty and Hope, KORWIN) is a Polish conservative political party that was founded in 2015 by Korwin-Mikke. The party's name in Polish forms a backronym of Korwin's surname, emphasising his central role within the party. While it has attracted a dedicated following, its electoral success has been limited to this date.

[38]*Masakrować lewaków (*to massacre the leftists*)* is a slang saying that has acquired idiomatic connotations. It is used to signify a perceived victory or dominance in a discussion or debate with individuals who hold leftist views. Paradoxically, the phrase has become associated with the use of low-quality arguments by supporters of Korwin-Mikke, thus detracting from its original intent.

Some have even swerved beyond free-market thought, identifying Korwin primarily with his approach to various social issues, and thus renouncing his views altogether. BG comes from a relatively large town in the east of Poland but now lives in a major city in western Poland. He owns a company in a niche market and simultaneously works for a digital company. Previously, for many years, he hosted a radio programme on student radio where he was known for promoting free-market thought. He gives the impression of being very confident and is used to a sort of educative tone – perhaps since he was once also an English teacher. He mentions that he has friends who disagreed so much with the ideas presented by Korwin that they advocated the exact opposite of his ideas – he calls it *'the extreme left'*. According to him, these friends decided that Korwin was wrong in some of his political and social commentaries, and so the rest of his intellectual assumptions must be wrong as well.

For those of my interviewees who had any dealings with this politician, the episode with Korwin was important, because it allowed them to familiarise themselves with free-market ideas. They extracted only those parts of the Korwin narrative that they considered logical and left the rest aside. MS, another interviewee, recalls that this came hard to him because his father comes from one of the Arab countries. *'I didn't agree with him on everything from the very beginning, because (…) my father is an immigrant from an Arab country, and as you know, Mr Korwin expressed himself* (negatively about this culture) (…) *But the idea of free market appealed to me very much'*.

Nevertheless, it was in large part Korwin that was in big part behind the popularisation of free-market thought in the country, thanks in part to his influential media presence, reach, and charisma. He certainly played a key role among many of my interviewees. Korwin-Mikke was above all an intellectual leader - albeit a very controversial one - whose writings appealed to young and old alike. My interviewees were looking for answers to questions about their role in the marketplace of the 1990s and 2000s, and Korwin had some answers that nobody else offered. As MM recalls, Korwin's circle – gathered around *Najwyższy Czas* – wrote commentaries on things that did not make it into the political and media

mainstream at the time. Both Korwin and *Najwyższy Czas* quickly found an audience amongst my older interviewees, who were seeking alternatives to the chaotic and divided political scene of Poland in the 1990s and early 2000s. In the previous regime, such views were considered hostile, so only underground sources were publishing this type of content. Thus, the emergence of a national press title that was publishing free-market content, aided the promotion of the idea across the state. The quality of the magazine, according to JSP – a Silesian in his mid-30s – has changed over time, but he says that back in the early 2000s it was still an excellent source of information on free-market thought.

Yet, Korwin's influence was not just about creating an influential media platform. It was the creation of a certain *ethos* that stood in contrast to the politicians of the time and became a model for his audience. The interviews indicate that it was the combination of the availability and popularity of this idea, and the simultaneous emergence of the Internet, that led to the growing popularity of *Korwinism*[39]. In its wake, my interviewees mention that the online forum and site of Korwinists grew. TM adds that users of these media were largely the creators of the first Facebook libertarian groups a few years later. This is largely due to the period my interviewee is referring to. Korwin ran in several presidential elections, but the 2000s were the first in which he was able to promote himself using the Internet, also, because it was only in this period that the Internet became popular in Polish homes. As part of his promotion, his team created web content, including his official site and the associated forum, that reached out to my interviewees, including JSP and TM.

Since the 1990s, *Korwinists* have been organised into different types of organisations, i.e., political parties and their parties' youth branches. MM mentions that this political organisation, in his view, was also the catalyst for community creation. He recalls that it came about for prosaic reasons. Political meetings of UPR supporters, that he was attending – during which he was meeting various politicians

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[39] Korwinism refers to the ideology and beliefs associated with Janusz Korwin-Mikke and his supporters. It is a term used in Poland to describe individuals who align themselves with Korwin-Mikke's political views and principles. Korwinism encompasses a range of conservative and peri-libertarian ideas, including free-market capitalism, forms of limited governance, and a critique of political correctness. See: Kiełpińska, 2021.

from Korwin's group, including Korwin himself – turned into something that he calls beer meetups (pol. *zloty piwne*). These meetings, because of their social and informal nature – but also because most of their participants drank beer (which, according to my conversations, lowered the barrier of interaction between the participants) – evolved into the creation of more *social* contacts.

Several interviewees mentioned that at this time, a youth centred around the *Korwinists* began to create their gatherings. It was primarily an organisation called Koliber[40], but also several online communities – discussion groups, sites, forums, and, in later years, Facebook groups. It so happened that some of my interviewees who were talking through this theme came from the same area of Poland – Silesia. Thanks to their similar interests – as well as the then still similar mission of the *Korwinists* and other free-market organisations – they managed to establish contacts with other free-marketeers in Silesia, primarily with some of the *proto-libertarians,* including JS and SG. JSP explicitly states that they formed a compact discussion group in Katowice around the mid-2000s, for which the main organisational engine was the Internet. Amongst the people who were in those meetings, JSP mentions Tomasz Teluk[41], Przemysław Wipler[42], and Jerzy Gorzelik[43]. Today they don't want to, or cannot be, identified with libertarianism. It shows how organically this community was built up, from groups of people with anti-authoritarian and locally oriented views. It was also on the initiative of my Silesian interviewees that a newly formed group of Polish libertarians went to international

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[40] *KoLiber* is a Polish conservative-liberal youth political organisation that was established in 1999. Initially, the group predominantly espoused classical-liberal and libertarian perspectives. However, in recent years, it has shifted its focus more towards classical conservatism. The name *KoLiber* is derived from a combination of the Polish words *Konserwatywny* (Conservative) and *Liberalny* (Liberal), and it also serves as a wordplay incorporating the Polish term for a hummingbird.

[41] Tomasz Teluk is a Polish journalist and former activist who was known for his involvement in promoting libertarianism in the 2000s. He is recognised as one of the first authors to publish on the topic of libertarianism in Poland. He had since undergone an ideological shift and in his later years focused on criticising the idea.

[42] Przemysław Wipler is a Polish politician who has been associated with various political parties, including UPR, KORWin, KNP, and PiS. He was one of the founders of *KoLiber*, a youth political organisation, and served as its former president.

[43] Jerzy Gorzelik is the head of the *Ruch Autonomii Śląska,* Silesian Autonomy Movement.

conferences organised by the International Society for Individual Liberty (ISIL)[44]. In his story, JSP notes that it was through this trip – and subsequent contacts with the American libertarians – that his colleagues and himself, became fully *international* libertarians. They have gained the first access to the international libertarian movement, cementing its subsequent growth. Eventually, JSP became the president of ISIL, renamed Liberty International, demonstrating the effectiveness of these initial network building.

What the activists' stories have in common is that their current activities are focused on actively promoting libertarian thought. Some of them call this process an enterprise of ideas. They all stress that their path to libertarianism led through a temporary association with Korwin-Mikke's political thinking. They largely seem to have been disappointed by political action and found that their path was through the active promotion of libertarian thought, but not *within* political parties. *Activists* created or trademarked a few organisations in the sector – JSP, together with MC, co-founded *Fundacja Wolności i Przedsiębiorczości* (FEF), whilst JS became a public face of the *Stowarzyszenie Libertariańskie* (SL) – one of the most prominent promoters of libertarian thought in Poland.

Summary

This excerpt is based on the reflections and observations of the interviewees, whose libertarianism is largely the result of links with the Janusz Korwin-Mikke. From their words, their sympathy towards the ideas propounded by this politician was due to the unavailability of other sources treating free market thought in the public space. These interlocutors are nowadays very much around the third sector and are actively promoting libertarian thought. The interviewees mention their encounters with Korwin's ideas and how they led them to explore free-market and libertarian concepts. However, many interviewees also express disappointment with certain aspects of Korwin's views and eventually distance themselves from his ideology. The influence of Korwin extended beyond media platforms and

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[44] international Society for individual Liberty (ISIL) later rebranded as Liberty international (LI). The non-for-profit, libertarian organisation based in the US. Jacek Spendel serves as a current President of LI.

encompassed the creation of an ethos that stood in contrast to the mainstream politicians of the time. The availability and popularity of Korwin's ideas, combined with the emergence of the Internet, led to the growth of Korwinism. Online forums, sites, and later Facebook groups played a significant role in connecting those Korwin-inspired individuals and fostering social contacts. Moreover, the fragment highlights the formation of various organisations and youth groups associated with Korwin's ideology. These groups, such as Koliber, facilitated the establishment of social connections among free marketeers. The interviewees from Silesia played a crucial role in creating a compact discussion group and initiating contacts with other libertarians, including proto-libertarians.

This section sheds light on the influence of political figures like Janusz Korwin-Mikke and the formation of ethos within the community. It sets the stage for exploring the role of activism, political engagement, and the impact of ideological shifts on the community's dynamics in later sections and chapters (Figure 13). Access to information was one of the themes raised by interviewees, who argued their interest in Korwin's thought in this way [*Information_Access*]. However, these interviewees also note that as the role of the Internet and access to international content expanded, the role of Korwin as their intellectual reference diminished and their libertarian self-awareness increased [*Political_Attitudes*]. Irrespective of this, at the height of Korwin's popularity, groups of supporters, often of a young age, formed around him and later formed the basis of the virtual communities. This gave rise to websites and forums of Korwin supporters where, according to some interviewees, libertarians led the way [*Pre-Social]*. These people were active in promoting free-market thinking, establishing professional [*Networking*] and later also private contacts among themselves [*Integration*]. With the growth of Facebook, the role of the various media centred around Korwin diminished, and his supporters found their way to the newly forming Facebook Groups [*Facebook_Groups*].

## Intellectuals

At the end of the 2000s and early 2010s, Facebook played an increasingly strong role among digital interaction platforms. As it grew, so did user interest.  As my

interviewees point out, it wasn't long before Facebook took over as the dominant social medium for their community. And with Facebook came the simplicity of conducting daily communications. At the time, *Gadu-Gadu*[45] (used for chatting) and *Nasza-Klasa*[46] (used to 'retrieve' contacts with school friends) were still the dominant interaction media on the Polish Internet (Małachowski, 2009). Despite the relative popularity of MySpace in many countries, it did not compete with these native platforms in Poland; nor were other social media platforms. While in the stories of the *Activists*, the dominant role was still played by the old-type platforms (such as websites or forums), in the stories of the *intellectuals*, the main axis on which their interaction with the group of virtual libertarians rested, was the social media. Importantly, however, a large part of this community also emphasised the strong role of the *Instytut Misesa* website. This website has become a kind of knowledge centre on libertarianism for many of these interviewees. People working with the organisation emphasise the social ties that emerge from its structures, but also the challenging and rewarding role of educators that they have taken on because they started interacting with *Instytut Misesa's* readers.

Some of my interviewees were amongst the first who worked for growing *Instytut Misesa* in Wroclaw. They studied at the same university as the founders of this think-tank, which has facilitated such integration. This group of my interlocutors were constituting the next collection of narratives I group– *the intellectuals*. In this group, I analyse all those interviewees whose way to the community is primarily through intellectual or academic routes, and who clearly emphasise the role of the Wroclaw circle in shaping their libertarian views. What distinguishes them from their peers is that their main motivation is the desire to share knowledge with other online users. They were driven by the passion for deepening intellectual understanding of libertarianism and were focused primarily on a libertarian

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[45] *Gadu-Gadu* is a Polish instant messaging client that was founded in 2000. It gained popularity in the mid-2000s and became the main instant messaging platform used on the Polish Internet around the time. The name is derived from a Polish slang word meaning 'chit-chat'. Over time, it has lost relevance being replaced by large international players, most notably Messenger.
[46] *Nasza-Klasa* (Our Class) was a social media platform founded in 2006. It gained immense popularity and became the most popular social network in Poland at its peak. However, with the rise of Facebook and other global platforms, Nasza-Klasa started losing ground and eventually dissolved in 2021 (Małachowski, 2009).

education. True, some of them belonged to different groups within the community, but their operational theme remained academic and intellectual. One of my interlocutors said he always felt like a *'lone wolf'* amongst other libertarians in the community because of his passion for pursuing knowledge rather than exploring relationships. AC, in his narrative, also emphasises that the main motive for the integration of *intellectuals* was the need to acquire and deepen knowledge. Social relationships came along with the execution of this primary need.

LS, a very calm and level-headed interlocutor, recalls that he met the institute's founders in his early days at the university. He was quite quick to spot that people around the organisation formed a very close-knit group that could spend many night hours in online disputes. They held discussions on a variety of topics, which were dominated by a philosophical note of libertarianism and its theories. In his view, with the development of the *Instytut Misesa* site, and especially its comments section, this community was consolidating its position. AC also mentions that there was a close group of people who commented on this website over the years, and who – unlike other similar mediums – have largely developed a '*high culture of discussion*', as he puts it. One without insulting and mocking, also known as trolling[47], was popular on other Internet platforms at that time. He brings up the story that – as a moderator of this medium – he *once* had to decide to ban one user for his trolling behaviour. He recalls it specifically because it was *the only* such situation. He says humorously that it is still '*haunting'* him that he had to ban this user. He also mentions, that with the development of new media, especially Facebook, the discussion space has moved fully to social media, and the initial community has largely blurred into this wider audience of *Instytut Misesa* Facebook profile and community. AC cites another noteworthy story about the institute, namely the process of contributions to their site in its early stages: *'Admittedly, Institute at the time seemed a bit elitist to me.* (...) (to) *make a content contribution you had to pay in gold. This seemed quite strange to me. Why do they demand*

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[47] Trolling is an Internet slang term used to describe the behaviour of individuals who intentionally provoke or ridicule others online. Trolls engage in disruptive or inflammatory actions, such as posting controversial comments or starting arguments, with the goal of eliciting strong emotional responses or creating chaos within online communities.

*donations in gold? But then it turned out to be quite logical, that's exactly the kind of thing they allowed themselves to do.* For an organisation that promoted primarily an Austrian economic and social perspective, one of the determinants of action was the promotion of the gold standard. In this way, they engaged people willing to work together around the standard's core idea.

Several interviewees, including AC, mention that their path in this community was largely set by staff at the University of Wroclaw. Among the people who had the greatest influence on them, they mentioned the *Instytut Misesa* founder Prof. Mateusz Machaj, Dr Radosław Wojtyszyn, and the late Prof. Witold Kwaśnicki[48]. An unconventional approach to teaching economics outside the mainstream curriculum was evident in the work of the institute's PhD students, and some staff members. Machaj promoted classic liberal and libertarian thinking by referring to pop culture's icons – just to mention that one of his most known works was translated to English as *The Rise and Fall of the First Galactic Empire: Star Wars and Political Philosophy,* and its content is exactly what the title says. An offbeat approach influenced some of my interviewees. MB, today one of the members of the supervisory board of *Instytut Misesa*, mentions that Machaj's texts touched on issues such as the A-Team as an example of an anarcho-capitalist organisation. For him this was fresh, new, and funny – he even mentions that he wondered if it wasn't just an intellectual ploy. The university staff recommended some basic readings of the Austrian School and libertarian theory, which convinced him to follow the same path and educate others by first volunteering for *Instytut Misesa*, and then working there.

The Wroclaw University team's creative approach to education and their response to deficiencies in mainstream material were to prove so successful that they influenced a handful of different generations of my interlocutors. Their development was primarily dictated by their first contact with free-market thought - in MB's case it was Mateusz Machaj's texts, but in the case of my other

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[48] Witold Kwaśnicki (1952-2022) was a Polish professor of economy, a specialist of the Austrian school. Considered by many free-market proponents in Poland to be one of the most influential Polish academics in the 2000s-2010s.

interlocutors, also Korwin's statements; and even the American libertarian movement's YouTube videos but characterised by subsequent in-depth source analysis. Nevertheless, the intellectuals primarily share a similar path to the community. Some of these interviewees may have been in contact with other groups at an early stage or even constituted it earlier on. SG claims that he was one of the first to be fascinated with the more individual and intellectual path of libertarianism. He focused on an academic career also because he felt that his peers from the *proto-libertarian* groups, such as those on *Libnet*, focused too much on repeatedly dredging up the same problems and too little on confronting ideas with the outside world. At first, he participated in *Koliber* meetings in Katowice, but over time he removed himself almost completely from online interactions. For those interlocutors, political and economic theory, rather than activism, was the most important aspect of libertarianism. For example, LB mentions that he never had anything to do with Korwin or *Koliber* and that he came to libertarian positions, and the libertarian community, by reading Mises and Hayek. At some stage, the desire for knowledge drove him online and put him in contact with the community of virtual libertarians in Poland. The process looked similar for several interviewees. They familiarised themselves with the texts of the main theorists of classic liberalism or libertarianism – which they found, for example, on school reading lists or in online material – and then, whilst searching for additional knowledge, they ended up on various websites, forums, and discussion groups. For most, this was their first contact with the virtual libertarian community.

Importantly, such a path is not just for the social media era. SS mentions that he came across the libertarian content by reading Sierpinski's website. For SW, the study of libertarian thought was associated with openness and intellectual amusement. Becoming familiar with libertarian thought even led him to change his academic orientation. This interviewee was led to the community by his passion for discussing libertarian issues, which he preferred over his original research activities. LS says that it was libertarianism itself that was his research topic from the beginning, but only after completing his PhD research, he joined the community himself. In his view, this was largely due to a conflict of interest that might have

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arisen if he had interacted with libertarians at the PhD stage. Interestingly, LB admits that it was not necessarily the Polish Internet that was the axis for him to acquire knowledge on libertarianism. He joined the community quite late, but he had long before becoming acquainted with Western libertarian thought and community. In turn, IS mentions that he came across Korwin, who initiated his intellectual journey into libertarianism, but that he verified all his statements by reading the sources of his thoughts before internalising them. JBW notes, that his ties to Western libertarian communities were shallow, and seeing the activity of people in Poland, he decided to join the latter. Becoming familiar with international libertarians and sources resulted in further consolidation of the community.

Summary

This section focuses on the groups of my interviewees who were introduced to libertarianism through reading and intellectual discourse. The intellectuals within the community played a significant role in shaping the libertarians in Poland. They were driven by a passion for deepening their understanding of libertarianism and focused on education and sharing knowledge with others. In this section, my interviewees mention the rise of Facebook as the dominant social medium for the community, facilitating daily communications and replacing native platforms like Gadu-Gadu and Nasza-Klasa. This demonstrates the initial influence of technological change on the community's communication dynamics. Facebook played a significant role as a dominant social medium for the community. The simplicity of conducting daily communications on Facebook contributed to its popularity. The Instytut Misesa website served as a central hub for many interviewees, providing a wealth of knowledge on libertarianism. It acted as an influential factor for the intellectuals, who appreciated the social ties and educational opportunities it provided. The website had a high culture of discussion, which set it apart from other platforms at that time. The Wroclaw academic circle, including the founders of Instytut Misesa, had a strong influence on the intellectuals' group. The unconventional approach to teaching economics outside the mainstream curriculum and incorporating pop culture references attracted some interviewees. It's important to note that the path to libertarianism was not

limited to the social media era. Some interviewees found libertarian content through websites like *sierpinski.libertarianizm.pl*, while others came across Western libertarian thought before joining the Polish community.

This section highlights the role of intellectuals in shaping the online experience of libertarianism. It explores the impact of academic circles, educational opportunities, and knowledge-sharing platforms like the Instytut Misesa website. It provides insights into the intellectual development within the community and sets the foundation for examining the intersection of knowledge, education, and libertarian promotion in later sections and chapters (Figure 14). The interviewees who were part of this group focused largely on their experiences at the University of Wrocław, mentioning the role of the staff there. They described the positive impact of these people on their intellectual lives [*Schools*]. Largely because of these initial interactions with the professorial staff at that university, libertarian positions crystallised within them, further reinforced by the classes taught [*Political_Attitudes*]. In later years, these interviewees were involved in the development of the Polish Instytut Misesa, which influenced the social relationship that developed between them [*Integration*]. The institute's website, in their view, was one of the first on the Polish Internet to promote libertarian thought and provide access to Polish content touching on these issues [*Information_Access*]. However, they also point out that over time, however, the information and integration function has been taken over by Facebook [*Facebook_Groups*].

## Libertarians of the social media era

Finally, let us focus on those of my interviewees who, by their admission, were entering an already existing, thriving community of virtual libertarians. These are the youngest interviewees who have interacted with other libertarians on already existing and well-populated platforms. AR connected with the community by engaging with existing media. He says that the Internet was a *window to the world* that gave them '*access to the information to which we had not previously had access to, nor couldn't we come to these conclusions on our own'*. AR points out that in the mid-to-late-2000s, the printed press had very limited content, and television too had barely a few channels, including the first public and private Polish news

channels. He believes that it was severely limited access to information. But it was his generation that was to witness a generational change, for, as he notes: *'Perhaps I am from the generation that didn't wake up at the time of the political breakthrough, but we woke up together with the Internet breakthrough in Poland'*. He observed a rash of new platforms and portals, tools, and spaces, that supported his interest in libertarian thought. Among them, as he points out, one platform played a leading role and has at some point taken over the role of content aggregator – a role previously performed by different tools such as RSS feeds and Google Reader. It was Facebook. AR believes that there was also a libertarian group on the Grono.pl[49] he was part of, but that it too has not withstood the clash with the *Facebook revolution*.

My other interviewees talked about having joined the community by entering Facebook Groups, which were dedicated spaces for micro-communities *parked* on the Facebook platform. Those groups were intended to make the platform more attractive to existing fans of online forums and related communication platforms and engage them *within* Facebook. UD joined *Niskie Składki* because of his interest in political disputes. The same happened with MS, who became interested in joining the Facebook groups because of his fellow Korwin followers. His entry into the milieu had already taken place in developed groups, such as the *Atomowa Alternatywa (AA)* or the *Nieprzyjaciele Niewoli* (NN). NS, who joined the groups for similar reasons, started by watching the controversial YouTuber Ator and following his fan group, the *Płatnicy Składek Atora*[50] then switched to more libertarian-themed groups. TP gained access to the groups through his interest in *Stowarzyszenie Libertariańskie* (SL). The groups gave him access to information on offline libertarian meetings in his hometown Lodz, which he started attending. PJ

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[49] *Grono.net* was a Polish social networking platform with ~2m users in 2009. In its peak, it was one of the most popular Polish social media. It was shut down in 2012 [see: https://media2.pl/media/51703-2-mln-zarejestrowanych-uzytkownikow-Grono.net.html [PL]].

[50] *Płatnicy Składek Atora* (Dues Payers of Ator) is a group formed by supporters of Krzysztof 'Ator' Woźniak, a popular Polish YouTuber known for his channel *Wideoprezentacje* (Video-presentations), which has amassed over 652,000 followers as of June 2023. The interviewee mentions past allegations of manipulation against Ator, relating to claims that he benefitted financially from commercial collaborations with younger gaming vloggers, resulting in controversy and discussions within the Polish online community.

joined the groups through the recommendation of people he had worked with on *Koliber* projects. He admits that he would have never managed to get involved in freedom activity if not for the Internet. Interestingly, he also adds that *'the Internet also radicalised me a bit'*. WP was also invited to the Facebook groups by the people she worked with on one of the student projects. She also points out that her integration into the community has been intensified by mobile Internet access. For TD, getting into groups was a way to meet like-minded people. He had been interested in such views for a long time, but it was not until he joined the groups that he began to take them seriously. By contrast, MD mentions that before joining the community of virtual libertarians, she got to know some of them within other online communities, especially the trolling community.

Summary

This section focuses on the entry-level experiences of the interviewees who joined the community around or after the social media emergence. These individuals entered the realm of libertarianism through their interactions on social media platforms, notably Facebook, and became a part of an already thriving virtual libertarian community. They attribute their access to and the growth of their interest in libertarianism to the explosion of the Internet and the subsequent information access it provided. One of the interviewees, found the Internet as a 'window to the world' that offered unprecedented access to information, catalysing his interest in libertarianism. He specifically pointed out Facebook as a key platform that supplanted previous information aggregating tools and hosted a vibrant libertarian community. Other interviewees echoed similar experiences, detailing their engagement with libertarian-themed Facebook groups, which served as dedicated spaces for like-minded individuals to discuss, share, and develop their ideas. Moreover, these platforms also facilitated their involvement in offline libertarian activities and gatherings, further solidifying their engagement with the community. Some interviewees recognised the radicalising effect of the Internet on their libertarian beliefs, and some mentioned different devices, such as mobiles, that played an important role in their integration with the community.

This section focuses on individuals who joined the virtual libertarian community during or after the emergence of social media platforms. It emphasises the role of social media, particularly Facebook, in facilitating their access to libertarianism and connecting them with the existing community. It provides valuable insights into the transformative effect of social media on community dynamics and the way technology influenced the entry and integration of individuals into the virtual libertarian community. It sets the stage for further examination of the impact of social media and online interactions in later sections and chapters (Figure 15). These interviewees stressed the significance of information access in gaining both the knowledge of libertarianism, but also the way to access the community [*Information_Access*]. They were pointing out that their engagement within this group started by joining and exploring Facebook [*Facebook_Groups*]. Their engagement in these platforms led to their integration into the libertarian community [*Integration*]. Online libertarian-themed groups acted as binders and fostered a sense of belonging among them. The influence of social media platforms also facilitated their engagement with the community [*Internet_Access*], as well as the advent of Internet access on mobile devices [*Mobile_Access*].

## Chapter conclusions

From the conversations, it becomes evident that my interviewees had three primary ways of joining virtual libertarian communities. These pathways were determined mainly by when they started using the Internet and the technological resources that were accessible at the time. It is important to note that merely connecting to the Internet was not sufficient – it also required developing an interest in political philosophy. Such individual pathways align with the observations of Castells (2000), who highlighted the role of timing and available technological resources in the creation of virtual groups. He discusses how digital technologies facilitate the emergence of such groups and the formation of networks for political action, aligning with the idea of using the Internet as a platform for promoting and spreading political ideologies. This also enriches the opinion of Schroeder (2016) by showing that indeed the interpenetration between the digital world and politics and culture, including especially their media side, is

high. Crucially, this interpenetration is observed by my audience. This therefore confirms my point that technological change - and in particular access to new platforms - has a clear impact beyond the media on how social integration is built and in which interactions alone are conducted.

Moreover, those passages provide a historical account of the development of virtual libertarian communities in Poland over the past two decades. Tracing the origins of these communities – from anarchist meetings to the emergence of online platforms like discussion groups, forums, websites, and social media – offers insights into the evolution of virtual communities. This historical perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural context in which these communities emerged and evolved. The path of the first, proto-libertarians, was through the discovery of the Internet, when their political views were almost mapped out. Before the widespread use of the Internet in Poland, and even before it became a readily accessible platform for philosophical discourse, individuals like JS and SG had already familiarised themselves with libertarian thought. Their stories are, in fact, prototypical stories of the origins of libertarian thinking in Poland in general. They were among the first people who were openly interested and involved in discovering and promoting this thought in the country. Their personal stories are of course only a snippet of the whole but given that the number of libertarians in the country at the time was less than a handful – at least according to my interviewees – it is a significant piece of the story. From such a perspective, their entry into the world of the Internet was not only the use of a communication tool that allowed them to reach a wider audience but also discovering a source of new knowledge about this thought. I would even go so far as to say that it was a defining moment for the future of libertarians in Poland in general, not just the virtual ones. Previously, the dissemination of the, rather enigmatically defined, libertarian philosophy was very limited, also for formal reasons (lack of available sources in Polish, which only appeared on the market in the late 1990s and early 2000s). Proto-libertarians focused on promoting libertarianism through writing and publishing online magazines. With the development of the first Internet tools, groups of people were formed who commented on these publications in the

discussion groups, and on the libertarian forum. It was on the back of this group that a thriving libertarian community developed, which is still in place today. However, the Internet has continued to develop and provide newer and newer tools. Since the early 2000s, phpBB forums have been gaining popularity, followed by private websites and the first blogs and microblogs, websites of foundations and free-market organisations – of course, created by the very collaborators of the organisations themselves – and, shortly afterwards, the first social media. It was the latter that was to become the space where new libertarian groups, co-founded by my interviewees, began to emerge alongside the Libnet, which was using slightly more old-school platforms. This is in line with the findings of McFarland & Ployhart's (2015) research, about how new types of social media platforms using their hybrid nature have allowed the aggregation of all types of digital interactions. Social media has become, at some stage, a fundamental part of my interviewees' virtual lives, or even their social lives. This confirms Van Dijck's (2013) observations that social media are important not only for our digital lives but beyond them.

In the meantime, Poland was undergoing major geopolitical changes. The turbulent 1990s and 2000s largely marked by economic and social reforms (which were supposed to make the country more market-oriented, after 45 years of forced socialist realism), followed by massive political reforms of the early 2000s, brought changes in many levels, including the political one. Poland's position within Europe changed during these years. Firstly, by the end of the 1990s Poland joined NATO and then, in 2004, the European Union. These two events, combined with the very rapid expansion of the Internet in the country, led to a widespread phenomenon of westernisation of the younger population, who began to learn English and other foreign languages, study and live in Western European countries, or simply travel abroad. They also gained access to sources of knowledge that were forbidden or unavailable under the previous regime (Toczyski, et al., 2015). Pro-market parties, including those whose face was Janusz Korwin-Mikke, gained relatively wide popularity in the country, at peak reaching up to several per cent support. On the wave of this popularity, the first Internet media were created to promote the free market. A significant part of my interlocutors was associated – at least in passing –

with this politician, his political parties, or their youth organisations. This was largely an audience of people who are now in their 30s and 40s. Most of those interviewees who emphasised links to Korwin and Koliber also mentioned that they accessed the Internet around their mid-teen birthdays, or even earlier. Their entry into the libertarian community was through contact with Korwin, his parties or publishing, followed by their entry into existing online communities centred around this politician (if only his website). In some cases, they were also finding the Libertarian Forum – Libnet in the search engines or via other links. Since 2010, the time when Facebook was becoming a major Internet content player, they were among its first users, observing how it came about. Largely contact with other users and the expansion of knowledge led to my interlocutors ending their ties with Korwin and becoming full-fledged members of the virtual libertarian community. It highlights that it was not merely the act of connecting to the Internet but also the development of an interest in political philosophy that led individuals to participate in this community. This insight emphasises the role of personal agency and ideological alignment in the adoption of political ideologies within virtual space and aligns with the views of authors studying hybrid media's impact on social living (i.e., Ahmed, 2019). It also aligns with the observations of González-Larrea & Hernández-Serrano (2020) on how contemporary digital users co-craft their digital identities. At some point, my interviewees started to perceive Korwin and his surrounding network as incompatible with their lives or at least with the public image of it. One could sense they felt the association with Korwin was *passe* – even though, historically, they were fine with being called *Korwinists.*

The broadening of knowledge was largely because the third group of my interlocutors developed in parallel, in the academic centres of Poland. Wroclaw, and the *Instytut Misesa* circle, were predominant among those interlocutors but there were also intellectuals in the community from Lublin, Krakow, or Warsaw. They, too, were coming online through the evolving technologies of the 2000s. Most mention that at some point when they were looking for information about libertarianism, they came across the virtual libertarian community (primarily on Facebook) and joined it looking for some interactions. Their path was largely

through an exploration of different online libertarian sources and a focus on furthering their understanding of libertarianism on the Polish Internet. So, it is fair to say that some of these interlocutors were complicit in overturning the activists, the Korwin supporters, and Koliber members, to more libertarian positions. Those threads used various online platforms as their main setting. The older interviewees primarily mention Libertarian Forum – Libnet, and emailing groups, but also first online websites. Around them, they formed discussion groups in the early years of the community. They mention that these were functionally limited platforms, especially emailing groups and that the development of the Internet and technology has led to improvements in the forms of communication between such platforms. Most interviewees, however, focus on social networking platforms, especially Facebook. They describe the impact of this platform on their social interactions, how its development led to an intensification of contacts and opportunities with their peers, and how such development coincided with the real growth of the community. These threads will be crucial in fully understanding my interviewees' experience with the development of technology and the role they attribute to this experience. Understanding what path my interviewees took to enter this community seems crucial to fully understanding how they describe the impact of technology on the community.

In fact, in the above threads, they were raising points that are important in such considerations. They have pointed out the position of Facebook, the role of previous platforms of use, some generational differences (i.e., with the usage of platforms), or the influence of various factors that were in play throughout the formation of a community (i.e., the emergence of Facebook Groups, YouTube, and Twitter). This leads me to yet another observation, namely that there exists the fluid and overlapping nature of virtual community formation and identification. That fluidity is observable in the hierarchy of the group, with some people having a certain level of *prestige* because of their contribution to the group – be it, the popularisation of libertarian ideas, explanation of these ideas, or merely running organisations that do the former. Such an argument fits in with the idea of *fractal communities* as proposed by Karatzogianni and Matthews (2023). My interviewees

mentioned that they often move between different groups and platforms based on their evolving needs and interests. This understanding challenges the notion of a fixed and linear community structure, highlighting the dynamic nature of virtual communities. It also raises the question of whether such fluidity refers only to the hierarchical structure within the community or perhaps to the entire idea of belonging in the digital age. This contribution adds nuance to the existing scholarship on virtual communities and their formation processes.

Moreover, the paths taken by the interviewees to enter the virtual libertarian community reflect the idea that individuals are represented as autonomous agents, forming connections and networks based on their fit with network rules and protocols. It also showcases that the concept of heterodoxy should be discussed when focusing on some communities. Some political digital communities seem to be atypical when compared with others. Apparent similarities in the way they construct their identification (i.e., via memes – which aligns with far-right groups observed by Tuters and Hagen (2020)), conduct interactions or even subscribe partially to the ideological ideas of other groups (for instance, the far right) does not indicate that they can be categorised alongside them. This is because some of these communities can also be characterised by properties typical of communities competing with the former, i.e., because of their *leftist* subscription to the idea of social disobedience in case the state violates societal rights. In the case of my interlocutors, for example, they co-organised protests against the excessive codification of the Internet space (ACTA & ACTA 2) but also participated in women's rights marches and discussions about the legalisation of soft drugs. It is obvious that some of these characteristics directly negate their far-right classification. Because my interviewing cohort wasn't large enough, I won't be able to analyse it further, however, I sense this idea to be crucial in future considerations of the virtual libertarians.

The evolution of Internet tools, from discussion groups and forums to social media platforms, further expanded the possibilities for individuals to engage with the libertarian community and connect with like-minded individuals. Examining the timing of Internet usage and the availability of technological resources sheds light

on the factors that influenced individuals' entry into these communities, a notion that I will analyse further down the chapter. This contribution helps in understanding the formation and development of virtual communities within specific contexts. It aligns with Bennett et al. (i.e., 2012; 2014) argument that digital groups exhibit a more individualised and personalised nature, with less reliance on formal structures. Such were the experiences of the interviewees who followed personalised pathways into the virtual libertarian community, and who were driven by their interests in libertarian thought and political activism. The development of online platforms, including forums, websites, and social media, provided spaces for them to actively participate, collaborate, and engage in political discussions and initiatives.

To better understand their positions, however, it is necessary to go through their socio-cultural self-identification. Deepening these threads will allow for a more thorough embedding of the research questions, the solution of which I will undertake in the last analytics chapter. Finally, the above categorisation is not – and should not – be considered definitive for this community. The attentive reader will have caught out that some participants are repeated between groups. This is due to the fluidity of the formation of such a community and how individuals define their needs at different stages of the development of that community. It is a collection of similar stories that are related within the modes of entry into the community and are characteristic of many other members of this community, but I treat them as a way of putting in order the stories that my interviewees shared – not the history of the community per se. Naturally, there could be dozens more stories describing the convoluted history of community formation, but that is not what this work is about. Nevertheless, the above stories largely give a picture of how the community might have been developing over the last two decades – from anarchist meetings in illegal squats in Katowice, through the publication of the first e-magazines (zins), creation of the first emailing discussion groups, founding of the Libertarian Forum – Libnet, to the social media boom of the 2010s. This way of presenting the historical background will allow the embedding of later views of my interlocutors on how technology affected their lives in this community in a

historical context. And that was my aim in this chapter. Importantly, it also provides a great deal of important information about how my interviewees' membership of this community was shaped, and the role of the various technologies implemented at different stages of the Internet's development, i.e., discussion groups, forums, websites and finally Facebook. This will allow for a deeper analysis of these issues in the final analytical chapter.

# CHAPTER 5. ANALYSIS: BELONGING TO THE POLISH VIRTUAL LIBERTARIAN COMMUNITY

## Overview

After exploring the varied journeys that led my interviewees to the virtual libertarian community, it becomes crucial to walk through the processes of socialisation that informed their membership in this community. This is significant for a few key reasons. Firstly, the motivations behind their socialisation could have shaped the experiences they had within the technological sphere that served as their community platform. This is one aspect of their participation in the community. Secondly, technological experiences essentially form one of the primary contexts for their social interactions with fellow community members. To understand the distinct way some of my interviewees articulated their experiences within the community, it's helpful to determine the origins of their behaviour, sense of belonging, interests, and ultimately, their motivations after becoming part of this online community. The backdrop thus outlined, coupled with the prior discussions on paths leading to joining the community, will pave the way for the next chapter – and allow delving into the research questions in greater detail.

I will begin this chapter with the stories of the influence that the socialisation process had on my interviewees. This theme primarily touches on two main areas regarding my interviewees' experiences: with their families and the schooling system. The influence of both is crucial to understanding how the need for political activism of my interviewees was forged, and why this *need* has not taken the form of an *active* political organisation, that is, participation in elections and within political groupings. On the one hand, we have the influence of families on the formation of the worldview of my interviewees, which in some cases had a key impact on their later decisions related to the virtual libertarian community. These experiences may have resulted from family traumas, sometimes from mere observation and internalisation of positive values, and most often from proximity to family members who manifested similar moral inclinations. There are also, of course, cases that negate the values brought up at home, which shows that there

is a relative diversity of family experiences among my interviewees. However, each of these experiences influenced their pathways into this community, which seems crucial in the context of later discourses about the impact of technology on their actions. Next, I will focus on the educational and public schooling experiences of my interviewees. Here, too, it is evident that some of them had negative experiences in these regards, either for the sake of institutionalisation and formalisation of the schooling system, or for the lack of an adequate curriculum, or because, in their view, they were not provided with the adequate knowledge – or at least not the knowledge they expressively *wished for*. In parallel, as a counterbalance to these negative experiences, I will touch on themes related to the individual influence of academics who supported my interviewees' familiarisation with the intellectual thought of libertarianism. I will also touch on threads related to a certain inclination for discourse that manifests among my interlocutors, which was one of the glues of the formation of a virtual community.

I will also investigate whether this group that my interviewees belong to could be categorised as a community or a virtual social movement. It will, however, be preceded by issues related to their socio-political activism. The theme of their activism seems to be very important because it shows the form of any external expression of my interlocutors and their grouping, which stems from their adopted political behaviours. I will analyse those statements and try to understand why they adopt such attitudes.

I will then move to focus on the elements that bind this group together. I will start with threads touching on networking. This process is understood here in two ways: managing social interactions and building a certain informal structure within the community that supported some of their life (primarily professional) decisions. From the words of my interviewees, it appears that other members of the community were also the beneficiaries of this type of contact and interaction, which may indicate a certain regularity in the community. However, without going into the macro level – for which I would need additional volume research – there is a trend in my interview cohort that shows that this group is essentially bonding in the virtual world, and these types of interactions spill over into the offline world.

At the end of this chapter, I will touch on the language that my interlocutors used in the conversations. At the same time, I will look at the form of expression of this community, including visual art, music, and literature, as it is an excellent reflection of their level of integration, but also their assessment of how this community functions from the point of view of non-obvious integrative components. These are important themes that will allow the final chapter to focus on tools for the development of such integration points. In this context, the themes in this chapter must be seen as part of a funnel that approaches the technology, i.e., the plane that binds the whole community together.

This chapter makes a significant contribution to the exploration of community formation processes by addressing key aspects related to belonging to the virtual libertarian community. It offers an in-depth reflection on the defining characteristics of the community, as discussed in the literature review. By examining these important threads, this chapter provides ample space for analysis and reflection on the complexities involved in the formation of this particular community.

## Political Socialisation

One observation becomes clear after conducting interviews with members of this community. As their stories in the previous chapter show, they're joining the virtual libertarian community is largely dictated by their desire to get to know other people who hold a similar set of views. My interviewees developed a *sense of community*, one of the main motives for the creation of communities (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In many cases, it is also a desire to learn something new about the theory, or even to try to educate others about it. Bragd, et al. (2008) call it a *discourse community*. It is also clear that once they joined the community, amongst many of them, there was no desire to practically implement the libertarian ideas in the form of active political participation, i.e., in political parties and elections. It is worth leaning into where their approach to this topic may be coming from.

### Family Narratives

AC is a thirty-something from a large Polish city, who works at the university, in a consultancy business, and in a think-tank promoting the Austrian school of economics. When talking, he gives the impression of a very positive, and intelligent person. He is a joker, but both polite and balanced in his words. He begins the story by describing the influence of his family on his beliefs and the life path he has taken. His mother, now retired, was a lawyer. His father on the other hand was a math teacher. As he recalls, his home was a place where anti-communist attitudes prevailed. This was related to the fact that his parents were associated with the opposition movement during the communist period. '*Our house was always quite political*', he says. His parents were dedicated to anti-communist activities, also making their home available to other dissidents. And while my interlocutor, as he recalls, did not experience these meetings himself, they were later reflected in the domestic vibe, which could be sensed when talking about these events. This type of experience influenced my interviewee, who felt that the house was '*soaked up with (*negative*) memories of* communism'.

It is noteworthy that this type of home experience was not one-off and typical only of AC. LS's experiences are similar. He is a close peer of AC, and a resident of the big city, who works at the university. He too begins his story with his parents and the fact that they were involved in opposition activities in the 1980s. This activity – but also the repercussions that befell the LS family, including his father's internment in the 1980s[51] – influenced the deep resentment his father had towards people of that system. LS says that '*this was the source of my animal-like, mindless dislike for communists'.* MG, a third interviewee who shares very similar experiences with his family, grew up in one of the larger towns in central Poland, and studied in Wrocław, even though he lives abroad at this point. He explicitly says that his family was important in shaping his approach to the world. His great-grandfather fought against Nazis, whilst his father protested communists as a

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[51] During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a growing social backlash in Poland against the power monopoly of the People's Republic of Poland. Oppositionists, grouped largely around the Solidarity, were very often arrested at rallies and during protests – even if there were no grounds for their arrest. Their detention was a *de facto* form of internment. LS's father was one of those who experienced this extra-legal form of detention.

member of the *Solidarność* movement in the 1980s. He says that *'it is* (our) *familial tradition:* (to be) *anti-regime (*and*) anti-socialist'.* It was not only the male interviewees who had similar experiences. TG, too, shares memories of her family's strong influence in shaping her approach to Poland's previous system. TG is around MG's age and now lives in southern Poland. She also lived abroad for years. She shares a moving story about her family experiences that heavily influenced her worldview. Her grandfather's uncle was killed in Kharkiv[52] by the Soviets – an event that largely influenced her dislike towards the communist ideology. It was one of the dominant domestic stories that influenced her views on communism and its derivatives. As she points out, schooling institutions did not help her understand what happened during those times, as the curriculum ended around the Second World War each year, she had history lessons. Not surprisingly, her grandfather as well as her parents, were largely the sources of her knowledge of wartime and post-war Poland. And these experiences, like those of AC, LS, or MG, were largely negative or even *very* negative.

A strong influence of their parents and grandparents, together with the interviewee's clear respect for their families – but also a clear linking of the parents' opinions or views with the choices they were making – indicate that my interviewees were significantly influenced by the narratives (co-)constructed by their respective households. Familial influence seems to be crucial in choosing a path that led those interviewees to the virtual libertarian community. Whereas, of course, anti-communism is not in the credo of libertarian thought, it arises, as it were, spontaneously from the postulates and philosophy of this thinking stream. In simplified terms, it can be said that not every anti-communist will be a libertarian, but every libertarian will be an anti-communist. Certainly, libertarianism at its core implies many postulates that are considered anti-communist, i.e., dissent over top-down coercion (Hamowy, 2008), and an inverse (to the communist) understanding

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[52] The *Katyń* massacre was a Second World War mass execution of ~22,000 Polish officers and intellectuals carried out by the Soviet military and policing forces in 1940. Amongst the killed were the representatives of many pre-war Polish minorities fighting in the Polish army, including Jews, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. *Katyń* was understood as a planned purge of Polish army officers and intelligentsia who could threaten the planned Soviet invasion of Polish territory in the later stages of the war.

of the role of the individual in the market, as a fundamental market component rather than a mere cog in the collective (Hayek, 2005). Many theorists of classical-liberal and libertarian thought have focused on criticising the solutions proposed by the communists, including the theory of common goods or market collectivisation. The most vocal were those who lived in parallel with the developing communist utopia in USSR. Ludwig von Mises, in his anti-communist seminal work *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (von Mises, 1981), deeply criticised the economic and social model of this utopia, whilst Ayn Rand published a novel, *We, The Living* (1936) that was to become one of the strongest critiques of the anti-individualist ideals guiding the Soviet Union. Libertarianism, for my interviewees, could therefore be perceived as a form of antithesis to what communism proposes and stands for. Each interviewee mentions that they came across libertarian themes in later periods, but it is worth emphasising that these experiences may have prepared the ground for the later internalisation of libertarian values. Nevertheless, with their parents as role models, or at least as important figures in the process of shaping political positions, my interviewees settled quite quickly on the liberal side of the political philosophy axis.

In contrast, TM – an entrepreneur, and IT specialist, who is in his early 30s – had a different experience. His family held liberal views and ran a thriving business since the early 1990s[53]. In his own words, he grew up in the so-called middle class with a free-market approach being a norm in his home. TM grew up having his parents as his role models and very quickly adopted their liberal views as his own, and soon deepened them into libertarianism. His experience is based on a positive association of prosperity with his parents' market views and consequent political views.

Let us return to the AC's story. His father was a book collector. AC goes as far as to call his book collection *'gigantic'*. He also adds that his brother's library on

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[53] The factual liberation of the market in Poland took place even before the formal collapse of the socialist system. On 23 December 1988, the Minister of industry, Mieczysław Wilczek, together with Prime Minister, Mieczysław Rakowski, enacted a law to liberalise economic activity, which gave rise to the colloquial term for this law: the 'Wilczek Act'. For supporters of free-market thinking, to this day this law is considered the best of its kind in the history of modern Poland (i.e., Sadowski, 2008).

contemporary history issues may be the most comprehensive in the country. This shared passion for books came in handy when AC was to choose his field of study. As he recalls, he was guided more by pragmatism – he preferred a degree course that would be simple and would not require much commitment to get into. '*I was always a bit lazy by nature and wanted to optimise my studies, to deal with the things I had a flair for'* he said. When he informed his father that he was considering economics – because of his good knowledge of mathematics, of which his dad was a teacher, and political science, in which AC was interested– largely because of his familial experiences – his dad brought him a stack of economics books and told him that reading through them would help to figure out what the field of study he was willing to start, is about. Reading these books not only helped AC understand the basic nature of economics, but also familiarise himself for the first time with the thought of Austrian economics and, more precisely, the works of Ludwig von Mises. AC recalls this moment as his first contact with, what he can broadly define as, libertarianism. The impact of a family on the formation of AC's economic and political consciousness is visible. Likewise, the stories of MG, LS, or TG, point to the strong impact of family histories on, at least in part, the later path to the internalisation of libertarian political philosophy. I call this influence a *familial narrative*. And, while, at first glance, this seems unrelated to the very idea of technological influence on my interlocutors' virtual libertarian status, it is important to understand their very intention of seeking a community with such a political profile. Particularly because several interviewees explicitly admit that they made important life decisions through family influence alone.

Not for every one of my interviewees did the influence of family translate into choosing a path that followed the narrative line of the household. BG begins his story by mentioning how his family and its values – including Catholicism and the '*left-wing sensitivity'* – were '*installed'* in him through familial and school influences. He says *'My path has been rather tortuous, but I think that's a common trait of all Polish libertarians*'. As he concludes, it was a '*strangely conceived'* social sensibility according to which the state must help by '*taking from the rich'* and in which the rich are '*greedy and bad'*. BG grew up convinced that communalism was

the only form of morally good order. Because of this, in high school, he walked the school corridors wearing a T-shirt with Fidel Castro or with Andrzej Lepper, the leader of the *Samoobrona*[54] party. '*Capitalism was for me a symbol of something bad*' he emphasises. In his case, the change in tone came with his exposure to the work of Janusz Korwin-Mikke and the following *Korwin's sting*, as he calls it. However, because of the world view promoted at home, his views were anti-capitalist or even communist for many years.

One of the younger interviewees, MS, begins his story by noting that in his family most of the household members were supporters of the ruling at the time *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform)[55]. As he points out, it was the ideals of this party that he first encountered. Initially, it was a Christian-liberal party in a German ordoliberal style, but once in power, it aligned more with centrist policymaking. In the last decade, its programme has taken a rather significant turn towards a social-liberal programme. And it was this last twist that caused my interlocutor to slowly start realising he is looking for something else. As he recalls, it so happened that his school was visited by Janusz Korwin-Mikke. He and his vision of the world became so compelling to MS that it adopted them as its own. What is interesting about this story is that MS has compromised somehow. He comes from an international family living in Poland. His father is a migrant from one of the Arabic countries. In Poland, a very homogenous country, only about 3% of the total population are national minorities who were from abroad before the 2022 migration crisis caused by Russia's attack on Ukraine. According to various sources, the number of Ukrainians who have crossed the Polish border could have been as high as around two million people, and over 1.3m remain in Poland a year after the war started (Ptak, 2023). Nevertheless, many migrants in Poland come from neighbouring countries (Ukraine, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Russia).

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[54] *Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej* (Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland, SRP) is a syncretic and agrarian Polish political party founded in the early 1990s by its first leader andrzej Lepper. In the mid-2000s it became one of the most popular parties in the Polish parliament, with over 50 MPs between 2001 and 2007. The party lost ground after the 2007 elections and did not have any MPs since. In 2011 its leader, Lepper, was found dead in his party's office in Warsaw.

[55] *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform, PO) is a Polish centrist party led by Donald Tusk. It was established in 2001 and held power as the ruling party from 2007 to 2015. Following its defeat in the 2015 elections, it became the largest opposition party in the country.

Yet, before the Second World War – and the national cleansing carried out first by Nazi Germany and then, as part of the resettlement and pressure policy, by the Soviets – Poland was a relatively culturally diverse country. With that in mind, apart from Tatars[56] and cultural intermingling during the Polish-Turkish wars in the 14th-16th, it never had the heavy influence of non-European cultures. People from Middle and Far East Asia constituted in Polish society only a fraction of the local communities in its history.

The interviewee initially had reservations about libertarian thought due to its association with *Korwinist* politicians. This association stems from the fact that *Korwinists* often align with nationalist circles, which promote anti-immigration and anti-Arab narratives in the context of migration policy. However, over time, the interviewee became convinced of the merits of free-market ideas and developed a positive view of Korwin and his libertarian stance. IOn this case, the family influenced a kind of conundrum for the interviewee. For, on the one hand, he is the son of an émigré, whom some representatives of a *Korwinist* ideological group considered unwelcome in Poland. On the other hand, he was attracted to the theoretical ideals behind this movement, primarily free-market narratives. In my interviewee, free-market logic prevailed. As he also mentions in later passages, his *marriage* with the *Korwinist* did not stand the test of time either. He remained a free marketeer and later a libertarian, quite quickly marginalising or disregarding the rest of the social views of this political current.

Summary

An exploration of familial narratives, as referenced by my interviewees, uncovers the impact of their family histories on their philosophical and political awareness. This influence significantly contributed to their ultimate embrace of libertarian values. AC, LS, MG, and TG all provide accounts of familial experiences marked by anti-communist attitudes, oppositional activities during the communist period, and the lingering influence of these experiences on their lives. These experiences shape

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[56] Polish-Lithuanian Tatars were a group of Tatars who lived in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth since 14th century. They were one of a few Muslim groups living in the area until the Second World War.

their political beliefs and influence their decision to join the libertarian community online later in life. In the case of AC, his intellectual journey to libertarianism was guided in part by his father's collection of economics books, particularly those by Ludwig von Mises, a prominent libertarian economist. The experiences of TM and MS show different paths to libertarianism. TM was raised in a free-market household, fostering an early adoption of classic liberal and libertarian ideals. MS, whose family supported a centrist party, adopted libertarian ideals after being inspired by Korwin-Mikke's free-market statements. In turn, some interviewees have consciously changed their political positions, despite the prevailing political beliefs in their homes. BG was raised in a family promoting 'left-wing sensitivity' and communalism, but eventually, he turned to libertarianism also after exposure to Korwin. These narratives highlight the complex interplay of familial influence, personal experiences, and intellectual pursuit among members of the virtual community. The impact of these factors, combined with their virtual interactions, formed a unique trajectory leading my interviewees to embrace libertarian philosophy (Figure 16).

The role of families in the socialisation process, especially in shaping political positions, is well-documented in social science literature. Families provide the initial social context for individuals, where they first learn about the world and start forming their worldviews, which include political attitudes (Jennings et al., 2009). Parents play a crucial role in transmitting political values to their children (Achen, 2002). This process can happen both directly, through explicit communication about political issues, and indirectly, through children observing and mimicking their parents' political behaviour (Westholm, 1999). The impact of familial influence can be long-lasting, with studies showing that political attitudes acquired in childhood often remain stable throughout a person's life (Sears and Levy, 2003). This process of political socialisation within the family is part of what establishes the foundation for later political attitudes – such as the attitudes towards communism or capitalism expressed by the interviewees in this study. It's important to note that the process of political socialisation within families is not always a straightforward transmission of values and attitudes. Sometimes, children

may reject the beliefs and views of their parents, taking on political stances that stand in stark opposition to their parents' views (Mummendey et al., 1999). This phenomenon can occur for several reasons, including generational changes, rebellious tendencies, different social influences, or simply having access to a wider range of information and perspectives – the latter being the source of this attitude in one of my interviewees (ibid). Thus, while family provides the initial blueprint for political attitudes, individual paths can diverge significantly based on a multitude of factors.

## Schooling and Education Narratives

Many of my interviewees focused, if only in brief passages, on schooling and education. Even though they all had at least a bachelor's or master's degree, and more than a third even a doctorate[57], some of them are openly critical of the educational system in which they have come to function. Many also acknowledge, however, that it was at the university stage that they were able to familiarise themselves with libertarian thought. The shaping of these interviewees' perspectives was heavily influenced by the teaching staff. Furthermore, their education played a significant role in fostering a keen interest in political debates among them. This interest was either cultivated through involvement in university debate clubs or carried over from conversational practices adopted during their studies, which later manifested in their online interactions. The virtual libertarian community, particularly the groups originating from the University of Wrocław, found its core foundation in a fondness for discussion.

Let me start with a critique of the education model and related themes that led some of my interviewees to libertarian positions. An excellent starting point for these reflections is the story told by TG. As if to provide a contrast to the subject she covers, she narrates with a lively wit, her, rather unpleasant, experiences from an unfinished doctorate in the Netherlands. She begins her story by highlighting – what she believes are natural – self-inclinations towards libertarianism: *'I would say*

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[57] For context, according to Poland's Central Statistical office, almost half of the Poles aged 25-34 have a university degree; a result that places Poles in the middle of the European pack (Zdzieblowski, 2019)

*that I've always been a libertarian, I just didn't know it* (back in school).'. During her social science classes, she often questioned the purpose of politicians engaging in debates over new laws, perceiving such discussions as unproductive. She vividly remembers being filled with numerous questions and thoughts during those moments: *'Why new laws? Are our lives changing somehow? Is human nature changing? What do they want from us?'. In* a light-hearted manner, she jokingly suggests that debates over new laws might be warranted in the event of an alien arrival or the invention of super-advanced technology. However, aside from those exceptional scenarios, she found such discussions to be devoid of meaningful substance. TG found the school experience very distressing, so much so that she spent time imagining that it was physical imprisonment: *'I always drew a cartoon about how school is a prison, and we are imprisoned here by the evil Pharaoh – the Minister of Education; and that we want to escape from this prison. Because I didn't understand what it was all about.* (It was) *a bit physically unpleasant for me.',* she claims. She also expressed dissatisfaction with the curriculum implemented in primary schools, particularly about the socio-historical content. She felt that it primarily involved the repetition of material from previous years, failing to delve into the post-war era that captivated her attention. She yearned for a deeper exploration of the interactions between Poles and the post-war authorities during that period. Contextually, the post-war reconstruction of the Polish state under the control of the Soviet empire was – immediately after the war – the object of passionate criticism from many quarters, brutally pacified by the Soviet-supported authorities (Prażmowska, 2004). From her perspective, she held the belief that both the Soviets and the Polish government at that time bore responsibility for the crimes committed against her family. The school's failure to take account of these events, so important from her perspective, irritated my interviewer. She believed that placing significance on ancient history while neglecting to discuss recent history was erroneous, resulting in history classes lacking context and meaning.

Other interviewees also describe how uncomfortable they felt in the context of the schooling system, especially in lower-level schools. It is even claimed that the school did not contribute to their educational aspirations and that they achieved

their goals solely through personal dedication or family influences. This aversion towards the public education system may stem from the fact that the Polish system is generally resistant to innovation, which is one of the key driving forces of libertarian thought. To provide some context, the Polish system is centralised with curricula being developed under the guidance of the relevant ministry. My interlocutors lived their school experience several or more years ago, and the system has undergone significant formal changes several times during this period. For the oldest interviewees, the norm was to start school at the age of seven, followed by eight years of primary school, four years of secondary school and continuing through university – still at that time the unified, five-year master's degree[58]. Most of my interviewees – but also including myself – had experienced structural changes and the implementation of new educational strategies in the 1990s and 2000s (e.g., the creation of new types of mid-level schools, new examinations, or changes in the way final examinations were conducted) (Hodun, 2017). For them (or should I say, for us), the norm was to start school at the age of seven, followed by six years of primary school, three years of lower secondary school (called *gimnazjum* in Polish) and another three years of secondary school (*liceum*) or four years of technical school (*technikum)*. After that, they started their studies, usually in the university Bologna system, so with 3 years of the Bachelor of Science/Arts equivalent and 1 or 2 years of the Master of Science/Arts equivalent. It is noteworthy that in recent years there has been another change that has done away with the division into two levels of secondary school and restored the three-phase model (starting at age 6, eight years of primary school, five years of secondary school or six years of technical school and the university Bologna system). And while the data shows that the performance of Polish students are better than in other countries in the region (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, or Hungary – see Hodun, ibid), some point out that schools focus on preparing students for important examinations rather than preparing them for their future lives. Moreover, this system became subject to political manipulation, particularly in recent years (Włodarczyk-Semczuk, 2022). And while only some of my

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[58] This changed with the adaptation of the Bologna Process and the division of studies into bachelor's and master's degrees.

interviewees were affected by the structural changes in schools in Poland, the change in the curriculum for universities has strongly affected many, as they only required the approval of the relevant ministry. Invariably, many of my interviewees emphasise their dissatisfaction with the public schooling system. The EP, for example, says explicitly that she doesn't appreciate the time spent at the university: *'Even though I studied economics in Poland – apart from political science - I can't say that anyone in Poland gave me any knowledge on what the free-market economy and ideas were.'.* She is clear that such a situation was an issue for her. She said she had to come to many things, including free market economics, on her own.

Going back to TG's story, even the university experience did not change her opinion of public education and exacerbated her dislike of the schooling institutions. It is worth mentioning that she had cross-European experience as she started her university education in Poland but continued it in the Netherlands. As a PhD student, she was running lectures at one of the leading Dutch universities. To her shock, some students were coming to her lectures wearing hammer and sickle[59] shirts. Surprised and disgusted by such a display, the interviewee comes into conflict with the university authorities, who do not understand her aversion to the symbolism of the hammer and sickle. She believes that the university she was at, had her traumatic family experience of communist ideology for nothing. According to TG, they believed it was merely a *symbol of the hippies.'.* The lack of reaction from the university administration, which even went so far as to formally blame her for not accepting students' views, was even more conflicting to her. From her perspective, communism was the ideology responsible for harming her family[60]. Meanwhile, the university accused her of being intolerant for not accepting the display of the hammer and sickle symbol in her class. She describes it as a *'traumatic experience'.* As a result of these events, her cooperation with the supervisor and other institute staff broke down badly. She never finishes her PhD even though she

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[59] The Hammer and Sickle is an international symbol of communism. Considered a prohibited sign in many European countries due to its association with the Soviet Union, of which it was a symbol.
[60] in the previous chapter, I've mentioned an uncle killed during the Soviet's officer-level purges in and around Katyń.

just needed to submit her thesis for a public defence. By her admission, she did not want to be identified with this university should she defend it. TG also recalls that one of the other things that disturbed her the most whilst still studying was their participation in a geophysical conference in San Francisco where, to her shock, communist pamphlets were distributed openly in the audience. Ultimately, it led her to shift to libertarian positions. As a result of these experiences, the interviewee has become interested in expanding awareness of how political ideologies might be psychologically manipulative.

However, not all school experiences were negative for my interviewees. Some point to important moments that led them to understand what libertarianism is, or even indicate that they directly influenced their conversion to supporters of the thought. What is interesting, however, is that each interviewee points to individual situations in which their respective university lecturers were the triggers. Based on their words, it can be assumed that these lecturers were breaking out of the pattern and thus got them interested in exploring these issues as interesting alternatives to the mainstream philosophies. AC continued his story about the influence of his father and books on his life decisions. He describes that the books recommended by his father, including those written by Ludwig von Mises, were game-changing for him. He describes them as follows: '*I read these books and got enthralled, I felt that it was just plain clear. A pure argument, like a flowing stream. Everything made logical sense. It was derived from such very non-controversial, primary premises. I was delighted.* He concluded that von Mises must have been one of the most important economists in history, and it was with this conviction that he went to his first classes at the University of Wrocław. They were run by the late prof Witold Kwaśnicki, who seemingly confirmed the status of von Mises by quoting and referring to him extensively throughout the lecture. Machaj and Kwaśnicki influenced several of my other interviewees. It is worth focusing on the BS story here. He recalls that he didn't want to go for the easy-reach department. After applying to both economics and international relations, he was ranked among the top students in the international relations department. '*When I saw my results on the candidate's lists, I was too high. I realised that if I got there, it won't be too challenging.'. In*stead, he

chose economics where he was listed in the mid-pack. At the faculty, both Machaj and Kwaśnicki were to be his lecturers. According to BS, it was Kwaśnicki's first lecture that redefined his view of liberalism and freedom-thinking. *'Fifteen minutes that changed my approach to freedom, to this idea in general. Witold* (Kwaśnicki) *gave us a political test at the end of our first class, a political compass (…) (It) contained probably only ten questions: five regarding economics and five regarding worldview (…) I saw where I was placed - in a quadrant of conservatism – and where Witold showed his position was. He was 100 out of 100 in freedom, total extremity. I was shocked.'.* To BS, the biggest revelation was the question that was touching on the necessity of passport-issuing, whether they should be in play or not. *'And I said: 'Well, yes! I mean, how does it even … this must be regulated!'. Witold disagreed. And for me, it was like 'Oh snap, how can this be?'.* BS regards this moment as the starting point in his conversion to libertarianism. However, not everyone was reached with this thought by its proponents. Sometimes it was the work of chance. MC says he discovered libertarian thought through reading Ayn Rand, which he found on the compulsory reading list for one of his political theory classes. And even though the professor was not one of her followers, and Rand was only included in this list as a subject of analysis of contemporary philosophical theories, MC found her philosophy extremely compelling and adapted libertarianism as his thinking.

But let's go back to the story of AC and his experiences with Kwaśnicki. This is because this thread will link to the last topic I addressed in this subsection. AC alluded to the fact that the staff at the University of Wrocław encouraged students to participate in extracurricular activities, primarily student clubs. The university had a club named after von Mises, to which AC was invited by Kwaśnicki. AC recalls that, for him, this was one of the most important events in his libertarian life. It was at a gathering of this club that AC was to meet the people who co-founded Wrocław's free-market environment, including the founders of the Polish *Instytut Misesa*. At this meeting, the idea of intellectual property rights was discussed. He recalls that he wanted to enter the discussion *'with a combative attitude'* against intellectual property rights. And, shockingly, as he puts it, he found out that almost

everyone else in the room was opposing them. '*So, out of pure intellectual contrariness, I changed my front and started discussing in favour of intellectual property*' he said. AC stresses that he was surprised by how well-read other discussants within the club were. He recalls that '*before university, I didn't have that much exposure to people who were that well-read, outside my family*'. *In*deed, thanks to Kwasnicki, AC came across a group that largely shaped the later *Instytut Misesa* in Wrocław. Both BS and AC mention that Kwaśnicki was the main instigator of their involvement in the club, as presumably, many other students have been over the years.

A second characteristic observation is outlined here, namely the eagerness for discourse. AC explicitly says that he took an interest in rhetorical disputes from home. He was brought up in an intellectual home where the prevailing authority was always in question. A focus was placed on reading and deepening knowledge, which influenced my interviewee's contrariness. This one manifested itself, of course, in the above passage, but at the same time, it fits firmly into the characteristics of some other libertarians I have spoken to. Such love of discussion, but also the conviction of being right, was reflected in their online activities. Some of them explicitly mention that their desire for a discussion led them to seek out virtual communities where they could discuss topics of interest to them – such as in the stories of MB, IS and MA. They describe how, in their search for sources of information on a given issue – largely initiated at the universities, if only because of the thesis they were pursuing – they arrived at forums or community groups where discussants held advanced philosophical conversations. MB – in his mid-thirties, currently a director in the leading free-market think-tank in Poland – also recalls the impact of the lecturers at the University of Wrocław in this process. Contrary to other interviewees, he encountered Machaj's article online: '*I came across the website of the Polish Instytut Misesa, and a text by Mateusz Machaj, about how the A-Team from the popular TV series is an example of an anarcho-capitalist organisation. How it creates a private order and pursues justice on its own. I was intrigued. I couldn't tell how much of it was intellectual ploy, and how much was*

*taken seriously with the use of some extreme anti-state arguments, but somehow, I started coming back to this site.'*.

In this way, some of the interlocutors became familiar with libertarianism. For others, the online discussion itself, touching on the issues of libertarian philosophy, became to some extent the aim of this interaction. Some of them were becoming experts and were trying to help others understand the intricacies of the philosophy. This kind of evolution was best described by LS, who shares that: *'It was a very interesting milieu and intellectually vivid people. They could talk all night and day about ideological issues, the market, economics, and so on (…) it was a stage of ideological training, propagandizing oneself, and later getting to know these ideological and theoretical realities. Because it later turned into theoretical interests. Later – or at least in my case it was so – I moved more and more away from these ideological questions, towards more theoretical aspects. And this was something that virtually all of us in that environment shared. It was this observation that the theory of what the world is like, is much more interesting than our beliefs of the world, and whether we want to convince someone of certain things or not. The study of this world may be more interesting and maybe a better tool for later; to – possibly – convince some people too.'*.

In conclusion, several of my interviewees are critical of the public schooling model in Poland and recall unpleasant or negative experiences related to it. Their criticism may result from different expectations towards education. Perhaps the same factors are at work here that make my interviewees not active in electoral and party contexts. My interviewees are decidedly more pro-individualist and focused on self-responsibility. The current system is not providing, in the crucial from the market-point of view, areas, i.e., in promoting critical thinking or media literacy training (currently around 60% of young Poles point to the Internet as a source of knowledge, but only 21% check information from the Internet in more depth) (Hodun, ibid.). For free-market advocates, this type of schooling appears to be inefficient, geared towards short-term goals (passing an exam) rather than market goals (getting a job or starting a business). Perhaps solutions that allow for a wider

range of private schools to grow[61], but also greater curricular freedom, and above all an emphasis on acquiring practical knowledge, would be the solution here. For a highly intellectualised community, which is also advocating rather extreme pro-market solutions, the structural and substantive shortcomings of the public schooling system can be as irritating as an underdeveloped party programme and thus lead to a wholesale rejection – or in this case loud criticism – of the model in use.

Simultaneously, it is worth emphasising the role those individual academic lecturers, above all from the University of Wrocław, have played in the experiences of my interviewees. Thanks to their work, many of my interlocutors explicitly admit that they became interested in, or even converted to liberal and libertarian thought. This community around the *Instytut Misesa* has become one of the main links on the intellectual map of libertarianism in Poland, as evidenced by its popularity.

<u>Summary</u>

This section explores the experiences of various interviewees with formal education and how it influenced their trajectory towards libertarian thought. Many interviewees had a critical perspective of the educational system, despite their academic achievements. Notably, their exposure to libertarian thought often occurred at the university stage, with mentors and debate clubs significantly shaping their perspectives. In many cases, a strong intellectual and academic influence was instrumental in triggering the members' conversion to libertarianism. This happened through encounters with lecturers, who provided a different perspective on mainstream philosophies and led to an interest in libertarianism. Influences also came from readings recommended by family members, as mentioned in the previous section.

TG's story presents a profound critique of the education system. From her school days, she perceived an inherent inclination towards free-market thinking and had

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[61] Whose popularity in Poland is already growing, as indicated by the *'Report on non-public education in Poland 2019'*. See: Ourkids.net, 2019.

a distaste for political debates around new laws. Her discomfort with the educational system, especially with the socio-historical content taught in primary schools, led her to perceive the schooling system as a 'prison'. Her schooling did not cover post-war history, a period of keen interest to her, further intensifying her dissatisfaction. Moreover, other interviewees also expressed their discomfort with the schooling system and credited their educational aspirations to personal dedication and family influences rather than the public education system. The interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the centralised Polish education system, which they found resistant to innovation, a key tenet of libertarian thought. The experience of TG continued to be negative in her university years, even as she continued her education in the Netherlands. Encountering students wearing hammer and sickle shirts, symbols of communism, and the university's dismissal of her concerns further solidified her aversion to public education and her shift towards libertarianism. These experiences led TG to focus on raising awareness of the manipulative potential of political ideologies.

On the other hand, other interviewees are underlining the influence they experienced at the university level. The experiences at the University of Wrocław were particularly significant, with faculty members such as Machaj and Kwaśnicki being major instigators of libertarian interest. They not only inspired students in their classes but also motivated participation in extracurricular activities, like the von Mises Discussion Club, which further enhanced the understanding and appreciation of libertarian thought. An intriguing dynamic emerged within the discussions, where individuals took contrary positions to stimulate debate, demonstrating an eagerness for intellectual discourse. This tendency also transitioned into their online activities, where members sought out virtual communities to continue these discussions. Despite the critical view of the public schooling system in Poland of some of the interviewees, the role of individual lecturers and intellectual discourse in schools and universities emerged as significant in shaping their libertarian philosophies.

Schools play a pivotal role in the socialisation process, particularly in the formation of political attitudes. The school environment serves as a melting pot of various

ideologies and thoughts, offering students exposure to a diverse range of perspectives. Specifically, educators, through the curriculum and classroom discourse, can significantly influence students' political viewpoints (Hess and McAvoy, 2015). They are not merely institutions for imparting academic knowledge but also platforms where young people are exposed to a variety of political, social, and cultural ideologies (ibid).  For instance, as highlighted in the fragment, the University of Wrocław's lecturers were instrumental in steering students towards libertarianism. This aligns with the literature that suggests that political socialisation, or the shaping of political attitudes, often begins at schools (Jennings and Niemi, 1968). The curriculum, the school culture, and the attitudes of teachers and peers all contribute to the development of an individual's political perspective. Schools provide a diverse setting where political attitudes can be formed, challenged, and reformed through debates, discussions, and the teaching of various subjects (Torney-Purta, 2002).

The critique of the public schooling system by my interviewees offers a unique insight into the tension between libertarian ideologies and centralised public education, an area not extensively covered in existing research. This brings out the paradox of how an educational system perceived as restrictive can indirectly foster the growth of libertarian ideologies. Also, it becomes clear that the intellectual discourse, both offline (in schools and universities) and online, contributes to shaping and affirming political beliefs. This brings an interesting perspective on the interplay between offline and online spheres in shaping political attitudes, a topic that has been gaining interest with the rise of digital platforms but is rarely discussed in virtual communities. Consequently, the education system in which my interviewees were fitted in, can be understood as a key factor in their socialisation process (Figure 17).

## Political Attitudes

Among the themes raised in the interviews, there were also points relating to the political attitudes developed by my interviewees. This appears to be an important thread, as it brings together socialisation elements within a single strand of *political behaviours*. These are largely *anti-political* in their essence. Fawcett, et al. (2017)

identify anti-politics as a *'set of beliefs and practices that demonstrate disillusionment, disaffection, and disengagement with institutional politics.'*. Politics understood as an activity designed to distribute power over individuals, is an undesirable activity for libertarians. In return, anti-political attitudes, including a lack of active involvement in current political activities, seem natural for a philosophy that negates the logic and legitimacy of *institutionalised collective* power. In this section, I will delve into the threads within the interviews where my interviewees directly discuss the specific attitudes they have adopted in their lives and examine how these attitudes have influenced their political stances within the political landscape of Poland.

Before further analysis, it is important to provide an overview of the political context in which my interviewees' narratives unfold. Particularly among the *Activists*, there is a recurring mention of a political landscape where Janusz Korwin-Mikke and the politicians affiliated with his groups represented one of the few outlets for free-market or classically liberal ideas. However, it is important to note that the complex party landscape in the country played a significant role not only for them but also for other interviewees. From the 1990s to the mid-2000s, Poland had a party system dominated by small parties, which often clashed with each other during daily political struggles. Whilst the Left remained relatively unified under the *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* (SLD), which had roots in the communist party; the Right and the Centre witnessed constant shifts and changes until they eventually consolidated into two major political parties: *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO) and *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS)[62]. PO attracted many centre-right voters from the former *Unia Wolności* (UW)[63] and some centre-left voters from SLD, while PiS incorporated various smaller right-wing and nationalist parties along with their respective supporters. Since the mid-2000s, this situation has turned into a system in which PiS and PO have exchanged power and the name of the largest opposition

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[62] *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice, PiS), is a Polish right-wing, protectionist party led by Jarosław Kaczyński. It was a ruling party in 2005 and is again since 2015. It has been the biggest opposition party in the country between 2007 and 2015.

[63] *Unia Wolności* (Freedom Union, UW), was a Polish social-liberal, Christian-democratic party that was influential in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was largely absorbed into the PO after its creation in 2001.

party. This largely influenced the construction of the dominant political narrative in Poland. Both parties, because of the long absence of competition on the political map, began to adopt increasingly populist policies without which they needed coalition strategies to win the elections. In late 2014, Donald Tusk[64] moved to the position of President of the European Council, followed by PO losing the 2015 general election. Since then, PiS has emerged as the dominant political force in Poland, while PO has experienced a decline in its former political standing. While PO still holds the position of the main opposition party, its political position is largely shaped by the ongoing activities of PiS. As Szczerbiak (2017) refers to it, PO's focus has shifted towards being a "total opposition" party, meaning that its political agenda and actions are largely driven by opposition to PiS. In this political landscape, the remaining parties are primarily vying for the position of the country's third and subsequent political forces. However, their competition often revolves around seeking public exposure within the Parliament rather than challenging the dominant positions held by PiS and PO. My interviewees, therefore, admit that it would be difficult for them to embed themselves in such a party context. This is also because for many of them the very concept of politics, understood as a competition for collective power, is inaccessible. One interviewee emphasises that it is difficult to initiate a libertarian change in such realities.

An excellent introduction will be the story told by MS, which addresses issues of political activism among libertarians. In his opinion, Polish libertarians have no organised political structures and have no real political significance in the country. The few that exist, remain – in his words – a *'political plankton'*[65] on the Polish political scene, i.e., meaningless small political groups that operate on the fringes of Poles' party consciousness. He mentions marginal parties (*Libertarianie*[66],

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[64] Donald Tusk is a Polish politician, former Prime Minister (2007-14) and President of the European Council (2014-19). Widely considered one of the most influential Polish politicians of the 20th and 21st centuries.

[65] *Polityczny plankton* (Political plankton) is an ironic term used in Poland for political parties (but also individual politicians and even associations) of minor importance, for which success is sometimes something that would be considered a common task for other political agents (e.g., registration in the register of political parties or participation in the parliamentary voting).

[66] *Libertarianie* (Libertarians) is a Polish political party founded in 2019 and officially registered in 2021. It assumes the libertarian political and economic proposals as the core of their political programme, including deregulations, lowering of the taxes, and decentralisation.

*Możemy*[67]), whose real strength is, in his view, residual. He also criticises the *Konfederacja* party, which, despite having free-market politicians in its ranks, and who even *'claim to be libertarian'* – executes political scenarios drawn by nationalist politicians of the rest of the coalition. In this context, he mentions two MPs, Mr Grzegorz Braun[68] and Mr Krzysztof Bosak[69] – faces of the far-right electorate of that party[70]. He also believes that there is some discord prevailing among libertarians, which makes it difficult for them to build any political structures. He compares this situation to a left-wing electorate who, despite their reluctance to vote for a certain candidate, still make a reasonable political choice for someone who is at least partially aligned with their views[71]. The discouragement of politics, or at least the reality of politics, echoes in this story. The interviewee sounds as if he is looking for party arrangements, which, however, do not exist in the political space of the country. This leaves him disappointed. Perhaps if there was a political party that pursued libertarian ideas, MS would be able to actively participate in its activities. This, however, remains in the realm of presumption. Interestingly, research indicates that there are up to several per cent of people with similar socio-political inclinations in Poland, and yet they have no political representation. Moreover, they are aware of the lack of this representation and explicitly admit that they do

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[67] *Możemy!* (We Can!) is a Polish political party founded in 2019. Supporters of this political option are also supporters of deeper reforms towards freeing the market and implementing libertarian ideas.

[68] Grzegorz Braun is a Polish politician, and a current MP. Member of the *Konfederacja* party. Known for his far-right views, and opposition to the European Union, promotion of the nationalist views in Poland, and heavy dislike for liberals.

[69] Krzysztof Bosak is a Polish politician, and a current MP. Member of the *Konfederacja* party. Former leader of the *Młodzież Wszechpolska* (All-Polish Youth) – far-right, nationalist youth organisation – and a current vice-chairman of the *Konfederacja* party. Known for his opposition to the European Union, promotion of the nationalist views in Poland, and heavy dislike for liberals.

[70] Over time, the dominant party narrative of *Konfederacja* became increasingly nationalistic, resulting in party schism of three of their MPs in Q1 2022. The MPs who left the party – Dziambor, Kulesza and Sośnierz – formed a new grouping called *Wolnościowcy* (Freedomites). In July 2023 Sośnierz left *Wolnościowcy* and re-joined *Konfederacja* before 2023 Polish elections.

[71] The interviewee refers to the 2020 Polish presidential elections, in which Trzaskowski (PO) was opposing Andrzej Duda (PiS). Trzaskowski – the Mayor of Warsaw and a former minister of Administration and Digitisation and a Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs – was seen as a centre-left option. Many internauts that are on libertarian Facebook groups disagreed with Trzaskowski's views, to the point they have been withdrawing from voting or were even voting for Duda instead. The elections saw Duda winning, and consequently, consolidating the position of the PiS party and exacerbating its anti-democratic activities.

not trust any political option also because it does not represent their beliefs (Marzęcki, et al., 2024).

It is worth adding context to MS' remarks. He mentions a couple of political parties that were created in the 2010s out of the virtual libertarian community in Poland (*Możemy* and *Libertarianie*). Their role, as described by MS, is marginal. No political party of a vocally libertarian nature has so far won enough votes to be present on the national lists in parliamentary elections (Jaskiernia, 2018). of course, as several interviewees mention, there is a *Konfederacja* party in a Polish Parliament — and some of the *Konfederacja* MPs self-identify with libertarian thought — but their actual political activity is hardly considered pro-libertarian by my interviewees. According to my interviewees, this is a derivative of the fact that libertarians may have a much lower sense of concession in political contexts. Their political choice is dictated by whether a particular political option — both of a politician and a political party — shares their views on an extended list of topics. These issues could include a reduced role for the state, reduced taxes, full privatisation of certain sectors of the economy, or a real separation of the state and religious institutions. They could also address social issues, such as the full legalisation of the rights of minorities, including sexual and religious minorities, open borders, but also the absence of institutions of social redistribution. The emphasis on certain issues would vary depending on which libertarian groups or individuals are behind the proposals. In this sense, libertarians could accept, for example, a reduced role of the state in one sector at a time but would not advocate the categorisation of individuals within privileged groups — e.g., separate rights for representatives of religious minorities. MS believes that they do not accept concessions in such a context. And, if a party do not advocate for several solutions that are aligned with the libertarian credo or introduce strictly anti-libertarian proposals alongside slightly libertarian postulates; most of my interviewees reject supporting them. That would explain the clear aversion of most interviewees to the *Konfederacja* and its MPs. Some interviewees even said expressly that those MPs should not be identified with the spectrum of libertarian thought. Practically, however, most

political options would be unable to meet their demand due to the rather limited audience of the libertarian proposals.

It's best put in JS's story, who says that self-identified libertarians, including Jakub Kulesza[72], Dobromir Sośnierz[73], and Artur Dziambor[74], in their political activity make decisions along party lines. And such party policies are often antilibertarian in their core, for instance calling for anti-immigration laws implementation that are at odds with the basic understanding of libertarian credo. JS draws a comparison between the success of the Pirate Party[75] in countries like Iceland and the Czech Republic, where their Internet-driven activities led to winning parliamentary seats and influencing the local political scene. In contrast, he reflects on the limited impact of Polish libertarians on the broader Polish electorate. Despite their active presence in both the virtual and physical realms, including participation in social protests, their activities have not translated into significant political power on a national level. JS, along with other interlocutors associated with Korwin-led parties, attributes this to the dominance of *Korwinisms* and the overshadowing of the free market narrative by nationalist politicians and supporters of Korwin. In their views, this phenomenon has hindered libertarianism from becoming a more substantial political force within the Polish political landscape. Despite the *Konfederacja* coalition's relative success in the 2019 parliamentary elections, where they secured 6.8% of the vote and won 11 parliamentary seats, including four self-described libertarians; none of the interviewees mentioned any positive impact or significance associated with their few years of political participation in the

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[72] Jakub Kulesza is a Polish politician, former MP of the *Konfederacja* party. He declares *himself 'the most libertarian MP in the current Parliament',* as per his official site (kulesza.pl).

[73] Dobromir Sośnierz is a Polish politician, former MP, and MEP of the Konfederacja coalition party. He declares libertarian views and is known for promoting anti-statist stances, including short-films showing the outgrown bureaucracy of the European and the Polish Parliaments.

[74] Artur Dziambor is a Polish politician, former MP of the *Konfederacja* coalition party. He declares libertarian views.

[75] Pirate Party is an international socio-political movement advocating direct (participatory) democracy, civil rights, and net neutrality. In 2019 Pirates in the Czech Republic got 14% of votes in the national elections and 22 seats in the Czech Parliament. In Iceland, between 2013 and 2021, they had 3-10 seats. They also have Parliamentary seats in Luxembourg. Their origins are linked to the online platform The Pirate Hub, one of the first info-anarchic sites on the Web. The Pirate Hub largely changed the face of the modern Internet, because due to their popularity, governments of various countries started to introduce new regulations of content on the Internet.

Parliament. The interviewees did not highlight any favourable outcomes or implications resulting from the presence of these libertarian MPs within the mainstream political system.

SW says that had it not been for the Internet and access to sources of information about different political thoughts, he would never have become a libertarian, also due to this term's public association with Korwin: '*I didn't like him, and I would never have thought of going to a meeting with him*' he says and adds that '*Before there was a bit of a one-way street situation. Thanks to the Internet, there are many more paths to follow, and we can choose how we want to enter and participate in the community*'. It appears that many of my interviewees are not extensively involved in traditional political party activities. They express a level of awareness about current events, diligently follow the news, and engage with various studies, surveys, and reports. However, this knowledge and awareness do not necessarily translate into a strong inclination for proactive political activism. Drawing on the insights of Grasso and Giugni (2018), who highlight that individuals identifying as libertarians tend to be actively engaged in social protests, it becomes evident that my interviewees exhibit a similar inclination. They demonstrate a willingness to actively participate and make their voices heard in *some* areas. However, it is notable that my interviewees exhibit a greater reluctance to engage actively within *traditional* political parties, instead favouring their active involvement in social movements and protests as a means of expressing their political views. This suggests a preference for more direct and grassroots forms of political engagement rather than traditional party politics.

BG mentions that when he and other people in this milieu were growing up, there was no real leftist force on the political scene in Poland that they could appeal to, whilst the right wing from the very beginning was heavily influenced by controversial, and even xenophobic, politicians and publicists. One of the key concerns expressed by him is the fact that the only party that openly identifies with libertarian values, *Konfederacja*, combines a limited number of free-market or libertarian demands with a dominant set of postulates that are fundamentally anti-libertarian in nature. This juxtaposition poses a significant challenge and raises

concerns among those who prioritise libertarian principles. BG refers to these as 'Korwin's platitudes', 'Michalkiewichisms'[76], and 'Pinochetisms'[77]. In his view, some of the libertarian positions represented by the supposed libertarian-wing politicians, have begun to be interpreted as identical to other positions of right-wing populist-leaning politicians in the Parliament. The intellectual lapses and nationalist rhetoric used by the likes of Michałkiewicz[78] or Korwin-Mikke were more often discussed in the public space, and consequently the free-market proposals of Sosniarz, Kulesza, Dziambor, or Berkowicz[79] – less often[80]. Such a situation leads him to call the people of this community a 'libertarian generation of the Columbuses'[81], or, in other words, the *lost* generation.

For many of my interviewees, politics is a topic around which many threads run, but which is not the core of their stories. This can be seen more clearly if one considers many conversations at once. On the one hand, one might expect a group of virtual libertarians – a collective of people whose self-identification results from the adopted political philosophy of libertarianism – to be heavily involved in political activism. For – if libertarian philosophy presupposes the non-interference of individuals in the lives of others, and a parallel reliance on the concept of self-responsibility (Miklaszewska, ibid.) – does not political activism appear to be an excellent field for maximising such beliefs? What the interviews show, however, is different. They divide the political activity into two spheres: political parties' actions and non-party protests. Their remarks focus primarily on the latter, with the stories

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[76] *Michałkiewiczyzmy* (Michalkiewichisms) is an expression coined from the name of Stanislaw Michałkiewicz. In this sense: *of a nature similar to the views propounded by Michalkiewicz.*

[77] Similar expression coined from the name of Augusto Pinochet and his views.

[78] Stanisław Michałkiewicz is a controversial Polish right-wing political publicist, former politician; also, an influential opposition figure in the 1980s and at the time one of the first promoters of the intellectual thought of liberalism and libertarianism in the country (Kaleta, 2016).

[79] Konrad Berkowicz is a Polish politician, MP of the Konfederacja party. Vice-chairman of the party. He declared libertarian views in the past.

[80] At a certain stage, some *Konfederacja* politicians even started to come out ahead and condemn the controversial comments of party leaders. In fact, the comments with regards to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, were one of the reasons that caused Sośnierz, together with Dziambor and Kulesza, to eventually leave the party and set up a *Wolnościowcy* party.

[81] *Pokolenie Kolumbów* (a generation of Columbuses) is a term used to describe the people who were born during the interwar period in Poland and had reached adulthood at the outbreak of World War II. It is used as an equivalent to the expression 'lost generation'. The term was used by the Polish writer Roman Bratny in his novel '*Kolumbowie. Rocznik 20*' (*Columbuses of the 1920s).*

that relate to the former sphere, primarily citing resentment towards the political formations with which they were in contact. This is most evident in the story told by the JS who goes on to criticise the whole of libertarian political activism in Poland. He says that libertarians *'generally have little interest in political activity'* and that some of them *'programmatically disavow it'*. JS directly, and negatively, assesses the political mobilisation of the community: '*It is quite paradoxical that even compared to countries where there seem to be far fewer libertarians than in Poland, (*Polish) *libertarians have practically no clout whatsoever when it comes to political influence of any kind'*. In the context of the research on the libertarian socio-political inclinations of almost 5% of Poles, this seems an audible criticism (Marzęcki, et al., ibid). Importantly, this reluctance to engage in physical political activism – i.e., to act within elections, to organise within existing political institutions, to enact political principles via voting – is not due to the ignorance of my interviewees. Some of them even assume that members of the community are more well-read and familiar with current affairs than the average Pole[82]. Hence, it is not ignorance but a conscious decision behind the lack of active political participation of the interviewees. JS himself confirms later in his story that protest activity is more alive among libertarians, although it is - in his view - still insufficient.

Scepticism about the very idea of centralised power seems to have been the main motive for my interviewees to substitute their desire for practical political activity for their desire for theoretical activity in the same field. This is because, as libertarians understand it, the state is an artificial creation whose existence is dictated by the greed of those in power forcefully imposing their vision on others (Konkin, ibid). And yet, in such a state, one must function as an individual, because *'The rule of the State is (…) made to seem inevitable.',* and, simultaneously, 'a*ny alternative to the existing State in encased in an aura of fear'* (Rothbard, ibid.). In such realities, my interviewees focus on intellectual activities that, as some understand, have the potential to make a difference in other people's lives over time. And, as JSP stresses, they can make this change tangible. These activities

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[82] Which is not out of the question, given that each of my interviewees had at least a bachelor's degree.

primarily include organisational, educational, and training events, which many of my interviewees focus on, instead of full political participation, for instance in the form of political party activation. These programmes focus not only on promoting libertarianism itself, but much more often on promoting the values of this philosophy, including individualism, or encouragement for entrepreneurial creativity. Among the interviewees, I also had beneficiaries of such programmes and projects, who not only point to them as life-changing moments but also themselves try to act in a similar direction with their daily activities. ZS tells how he came across the Facebook profile of one of the organisations, from where he came across a training programme they were calling for. He describes the outcome as a snowball effect. In a short period, he won the programme, got individual prizes, a sponsored trip to the States, an internship, and experienced a lot of travels, all of which he describes as a life-changing experience. Another interviewee mentions that, directly because of such programmes, he was able to go abroad, find a job, and make a living from it.

However, this does not mean that every one of my interviewees is against voting and active political participation, in the sense of hand-in political actions, if only by pursuing the introduction of a new law. As I highlighted above, some of them focus on the area of protest, expressing their opposition to specific political arrangements. They admit that they protest also because of the growth of the state in recent years[83]. JS recounts protesting the ACTA[84] law in the early 2010s, which aimed to restrict access to certain websites. According to JS, these protests catalysed a sense of unity and connection among the participants. He highlights that during this time, Facebook groups emerged as platforms for communication

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[83] The government of *Prawo I Sprawiedliwość, which* took power in 2015, has implemented a set of authoritarian and anti-democratic measures that have translated into an intensified nationalisation of the country. These include various decisions, including the disruption of the tripartite division of power by accumulating some power in the hands of governmental authorities (i.e., factual, regulatory, combination of both legislation and the judiciary powers), the change of international strategy (the pro-Catholic and nationalist line that assumes anti-EU and partially anti-Western lines), interference in minorities rights, in abortion issues, the tightening of migration rights, the renationalisation of some companies, et al.

[84] ACTA 2.0 is the common term for the EU directive voted on in 2019, which largely duplicates proposals from the first ACTA initiative. It tries to impose the digital single market with similar legal framework for copyright protection.

and coordination among the protesters. JS mentions that the popularity of these protests spilt over into the simultaneous growing popularity of these groups. In turn, RG mentions that he was a co-organiser of other protests as well: *'I made a protest for around 200-300 people* (…) *but we also took part in anti-ACTA type protests, where something 30,000 people met in Krakow'*. At the time, he hosted a well-known programme on Internet radio. Thanks to his radio presence he had access directly to his listeners. According to him, at least a few hundred to a few thousand people followed his programme at the time. So, when protests took place, he encouraged his audience to participate. These protests – against the Internet restrictions or further rallies in support of women's rights – were opportunities for my interviewees to actively participate in the political life of Poland.

In such a context, it is worth leaning into the thread I introduced in the literature chapter, namely, whether this group of libertarians I interviewed can be identified as a virtual community or a virtual social movement. Diani (2000) notes that it is very hard to distinguish those groups from each other. This is also the case with my interviewees and their circle. On the one hand, it is easy to write this group onto the Tilly (1978) definition, because they participate in the collective activities aimed at certain political change (i.e., ACTA), there are agendas that they follow (for instance, disobedience of the governmental over-control of the Internet), and the unifying ideas that they believe in (shared libertarian views), but also human-level friendship amongst them.  One of the clearest cases of their participatory actions was the social protests organised against the implementation of new Internet-related restrictions in Europe, called the Register of banned sites[85], and the mentioned ACTA and ACTA2. RG and JS mentioned that libertarians from the community were among the organisers of these events and that the media exposure of these protests had an impact on the increased popularity of the newly formed Facebook groups. The protests had a dual purpose: to challenge the government's stance on the new regulations and to raise awareness among the

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[85] in 2009, the Polish Ministry of Finance proposed the implementation of a 'Register of Prohibited Sites and Services', which was then met with strong public opposition. The idea was revisited in 2019 and implemented to 'fight' illegal gambling and bookmaking sites.

Polish population about the growing regulation of the digital market. It raises a valid question whether such focused, short-term political objectives can catalyse the formation of a virtual social movement, rather than just a virtual community. However, it is worth noting that these events also provided an opportunity for socialisation among the participants and this sense of connection carried over into their subsequent interactions on Facebook. These events had the potential dual effect, acting as both a community-building platform and a catalyst for a virtual movement. The distinction between the two may overlap depending on the specific moment and context. This is because the nature of this group is thoroughly communal, and clear political or social purpose – which seems to be the main glue of social movements (van Bezouw and Kutlaca, 2019) – is not *central* to my interviewees. Importantly, they have critical moments when they act proactively. SW points out that going out into the real world and simultaneously being embedded in the virtual world, allows for more effective directional activities, for example in the form of a social movement: '*Meetings others in real-world is very important as it builds a commitment which cannot be achieved in the virtual world. This means that if you don't go out, you don't get your hands dirty, don't do something; it is always easier to detach yourself from these ideas later. And if you get involved and get a bit dirty doing something* (proactively)*, you end up being strongly committed*. Thus, in his view, those who have participated in external activities, such as protests, remain more attached to pro-libertarian activities. Those who participate in such activities could be identified, effectively, as the social movement *wing* of this community.

Most of my interviewees weren't that highly interested in participatory activities outside of protesting, though. None of them, for example, raised the topic of effectively implementing a stateless order, bar perhaps BS who claim to pursue an agorist living in a virtual world. But then, none of them referred to the fact that their main motive for joining with other libertarians was to organise and protest the introduction of regulatory restrictions on the Polish Internet. For them, these were additional values or only short-term objectives; but they did not raise these themes as binders of their existence in the group. It seems intriguing that the group

does not stand apart from other virtual communities in its willingness to go out of the virtual world and be socially active. They are willingly participating in an offline organisation that promotes their values or protest ideas to the contrary of theirs (i.e., Wellman, et al., 2001). Perhaps more suiting seems to be Diani's definition, which says that social movement is a '*network of informal interactions'* that '*engage in collective action based on a shared identity'*. In such case, my interlocutors point out several activities they were part of that were collective (i.e., street protests), were informal (they did not belong to a single organisation, nor were part of the same libertarian circles – according to RG there were also people from outside the community who were his radio listeners), and were having a shared identity (of people who do not want overly-governed Internet). It seems, however, that libertarians can pursue social movement activities, i.e., push for socio-political change, without forming *a* social movement. Interestingly, they can gather people from different political angles to support their actions, effectively creating social movement*s* aiming at a particular socio-political change (i.e., ACTA protests), or join other movements in their protesting activities (i.e., abortion protests), but without certain branding that comes with the term.

There is a blurred line between the virtual community and the virtual social movement, particularly in the context of the libertarians I've interviewed. Their behaviours, participations, and objectives offer insightful perspectives that fortify the proposition that a virtual community can effortlessly transition into a virtual social movement when targeting a specific *short-term* political objective. One vital feature is their fluidity, as demonstrated by the interviewees. They move between different platforms and channels in pursuit of the best environment for their needs, underscoring a flexible framework that allows for the accommodation of diverse pursuits and interests. Moreover, they are demonstrating the ability – within this community – to mobilise and unite under a common cause, transcending individual needs to focus on an end goal, often collective, necessities. This mobilisation, which can be facilitated swiftly due to the digital nature of my interviewees, can be triggered by a specific political goal, propelling this community into a social movement. This versatility is facilitated by the virtual realm's dynamics, allowing

communities to expand beyond their original scope and quickly galvanise collective action, emphasising the ease with which a community can act as a social movement. This change, or this moment of becoming a purpose-driven social group, is imperceptible, just as other digital phenomena are imperceptible when they occur - they only become meaningful from a perspective, be it time or space.

Consequently, is there any space between what is described as a virtual community and what is assumed to be a virtual social movement, about this grouping? It seems that a certain fluidity in some of the Internet groups should be assumed, evident in the case of people with whom I have spoken. They apply the principle of maximising individual needs. They fluctuate between different platforms and channels in their need to find the ideal virtual conditions for their good. They actively participate in social life within these interaction groups. But they also very actively participate in social movement-like activities when necessary. And these largely refer no longer to individual needs, but to group needs. Sometimes these are the needs of the libertarians themselves (e.g., by creating new solutions, new channels in which they can find themselves comfortable), but just as often they come out in the open, through actions aimed at curbing attempts to regulate the digital sphere, through support for important social protests – such as the nationwide women's strike against abortion bans[86] – or through the institutional organisation, i.e., the creation of foundations, organisations, schools, websites and the like, which aim to educate, share knowledge or help people to get out of a certain living situation. In such a context, the group should be considered as a virtual community which, however, can seamlessly 'dress up' as a virtual social movement oriented towards a short-term political goal via use of the social disobedience means.

Summary

This section focuses on the factors that were influencing the political attitudes of my interviewees, and their effects on their belonging to this community (Figure 18). Specifically, several of them expressed a tendency towards anti-political stances

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[86] in 2021 Polish government introduced a near-total ban on abortions which resulted in one of the biggest mass protests in the contemporary history of Poland, with several hundred people on the streets (Haeck, 2021)

due to a general disillusionment with institutional politics and power distribution in the contemporary world. The political landscape in Poland, marked by the dominance of PO and PiS, offers little appeal to them due to the lack of representation of classic liberal and libertarian ideas. They also underline that this aversion to politics is rooted in the libertarian belief that collective institutional power is undesirable. My interviewees are more interested in theoretical political activity rather than active political participation. This is not due to ignorance but a conscious choice stemming from their scepticism towards centralised power and a concurrent belief in individualism. Although they are not generally politically active in a more traditional sense, many participate in protests and campaigns against specific political issues, like the ACTA regulations restricting Internet access mentioned above. This indicates that they are prime examples of users engaged in *digital activism*. Interestingly, the goal of their activism is often the very freedom of pursuing such activism - as indicated by the aforementioned protests against ACTA. They oppose excessive government interference in digital space, thus responding, by way of example, to the problems identified by Gerschewski & Dukalsis (2018), among others. They engage in intellectual activities like educational and training events promoting libertarian values. Some interviewees found these programs life-changing, leading them to seek similar experiences for others. Although online activities and participation in offline social protests are common among these libertarians, their disinterest in traditional political activism is notable. They prefer direct involvement over party politics. Their views fit neatly with the discussion that I outlined in the previous sections. Even though digital technologies have revolutionised the political landscape by allowing everyone with access to a device and the Internet to participate in political discussions and mobilisations, they are not content with traditional politics. The interviewees, although dissatisfied with their political representation, leverage digital technologies to actively engage in activities that are aligned with their political inclinations. Virtuality enables these individuals to contribute to political discourses irrespective of their geographic location, socio-economic status, or political affiliation. This is an interesting observation, coinciding largely with research indicating that virtual spatiality has

replaced the need for physical proximity in establishing interactions (i.e., Tillander, 2014; Sobel-Lojeski, 2015).

Despite an estimated 5% of Poles aligning with libertarian socio-political inclinations, the interviewees note a lack of significant political representation of this idea in Poland (Marzęcki, et al, 2024). They believe that negative associations with key figures and platforms who claim to represent libertarians, such as Konfederacja and Janusz Korwin-Mikke, have hindered the growth of libertarianism as a substantial political force in Poland. They mention that libertarian parties, like *Libertarianie* and *Możemy*, are marginal, with one interviewee labelling them as 'political plankton', that is, with little if any political power. The Konfederacja party, despite claiming libertarian representation, is criticised by my interviewees for its nationalist and anti-market leanings. While this group primarily functions as a virtual community, focusing on shared libertarian values and individual pursuits amongst its members, there are instances where they shift towards a group that could be characterised as a virtual social movement, particularly when rallying against specific political initiatives. Such a group is not centralised or formally organised but is rather a collection of informal interactions based on mutual interest, often to instigate a single socio-political change. This distinction, between being a virtual community and a virtual social movement, is fluid and context-dependent. In essence, the group effortlessly transitions into such an understood social movement – or rather it takes on a characteristic of the social movement – when there's a shared, short-term political objective. The group is then involved in a series of digital activism activities, targeting a specific political objective. It thus fits in with many studies on this phenomenon, such as George and Leidner (2019) and Karatzogianni (2015). This fluidity is a distinctive feature of online groups, allowing them to adapt to different circumstances and goals as needed. Their ability to mobilise rapidly for collective action, facilitated by digital platforms, underscores the ease with which a virtual community can function as a social movement in a short-term scenario. What is also worth noting is that digital technology has blurred traditional definitions of political engagement. The libertarians' engagement in this study — participation in online discussions, involvement in educational activities

promoting libertarian values, and rallying against specific political issues — provides an alternative to conventional notions of political activism, while also serving as a good demonstration of how present-day digital activism works.

## Community binders

Now that we understand the paths my interviewees followed to join the virtual libertarian community and the environmental factors that influenced their search for such a group, we can delve into the common threads connecting these interviewees. One important aspect to emphasise is the way interactions are established within this community, both on an individual level and about the overall conclusions drawn from these interactions. In this context, it is worth reflecting on two dimensions of the interactions they spoke about. The first dimension pertains to personal experiences, specifically the impact of networking on the private lives of my interviewees. The second dimension relates to their professional experiences, specifically the influence of these interactions on their careers and work-related endeavours. Through exploring these themes, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of social bonding among my interviewees and explore the nature of interactions that unfold between them. My interlocutors emphasise from the outset that when online micro-cultures were developing on the Polish Internet since the 1990s and 2000s, one of the results was the emergence of a virtual libertarians' branch. They were part of a wider phenomenon of emerging *Polish* virtual communities. As several interviewees focused on Internet culture in their stories, I will devote a segment of this section to it. Within this framework, this segment will concentrate on examining two dimensions of this virtual micro-culture: the distinctive language that has become emblematic of this community, encompassing expressions unique to its members, and the realm of creative expressions, which serves as an illustrative example of such culture in play as explored by my interviewees in their stories. The latter is a prime example of the intermingling of the online and offline worlds in this community and the great influence of technology in shaping such space. The initial focus of this analysis will revolve around the language employed by my interviewees, exploring the origins of the neologisms they utilise and examining their connection to the broader Polish

Internet culture – although I must point out that this analysis will not be exhaustive, rather cursory, as it aims not to understand the phenomenon in its depth, but to illustrate it. I will then move on to the creative space that was developed by this group: the creation of libertarian music, radio, literature, and the pop culture references that emerge from these conversations. In this excerpt, the primary objective is to understand the influence exerted by the community itself on the emergence of these phenomena, as recounted by the interviewees. The aim is to gain a better understanding of the community's role in shaping these dynamics.

## Networking

BS seems happy to talk to me about this community. During the conversation, I get the impression that he wants to return the favour to the community. What kind of payback this is, I learn moments later when he begins his story about the virtual community of libertarians that helped him reorganise his professional and private life. As he recalls, after finishing his bachelor's degree, he had no desire to continue his studies, which caused him to have a minor conflict with his parents. At that point, he was just breaking up with his girlfriend and felt he is lacking a purpose in life. Largely by chance, he got an invitation to attend an event organised by a virtual libertarian community. As he points out, during this event and after talking to the people who were there, he decided that he should leave his hometown and move abroad to Czechia. He returned to his home city after several months there and this experience helped him get a job as a graphic and web developer.

This aspect of community has two dimensions. On the one hand, it is related to the building of collegial bonds between its members (Hoggett, 1997.), but it also influences the construction of a network of people with specific professional profiles, who later influence the structures of libertarian organisations. Today, BS has a quiet job and a comfortable life in which he has time and means to help others. Interestingly, as a way of expressing gratitude, he immediately mentions professional help with design, with which he fits into a libertarian contour based on a sometimes very pragmatic vision of the entrepreneurial world. In this sense, such help is more a transfer of access to some knowledge or a particular talent-developing skills, or an introduction to specific people in the network. It has a

practical dimension and often requires a strong commitment from the other party, as in the case of BS, who had to sacrifice his life in his hometown and go abroad as part of his decision-making that was benefiting him long term. One could sense in BS's story the gratitude he feels towards the community. He straightforwardly admits that it was through his contacts with other people in the community that he became financially and professionally independent and that he has developed friendships with some of the people in the group that last for years now. BS mentions that getting to know people from the community and then working with them, allowed him to find professional stability in his life. In his view, had it not been for libertarians, he would have had trouble finding himself in his professional life and, perhaps more importantly, in coping with a difficult life situation he was facing at the time. The community helped him in two ways. First, by offering the opportunity to get out of his place of residence, and then by reaching out with a cooperation offer. This has largely helped him to understand what he wants to do in life. Today he says that he owes a lot to the community and would be able to offer the community and its members a lot in return for the help he received.

In a similar vein, the sense of support from the community is expressed by MD. She mentions that the community has helped her with personal interactions. Until meeting the libertarian group, she had no physical, face-to-face contact with her Internet friends. Thanks to the fact that she was persuaded to go to one of the events – that was also attended by MC, her Internet contact – she found a circle of friends with whom she keeps in touch to this day. As she admits, '*Suddenly I felt that I belong to this community, to the real people*'. She is grateful to MC for persuading her to go out to people at the time. In turn, WP mentions how her professional life has changed through her participation in events organised by libertarian organisations. She enthusiastically recounts a trip organised by one of the community members, that allowed her to live in the United States for several months. She recalls that through this decision she made many contacts that were invaluable in her later work with promotion and marketing in the non-governmental sector. At the same time, she admits that this period had a strong impact on her self-esteem when she realised that she was appreciated by others.

Also, MD mentions how the community has impacted her private life. It was the social activation of one libertarian woman who had previously experienced separately the virtual and real life, to a certain degree affecting her ability to build lasting relationships with some people from the online realm. For her, meeting libertarians appeared to have a very positive effect on her ability to interact with other people – also in the offline world – and factually aided her social self-awareness.

Two stories told by MC are worth quoting here. The first one concerns a meeting of libertarians in a small town in southern Poland. MC, along with 60-70 other people, were drinking beer as part of their integration in two pubs on two sides of the same street, as they couldn't fit in one. Because of the late hour, both pubs were about to close, so the groups went outside to discuss the next steps: *'Our friends said 'listen, we'd like to go for another pint' – the ones from the other pub because we met them on the street – 'but there's nowhere to go, because everything's closed. And the bouncer in the other pub says he won't let us in'. I said, 'Oh come on, why wouldn't he!'. So, I went to this pub, and someone told me they are indeed closing. But the bouncer pokes his head out of the corner and goes 'Wait, are you MC?!'. I confirmed that I am. And he said, with awe, 'Holy shit – MC!'. So, I said 'Mate, I see that you know me somehow'. And he goes 'of course I know you. I show all your videos to my friends at the gym, and they watch them with me. So, I said to him 'Mate, we'd love to get in for a pint, if possible'. And he said 'Oh, absolutely. Sure! Come on over!'. And he shook everyone's hand as we've been entering the place – a few dozen people came in! We took the whole room, and he called his boss to tell him that he was taking the next day off, to sit there with us'.* MC recounts these events with laughter, but one can feel that these events had quite an impact on his life, as they caused him to take up the promotion of free-market ideas professionally. As he admits, it was easier for him to make such a decision by noticing his growing reputation. He further shares other stories, which also show the kind of relationship he developed with his audience at the time. In one of them, his laptop broke down and an unknown fan lent him his computer after seeing his post on Facebook. All he needed to organise a new computer, was

a Facebook post. Later that day he had several offers to borrow the laptop, the most specific one from a fan who asked him to come to a certain place to just pick up the hardware. In another story, due to an airline mix-up, he found he had to get to Warsaw from Krakow in the middle of the night - connections between the two cities do not operate between midnight and morning. The MC simply posted to Facebook his problem and just a few moments later he had a trip organised with an Uber driver and his friend who happened to be an avid online fan of his videos. In exchange for the favour, all he requested was a moment to engage in a conversation with him.

Several interviewees emphasise that in a relatively short period, a group of previously unknown people formed very close social bonds in the virtual realm that went beyond the Internet. For instance, MM says how he started to meet new people *'also in real life'*, and how that moment changed the way he perceived virtual ties. It carried over into building a community that, according to my interviewees, could rely on each other. And, perhaps most importantly, to build a community that significantly influenced the private and emotional lives of my interviewees. Many other interviewees mentioned that the libertarian community was for them first and foremost a *community of interaction*. This interaction, the ability to communicate with others, was in essence the glue of this community. They built their friendships and relationships within it, and sometimes, conversely, they were making their enemies in it. LS jokingly cites a story in which one of his online friends was furious with him for online jokes on his Facebook account in which he humorously advocated state control in one area of social life. The reaction was several months' bans that that person invoked on him.

Nevertheless, my interviewees emphasised, above all, the element of integration in the group. Many of them mentioned informal meetings with other people, including those that were accompanied by alcohol. The theme of intoxication will also recur in several other interviewees, who admit that it affected their integration in a significant way. One interviewee even stressed that he wanted to raise the issue of how much influence alcohol had, in his opinion, on the overall integration of libertarians. In his view, at such meetings, problems were solved, and people got to

know each other better. One of the interviewees recalls observing politicians and future MPs of different political options at such events, including the conservative politicians who '*did not behave very conservatively*'. The intoxication as a theme is also related to the historical experiences of my interlocutors, which I wrote about in the previous chapter. Both the original organisational meetings of libertarians in the offline world and the later forum meetups all took place without formalities. One interviewee even used the phrase *zloty piwne* (beer meetups), another mentioned *spotkania przy piwku* (beer gatherings), and yet another mentioned how much fun interaction took place after events of this type. As a result, as the interviewees emphasised, libertarians very quickly built a social bonding during those offline events.

One interviewee even identifies one such event as the most important moment of his life. Like MD or BS before him, ZS mentions the influence the libertarian community had on his life. He too, like WP, entered the milieu through participation in libertarian organisations-run projects. Like BS, he built his professional career on contacts and contracts with the milieu. What is much more intriguing, however, is that the libertarian world has significantly influenced his private life in a rather unexpected way: he met his future wife by attending one of the events he went to on behalf of a libertarian organisation. Noteworthy, it is not the only theme that points to long-term relationships built by community members. Other interviewees also mention their partners (in some cases also spouses) whom they met through these contacts. Some others mention their friends and emphasise the role of community in building these interactions. In essence, these threads confirm Nancy's words (ibid.) that community is formed '*through others and for others*'. For instance, ZS describes how many other experiences he owes to libertarians, including meeting people and visiting various countries around the world. What is also significant in ZS' story is the thread that overlaps with what BS also shared, which is building self-awareness and self-confidence. ZS admits that by getting to know libertarians – and familiarising himself with the ideas behind this philosophy – he has set his sights more firmly on developing his passion for self-improvement.

He combined it with the individualistic approach and assumed that he must be self-responsible for his own life.

This kind of reflection is most clearly seen in a conversation I had with ZS, but similar themes run through several others. This may indicate that for some members of the community, its impact was more psychological. It allowed them to confront their hidden needs with other people with a similar approach to life, possibly setting the machinery of self-awareness in motion. The story of the MD, who admits that meeting people from this community unlocked her approach to virtual interactions in the real world, is a great example of such a process. It is worth noting that this social aspect of the interactions in the community, clearly emphasised by my interviewees, may confront the research conducted by Iyer, et al. (ibid.). According to these researchers, libertarians tend to build less-binding relationships in their lives. It seems worth investigating in the future whether this is a peculiarity of the American libertarian movement, as among my interviewees, many tend to build long-term relationships – both with each other and, as highlighted by many of my interviewees, with people from outer circles.  As I would need precise quantitative data to answer such a question, I leave this unanswered and note it as a potential direction for further research.

BG raises the issue of how group relationships that were discussed above, also helped build professional relationships outside of the community. BG begins his story by saying that libertarians are often perceived as antisocial, as he puts it, they are *'living in the basement'*[87]. He mentions that one of the hallmarks of this community is its interest in very convoluted and complicated philosophical discussions, such as whether a very rich person could buy his lake and cook soup in it[88]. However, as he notes, this type of interaction has resulted in very good friendships among the community members. So much so, that, when needed,

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[87] One of the inside jokes of libertarians (but also of other Internet users) is that libertarians live in basements, and that is because of their apparent antisociality and their interest in lengthy discussions on political theory. This expression is associated with the image of the first Internet users, who often lived in basement flats or rooms and rarely built a binding social life outside of the virtual realm.

[88] Today the *string 'I wonder what would happen if a very rich guy came up with an idea of cooking a soup in a lake'* is used by Polish libertarians as an example of pointless discussions.

people from the community can use their unique talents to help others. BG mentions that through these relationships, he asked one community member to support his friend's business. Thanks to BG's network of contacts, his friend was able to get professional help in a specific, narrow area of specialisation. Through the connections he made with other libertarians, he was able to bring together two people who normally would not have been able to work together. Besides, BG mentions that by participating in network building with other virtual libertarians, he was able to set up his own business. This shows that for virtual libertarians, communication and relationship building, have become the pivot of functioning, influencing their activity in both the online and offline worlds. EP recalls how she combined her professional life with working with others in the community. Thanks to her profession, she was able to use a large advertising billboard in the centre of the Polish capital for her use. Together with leaders of several major Polish libertarian organisations, she was able to swiftly organise a communication campaign to promote libertarian thought through it. AR mentions that one of his businesses *Świetlica Wolności*[89] – which also grew out of a community of virtual libertarians, and which treated them as its major clientele – benefited not only from the very idea of belonging to a group network *per se* but also from the creativity of the group in its bottom-to-top state of mind. AR says he relied on their feedback if only to put together the list of drink names they still serve today. This kind of grassroots cooperation shows that my interlocutors have a good understanding of the extent to which virtual communities can not only interfere with virtual life but also project themselves into real-life - proving that these two concepts are inextricably linked.

Summary

Networking understood as a way of building private and professional interactions, was one of the most important components of many of the stories my interviewees

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[89] *Świetlica Wolności* (*Freedom Community Centre*) is a cultural centre and a libertarian and classical-liberal pub, located in a building which before 1989 housed the headquarters of the Polish United Workers' Party. The name itself alludes to the cultural facilities that were located at the *Domy Kultury* (Cultural Houses) during the communist era and in which the state apparatus supervised the *provision of culture to the people*. The word took on cultural overtones only in Soviet times; before the war, it was used to denote a manor chamber or a hospitable and ceremonial rural room.

cited (Figure 20). In their words, this community was instrumental in providing opportunities for personal growth and paving the way for professional stability and advancement. Through these shared experiences and connections, members of the community formed tight bonds that transcended online interactions and significantly influenced their offline lives. Several members, including BS, MD, and ZS, found the community to be a source of direction and purpose during crucial moments in their lives. For BS, his interaction with this community led him to move abroad, which eventually resulted in a rewarding career as a graphic and web developer. MD found a sense of belonging and improved the face-to-face interactions that she was missing before joining the community. For ZS, the community not only assisted in shaping his professional life but also played a crucial role in his personal life, as he met his future wife at one of its events. In those stories, the community was not merely a platform – or a space – for ideological discussions, but also a hub for pragmatic and entrepreneurial activities. These ranged from supporting businesses to running advertising campaigns. Furthermore, there was a strong sense of gratitude and willingness among members to give back to the community, which is often expressed in terms of professional assistance. While some research suggests libertarians tend to form less-binding relationships, the experiences of my interviewees suggest otherwise, and indicate a potential area for further exploration.

## Integration

In concluding this chapter, I would like to highlight the noteworthy threads that have left a strong impression on me regarding the strategies employed by my interviewees and their friends to engage and integrate within this community. From the outset of my interviews, I observed the consistent use of a distinct language among my interlocutors, a language that is likely exclusive to this community and undoubtedly unique to the Polish Internet. They used phrases that are incomprehensible for someone who has not had contact with the culture of the Polish Internet, often incorporating references to well-known memes or

copypastas[90]. There were also, however, phrases unique only to this group. According to JS, many words, and phrases of Polish Internet slang, including 'RIGCZ'[91] as a prime example, originated among libertarians.

Some people from this community were part of what they called *'the troll net'* (i.e., MD, TM, AR). This is another expansive virtual community that primarily revolves around Internet-based humour and the desire to engage with other online users to elicit or provoke their frequently negative emotions. As Bodle (2012) notes, there have been many definitions of what Internet trolls are. Many of these definitions have focused on the villainous side of their activities. Initially, however, a large part of trolls was a trigger-happy community, embarrassing others and just as often angering them if only by breaking social taboos (Jussinoja, 2018). Today's online trolling has taken on other dimensions, very often equated with deliberate disinformation on behalf of governments, such as in the case of the Internet Research Agency, which is linked to the Russian government (Almond, et al. 2022). However, in earlier years these were less hurtful activities, much more often simply bending the existing public discourse, e.g., jokes about Pope John Paul II, popular in Poland since the early 2010s. To this day, one of the most famous non-graphic memes in Poland is the number 2137 (in every variation, e.g., 21:37, 21.37, 2.137 etc.). This is the hour of Karol Wojtyla's death – a moment that has become a sort of rallying cry for Internet trolls who challenge the prevalent notion in Poland that it is inappropriate to mock or make fun of the Polish Pope (pol. *szkalować papieża)*. This expression was used by one of my interviewees during the interview in its original formulation, as an example of how taboo in human interaction is not desirable. My interviewees mention that not only did they participate in these activities, but they also know that other users of those libertarian Facebook groups took part in them. As I have already touched upon in previous threads a significant number of my interviewees have connections to the IT industry and are currently

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[90] *Pasta* (copypasta) is a piece of text that is intended by the originator to evoke emotional reactions from the audience, often negative. The text, in its (usually) unaltered form, is then circulated over the Internet in comments, forums and across social media.

[91] *Rozum I Godność Człowieka (*Reason and Human Dignity, RiGCZ) is a Polish Internet slang word used in a first Polish copypasta. Nowadays it's used literally as a designation of something that is in its conception good and correct.

in their thirties or older. As Jones (2019) notes, it was people from such backgrounds who were the users of this 'weird' type of Internet humour: mainly programmers who, in the earlier years of the Internet, were known for including little trolling lines, or Internet-culture easter-eggs, in their code (Donovan, 2019).

The best example of a conversation in which I had to deal with a variety of different libertarian-used expressions, was my conversation with MM. He uses many such expressions in his stories, i.e., *'gimby nie znajo'*[92], *'śmieszkujący'*[93], *'LOLcontent'*, *'randomy'*[94], *'gimbaza'*[95]. Another interviewee refers to the *Julka*[96] generation (pol. *'generacja Julek')*. AR also uses word play combining the slang word LARP (live-action-role-playing games) with the word libertarianism – *'LARP-etarians'*, to describe a disguise of people who identify themselves as libertarians but factually are far from being ones. Even longer phrases were mentioned that took iconic forms in the community, such as *'I recommend reading Rothbard'* (pol*. 'polecam poczytać Rothbarda'). In* libertarian circles, this phrase has acquired the status of an idiom used to refer to the basics or foundations of libertarian theory. In this sense, to say, 'I recommend reading Rothbard' is equivalent to saying, 'Go back to basics'. In other senses, the phrase is also sometimes used as a mockery. I also mentioned the use of the popular phrase *'I wonder what would happen if a very rich guy came up with an idea of cooking a soup in a lake'* used as an expression to point out some rather pointless conversations.

As Hart points out in her article *'How slang helps turn online worlds into communities'* (2020), the language of a community is one of the links that create its

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[92] *Gimby nie znajo* (clueless zoomers) derogatory term for someone who attends *gimnazjum*, a former compulsory 3-year school for kids aged 12-16. *Gimnazjum* was withdrawn from the Polish schooling system under the 2017 education reform and formally ceased to exist in 2019. The phrase is used to make fun of younger people unacquainted with some topic. In phonetic notation, it is written with a deliberate grammatical error replacing the Polish diacritical letter ą with o, which matches the standard notation of this phrase in Internet slang.
[93] *Śmieszkujący* is a slang word meaning the intentional mockery of a concept or a person, usually for humorous reasons. The purpose of this action is usually not to humiliate the subject, but the joke itself. The closest English translation would be ridiculing, mockery, but also laughter-stock.
[94] Polish Internet slang adopted a word *randomy* – from English 'random' – identifying people who stand out from the group, often because of their rather accidental position in it.
[95] *Gimbaza* is a mix of two Polish words, *gimnazjum* and *baza* (literally 'the base'). It can be used both to describe students of *gimnazjum* or to call someone's immaturity.
[96] *Julka* is a term for a young woman fascinated by American culture and leftist movements. Usually used in the context of naive yet articulate Twitter posts.

identity. As in other virtual communities, the language used by my interlocutors is the result of such an identity-building process. The younger interviewees mention that they simply entered Facebook groups without knowing much of its culture and language and that the level of acceptance increased as they became more familiar with those aspects of the group functioning. Hence, some interviewees bring up themes of language, humour, and a kind of code of behaviour that they had to understand to feel more closely with the group.

An equally captivating aspect of my interviewees' narratives revolves around their perspective on the making of freedom-oriented content through various creative activities. One of the interviewees mentions in this context the *Free-Market Simpson* project (*Figure 11*), which aims to promote free market solutions through artistic projects, such as paintings, graphics, and murals. JSP believes that the work of such artists can help to bring free-market ideals – including libertarian ones – to a wider audience and to defog the public image of these views. Several other interviewees mention the Internet music of *Kelthuz*, who has emerged as a prominent figure representing libertarian ideals through his musical compositions. *Kelthuz*'s music blends rock and metal guitar sounds, accompanied by lyrics that touch upon various libertarian themes. His songs often address state oppression, critique socialism, and express admiration for the power of the free market, among other related topics. Some of the interviewees maintain a certain distance or exhibit noticeable irony when referring to *Kelthuz*'s works, although they acknowledge being familiar with his music and having listened to it at some point. *Kelthuz*'s songs have even taken the form of memes that people in libertarian groups use in everyday discourse. Kelthuz is not the only musician in the community. EP shares a similar aspiration to dedicate herself to music creation and expresses her desire to transform her hobby and passion for music into a professional career. She admits that her artistic direction leans more towards the electronic genre. Other interviewees, including MT and GB, highlight the significance of literature in advocating libertarian ideas. They argue that books play a crucial role in shaping the logical framework of their beliefs. GB specifically emphasises the intimate connection one establishes with the ideas of an author

through reading, and he strives to provide others with similar opportunities. As a result, he actively engages in publishing new books on free-market principles in Poland, aiming to expand access to such literature and promote libertarian thought. MT, on the other hand, goes into quite some detail about various figures in Polish literature who have made non-obvious contributions to the development of the understanding of liberalism in this country.

Summary

This section highlights the unique strategies and experiences of interviewees integrating into the Polish Internet community, focusing on distinct language, humour, and different forms of art. They used a variety of unique expressions, idiomatic phrases, and even wordplay that reflected their libertarian affiliation and helped to reinforce the group's identity (Figure 21). Some of the libertarians have also participated in troll-net activities, designed to provoke, or humorously bend public discourse, often through taboo topics. Several of the interviewees have backgrounds in the digital industry, echoing an association between programmers and this type of humour. As new members become more familiar with the group's culture and language, they feel more integrated and accepted within it.

In terms of art making, the interviewees' narratives reveal a strong emphasis on freedom-oriented content that can advocate for libertarian and free-market principles. Notably, artistic projects like Free-Market Simpson and music like Kelthuz serve to popularise these ideas. Literature is also seen as an effective tool in advocating libertarian ideas, leading to initiatives like publishing new books on free-market principles in Poland. These strategies appear to help solidify the group's identity, engage the community, and propagate their beliefs to a wider audience.

## Chapter conclusions

One observation becomes clear after conducting interviews with members of this community. As their stories in the previous chapter show, joining the virtual libertarian community is largely dictated by their desire to get to know other people who hold a similar set of views. My interviewees developed a sense of community,

one of the main motives for the creation of communities (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In many cases, it is also a desire to learn something new about the theory, or even to try to educate others about it. Bragd, et al. (2008) call it a discourse community. It is also clear that once they joined the community, amongst many of them, there was no desire to practically implement the libertarian ideas in the form of active political participation, i.e., in political parties and elections. It is worth leaning into where their approach to this topic may be coming from.

In this context specifically, many of my interviewees mentioned how much their political consciousness was influenced by family and public schooling experiences – and how both, in a clear-cut way, impacted their later path into the libertarian community. Both were taking place during, or alongside, basic primary (familial) and secondary (schooling) socialisation, contributing heavily to the *political* socialisation of my interlocutors. This type of socialisation in its essence implies a process of learning political behaviour and attitudes (i.e., Quintellier, 2009). Clearly, in the case of a community whose main bond is political philosophy, this moment is therefore tantamount to at least partially creating a desire to belong to such a community. For some of my interviewees, the influence of their close family on their motivations was clear, which is the norm rather than a deviation, as noted by Ochs and Taylor (1992). One other element is important in this introduction. A study by Neundorf and Smets (2017) emphasises that political views and behaviours acquired at home with family and in school remain '*relatively persistent*' in later life. Their research built on earlier analyses of Tedin (1974) and Davies (1965), who both wrote on the role played by the family in the formation of political positions. More recent studies, conducted in the 2010s, confirm that this influence remains quite profound in the digital era (van Ditmars, 2017). So, knowing that this thread is raised by many of my interviewees, it is worth raising it to show how the fascination with the political vision of libertarianism built up among my interviewees and what role their families and schooling system played in such a process.

The influence of networking and integratory components is also critical in shaping the way my interviewees seek and participate in virtual communities. My interviewees are self-identified libertarians who are part of a virtual libertarian community in Poland, with their pathways to this group having been shaped by various phenomena, both offline and online. I focused on what socio-cultural elements influenced the formation of their beliefs and, consequently, which of these influenced their belonging to the community – a theme that was studied by several academics in the past (i.e., Hogan, 2008). In the first part, I focused on how the need to seek a libertarian philosophy was shaped by my interviewees (Figure 19). For some of them, it was related to accidentally coming across this information as part of a school curriculum, for others it was precisely the opposite – they found interest in a content alternative to the dominant curriculum. often, they came across it by accident, influenced in part by their negative school experiences. This aligns with some research on the way that the schooling system incorporates political agendas in its curriculum (Apple, 2004). I also analysed the family themes raised by my interviewees, which demonstrate the influence of the family on the formation of a certain individual narrative. Familial narratives play a vital role in shaping the political attitudes of individuals, often acting as a bedrock for their ideological beliefs (Stoker and Bass, 2011).

These elements served to make my interlocutors develop specific political positions and to make them want to seek out other people who have similar stances. Their community affiliation was therefore largely dictated by environmental factors, which were then extended by emerging technology. A similar notion is noticed by Rainie and Wellman (2012). Once they joined the community, they formed a strong bond with other community members, which translated not only into social contacts in the online and offline worlds but also into professional contracts, thanks to the combination of community activities with business. I have focused on highlighting this networking, or contact-building because the social aspect seems to me to be natal to each of the virtual communities. I have touched on these themes, but I have devoted less space to them, highlighting only the most

important findings, such as those about a certain functional property of alcoholic gatherings in social binding.

Finally, I touched on themes related to less obvious aspects of community functioning that were touched upon in those conversations. Those were the language my interviewees used and the creative expression forms they mentioned as important to them and the community (Figure 22). Counter-intuitively, these are very important elements, as they illustrate how my interviewees have crystallised various forms of integration components, to the point of producing unique phrases, specific to their cohort; and even pursuing art for its audience. It's worth having in mind that the latter requires not only an artist-creator but an audience willing to consume it. All these elements have a point of contact at a functional, or rather existential, level. They would not exist, or would not have come into being, were it not for the presence of technological solutions to enable their pursuit. and – as this work is built on the principle of a funnel, in which I start by describing the broadest contexts to follow as close as possible to the centre, i.e., the technological issues – I will focus on these last elements, which bind the belonging of my speakers to this community, in the next chapter.

This chapter contributes to the broader field of community studies and ongoing debates in digital politics. It sheds light on the intricate interplay between offline socio-cultural factors and online technological platforms in shaping individuals' political beliefs and sense of community. By exploring the influence of family narratives, education, networking, and integration within the virtual community, this chapter emphasises the multifaceted nature of community formation in the digital age. It expands our understanding of how virtual communities are formed, sustained, and experienced. It highlights the role of shared ideologies, experiences, and interactions facilitated by digital technologies in fostering a sense of belonging and creating meaningful social bonds, supplementing observations of the likes of Rheingold (2000) or Wellman et al. (2001). It also underscores the importance of contextual factors and personal narratives in community formation, challenging the notion of a uniform online community experience (i.e., Baym, 2015; Boyd, 2011).

Furthermore, this chapter contributes to current debates in digital politics by exploring the intersection of technology and political attitudes. It demonstrates how digital platforms and online spaces serve as catalysts for political engagement and ideological development (i.e., Chadwick, 2017; Coleman and Blumler, 2009). The examination of networking and integration within the virtual community highlights the unique opportunities for personal and professional growth that emerge from online interactions (i.e., Nonnecke and Preece, 2001; Boyd and Ellison, 2007). It also underscores the fluidity and adaptability of virtual communities in mobilising collective action, blurring the boundaries between online communities and social movements (i.e., Castells, 2015; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

This chapter also touches on the power dynamics and symbolic capital within digital spaces. It showcases how linguistic and artistic practices can reinforce group identity, challenge dominant narratives, and create alternative discourses (i.e., Boyd, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010). This resonates with current discussions on the role of digital technologies in shaping political discourse, promoting inclusivity, and facilitating resistance against mainstream power structures (i.e., Tufekci, 2017).

# CHAPTER 6. ANALYSIS: ENABLING THE VIRTUAL LIBERTARIAN COMMUNITY

## Overview

In the chapter *'Origins of the Polish Virtual Libertarian Community'*, I focused on the varied journeys of my interviewees as they discovered and integrated into the virtual libertarian community. These paths were diverse, some stumbled upon it by chance, while others pursued it actively over the years. Regardless of how they got there, all paths led to the same destination: an Internet-based community of libertarians. This virtual community transcended the confines of time and space, thereby enabling a broader reach of content that was created and published, facilitating connections with like-minded individuals, and encouraging meaningful discussions on libertarian philosophy, and beyond it. This community was essentially anchored in digital platforms such as discussion groups, forums, and social media.

In the following chapter, *'Belonging to the Polish Virtual Libertarian Community',* I explored the societal and cultural influences that stirred a desire for libertarian self-identification among my interviewees. Their narratives revealed some of the elements that foster a sense of belonging within this community. While these insights are based on a specific group I interacted with, they shed light on the cohesive factors that unify individuals within this virtual community in general. Drawing upon the funnel framework, the subsequent section will focus on the threads that intertwine and amalgamate these stories, creating a cohesive whole, with a clearly outlined reason that allowed them to function as members of this community. With an understanding of how the interviewees integrated themselves into the community and what phenomena made them want to seek it and stay within it, we can move on to an analysis of the technological elements that enabled and supported these processes.

I will start with something that seems natural from a 2020s perspective – access to the Internet itself. It should be stressed that for many of my interviewees, this access was not always so obvious. In the first part of this chapter, I will address

issues of accessibility and the importance that my interviewees attributed to these issues. My interlocutors often brought up topics related to the Internet understood as a synonym for the virtual realm. In their words, the process of accessing the Internet – both as a technological umbrella-like term for the virtual world and as a technology for accessing different information sources – is central to their self-identification as libertarians. I will then go on to analyse the media and their impact on my interviewees. I will reflect on how they were influenced by old media, the first online tools and software, interactive media, and websites. This, in turn, will take us to the main platform of operations for my interviewees, which is Facebook. They discuss the various personal aspects of their experience with the platform, including the ease of access to content it provides, the integration features, and the simplification of reaching different audiences. Finally, I will focus on the threads that touch on the demarcation between the virtual and real worlds as raised by my interviewees. From this point, I will be able to move on to summaries.

## Getting Online

In the narratives of my interviewees, the concept of accessibility emerged in various dimensions. One such dimension was the emergence of the Internet. AR explicitly states that the availability of the Internet *'opened a window to the world'* and *'gave us* (libertarians) *access to the information to which we had not previously accessed, nor couldn't we come to those conclusions on our own'.* To reiterate what I wrote in the previous chapters, access to foreign television or press was almost non-existent until the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. Even with the liberalisation of the media market, accessing foreign content still posed challenges. It often demanded a significant budget, as foreign titles were expensive in Poland in the 1990s and early 2000s. Additionally, access to television programming required costly satellite or cable TV subscriptions. Furthermore, obtaining such content necessitated a knowledge of foreign languages, predominantly English, German, or French. Most importantly, it required awareness that such sources of media were available and knowing where to acquire them. As the Internet became more accessible to a broader audience in Poland during the 1990s and early 2000s, it provided a gateway to a wealth of information without the need to fulfil many of the previous

prerequisites, perhaps aside from language proficiency. Over time, accessing this information online also became more affordable, essentially eliminating the high budget requirements that were previously necessary.

This is just one aspect of access that my interviewees discussed. They also highlighted two other dimensions: access to the virtual realm through mobile devices, and access to information in general. These three dimensions of access play a significant role in shaping their experiences within the virtual libertarian community.

## Internet Access

Access to the Internet has been pivotal in the development and proliferation of virtual communities. As the digital divide narrows, more individuals can participate in these online spaces, enabling richer exchanges of ideas and experiences (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). As an example, one of my interviewees, MC, differentiates between his generation (the early 1980s) and younger cohorts, particularly those born in the late 1990s and 2000s. In his view, the Internet has been a *'natural thing'* for these younger individuals, unlike his own experience growing up with limited access due to his parents' financial constraints. He mentioned that he gained access to a computer at home when he was fifteen years old. On the other hand, LS shared that being born in a major Polish city facilitated his early access to the Internet. His voice is particularly visual in this regard. He said '*Many people had to go to libraries* (in the 1990s and early 2000s) (…) *I think that some* (people) *of my generation may have had a problem with getting online, and continuing online life, participating in this kind of community. That's why there are a lot of young people whose presence is more visible (*now)*'. ML says that '*if someone is now a first-year student, or is a student in general, and has some broad libertarian interests – and wants to get interested in libertarianism – they will inevitably look for it on the Internet'*. According to him, things used to be different, and the first point of search would be the local or university library.

For EP, living an interconnected life was a natural experience. She says that *'from high school until today the Internet has always accompanied me'.* This generational

change is also highlighted by BG, who says that *'we belonged to a fairly young generation in which everyone knew how to use the Internet. The social media revolution affected us – each of us had accounts on all kinds of social media sites. And it was a logical consequence that whilst using such portals we would also create groups of common interests.'*. His words confirm that my interviewees shared a common interest (libertarianism), a sense of community, but also a certain (virtual) space, three components characteristic of Crow and Allan in their seminal definition of community (Crow and Allan, 1995). ML continues this theme and says that during this period, Facebook effectively became the main space of libertarians' communication. *'You could say that during the first years if something wasn't on Facebook, it couldn't be found online'* he says and adds that if someone wasn't part of those groups, wasn't following them, or didn't know some people involved in it, one would assume that someone was *'an outsider'. In* his view, the effect of such a situation was, that most libertarian activities took place online 'What *was happening in the so-called real world - not in the virtual world, but in the real world - was a derivative and fruit of what was happening on the Internet'* he says. Interestingly, Serek et al. (2018) argue that online activities do not translate into real-world civic engagement. However, ML's perspective, along with others that will be discussed later, contradicts this notion. Indeed, whilst most of my interviewees' organisational activities occurred in the virtual world, the impact of these activities extended to the real world as well. RG and JS, for instance, discuss the social protests they co-organised within the virtual libertarian community, which then manifested in the physical world with demonstrations taking place on the streets of Polish cities, attracting several thousand participants. In the following section, I will focus with higher detail on this aspect of community functioning.

Returning to accessibility issues, LS identified the main problem stemming from the lack of Internet access, which led to the exclusivity of this milieu. According to him, access to virtual communities was limited only to people who had the capacity for *constant* communication. Those who were outside a fixed bandwidth edge were not bonding with others regularly, hence, they have not been able to build closer ties with others. It was only when the access became more widespread that *the*

community began to spring. According to him, pre-existing communities were primarily centred around specific platforms, but they gained viability as true communities with the increased potential for ad hoc interaction. If we revisit the stories in the previous chapter, particularly those centred around networking, they all relied on the ability of individual interlocutors to communicate with others in a timely and unhindered manner. This type of interaction would have been limited with restricted connectivity. This is made all the stronger by the voices of younger libertarians. As noted by ZS, '*The older generations were entering the libertarian movement in a technological prehistory'.* He admits, as almost every younger libertarian in my interviews, that he is more of a '*Facebook kid',* and that by the time he logged online, this access was already commonplace for him and others around him. For these interviewees, the problem of *connecting* – the very fact of entering the virtual world via the technological intermediary, such as a computer – has become a natural thing or even *ubiquity.* Their stories touch on different aspects of portals and platforms, Facebook groups and other spaces of virtual contact, all of which, nevertheless, build on an already existing access *structure.* One can even assume that the perspective of my interviewees indicates a slow change in the community, from an exclusive group of specific-medium users in the early 2000s (various sites and forums build around *Libnet*) to an inclusive group of multimedia and multi-platform users in the 2010s (with several sites, forums, and especially Facebook groups in play), open to anyone who finds such content on either of the social media platforms or in a search engine. In AR's words, the role of the Internet '*definitely increased after 2012'* and plays an important role for all communities going forward. In TD's vision, its role is even more important with the lessening role that TV plays in society: *'I'm afraid of government control of the Internet* (...) *traditional television is practically dying and, in a few decades, I suppose it will be a memory. And the Internet will then be under greater control'. In* this sense, information access might get limited only to the virtual space regulated by the relevant institutions – one such model might be a sovereign (state-run) surveillant Internet as exampled by China in the 2020s (Kaleta, 2023). It is a threat that he believes should be commented on loudly.

MG believes that *'from a logistical point of view, the Internet has not only made all the communication easier, but it made it possible at all'.* With the Internet becoming normality, my interlocutors gained access to a communication space allowing them to interact without physical boundaries, in both physical and intellectual contexts. EP underlines that the Internet provided the possibility of quick communication that was, in her view, unprecedented. She is echoed by JS who says that *'The Internet helped people to get in touch'.* JS also adds that *'conveying certain thoughts via the Internet is much easier than it used to be, offline'.* He also highlights a rather non-obvious change that, from his perspective, a man entering the libertarian world in the early 1990s, was crucial: *'the possibility of getting our message out was incredible'.* Previously, they had to rely on sending letters or printed posters through postal services, that was a highly engaging and labour-intensive activity. JSP underlines the fact that the Internet helped him become a libertarian and *'get contacts and information'* he didn't have before. That was crucial for his work in the third sector. LA says that he *'used the Internet to become at least in some minimal way a part of the libertarian movement not only in Poland but also internationally'* and that the virtual nature of this communication has made possible what was previously unthinkable. LB describes himself as a person who has always liked *'to use the Internet and computers',* and who has been *'active in other Internet communities.'.* The Internet has allowed him to form various interactions not only with libertarians but also, for instance, with fellow gamers. TD, on the other hand, strikes almost poetic tones when he talks about what he thinks of the Internet: *'The Internet is a tool. It's a big sandbox where you can get your eye knocked out. You can get sand in your eye. But you can also build a nice castle with it*.

Several other of my interviewees recount how they settled onto the Internet in the mid-2000s, after the drop in prices. Above all, they mention that the revolution was feasible because of a fixed Internet connection at home. MA says that *'the biggest change for me, was having a permanent Internet connection; being able to contribute* (without limits) *on Internet forums.'.* He adds that *'it was only when I had a permanent Internet connection that I could search for what I wanted'.* LS adds that

he was '*lucky*' because he was born in an area that was already had an Internet connection at the time, when *'the Internet was only starting to become a thing'*. Besides, as he notes, previously it was problematic not only to have Internet access, but just to have a computer at home. And he stresses that *'now people don't remember that, but those were times when people were really poor'*. *'Many people in other towns and cities had to go to libraries or get a radio Internet access'* he adds. The radio signal was slower and weaker, but also more expensive than a cable connection. MG says that with time *'the Internet became more accessible. Broadband … at some point, it didn't even matter anymore how much bandwidth there was. How many megabytes or gigabytes a month were downloaded? The Internet was available as much as you wanted.'*. He stresses that this allowed him to '*start looking for information'*, and that it was *'a transition from low-tech - like books, magazines, newspapers - to more hi-tech, which is the Internet with its websites and forums.* However, despite the proliferation of the Internet, there were still limitations that needed to be jumped over before full immersion.

Section summary

The Internet's accessibility has been instrumental in enabling virtual communities' formation and expansion (i.e., Rainie & Wellman, ibid). This aligns with Powell et al. (2010), who highlight that traditional geographical limitations are replaced by the need for technology access to participate in virtual communities. Generational shifts in Internet access are evident, with younger interviewees having more natural experiences with the online realm, compared to older counterparts who faced barriers in early Internet accessibility. The wider access has facilitated the development of a sense of community that was built around shared interests (libertarian attitudes). The expanded connectivity has led to increased engagement and activities in both the virtual and physical realms, challenging Serek et al. (2018) argument that online activities do not translate to real-world civic engagement. As the digital divide narrows the virtual libertarian community is transforming, shifting from being centred around specific platforms and scattered among various micro-communities to becoming a cohesive and multi-platform cohort, that has a fluid organisational form. My interviewees discuss how there is no longer a need for

physical interaction for the community to exist, and that the online and offline realms interplay with each other in allowing the participation of the community. This notion enriches insights by Burgess & Green (2018) on social and technological realms impacting each other.

Concerns about Internet freedom and the potential threats it faces, such as increased government control, have been raised by some interviewees, meaning that access is crucial in maintaining the freedom of interactions in the virtual realm. This aligns with the observations of Thierer and Szoka (2009) of the virtual libertarians being anti-authoritarian in mind, especially when it comes to the overgrown activity of the government in the cyber realm. The Internet for my interviewees became a communication space and a tool for self-realisation, but like any other space, it required them to meander within its boundaries and draw attention to the various risks they have encountered. These conversations are consistent with the discussion of virtual communities that I have analysed earlier. The ability to build and sustain interactions with other libertarians was primarily the result of the emergence and consequent spread of the Internet. But, says TG, technology was not the primary goal of libertarians: 'If I think about it, technology is a means to an end. The goal is to strengthen interpersonal ties.'. The Internet, as both a space and a tool, became a platform for interactions that primarily manifested on an interpersonal level, transcending the notions of virtuality and physicality. In this way, my interlocutors corroborate the claims of Castells (ibid), May (ibid) and Jurgenson (ibid), who believe that community is created by fully lived experience even whilst being logged off and that they don't require physical linking between its members. With the advent of this medium, my interviewees fully immersed themselves in the virtual world and then built bonding social and professional relationships with other participants in this community in an online space that were soon taken to the real world – as discussed in the previous chapter. Their relationships did not become any less binding than those established solely in the real world, although - as many of my interviewees stressed - virtuality was for many of them only a tool to build such (Figure 23). This in turn confirms the

considerations of Poster (ibid), who pointed out that online and offline ties are equally binding.

## Mobile Access

The next evolutionary point for my interviewees was the emergence of smartphones and mobile connections altogether. LA highlights that when such a technology came along, and with it the price of mobile Internet decreased, people gained the ability to interact directly at any time of the day. Because of that, they *'had more access to any content, contacts and interactions than through the computer'*. He is echoed by NS, who says that smartphones have redefined the way he is connecting to the Internet. *'I had a poor laptop, which meant that I was browsing Facebook and the Internet rather than playing something like The Witcher 3. The change in hardware helped a lot.* MS also says that everything became simpler with the development of smartphones and the fact that they allowed the use of platforms like Facebook at any given moment: *'You could have used it anywhere. At any time. There was no problem with the Internet – it's hard to find a smartphone that doesn't work well with Facebook. And in the past, it was all about hardware and Internet limitations'* he says.

Mobility further offsets the physical limitations of virtuality, resulting from the previous inability to communicate without a home computer. With the advent of mobility and the parallel development of mobile Internet, my interlocutors were becoming tangibly connected to the virtual plane of their lives at every moment of the day. RG notes that in the mid-to-late 2000s, the Internet was still the domain of single households – if they had already gained this access. It was extremely difficult to use the Internet on the go, as mobile connection prices were very high.

*'My first experience with the Internet radio was that you had to download it directly to your phone. Data transfer was expensive back then. To listen to just one episode (*of some show*), I could use up to 10% of my monthly limit. You had to pay extra for the Internet, so you had to remember to download something to your mobile at home, or even to your computer first, and then to your mobile.'*. He also adds that *'Our heyday was when the bandwidth allowed us to broadcast audio'*. This also

influenced the way they interacted with other media or the way they consumed content. TD says that the technological change associated with the availability of new tools (*'greater availability of laptops and smartphones'*) caused him to stop *'consuming traditional media such as TV quite early on'* and fill it with new media *'YouTube, streaming platforms, and other platforms that were gaining popularity back then'*. TP stresses that in the beginning everyone used computers, and only at a certain point in their virtual history did they also move to phones. He calls this moment a *major technological change from my perspective*. He believes that the community consume social media on their phone rather than on personal computers. The same goes for most of the day-to-day communication*: 'maintaining contact through communication software for me is purely smartphone thing. Ninety per cent of this is done via smartphone, and not even a tablet. I have it too, but it's not convenient for it. The communication is strictly a smartphone thing'* he says. He ends his comment by emphasising that it is *'a revolution because the type of device I use to connect to the Internet and communicate, has changed'*.

Younger interviewees also underline the role of smartphones in their daily interactions. WP says that she uses her smartphone mostly for maintaining her everyday contact with others, even if she occasionally turns on social media in her computer browser: *'If I get a notification that someone has added a post to one of the Facebook groups, I can check it very quickly. This also gives me very smooth access to all the news. Honestly, I usually find out from these groups if something interesting happened in the economy or if some scandal broke out in the world. There is a post right away, because someone from these tens of thousands of people who are members of those groups, watched some news or read some articles and decided to share it there.'* she says.

it's worth having in mind that, while in the past the Internet was still designed to allow us to talk intermittently, today's communication – or to be more precise, communication since the late 2000s – requires more of a direct response, often a computer-mediated way (CMC) (Venter, 2019). Without it, it would be difficult to build long-term relationships virtually. JBW says that, in his view, *'the possibility of Internet communication, especially in the post-modem era'* was a revolution that

changed the whole way we communicate. He says, fitting in with Hoggett's theory (ibid) that *'since the fixed broadband, it became possible to contact anonymous people and easily communicate with them, not only because of any social ties you had but because of common interests you shared'*. JBW goes as far as to claim that virtual communication is the most important technological change he experienced. MG shares his vision of the Internet being a tool that simplifies communication in general. He says it made it *'practically instantaneous.'*. MT goes as far as to say that *'without the Internet, there would not be a global libertarian movement'*. He also notices a certain paradox, as he calls it, in which the Internet brings *'all these ideological bubbles, radicalisation, the polarization of society'*, but also that it is a *great medium that connects people all over the world.'*. NG also shares this opinion of a paradoxical aspect of the network. He says that *'the impact of new technology on libertarians is a double-edged sword'*. Even though it expands the bubbles they function within, it allows easier access to like-minded people – despite the physical distance – and provides them with an understanding of others who might think alike. He indirectly develops Szpunar's idea (2004) that virtual communities are highly individualised, changeable, and interest-oriented, adding the aspect of developing an understanding of the existence of other, like-minded, participants in that community.

The infrastructural developments have contributed to accelerated connectivity and thus to increased user interaction capabilities. With that, my interviewees had the opportunity not only to read content posted by others but also to create it themselves. This coincided with the emergence of new platforms, including the first social media in the late 2000s, like YouTube and Facebook. While some interviewees mention platforms native to the Polish Internet that were important spaces of use in the mid-to-late 2000s (i.e., *Nasza Klasa* and *Gadu-Gadu*), most emphasise that their role has been replaced by international platforms gaining popularity in the 2010s. Those themes largely coincide with the Internet periodisation attempt that I proposed in previous chapters: its development from Web 1.0 (text-based, using relatively low bandwidth), through Web 2.0 (interactive, using multi-device reach and much higher bandwidth), to Web 3.0 (fully immersed,

using any device with limitless bandwidth) (Viswanathan, et al. (ibid), DiNucci (ibid), Strickland (ibid), Isaias, et al. (ibid)).

<u>Section summary</u>

This section illustrates the profound role that mobile connectivity played among my interviewees. The emergence of smartphones and affordable mobile Internet has transformed the ways community members access content and communicate with each other (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). As highlighted by several interviewees, from this point the community members could communicate on the go, signifying a shift from indirect (i.e., comment sections on the websites and forum – [*Pre-Social*]) to spontaneous communication (i.e., chats and chat-like features within single platforms – [*Facebook_Groups*]) (Figure 24). They became *super-connected* (Chayko, 2020) with multiple devices allowing them to connect with other members of the community. In such a way, mobile technology has propelled a shift from traditional media like TV [*Old_Media*] to new media platforms such as YouTube and streaming services [*Sharing_Platforms*] (Mossberger et al., 2007). Such insights align with Chadwick's idea of a hybrid media system (2017). This system, my interviewees observe, allowed for a community to blossom, if only by allowing constant communication and information distribution. TD's narrative underscores this transition, indicating how changes in technology and the rise of new tools foster new media consumption habits. Mobile technology has bridged the gap between physical and virtual realities, enabling users to remain connected with their virtual communities beyond the previous confines of home-based networking (Farman, 2021). With that, people were realising they were members of the virtual communities also outside the virtual realm, as they could connect back to it at any time.

The other change, driven particularly by smartphones, was changing the way people were communicating in the virtual world. Platforms like instant messaging and social media have facilitated more immediate and direct responses – a crucial element in cultivating long-term virtual relationships. The advent and widespread adoption of social media platforms, enabled by mobile technology, have allowed the evolution from local to international platforms, nurturing the growth of virtual

communities [*Network_Effect*]. Finally, some of the interviewees observed the dualistic aspect of mobile technology, reflecting on the Internet's power to both divide and unite in the mobile and social media era. Simplification of content, driven largely by its volume and ease of access, ideological bubbles, and societal polarisation, was becoming more visible, as noticed by several interviewees [*Risks*].

## Information Access

My interviewees also focused on the third surface of the access problem, namely the idea of information accessibility. IS and TM recognise that platforms like Sci-Hub and Library Genesis have provided access to previously inaccessible knowledge sources, expanding intellectual exploration opportunities for the community. BS underlines the role of the media-sharing websites in the process of information gaining: *'The books were scanned and* (were) *available online. All you had to do was to type in something like Chomikuj.pl[97]'*. Both threads show that my interviewees did not just focus their stories on the notion of belonging to the community and the role of technology in it, but also on trying to develop their interests in libertarianism. They used the available tools on the Internet to explore libertarian content and try to understand this philosophy better. Their interest became an axis of communication with other people, as I wrote about in the previous chapter. Such consumption of content also led to the natural discovery of non-Polish sources on libertarianism.

JBW stresses that the Internet has '*naturally globalised*' this community, and especially himself: *'It is probably because libertarianism is a social philosophy which has some immanent cosmopolitan or semi-cosmopolitan elements, so it quite naturally helped me to tighten up and build contacts with the American environment on an ongoing basis.'*. Other interviewees also mentioned that they tried to discover libertarianism by accessing foreign sources. This type of access required, in addition to the Internet, knowledge of foreign languages, primarily

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[97] Chomikuj.pl is a Polish file-sharing website that allows users to upload, store, and share various types of files, including documents, videos, music, and software. It gained popularity in Poland as a platform for sharing copyrighted material but raised concerns about intellectual property rights and copyright infringement. It has been subject to legal actions and controversies related to copyright violations.

English. This theme came up several times in the interviews and participants indicated that knowing English helped them a lot in this process. AR stresses that the sources he came across in the public space in the mid-00s were severely limited. In his view, there was no other access to information and that changed with Internet access. *'I might be from the generation that perhaps didn't wake up at the time of the political breakthrough but woke up with the Internet breakthrough in Poland'* he says. Yet, he also adds that *'I witnessed the changes, the birth of various portals or communication platforms. Many of the tools or spaces I used, and which inflicted the idea of freedom in me, or at least showed me the first path – they don't exist on the Internet anymore!'*. RG adds the very important reflection that *'at the moment we are no longer fighting over information, which in human history, as it seems, was a natural state.'*. The Internet has filled this void with an unimaginable amount of information that has become universally accessible. In his opinion, we even have an *'overwhelming amount of information'* that leads to a partial oversaturation of it. In his view, younger consumers of information, in their search for new sources, look for content tailored to their needs. RG argues that *'our attention span is very shortened; we are very picky; our point of focus is fluid'*. This change, he believes, is crucial in the way information is consumed, which had to be delivered to younger generations in a different, much faster, and on-the-spot way. For this reason, the function of forums, chats and pages was taken over by new forms of media that were far more interactive and livelier in their functionalities. But, as LS emphasises, *'now the infrastructure is developed to such an extent that I would say that further inventions are rather of ancillary importance, rather than being the foundation that binds my and other people's presence on the Internet'*. Platform novelties or even technological innovations are just an addition to the existing and closely related structure of the virtual libertarian community. They do, however, help younger users to find their branches of this community and more senior users to profile their interests within virtual activities. MA also notes that enabling virtual information access does not mean that users of the medium would suddenly seek out libertarian sources. Sometimes it might be the contrary, *'once a person finds that key to the information superhighway, it's just a matter of chance whether they end up with libertarianism or something much worse to go deep onto'*.

The previous chapters show the various factors that led my interviewees to seek information about libertarianism. Their need to search for philosophy and its representatives was often derived from social contacts, socio-political activism, or family narratives. The Internet became a tool for them to connect these experiences with a political philosophy of libertarianism, followed by joining the community around it. Virtuality helped my interviewees to transcend limitations, if only physical, and to orient themselves in this reality, confirming Kapralska's (ibid) and Turkle's (ibid) observations of integrating and supporting functions of community that aid the development of belonging.

<u>Section summary</u>

Interviewees acknowledged the change in the way information is accessed and consumed over time (Figure 25). The evolution from a scarcity of information (pre-Internet) to an overabundance (with social media) led to shifts in user behaviour towards more selective and focused information consumption. They emphasised the role of the Internet in providing them access to previously inaccessible sources, via platforms like Sci-Hub and Libgen. The availability of diverse knowledge sources facilitated their intellectual exploration and understanding of libertarian philosophy, further contributing to their sense of belonging to the community. This coincides with observations by other authors about the impact of access to information on the formation of political views (i.e., Shirky, 2011; Bimber et al., 2012). In such a way, the Internet also contributed to the globalisation of the community by connecting Polish libertarians with the larger libertarian community worldwide. It facilitated interaction with international libertarians, broadening perspectives, and deepening understanding. As pointed out by several interviewees, a mastery of the English language was perceived as crucial for accessing such non-Polish sources on this thought, hence, the interviewees identified the language skills as an important component of their virtual community experience.

The summary of the three dimensions of access and its impact on my interviewees' experiences is presented in graphical form in Figure 26.

## Between Traditional and Online Media

### Printed Press and Television

It must be borne in mind that the media in the modern world are an interconnected vessel. And so, not only the online media had impacted my interviewees. Old media platforms such as print press, television, and radio played a pivotal role in the formation and development of virtual communities. The transition from traditional media to the digital realm did not occur in a vacuum but was a complex, intertwined process that involved a hybridisation of these platforms (Chadwick, 2017). The effect of offline media on the virtual activity of my interviewees has also been important. In the chapter tracing the origins of my interlocutors in the community, I have mentioned the stories of home-grown magazines that were self-published by anarchists and libertarians through the early 1990s, just to be moved online in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Researchers confirm that traditional media provided the foundational content and audience that was later migrated to the online world, contributing to the creation of digital communities (Castells, 2009). As JS argues, it was on the back of these offline titles that an audience for libertarian content was formed. He claims that these publications created a sense of shared identity and community among libertarians, which was instrumental in forming an audience ready for digital engagement. SS adds that *'back then, the printed press and the Internet worked very well together'.* Much of the content published within the print magazines was further distributed online. This seems to be a natural process for print media, as the relationship between print and digital media seems to be symbiotic, as content created for print magazines was often repurposed and disseminated online at the time (Jenkins, 2006). of one of these titles, SS said this*: 'There was an irregular magazine, dozens of pages of very interesting content, even verging on the scientific tone. It was called Mind Fuck. What's interesting is that it was a fully printed magazine, not digitised, and yet there was an issue where most of the content was about cryptography!'.* This type of print press has therefore become a hotbed for the distribution of libertarian content to interlocutors with the longest tenure in the community. According to MM and JS, readers of these magazines later found their way onto mailing lists hosted on the servers of Yahoo,

then the most popular such service in the world. On the back of these groups, a libertarian forum was established in later years, which I will focus on below.

Television, too, has played its part in distributing libertarian content and thus reaching its audience. In MC's stories, he highlights the role of this medium in shaping his position in the libertarian world. Indeed, he believes that without television, he would be unlikely to ever appear in the consciousness of virtual libertarians. *'If it wasn't for TV libertarianism, I wouldn't be an Internet libertarian. I would just be one of the anonymous libertarians'* he says. And he adds that it was easier for him to become popular because his audience had already seen him on television. He highlights that TV was a much more popular medium amongst youth in the mid-to-late 2000s. He also believes that today, his path would not be repeatable: *'Simply put, the TV today is not the gateway it once was. It is an incredibly important medium. Very influential. But if we talk about young people, it is not very interesting for them.'*. The role of traditional media in forming virtual communities seems to be generation dependent. Older members of the community often cite the influence of television and print media on their path to digital engagement. In contrast, younger members of the community mainly mention digital platforms, reflecting the shift in media consumption towards them. Nevertheless, the role of traditional media among my interviewees should not be underestimated. These platforms provided the initial content, audience, and cultural framework that underpinned the evolution of this community. Those media facilitated the transition to the digital world, and their impact remains embedded in the structure and culture of today's virtual libertarian community.

Section summary

The transition from traditional to digital media didn't happen in isolation. Instead, it was a complex, intertwined process involving the hybridisation of traditional media platforms' characteristics. Old media provided foundational content and audience, which later transitioned into the digital realm, contributing to the development of virtual communities, including the virtual libertarian community. However, the influence of traditional media appears to be generation-dependent. Older members often cite the role of television and print media in their digital

engagement, while younger members focus predominantly on digital platforms. This reflects a generational shift in media consumption. Amongst the old media themes raised by my interviewees, two were the focus of several stories. Home-grown magazines self-published by libertarians in the early 1990s played a crucial role in forming the audience for libertarian content and fostering a sense of shared identity within the community, at least according to its publisher and first readers. Such content was further disseminated online, creating the basis of the first libertarian websites. Also, TV has been instrumental in shaping the community (Figure 27). Media personalities, like MC, utilised television to gain recognition within the virtual community, transitioning successfully to the digital realm with short videos summarising their performance on traditional TV (primarily via Youtube and *Wykop.pl*) [*Sharing_Platforms*].

## Pre-Social Media Platforms

In the context of many of the stories cited and discussed here, it is important to bear in mind that they took place within or in the immediate context of a virtual space, enabled by digital platforms. Whether a platform was used by those interviewees was also determined by its availability at the time. Hence, the stories that took place in the 2000s are different from those of the 2010s. The former is dominated by emailing discussion groups, followed by forums and comment sections on websites. The latter is dominated by social media and especially, in the overwhelming majority, by Facebook and its forum-like *Groups* functionality. Let's start this section with the threads raised by interviewees that dealt with mailing groups, forums, and websites, i.e., what is perceived by my interlocutors as the first period of the community.

JSP mentions that he would not be able to build his position as a libertarian without emailing functionalities: '*If I didn't have an email, I wouldn't write letters to* (American libertarians), *because I wouldn't even know whom to address. I didn't have a fax machine, so I wouldn't be able to send any fax. They would not know that I existed. Neither I would know that they existed.'*. LS and MT also mention the role of email as one of the key tools for virtual communication, citing it as one of the most important tools they came across as virtual libertarians. For MM, email, as a

communication tool, helped to create the first community of virtual libertarians. '*Around 2000 – or even a little earlier – I got to one of those emailing lists*' he says, and, humorously, adds that this type of communication is unfamiliar to younger users of this community: '*gimby nie znajo*'. He continues by telling the story of this space: '*These lists were hosted on Yahoo servers. Unfortunately, they are not online anymore, but when Yahoo was still allowing it, I got it archived. One of them was called Libertarianizm_PL and was online from 2001 to 2005*'. As he points out, there were two previous groups before this one, but he cannot remember their exact names. *Libertarianism_PL*, he says, grouped the users of the previous two groups. Finally, he adds that '*It was the first such virtual community*'. AC says that when libertarian-minded people met at any events around the country, there was always a piece of paper running through the crowd where one could leave the email address to be invited to join this group. Importantly, it is also not the case that these groups were only historical in scope and, with the development of other platforms, disappeared from the memory of my interviewees. This is indicated by the words of BG, who says that he was not a user of such mailing groups but had knowledge that they existed. The same goes for the libertarian forum, where, he admits, he had no account but was also aware of its existence.

While the mailing groups were only mentioned by a handful of users, the forum that emerged from it had already become a very popular space for the libertarians I spoke to. MM mentions that around the mid-2000s he found out that, in addition to the mailing lists, there was also a libertarian forum that someone put up on a free hosting service using phpBB technology (PHP Bulletin Board). The PHP language was used circa 2000 to create phpBB forums – a free and open-source Internet space which soon '*has become undoubtedly the most popular open-source software for managing Internet forums*' (Holmes and Jaim, 2012). Forum was intended as a response to the ineffectiveness of the emailing discussion groups – previously the dominant communication space for libertarians according to these interviewees. In this space, it was difficult to maintain control of the content - each successive response was displayed in a cascade way, and so also thread control was limited. MM knew the founder of this forum, who invited him to join the server

because, in his opinion, the mailing lists were *a little archaic for communication platforms*. He found the new forum to be an excellent solution that was easier to use. Yet, after some time, he realised that free hosting was problematic, as it could be shut down for any reason by the host. So, he decided to cover from his budget the purchase of the respective domains (*libertarianizm.pl* and *libertarianizm.net*) and server, on which the forum and sites still stand today. The space came to be known as *Libnet*. IS says that '*in libertarian circles, Libnet was surrounded by a peculiar and deserved cult'*. According to MM, however, the position of the forum has weakened over time. He says that '*the forum, as a form of contact, becomes something archaic'*. In his view, forums are no longer popular, and Facebook took over this popularity. '*There is also a good chance that Facebook will survive longer'* he adds. However, he and other forum users decided to modernise their approach and set up a Discord channel because, he says, not everyone is on Facebook and not everyone can communicate on the go. According to him, most of the people who used to be active on the forum started using Discord as well, and they have been joined by people from outside of the *Libnet*. This has its downside, he says, as communication on Discord is faster and more direct. Problematic in his view is that these exchanges on such platforms, quickly disappear from the sight of the users. This tool works like the old chat rooms so that the latest messages appear at the bottom and older ones disappear (roll-up) at the top. '(It) *worries me a bit, because sometimes when cool things are discussed, it disappears quickly'* he says. What is intriguing is that, effectively, this change has brought forum users back to similar functionality that they used in email newsgroups. Admittedly, they now use both forum and Discord – and the latter does offer a speed of communication that email systems did not – but it shows a certain way of getting used to interacting even with changing platform trends. SW mentions that the forum was not necessarily a place where one could learn much about libertarian thought. In his view, being a member of this forum was *a form of being a libertarian'* that allowed '*expressing one's newly acquired views'*. He believes the content in there was educational, but rather '*non-substantive'*, that was '*so skewed that even now I see it as a test of whether you are a libertarian'*. He adds jokingly that only '*those who survived the baptism of some stupid things written there'* were becoming libertarians.

In addition to *Libnet*, a forum of supporters of Janusz Korwin-Mikke – the so-called *e-UPR* – played a large role for some of my interviewees and is most accurately described by JSP: *'apart from the Libnet, which I have already mentioned, there was another very important forum for freedom-oriented people. It didn't have libertarianism in its name, but libertarians were active there. That was the e-UPR forum'*. He adds that in his opinion there were many more users on this forum, among which a large volume of libertarians. *'They argued with people with more conservative tendencies, even nationalist or pro-state tendencies. Many times, these libertarians managed to convince other people of their rights. They, somehow, did it very efficiently, I must admit'* he says. Unlike *Libnet*, however, it was not a forum dedicated to libertarians, but one where many libertarians were active and discussed with people of other beliefs. Another interviewee, TM, believes that it was from *e-UPR* that the first nuclei of Facebook groups were to form in the future. According to him, after discovering Facebook groups, users of this forum found that that space would be a better place for discussion. Especially since the *e-UPR* forum was becoming less libertarian in tone over time, at least according to my interlocutors. Nevertheless, ML believes that *'the heyday of such forums is long gone. Most people nowadays are either on Facebook, Discord, or other social media.* IS adds that *'it was dying out by the time Facebook was born and absorbed the energy that the Internet forums had before'*. He adds that he is still reading *Libnet* because he finds some discussions interesting. AC says that he has never been fascinated by these forums but knows people who have gone there out of a need to exchange ideas and felt a *'sense of community'*.

Many of my interlocutors mention that during this period, websites played a major role not only in storing content but also in promoting it – or rather making it available to further readers. Only in later years, social media took over sharing and recommending content functionalities. AR mentions that in the mid-2000s he used RSS daily – a tool that aggregated content from various sites. It has become less useful over time with the rise of social media. Only in recent years have we seen the return of similar tools, exemplified by the popularity of apps like Pocket. JSP hinted that many people believe that websites were the domain of the 1990s. But,

as he points out, from his perspective, websites were also springing up in the early-to-mid 2000s. This popularity of new sites was influencing the parallel boom of the Internet as they were largely a reflection of user demand. SS, a journalist by profession, believes that the supply of content was also far richer in those years. He mentions that at the time several websites had *'excellent'* content. He mentions specifically *Liberator, Libertarian.net* and *Libertarianin.pl* among other sites. He notes that the content was mostly translations, but over time there appeared also authored articles by Polish libertarians. At the time, websites were more '*like an online magazine'* that provided users with selected content, rather than engagement-driven platforms of mass-content production. IS also subscribes to these words. SS adds that a blogging space was forming around these platforms, further expanding the range of content on the Polish Internet. Other interviewees, including IS and LS, highlighted that among those sites and platforms that brought about the greatest change, were also scientific journal-sharing platforms. '(Because of) *Sci-Hub it was possible for people who didn't have access to very highly-priced scientific journals, to access the entire database of almost every human advance in modern science'* says LS and adds that '*It allowed for rapid intellectual exchange and sharing of scientific achievements, and through that, better discussions on the Internet'. In* his opinion, this has greatly contributed to both simplifying communication on Facebook and increasing the quality of these discussions, as people have been able to link to articles and materials that relate to any given phenomenon. But he points out, the real change that made many of these processes possible was the development of the advertising market: '*It feeds all these things into revenue. It makes it all free for users.'*.

Section summary

The evolution of digital communication platforms has had a significant influence on the nature of discourse in this community, as illustrated by my interviewees. In the pre-social era, predominantly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the narrative of the community was shaped through email discussion groups. As reported by several interviewees like JSP, LS, and MT, email was critical in establishing initial contact and communication among libertarians. During this period, email lists – hosted on

platforms like Yahoo – served as hubs of interactions. In the mid-2000s, forums emerged as a popular platform for discussion, enabling improved control over content and improvement in interaction quality. MM discussed the shift to phpBB technology, citing its popularity. The development of forums, such as Libnet, marked a response to the limitations of email discussion groups. Despite the decline of forums over time, their impact on the community was significant. The most recent phase, dominated by social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Discord, reshaped communication within the community [*Groups*]. The speed and directness of these platforms allowed for faster exchanges. Some users like SW reflected on the educational but "non-substantive" nature of forum content, suggesting that participation was a form of identifying as a libertarian, but not education on this thought. Besides, forums were not only venues for libertarians but also spaces where libertarians engaged with other ideological groups (e-UPR). Notably, the influence of digital platforms before the social media era extended beyond forums and email discussion groups. Websites played a pivotal role in curating and promoting content during this digital evolution; they were more akin to online magazines of the 1990s and gave access to a variety of libertarian sources (Figure 28). This phase saw the rise of blogging and the accessibility of scientific journals, boosting intellectual exchange and discussion quality.

## Sharing Platforms

Earlier I wrote about a certain generational shift mentioned by my interviewees. It is particularly evident when focusing on what could be called the virtual libertarian *trend*. Some of my interviewees mentioned that they have observed something they described in such a way, that was lasting for an undetermined number of years, and that has already come to an end. It was a manifestation of the popularity of selected libertarians in both the old media and on the springing Internet platforms (most notably on *Wykop.pl*[98] and on the then-rising YouTube[99]), which

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[98] Wykop.pl is a Polish social networking platform modelled after Digg.com (*Wykop* is a literal translation of the English word Digg). Founded in the mid-2000s, it quickly become one of the most popular Polish social networking sites. It served as a promotional platform for several politicians who participated in AMA (Ask Me Anything) events.

[99] Videos of MC's appearances in *Młodzież Kontra* reached several thousand views on YouTube and Wykop.pl

were influencing my interviewees' willingness to search for libertarians' philosophy and community. Today, a similar role of idea-popularisers who are extremely influential on the political views of young people has been assumed by some Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok creators (Sodani and Mendenhall, 2021). In BG's words, the popularity of libertarians on the early 2010s Internet was '*the glitch in the Matrix*'[100]*.* He believes that pro-market views are usually not popular amongst the youth. Therefore, according to him, the '*battle of the narratives*' on the Internet is currently being won by supporters of leftist thought. He believes that the libertarians failed to take advantage of the moment of popularity. In AR's view, this may be, because gaining popularity in the contemporary media world requires '*reaching the masses*' and that, in turn, requires '*tabloidisation and simplification*' of the content. Such simplification of the content is not a preferred idea for libertarians, who seem to be focusing on producing and consuming high-quality materials online.

Another area worth noting is how this community has grown through such popularity. JBW observes that libertarianism became a *phenomenon that is increasingly more popular rather than elitist'* with a greater reach because of the media impact. He points out that *'the larger the group, the more it has developed quantitatively and became more and more specialised'.* Because a few libertarians were becoming popular, in the sense of influencing certain audiences online, the reach of their ideas increased. '*Let's say that some were more interested in philosophical issues, others in economic ones. When all those bitcoins and blockchain cryptocurrencies were created, some of* (those people) *were more interested in* (digital) *IT or financial issues. So, there was a natural specialisation as the number of communication platforms increased.'* says JBW. He highlights the role of both the popularity of libertarians and the increased number of platforms in the wide spreading of ideas. NS told me that his participation in the libertarian community started with political Facebook groups, including *Płatnicy Składek Atora*,

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[100] Glitch in the Matrix (pol. *błąd w Matriksie*) is the Internet slang phrase used to explain something highly unlikely or irregular. Based on the 1999 movie The Matrix, in which the glitch was associated with the ruling machines altering a reality of the Matrix that was experienced by its users as the *déjà vu.*

*Niskie Składki[101], and JBWA.* It is on these groups that he comes across libertarian content and names, including MC, whom he describes as a '*top libertarian name in Poland back then'*, and who, in his view, was the initiator of this trend. MC himself, remarks how in the late 2000s and early 2010s he appeared on a TV programme *Młodzież Kontra*[102]. This TV format allowed direct interaction with the country's leading politicians and provided mainstream media exposure. It was first aired on Polish public TV, and, over time, its episodes were uploaded to popular video-sharing sites. It was around the time when YouTube and referral services such as *Wykop.pl* were gaining popularity in Poland. According to MC, the people in the stories he shared – and I was quoting in the previous chapter – were fans of his *Młodzież Kontra* appearances. It's worth adding that, according to MC, when a video of one of his appearances made its way to the homepage of *Wykop.pl* for the first time, he realised that he is indeed a *virtual* libertarian. Previously, at least in his mind, he was primarily a student and a thinker, and certainly an offline libertarian or a book-based libertarian. This confirms the theory of Dholakia and Reyes (2013), who argue that virtuality is not only the space or realm in which interactions take place but also the process by which virtuality is an expression. For my interviewee, virtuality began when he became aware of his presence in virtual media. This self-reflection plays an integral role in his process of *virtualisation. The* MC's popularity was therefore the result of an audience that was looking for this type of content within the entirety of online content. In his TV contributions, MC touched on topics related to the position of the Polish economy and society in the European context of the mid-to-late-2000s. It was this type of commentary, and perhaps the direct language that MC used (he adds that '*admittedly, in retrospect, I think it was a bit mouthful*'), that must have influenced the audience looking for

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[101] *Niskie Składki* (Low Contributions) is a Facebook group that was initially created as a classic liberal and libertarian community. Over time, the views of the members changed as the volume of users increased, reflected in the group's distinctly more left-centrist and liberal stance.

[102] *Młodzież kontra* (The Youth Versus) was a weekly Polish public TV program that was broadcast from 2001 to 2018. The idea of the show was to confront the younger people associated with political parties and social organisations with students. During each episode, a politician from a different party was a guest on the program and answered questions raised by the crowd.

this content. Today, each of his appearances on the show has tens to hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube alone.

The stories of my interlocutors demonstrate that a certain admiration has grown around people like MC. It was first the reach that *Młodzież Kontra* was hitting on air and in the streaming platforms, but soon it was resonating onto other social platforms as well. Some of my interviewees even admitted that this trend had a reflection on their private lives. They say that hopping on the libertarian *bandwagon* has helped them with the resolution of some private problems or the development of quality social interactions. YouTube was popularised in parallel in the 2010s, which also played a big role in my interviewees. In the previous chapters, I quoted MC's stories where he talked about his experience of transferring the popularity of television to the digital world thanks to YouTube. MA emphasises that YouTube was *a revolution on the scale of the printing press'* because it allowed the free publication of audio-visual content, including *'hours or more of lectures and talks'* that were available freely. TP adds that *'from my perspective, and I think it is kind of a trend as well, the video content is easier to consume. It's much easier to watch a vlog or a podcast whilst eating lunch, even it if only pops up as suggested content'*. He also observes a very important aspect of YouTube content recommendation, which is a simplification in message delivery. *'The libertarian content, especially when it comes to the written words, was quite hermetically sealed on dedicated sites. With platforms like YouTube, we have one space and a very wide range of available topics for a wider audience'* he says.

Section summary

The data from my interviewees reveal a generational shift in the way that libertarians were using media – a phenomenon largely driven by the evolving digital media landscape. The growth of online platforms like YouTube in the 2010s, referred to by MA as a 'revolution on the scale of the printing press', allowed a broader distribution of libertarian content and furthering possible interactions. This democratisation of information sharing enabled users to consume information from diverse sources and participate actively in creating and promoting content (Ahmed et al., 2019). TP highlighted that video content is easier to consume and

distribute on platforms like YouTube, expanding the reach beyond dedicated websites and forums. This evolution of content delivery reflects the changing ways in which the libertarian philosophy is shared and engaged, marking a significant shift from the earlier period. The rise of libertarian influencers and increased platforms for communication broadened the reach of libertarian ideas, enabling natural specialisation among followers. The popularity of libertarianism was fuelled by selected libertarians who were visible in the old media, like the press and TV and became popular on those emergent Internet platforms. For instance, MC became an influential libertarian figure after appearing on a Polish TV show, Młodzież Kontra, in the late 2000s and early 2010s. His TV appearances, which tackled societal and economic issues in Poland within the European context, were subsequently uploaded to video-sharing platforms, widening his audience reach. This transition to online platforms coincided with MC's self-realisation as a virtual libertarian. With that in mind, BG believes that this trend was odd, representing a temporary surge of pro-market views amongst the youth that eventually faded, potentially because of the libertarians' inability to simplify their content for mass appeal. This phenomenon aligns with the observation that digital platforms can create echo chambers where individuals interact with like-minded individuals, potentially limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and ideas (Cinelli, 2019). This period is what my interviewees refer to as the 'libertarian trend' (Figure 29).

The summary of the evolution of media platforms and their impact on my interviewees is presented in graphical form in Figure 30.

## Facebook

### Facebook Groups

After years of being connected to the virtual realm, many users were used to the functionality and way of communicating within forums and websites. Hence, many of my interviewees say that when the first social networking platforms started to bloom on the Polish market, they did not have an immediate effect on their transition or integration within the broader virtual communities. They were within various smaller communities, scattered around the Net, as part of forums (i.e.,

*Libnet and e-UPR*), websites (i.e., *Instytut Misesa, Libertarianizm.pl)*, and personal sites and blogs (i.e., *sierp.libertarianizm.pl, miasik.libertarianizm.pl)*. Neither *MySpace or Nasza-Klasa*, nor *Grono*, were able to provide the large volume of users needed to generate such integration. Some users mention that they used those platforms, but that they weren't pursuing their libertarianism *because of* them. It was not until the emergence of Facebook on the Polish market and its subsequent boom in the second decade of the 21st century that the process of transition onto this platform took place followed by further integration of the community. The impact of Facebook, but also social media more broadly, was crucial for the interviewees I spoke with.

A passage from the conversation with LB is a great starting point for this thread. *'When Facebook became a thing, all sorts of changes started to take place. First, people started to post texts that were not only meant to be solely pictures of events but were also focusing on various kinds of political or economic opinions. This provoked discussions that previously, and less frequently, used to take place during the beer meetups.'*. LB points out that Facebook was changing the way different social planes were discussed online. Other online platforms had a rather one-dimensional focus oriented on a single phenomenon or area of social life. For example, *Nasza-Klasa* was largely focused on sharing experiences and memories with school friends. MySpace, while it was a proto-social media platform, still revolved around music interests, as did LastFM. *Grono* was also a proto-social media platform but was functionally like an online forum, in which the interlocutors in specific rooms (*grono* or cluster) focused on a selected phenomenon, e.g., music, sports or film. In turn, Facebook – even though it was initially intended to be a platform like *Nasza-Klasa* – became an interactive platform focused on enabling various interactions to be built *within* it. This meant that there were no categorisations, or semi-limitations, of interlocutors' interests known from other platforms. Because of this lack of focus on a specific area of life, and the simplicity of interactions, Facebook took over areas that were previously the domain of various forums. Such changes, in turn, made it possible to discuss a wide range of

topics[103]. Facebook, besides functionalities that allow for discussions to take place on it, had a regular and significant increase in user volume. LB says: *'Before Facebook, there were no such stormy discussions on politics online* (…) *Facebook, in particular, became such a medium and a space to express one's views.'.* LS stresses that although he did not feel any great attachment to any technological change, he felt the advent of the ability to comment and participate in Facebook discussions as a *'great change'* that was *'very cool'* for him: *'The fact that you must summarise a thought in a short form'* was crucial for him. Even though it is now associated with Twitter rather than Facebook, LS felt that Facebook comments were still much shorter in general than other Internet content. He also stresses that *'often those comments were emotional, especially when they revolved around political issues.'.* The ability to interact quickly (as in chat rooms) and simultaneous allowance for longer thoughts (as on forums), but also reducing the barrier of seeking a space to exchange such opinions, were other key factors of change for some of my interlocutors.

AC also points out that in the early days, the Internet operated on a different basis than it does today. At that time, the content was delivered to the user by the creators, as in the old media, like TV or newspapers, and the audience had little-to-no influence over the content. He describes this moment in history as a *'sort of one-sided'*. He continues by saying that the content was created professionally or semi-professionally. The discussion about it often took place in the real world, or on *'narrow, niche forums'* that required *'some depth and belonging'*, otherwise it was out of the sight of an average user. *'Facebook opened it up'* he says and adds *'for better or worse'*. He notices that the entry barriers were dropped and allowed meeting people from all over Poland. *'The truism of the global village and the world that has shrunk is true'* he says. It allowed wider access, wider audience reach, and closer relations with audiences – including mentorship. But – he points out – with this process also came bad things, including opening to people who do stupid or even bad things on the Internet. As he notes empathy on the Internet is treated by

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[103] It's important to note that even if in the 2000s there were many multi-threaded forums in Poland, they were usually quite limited in scope.

some as an insult or as something bad. He describes the moment he realised that people think it that way as '*shocking*'. On a personal level, he notes that the Internet has also affected him negatively in terms of his personality, including that he has become more prone to frustration. He says that he was getting frustrated that people did not listen when provided with evidence for certain issues and that they did not listen to logical arguments in discussions. Over time, the frustration shifted to the fact that many people on the Internet did not care about others and their opinions. These changes (including language that uses phrasing disrespectful to other interlocutors) have affected him strongly, but he is trying to cope with them constantly. Today, his frustration is that people are openly unwilling to listen to the arguments and rationale of the other side '*and it's very stupid because it's obvious that they don't*' he ends up.

I would single out one business decision by the US giant that resulted in Facebook becoming the main space of communication for my interviewees. It was primarily the result of the creation of a space of mixed private and public forums, called *Groups*. AC says that the emergence of groups first and foremost simplified communication because it removed barriers to access, such as sharing an email address, registering, or searching for information on websites, all of which were a necessity and normality in the previous platforms. But it also had an impact on the other side of this phenomenon, namely the creation of communication channels for a wide audience, for which no specialist knowledge (e.g., of PHP or basic HTML) was required. AC says that it was as simple as it gets '*create a group, add friends. Thank you, bye!*'. This allowed people who were not able to build a website or a forum to create a space in which their friends and followers could follow them. Even though the main premise of the platform in the early 2010s was its universality and inclusiveness – which allowed access to knowledge and interaction for anyone potentially interested in such topics – it has not always been this way. TM points out that 'i*t was difficult to control such a discussion because there was no mechanism at all for threads, sub-threads and so on.*'. BG mentions that in 2007 it was not yet a platform of first use for Polish Internet users. He also underlines what MC mentioned, that Facebook itself did not yet have the functionality that groups

brought. It was only in 2010 that the groups became one of Facebook's flagship ideas (van Grove, 2014). Before, it was a platform that oriented itself on the user's *board*, that is, on what everyone published on their profile. With the launch of the Feed, Notifications and eventually Timeline, Facebook reprogrammed the way it displayed content to users, which also led to the launch of Groups (Loomer, 2012). The emerging Facebook groups were introduced in the early 2010s and were identified by most interviewees as the main space for their community day-to-day interactions in recent history. To a large extent, the simplicity of use of those communication spaces (that is, forums) and the ease of joining more of them within a single platform – but also the increasing popularity of Facebook itself as the main interaction platform of the early 2010s – were behind it. Moreover, the communication landscape underwent a significant transformation with the advent of social media, rendering the previous forms of communication in the 2000s, such as discussion groups, chat rooms, and online forums, obsolete.

As mentioned by my interviewees above, the fact of being directly and continuously connected to a mobile phone, which was in turn connected to Facebook, further reduced the barrier to communicating with other community members. TM says: *'At the beginning, these discussion groups were rather cumbersome and not very easy to use. They were a bit like Internet forums, only without moderation and without large toolsets.'.* MC recalls that '*Facebook used to be smaller than it is now*' and that '*Facebook groups used to be much less popular. If people discussed things with each other, it was mostly on forums.',* but also that Facebook became the main platform of interaction for my interlocutors: '(Facebook) *has factually eaten up online forums. It has channelled a huge amount of communication between people'.* In his view, it was also Facebook that was ultimately responsible for simplifying interactions between libertarians. However, MC points out that the original functionality of this platform did not facilitate interaction by any means: *'Facebook groups used to be much less popular. If people discussed things with each other, it was mostly on forums. You couldn't observe anyone in those* (media) *because Facebook didn't offer that option* (yet)*'.* MC recalls that back in the late-2000s, his Facebook account was receiving dozens of friend invitations a day, once his videos

were posted on *Wykop.pl*: '*There was an option to invite someone to become a friend. After each program in which I made a free-market statement, I got dozens of friend requests the very next day.*

<u>Section summary</u>

The advent of social networking platforms in Poland didn't initially impact the interviewees' integration into broader virtual communities due to the pre-existing familiarity and preference for forums and websites such as Libnet and e-UPR. The earlier social platforms, including MySpace and *Nasza-Klasa*, could not generate significant user integration. It was the rise of Facebook that initiated a significant transition and integration process, catalysing new methods of online discourse that diversified the scope of topics discussed. Facebook's transition from being primarily a platform like *Nasza-Klasa* (oriented on exchanging school experiences) to an interactive platform devoid of limitations on user interests, was a fundamental shift, leading to its dominance over other forums and platforms. Interviewees remarked that over time, Facebook's broad user base and functionalities facilitated discussions, allowed for quick interaction, and reduced the barrier of seeking a space to exchange opinions, marking a substantial change in the digital landscape. Facebook's development of its Group features – an amalgamation of private and public forums – was singled out as the most significant factor in the platform's rise as the principal communication space for the interviewees. Groups simplified communication and removed barriers to access, fostering a space for friends and followers without requiring specialist knowledge of running Internet forums and websites. The advent of social media platforms fundamentally transformed communication, rendering older forms – such as forums and chats – obsolete. It aligns with the observations of McFarland & Ployhart (2015) on social media platforms aggregating all types of digital interactions. The ability to remain constantly connected through mobile devices, significantly lowered the communication barrier between community members, leading to Facebook's dominance over online forums (Figure 31).

## The Network Effect

My interviewees mention something they call the *network effect*. In short, this is the idea that consumers of a certain product or service get a better quality of that product or service as the utility and volume of users increase. In this case, as the quality of social media platforms increased, other media began to lose users. Thus, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter became the most popular communication spaces on the Internet, with both websites and forums becoming enclaves of popularity for groups that strongly identified with these platforms. My interviewees acknowledge that they have effectively moved most of their activities to the Facebook world and that this comes with various problems and limitations.

AR stresses that Facebook was primarily changing the way that users interacted with the content: '*The revolution that social media or Web 2.0 brought us* (was) *that everyone could not only be a recipient of the content but also its creator'*. MS says that Facebook '*was the biggest tool that facilitated the development of such communities and interacting with different people'. And*, as JBW points out, Facebook became a platform that, above all, constantly grew and provided more and more functionality that users themselves were (unknowingly) looking for. '*This is where the so-called network effects came into play more and more. At a certain point, there was a consolidation in terms of communication and online platforms. There were fewer and fewer of them. And they began to attract more and more users'* he says. He is also explaining his understanding of the term: 'We *know how the principle of network effects works. A given good or service is the more useful it is, the more valuable it is, the better it fulfils its functions, and the more users use it*. In his view, *'Facebook did indeed dominate this space.'.*

MB also talks about how in his view, Facebook changed the way the work in the NGO sector was organised. He says that, by enabling more than just communication or interaction between community members in general, Facebook also provided the opportunity to reach external audiences through both advertising and reach-building *within* the same platform. He points out that, in combination with other tools offered by the big players in the online market – including Dropbox (giving the ability to transfer large files), office365 and Google Docs (for working in the Cloud),

and Messenger (giving the ability to communicate *ad hoc*) – it enabled non-governmental organisations to run more efficiently without a need for large budgets. ML, in turn, describes how, in his opinion, the development of the idea of crowdfunding has changed the rules of the game for the sector. Thanks to the emergence of platforms whose idea was to raise money for an idea or an organisation, it became possible to reach the audience more effectively and, at the same time, to strengthen ties with the audience. ML mentions several portals (such as *PolakPotrafi* and *Zrzutka.pl*), which, in his opinion, effectively cut these types of organisations off from the need to participate in public funding. '*You could say that it revolutionised the whole thing. Until the Internet, the third sector organisations were tied down by the straitjacket of public money.*' he says and adds that before '*everything had to be registered and accounted for and that was quite troublesome*' because, as he points out, this required, among other things, relatively high budgeting on staff and admin duties: '*If you didn't have a large staff, a lawyer and a good accountant, small organisations with modest budgets – like ours – had nothing to count on. T*he cost of running it could exceed the possible profits.'*. The Internet has therefore provided tools that have reduced barriers to efficiently running such organisations. And, with the development of these tools, the country's legislature has also changed, to allow organisations to raise money through this route, '*so that, in principle, every person – not even an organisation, but every person – can easily run such campaign without getting involved in some complicated formal procedures*' adds ML, and continues to call this change '*the biggest, positive breakthrough*'. MG adds that collaboration on such projects has become easier with the development of video communication and the higher quality of the videos. This, however, wouldn't be possible if not for the Internet that became '*faster and* (allow to) *work more efficiently*'.

Facebook's functionality as a platform shifted on many levels, the most important of which was the provision of the communication space itself. Facebook enabled users of this virtual libertarian community to communicate more quickly and clearly. However, my interlocutors point out that this has changed over time. AC says that Facebook has become a platform for older users and that the youngest

users are no longer interested in using it. He also notes that users' attitudes towards communication on this platform have changed. He says, 'Now *that it is big, I have the impression that it has revealed all its dark sides. People can be unpleasant, aggressive, and rude.* He says that he and people his age started using Facebook when it was still a relatively small platform, which makes him cope with it *'more pleasantly'*, as he puts it; whilst the younger audiences are often getting offended by the content that appears there. In his view, younger users of this platform do not have the perspective that older users had. Perhaps the past on the Internet forums and Facebook, that was still allowing anonymous communication, gave these older users a sense of greater freedom but also impunity, which in turn developed a kind of tougher skin, i.e., resistance to various kinds of jokes, often beyond the limits of good taste. Younger audiences *'don't have this perspective'* he says and adds that *'they live it a lot more'*. Some interviewees recall these shifts in the perception of humour as unproductive, and sometimes even harmful, from their point of view. The result of such changes has been much harsher censorship of content on Facebook. TM recounts, for example, how Facebook deemed his profile picture to be promoting Nazi content, even though it was cut from the Star Trek series which in its essence criticised this ideology. I will quote the whole story because it reflects the thinking of other interviewees as well, who raised the absurdities of the content censorship policy on this platform: *'You know the first Star Trek series* (…) *from the 60s or 70s. There was one episode where the crew of the USS Enterprise landed on some planet where an Earth historian, or a historical book from Earth, once landed* (…) *this society decided that they would organise their society based on National-Socialism in the style of the Germans from the 1930s. The main difference was that they wouldn't start any conflict – because if you don't have the war, you don't have the concentration camps, the mass murder of the Jews, and so on. You would only have the black uniforms and flag-waving; and a punitive, obedient society that runs like clockwork. Historically, it's completely absurd, but it's a science-fiction series* (…) *that being said, there was one scene in this episode where Mr Spock was dressed as an SS-man. They were doing a secret mission or something, so they had to blend in. And there was Mr Spock with his black fringe and his Vulcan ears sticking up, standing there in an SS-man's uniform with a gun in his hand. I*

*loved that scene, and I loved the contrast between Mr Spock – who is the epitome of rational altruism and pacifism – contrasted with that black uniform and the SS-flappers. I took this frame and put it as my profile picture, and it hung there for about 5 years. Nobody cared about it. Some people said that it was a cool photo and they liked it. And after 5 years I suddenly got banned for promoting Nazism* (…) *Explain it to Gene Roddenberry, that's the guy who came up with it'.* He closes the story by saying that it was just an *'awesome contrast between two completely opposite world views expressed in one frame.'.* TM points out that the content censorship policy does not consider anything beyond a predefined catalogue of rules to be acceptable, which ends up in problematic decisions. And, as this interviewee and several others underline, thanks to such policies, many things based on the Internet era of the 2000s – such as its specific, absurd, almost Monty Python-like humour – have become restricted in the new reality, even if it was used in a closed group with no access for the public. AC sums up that for his online generation, there was a clear demarcation between online and offline activities. Meanwhile, the younger *'identify themselves deeply with the online world, much more intensely than we do',* and that applies both to the good and the bad that happens online. In his view, younger people do not have this perspective, and they very often operate on both levels not so much in parallel, but all at once.

Section summary

The phenomenon of the network effect was a recurring theme in the interviews. This term refers to the increased value and utility of a product or service as the number of its users grows. This effect was observed in the rise of social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which became dominant communication spaces on the Internet, leading to a decline in the use of other media platforms. The interviewees acknowledged that they have largely migrated their activities to Facebook, despite recognising its limitations. They noted that Facebook has revolutionised user interaction with content, shifting from a recipient model to a creator model. Facebook was also identified as a significant tool in facilitating community development and interaction. Facebook's constant growth and expanding functionality were key factors in its success. The interviewees also

discussed how Facebook – along with online tools like Dropbox, Office 365, Google Docs, and Messenger – has transformed the operation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and enabled them to run more efficiently. The interviewees also highlighted the impact of crowdfunding platforms, which have changed the funding landscape for NGOs, reducing their reliance on public funding and lowering barriers to efficient operation. However, the interviewees also pointed out some negative aspects of Facebook's dominance (Figure 32). They have noted that, over time, Facebook has become a platform for older users, with younger users losing interest in it. This comes with a changing attitude towards communication on the platform, with increasing instances of unpleasant, aggressive, and rude behaviours. According to my interviewees, younger users lack the perspective of older users, who had experienced the Internet's earlier, more anonymous era, and thus have developed a thicker skin against offensive content. The interviewees also criticised Facebook's content censorship policy, citing instances where it was applied inappropriately or excessively. One of the interviewees shared an anecdote about a Star Trek image being misinterpreted as promoting Nazism, highlighting the lack of nuance in Facebook's content moderation. They lamented the loss of the Internet's earlier era of absurdity – in the spirit of the Monty Python sketches – due to such policies. These observations coincide with those presented by Tuters and Hagen (2020), in which 'meme culture', as they call it, plays a significant role in shaping the beliefs of members of far-right communities. The difference in the Polish libertarian community may lie in the approach to this culture. As this interviewee mentions, his intention was not political but could become so over time through the platform's response. In addition, he points out, that humour was not used to promote *political* views. In his view, it was consistent with the way Polish internet users interacted with each other in the 2000s.

## Risks

My interviewees emphasised that it was primarily ease of use and availability of a wide variety of content that encouraged them to use the platform. Facebook offered the opportunity to break through the reach barrier that was the main problem of Web 2.0. Previously, to reach the audience of their blog or website,

creators had to invest time and often money in promotion and traffic-outreach activities. Facebook bridged this barrier by creating a mechanism for accumulating friends to whom exposure to users' content was directed. In such a way, Facebook was becoming a space in which the stories of all my interviewees were tied together. The emerging discussion groups within this platform have generated a broad community, which my interviewees have been a part of. A community that differed from forums and mailings in that it also operated in a kind of communication mainstream. This observation is confirmed by my interlocutors. BS points out that libertarianism has moved into the mainstream from a sort of '*basement positions*'[104] – the initial state of libertarianism in Poland, as its proponents often humorously call it. GB points out that Facebook ultimately allowed Polish libertarians to reach out beyond the Polish Internet with the content they made. It also had an integrating impact. MT says that '*Social media had the biggest impact on my integration into the freedom community*'. TP as well stresses that it was essential that anyone could have an account there and anyone could be a potential contributor to the content.

The relative lack of anonymity[105] encouraged direct contacts, which later influenced the formation of social bonds between community members, as underlined by WP. Easier access to the content empowered this platform's ability to shape users' views. For instance, UD emphasised that Facebook had a strong influence on his views, including the way he accessed information and read group discussions. JSP in turn, underlines that the platform, for some of the community members, is '*an end in itself*' and '*the whole libertarian life*'. After all, MT says that, in his view, '*we're all addicted to the Internet and to social media that is our main medium of communication*'. For interviewees who grew up in an era of lower synergy between the virtual and real worlds, this seems to be quite crucial. AR, in later passages, also talks about the need to separate these two planes. He also adds

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[104] The interlocutor used the expression *piwniczny libertarianizm*. It is a polonisation of the English expression *libertarian basement dweller,* meaning someone who is socially awkward and unable or unwilling to live in *real* life.
[105] It should be remembered that in earlier years, on discussion forums, users communicated by using anonymised nicknames. Facebook did not only allow interaction under one's own name, but encouraged, and later forced it as a rule.

that this can be exclusionary for non-technologically savvy people: *'if there's somebody who is not able to put to put their business card on the Internet or leave an e-mail, or be available through some chat, Signal – anything like that – then these people can fall out of the loop'*.  I will expand on this theme later in the chapter. TM also touched on the fact that Facebook has become the dominant platform, in his view to the point that potentially shutting down this platform could prevent many libertarians from communicating: 'There *are jokes that if Facebook was switched off, the Polish libertarian community would collapse after a week because they simply wouldn't have any platform to communicate on.'*. In his view, the geographical disperse of the community is real, with strong circles of libertarians in Krakow or Wroclaw, but not so many in some other cities. This makes the case that the absence of the Internet - and not just Facebook - could affect the potential for this community to function on such a scale.

Referring further to the words of JSP, even those of my interviewees who were already active in the community for years, have been confronted with a relative conundrum. While initially, they did not have to join Facebook to continue their online activities, at some stage, the lion's share of libertarian activity was focused on this platform. Some, like MM, decided they preferred their communication platform (*Libnet*), while others, like JS, thought it was an interesting way forward. The latter emphasises the multiplicity of entry points into the community for its younger members: *'The younger ones have already entered the well-oiled Internet. They have already come across Facebook as a natural thing.'*. He adds: '*Now, there's even a certain culture around social media. It's a bit broader than libertarianism, but libertarians play quite a big role in it.'*. He believes that around Facebook groups a certain online microculture has emerged, the characteristics of which can be seen in everyday communication. In doing so, he picks up on the themes I raised in the previous chapter. Facebook became a space in which such phenomena could take place through the proper integration of communities. Some interlocutors even point out that Facebook has functionally become an integrator of various smaller groups with an interest in peri-libertarian themes: 'It *certainly helped to integrate the community, which was previously scattered across various discussion forums,*

*discussion groups, and so on. And it managed to increase its virtual audience*' says JBW.

The network effects, that this interviewee observed and mentioned in the previous passage, also had a negative side. He notices that as the audience increased, the overall quality of their communication declined, which, he believes, was also because they had less knowledge of philosophy. AR, in turn, argues that a consequence of the popularisation of YouTube and Facebook was its concomitant tabloidisation: '*It killed a little bit of the essence of content in this environment'.* He also refers to the non-archiving (or rather non-indexing on Google) of some of the content created within this platform. First, he notices that '*If you search 'libertarianism' on Google in Polish, you'll be provided with things from Libnet or pre-Facebook times, from let's say before 2012/13'*. He is referring to sites and blogs that existed before the revolution that was Facebook. After that, he says, '*Everything was getting created on Facebook'*. This led to a situation in which a vast amount of libertarian content is not searchable on search engines because it wasn't indexed by Google and other similar tools. This is because Facebook and Google are effectively competing over users' time on the Internet, making the indexing of Facebook content within Google's search engine very limited. But, AR believes, it's also the result of a certain content consumption mechanism on that platform. He says that if someone publishes something on Facebook, '*it isn't something that you come back to after two weeks'*. Such content has its best-before date, is '*shared with others for two weeks'*, and then, just 'falls *on the Facebook wall'. A*t the same time, in his opinion, these discussions are of high quality and should be documented: '*People are getting wasted on Facebook, contributing to pointless discussions* (...) *walls of texts are created on Facebook groups, good ones. Nice arguments,* (clearly) *laid out. That should be on some websites today and get proper editing.* (It should) *be Googleable'.* According to AR, a major challenge for this community lies in the limited intellectual output confined to selected sites and academic publications. In his view, there is a need for more commonplace discussions that can provide a better understanding of the interviewees' perspectives to the wider public.

In turn, LS focuses on the emotional aspect of content attachment on Facebook. He emphasises that the *'medium is the message'*, using McLuhan's maxim (1994). He believes it is important to pay attention to this aspect of social media. In his opinion, users of Facebook discussions became increasingly attached to the form of presentation of the content and, above all, gave it more and more emotional value. This is, in his view, problematic, not least because of how it affects the discussion itself. PJ also stresses that the rise of social media has changed the way information is delivered and information about various issues is acquired. In his view, audiences were not getting content created according to the top-down agendas and narratives of media creators and owners any longer. The media owners, in his view, *'had their agendas, their narratives that were pushed forward'. And* this has become problematic from the viewer's point of view, believes PJ. He adds that *'any news is given by using a certain key. Alternative views on these issues would not have been able to be pushed on a larger scale.* With the advent of the social media era, therefore, the audience's relationship with content has changed. AC even says that over time *'the rest of the world began to die out'*, in the sense that hardly anyone communicated and sought content on different platforms. However, MM also stresses that the advent of Facebook has changed the quality of the content discussed, not least because a lot of *'random'* people, as he calls them, have appeared in those groups. In his view, they declare that they are interested in libertarianism, but they are not. According to him, the proportion of such people on Facebook is far higher than on the forum or Discord, and this, in turn, distorts the quality of the discussion.

My interviewees also talk about the different dimensions of using social media. WP alludes to what PJ was referring to and says that she gets curated access to the media news whilst reading through the discussions on Facebook groups. By using these groups, she can keep abreast of various economic, social, and political issues that she would previously have had to explore on her own. Reading other members of the community discussing various aspects of these issues, right in the comments under the posted news, allows her to access information more quickly and swiftly. of course, this entails what is commonly referred to as an information bubble. WP,

as well as several other interviewees, is self-aware that she functions within such a bubble. often interviewees admit that this is even intentional. This may be due to what Bail et al. (2018) describe as a situation where exposure to stream information from outside the bubble may influence increased polarisation. Among highly intellectualised libertarians, deciding to stay within the bubbles may have to do with an unwillingness to have to deal with issues outside of these accepted creeds. PJ believes that what brings people to operate within these information bubbles almost intentionally, is the fact that they are responsible for selecting the channels that provide them with information. '*They select these groups according to their various ideological prejudices*' he says. And, he adds, this resonates with the characteristics of various Facebook groups. According to him, these groups have crystallised an audience that stands differently on a scale of beliefs, if only in morality. And so, in his view, *Nieprzyjaciele Niewoli* is more conservative, *Niskie Składki* is '*more progressive*', whilst *JBWA* is '*so progressive that* (…) *they seem to be moving away from libertarianism*'.

Other interviewees, when describing their experiences with these groups, also used similar arguments, even if only in the form of understatements – BG and TM, for example, talked about changes in the user structure of the first libertarian Facebook groups that they were part of. They have changed with the increased volume of users, moving more and more in a liberal and left-wing direction, at least in their view. PJ also argues that the crystallising profiles of these groups meant that, as they became more popular (he calls this process 'massification'), their differences deepened, less perceptible at first. In PJ's words, this made some of these groups become a bubble in themselves. He sums up this thread by saying: '*This seems to be a bit like the effect of the old media in the past and the effect of the ordinary media nowadays, that is attracting and retaining audiences who adhere to a particular political narrative*'. On the other hand, AC says he finds the radicalisation of content on Facebook hard to believe: '*There is this idea that Facebook makes us more radicalised and that we create bubbles. I'm not sure if I fully subscribe to it. I have a feeling that these bubbles existed before. It might be more of a Dunning-Kruger effect, and the fact that people have the feeling that they*

*have read something, so they have become experts in something.* He adds that '*It's just that we don't associate it with the same thing. But I have the feeling that this is the same as it used to be, such as the once-existing belief that Jews turn children into matzah. This is kind of a rumour that spreads so widely, that in every Polish village, people were afraid of a terrible Jew, and the fact that they were converting children into matzah. For me, it is just another reincarnation of the same phenomenon.'.* He also stresses that Facebook brought wider access to all information, and it's up to the users what they do with that knowledge.

AC sums up the impact of technology on his life as a libertarian by saying that '*online is a net positive tool, even if there is a lot of crap and ugly and sad stuff on it'*. He believes that even considering the degeneration that results from functioning in a virtual world, the sum of the positive impacts of digitalisation outweighs the negative overtones of this impact. He also points out that in the early days, the Internet operated on a different basis than it does today. At that time, the content was delivered to the user by the creators, as in the old media, like TV or newspapers, and the audience had little to no influence over the content. He describes this moment in history as '*sort of one-sided'*. He continues by saying that the content was created professionally or semi-professionally. The discussion about it often took place in the real world, or on '*narrow, niche forums'* that required '*some depth and belonging'*, otherwise it was out of the sight of an average user. '*Facebook opened it up'* he says and adds '*for better or worse'*. He noticed that the entry barriers were dropped and allowed meeting people from all over Poland. '*The truism of the global village and the world that has shrunk is true'* he says. It allowed wider access, wider audience reach, and closer relations with audiences – including mentorship. But – he points out – with this process also came bad things, including opening to people who do stupid or even bad things on the Internet. As he notes empathy on the Internet is treated by some as an insult or as something bad. He describes the moment he realised that people think it that way as '*shocking'*. On a personal level, he notes that the Internet has also affected him negatively in terms of his personality, including that he has become more prone to frustration. He says that previously he was frustrated that people did not listen when provided with

evidence for certain issues and that they did not listen to logical arguments in discussions. Over time, the frustration shifted to the fact that many people on the Internet do not care about others, including their opinions. These changes, including language that uses phrasing disrespectful to other interlocutors, have affected him strongly, but he is trying to cope with them. Today, his frustration is that people are openly unwilling to listen to the arguments and rationale of the other side *'and it's very stupid because it's obvious that they don't'* he says.

<u>Section summary</u>

The interviewees highlighted the ease of use and diverse content availability as key factors that attracted them to Facebook. They noted that Facebook overcame the reach barrier of Web 2.0, allowing creators to easily expose their content to a wider audience. This led to the formation of broad communities within the platform, which the interviewees became part of. The interviewees observed that Facebook allowed libertarianism to move from niche 'basement positions' to mainstream discourse. They noted that Facebook enabled Polish libertarians to reach beyond the Polish Internet with their content and that the platform fostered integration within the community. The lack of anonymity on Facebook was seen as encouraging direct contact and fostering social bonds within the community. The interviewees also noted that Facebook's dominance as a platform had both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, it provided a platform for the integration of various smaller groups interested in libertarian themes. However, they also noted that as the audience increased, the quality of communication declined due to the influx of users with less knowledge of philosophy. The interviewees also discussed the emotional aspect of content attachment on Facebook. They noted that users became increasingly attached to the form of content presentation and gave it more emotional value. This was seen as problematic as it affected the quality of the discussion. The interviewees also noted that a large amount of libertarian content on Facebook was not searchable on search engines due to limited indexing by Google. The interviewees acknowledged that they functioned within information bubbles on Facebook. They noted that this was often intentional, as exposure to information from outside the bubble could lead to increased polarisation. They also

observed that the profiles of various Facebook groups had crystallised over time, leading to deeper differences as they became more popular (Figure 33). These observations largely enrich discussions about how echo chambers work. It is clear to my interlocutors that they exist, and sometimes they even consciously choose them for their needs. This to some extent challenges Bail et al. (2018) research about how online individualisation can amplify echo chambers. The question is whether it is still possible to talk about such a phenomenon if someone *consciously* chooses their *own* chamber and remains in it. Alongside this, it demonstrates that belonging to a certain echo chamber does not have to be emotional, as Törnberg (2022) suggests, but might follow from a logical approach to the information access question.

The summary of the impact and influence of social media (especially Facebook) on my interviewees' experience as virtual libertarians is presented in graphical form in Figure 34.

## Summary

The advent of social media platforms like Facebook significantly impacted the digital landscape for my interviewees. Initially, familiar platforms – like *Libnet* and *e-UPR* website and forum – dominated it, but the unique features and broad user base of Facebook catalysed a shift towards a new platform. Facebook's transformation into a multi-threaded space for communication and social networking, drove its dominance, making forums and platforms largely obsolete. Its *Groups* feature, particularly, emerged as a principal communication space, enabling easy access, and simplifying interaction for diverse audiences. This shift to Facebook was further enabled by the network effect, where the platform's value increased with growing users. Facebook revolutionised user-content interaction, shifting from a recipient to a creator model and thereby facilitating community development. Its constant growth and expanding functionality, along with other online tools like Dropbox and Google Docs, transformed the operation of third-sector organisations that my interviewees are associated with. Despite these advantages, Facebook's dominance presented challenges. Over time, it became a platform for older users, losing its appeal to the younger generation. It also

encouraged unpleasant behaviours and faced criticism for its content censorship policy. The interviewees acknowledged that they are functioning within information bubbles on the platform, often intentionally, to avoid exposure to increased polarisation from outside. Over time, the profiles of various Facebook groups have crystallised, leading to deeper differences between them.

The interviewees highlighted the appeal of Facebook's ease of use and diverse content availability. Facebook allowed the libertarian discourse to move from niche positions to the mainstream, reaching beyond the Polish-speaking Internet. While it encouraged social bonds through its non-anonymous nature, the platform also saw a decline in communication quality due to an increase in users unfamiliar with in-detail libertarian philosophy. Furthermore, users became emotionally attached to content, negatively impacting discussions. Despite these setbacks, Facebook's dominance fostered integration among smaller groups interested in libertarianism. Despite these challenges, the advent of Facebook and similar platforms fundamentally transformed the landscape for virtual libertarians, reshaping the way they communicate and engage with each other and the broader digital world.

## Logging off

### Virtual and Non-Virtual Space

Many of the individuals I interviewed have witnessed and actively embraced numerous technological transformations over the past few decades. They have not only been participants but also early adopters of these advancements. Over time, their attitudes towards the Internet and the new tools it offers have waned. Their interest has shifted not so much to functioning within a virtual community, but to transferring, at least part of, virtual contacts to the *real* world. AC, for instance, says that '*for a very long time I had the feeling that I was just on the edge of this world, meandering through offline and online*'. With time, these virtual connections gradually transitioned into real-life interactions, and eventually, the significance of virtuality diminished for him. AC maintained contact with those friends in real life more than online. '*I had a lot of friends whom I met first on the Internet that I only meet in person at this point*' he says. TP notes that most libertarian contact until

recently took place in the virtual world and that there was even an anecdote about libertarians being strong only on the Internet. However, he also points out that this is not entirely true and adds that '*I agree with the opinion that there is much more of a presence on the Internet than – colloquially speaking – in the real world. This is certainly because it is much easier to do things on the Internet and organise some activities online.*'.

SW believes this is because online contacts are important, but, for him and other interviewees, real life is more important. He brings the example of Big Tech companies that started censoring, restricting, and '*cancelling*' various users. He says: 'This *showed me that, apart from the Internet layer, the Internet community should also be an Internet movement, especially because of our radical character.*'. Bennett and Segerberg (ibid) suggest that contemporary social movements are more personalised and individualised, which would fit well with SW's words. In his vision, such a movement would have precise goals that members of this community dare to talk about, unlike many other Internet users in their own virtual spaces. Otherwise, believes SW, the libertarian community is threatened with such cancellation: 'We *are a potential object of a cancelling and banning. That is why we should have this parallel movement in real life. Networking, meetings, and so on*'. In his view, social interactions would have to go from the purely virtual to being handled also in the outside world. For SW, the balance between offline activism and online activity is vital to the future of the group. Importantly, he is not alone in believing in such a future for the grouping. According to some other interviewees, the best network is one that also works in the real world. AR puts it bluntly: 'In *my opinion, the best network is this kind of life* (IRL[106]) *network. A network of real people.*'. He hints that the day after the interview he goes with a colleague from one of the Warsaw NGOs to play ping-pong. They play with a dozen other libertarians from Warsaw. He says that most of them have stopped participating in and discussing things on Facebook groups and have largely moved their contact to these face-to-face meetings. These people '*don't know what's going on in the virtual libertarian community*' he says. And he adds: '*I am not sure if we're going*

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[106] IRL, in Real Life.

*underground or if we're finally coming out*.'. Indeed, the stories of these gatherings show that there is a thriving group of people operating offline who have grown out of the virtual community, and who have little in common with it on the day of the interviews. For instance, NG talks about how he and AR organised libertarian theatre meetings in Warsaw. They decided to stage one of Ayn Rand's works. According to him, this staging did not come to fruition due to it being a flash in the pan, but he stresses that the group initially responded enthusiastically, and a lot of people turned up for the first rehearsals. *'Real social network is where we are most active, and I think the most powerful. We also have the biggest influence. I can say that I see every libertarian in Warsaw once a month for a beer meet-up. '*, adds AR.

MC argues that to position oneself intellectually, one requires getting out of that bank and having an offline discussion as well. BS mentions that for him, one of the most important moments of self-development was meeting a man who, in multiple debates, convinced him of various ideas outside his socio-political spectrum. He met him on one of the Facebook groups, where the person went under a pseudonym – at the time, Facebook did not yet require confirmation of the authenticity of personal information. Engaging in conversations with this individual enabled my interviewee to differentiate between theoretical and practical ideas, ultimately shaping his adoption of an agorist path. Through being a member of the community, he understood which activities were crucial for him to be able to live as a functional agorist in the modern world. Because, as SS notes, '*the Internet is a tool for political change – or rather a tool for the anti-political change*'. In his view, it enables freedom to be brought '*closer to others'*. This sometimes results in projects like Bitcoin or even the agorist taking on virtual space. The latter was used by a variety of people whose intentions might not have been libertarian at all, like the users of the Silk Road platform: *'It turns out that most people who use it were not those who wanted to avoid excessive taxation or exchange parsley and carrots, but rather criminals'*.  Regardless, among my interviewees, some referred to agorist online spaces or Bitcoin as an opportunity to put the libertarian vision into practice.

Another point is what GB highlights, namely that being a virtual libertarian does not necessarily mean that every one of my interlocutors should describe themselves

solely as '*libertarians*'. On the contrary, many of them stressed that it is just one of the adjectives that define them. GB says that indeed, he is fascinated by libertarian ideas and that he probably spends more time on them than he should. But that doesn't mean that the whole of his life is centred around this theme. '*I have friends who are not libertarians, I like to meet with such friends. I have friends whom I don't talk to about libertarianism, and I'm very happy that I don't talk to them about libertarianism. Sometimes when I have been around libertarians for too long, and yet another discussion about monarchy versus democracy starts – the fifth day in a row – it just makes me tired*.' he says. And adds that: '*My jokes aren't just about libertarianism. My metaphors and analogies are not just libertarian-related. If I'm walking down the street and I see a bank, then I don't pull out the garlic and the cross because the fractional reserve is tucked away in that bank. Who knows, maybe that also suppresses my experience of being a fully-fledged libertarian?*'. This is a very important observation, which is shared by other interviewees. BG says that he comes from this community and likes to be in it, but that he runs his business without thinking of libertarians whilst making products out. They might be his customers, but it doesn't mean he is going to centre his business around them.

Section summary

Many interviewees reflect on their transition from virtual participation to real-world interactions within the libertarian community. They have noted the importance of moving their online connections into the real world, and some express a desire to balance online activism with offline activity. The preference for face-to-face interaction over digital communication is a common theme. Several interviewees even stress the importance of maintaining real-life connections over virtual ones. The assertion that 'the best network is one that also works in the real world' underscores this sentiment. This could be seen as a reflection of broader societal trends, where offline social interactions are seen as more meaningful and authentic. Anecdotes about offline gatherings and activities further highlight the shift towards real-world engagement. Instances include libertarian-theatre meetings, beer meet-ups, and face-to-face debates. These examples suggest that offline engagements were offered more meaningful and impactful for my

interviewees (Figure 35). This also fits in with the observation by Burgess and Green (2018), among others, that social and technological realms coexist and that interactions in either plane are reflected in both simultaneously.

Another recurring theme is the complex identities of the interviewees, who are not defined solely by their association with libertarianism. While they identify as libertarians, they emphasise that it is only one aspect of their lives. They appreciate diverse social interactions and strive for a balance between their libertarian interests and other life activities. This theme indicates that the transition from online to offline engagement may be part of a broader personal development process where their libertarian beliefs become integrated with their overall identity. Besides, some interviewees suggest that online tools and communities can be instrumental in activism and political change. However, the practical implementation of their beliefs often occurs in the offline world. This suggests that the Internet is seen as a tool for networking and spreading ideas, while real-world actions and interactions provide opportunities for these ideas to be enacted. Amongst my interviewees, there is also a concern about the limitations of the virtual world, particularly related to issues of censorship and restrictions by Big Tech companies. This may be the result of the long-standing influence of various powers on the formation of not only information and knowledge itself, but also access to it in Poland – the topic I covered more extensively in the first chapter (i.e., Judson, 2016; Davies, 2005). This further highlights the importance of maintaining a real-world presence and not relying solely on online platforms for community engagement and activism.

The summary of the interplay of the online and offline realms for my interviewees' participation in the community is presented in graphical form in Figure 36.

## Chapter conclusions

This chapter examines the role of technology in shaping the virtual libertarian community in Poland. It builds upon the previous sections by analysing the impact of Internet access on the formation and expansion of the community. The chapter explores the generational shifts in Internet access, highlighting how younger

individuals have had more natural experiences with the online realm as compared to older counterparts – who faced barriers during the early stages of Internet accessibility. The increased connectivity facilitated the development of a sense of community based on shared libertarian attitudes, challenging the notion that online activities do not translate to real-world civic engagement. They influenced higher participation in both communal activities and digital activism for my interviewees, echoing the notion that technological access is influencing communal participation as an extension of the physical realm (i.e., Prodnik, 2012). It also explores the influence of mobile access on community interactions, emphasising the convenience and spontaneity it brings to communication within the virtual community. The availability of information on the Internet and access to diverse knowledge sources are examined, noting how they have contributed to the intellectual exploration and understanding of libertarian philosophy within the community. The transition from traditional to online media platforms, with a particular focus on social media, is also traced. It discusses the dominance of Facebook – and its flagship community feature, Groups – as the primary communication space for the virtual libertarian community, shedding light on the network effect and the risks associated with Facebook's dominance, such as content simplification, ideological bubbles, and censorship. Finally, the chapter explores the intersection of online and offline interactions within the community. It highlights the importance of real-world engagement, as many interviewees express a desire to balance online activism with offline activities. The chapter also underscores the complex identities of the interviewees, underlining that their affiliation with libertarianism is just one aspect of their lives, and they value diverse social interactions beyond their virtual community. The chapter also contributes to the exploration of community studies and current digital politics debates by examining the transformative impact of technology on virtual communities. It enriches our understanding of how digital platforms shape community dynamics and political participation.

# CHAPTER 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

## Synthesis

Regarding the first research question, the interviewees' experiences highlight the transformative role of technology, particularly the Internet, in their lives. They describe the Internet as a medium through which they have been able to connect with like-minded individuals, build relationships, and expand their knowledge and understanding of libertarian philosophy. Access to the Internet, along with the proliferation of mobile technology, has made it easier for them to engage with the community and its content, providing virtually continuous access to both information and human interactions. The integration of hybrid media has created a state of 'super-connectedness' among community members. Interviewees noted that their online interactions often extend into their offline lives, reinforcing this interconnectedness. This has led to a sense of full integration within the community, breaking down geographical barriers and enabling participation in the global libertarian community. The theoretical model of fractal heterodox communities is particularly relevant here, as it encapsulates the decentralised and adaptive nature of these virtual interactions. The interviewees also emphasise the role of technology in facilitating their self-realisation and self-expression. They see technology as a means to strengthen interpersonal ties and engage in meaningful interactions with other community members. The Internet's evolution as a platform for content consumption and production has allowed them to popularise their ideas, share information, and reach wider audiences. They recognise the Internet's capacity to democratise access to information and empower individuals to become producers of content, shaping their identity as virtual libertarians, amongst other features.

In response to the second research question, the interviewees discuss the impact of technological advancement on the community. They highlight the integration fostered by the Internet, which has brought scattered micro-communities together into a cohesive and multi-platform cohort. The interviewees also expressed concerns about threats to Internet freedom, such as increased government control, emphasising the importance of maintaining the freedom of interactions in the

virtual realm. The interviewees also highlighted the role of digital platforms in fostering various forms of socio-political engagement, i.e., digital activism. This is consistent with the theoretical model's emphasis on the transformative impact of technology on social and political interactions. The Internet acts as a catalyst for mobilisation and advocacy for those individuals, providing tools for better organisation, easier communication, and widened spread of information and knowledge.

## Key discussions

The preceding sections reveal that technological change was an integral part of my interviewees' real-life experiences, adding a multifaceted dimension to their offline lives. From their perspective, technology served as the backdrop for conversations that revolved primarily around the virtual libertarian community. By adopting a funnel-like methodology that guided the direction of our interviews, starting from the broader context of their initial contact with the community and technology, I gradually focused more on the specific threads of their individual technological experiences.

### Access to the Internet and information

The interviewees reflected on the various technological changes that made it possible to build ties with fellow users. Those with the longest tenure in the community emphasised the ability to connect to the internet as the first significant change, enabling them to delve into the virtual experience. The emergence, popularisation, and normalisation of the Internet in the Polish market was a broad accessibility dimension, but these were the key stages that allowed users to internalise the Internet as a norm in their everyday interactions. The internet, according to my interlocutors, primarily became a platform of connection for the virtual libertarian community. The expansion of mobile technology compounded this process, making it even easier for my interviewees to access both the community and its content. This led to virtually continuous access, as one user noted, allowing for broader access to information and the integration of communities previously scattered around various platforms. My interlocutors

emphasised that the internet was changing geographical limitations, enabling full community integration. This applied not only to the community in the local sense but also to its international embeddedness in the global libertarian community. Thus, my interlocutors extend the findings of Barbrook and Cameron (1996) and Turkle (2011), who inferred that technology would enable individuals to better express themselves and assert their individual rights online. Indeed, my interviewees confirm that technology - and the internet in particular - has played a key role in enabling and then maintaining their sense of belonging to this community. Through this belonging, they were able to make several significant, or even crucial, interactions and transactions. With the proliferation of mobile technology, community members found themselves with virtually continuous access to the community and its content. This shift, coupled with the integration of various communities within one wider libertarian community, broadened access to information and made virtual interactions an everyday norm.

## Impact of the Hybrid Media System

They also accentuated the media aspect of the Internet. The Internet was a medium within which various platforms for content consumption and delivery were used, which impacted a change in the media role itself – in which the user became a producer of content and had the potential to reach other audiences *en masse*. The Internet's role as a platform for content consumption and delivery is a well-established concept in media studies. The words of older interviewees, who recall pre-internet or early internet times in the community, confirm Bimber's (2012) assumption that the diffusion of political information always took place through some medium. In this case, it was printed newspapers, only to move and improve this diffusion to the digital world with the advent of the digital era. Castells (2009) argues that the Internet has fundamentally transformed the media landscape by enabling users to become producers of content, a phenomenon he refers to as 'mass self-communication. This concept resonates with the interviewees' experiences of using the Internet to popularise content and reach wider audiences. For those of them who spoke about it, this was one of the key aspects of operating in and experiencing, the virtual libertarian community. Thus, these users emphasise

that they have become a natural part of the development of the Internet as such, fitting into the various definitions of the periodisation of Web 2.0. Especially, O'Reilly's (2005) description of Web 2.0 – as a new phase in the Internet's development, characterised by user-generated content, participatory culture, and social networking – is well-aligned with the words of my interlocutors. On many occasions, my interviewees emphasised that this enabled them to realise themselves as virtual libertarians, as businessmen, as popularisers of ideas, or as commentators on reality.

## Political attitudes and engagement

This study also contributes to the ongoing discourse on the impact of digital technologies on political engagement by shedding light on the nuanced experiences of individuals within politically motivated virtual communities. While existing literature has explored the role of digital technologies in facilitating political action (i.e., Gentzkov and Shapiro, 2011), and the potential pitfalls of information bubbles and misinformation (i.e., Guess, 2019), this study focuses on personal experiences and motivations of individuals within these communities. The findings underscore the importance of considering both online and offline factors in understanding political engagement in virtual communities. The interviewees' experiences highlight how access to the internet and mobile on one hand, and the information (including the influence of information bubbles) on the other, interplay with their offline experiences (i.e., familial and schooling) in shaping their political beliefs and attitudes. Their process of belonging to this community drew heavily on experiences from their family homes and schools. In this context, the results prove the conclusions of Jennings and Niemi (1968), Menezes et al. (2003), and Willoughby et al. (2021), who all claim that family and school experiences significantly shape political attitudes and beliefs. This is important, given the changes that accompany virtualisation processes. It also coincides with the volume observations of Janmaat and Hoskins (2022), who confirmed the high influence of families on the formation of political beliefs and intentions among adolescents. Thus, this research enriches the existing literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of political engagement in the digital age on a

personal level, emphasising the need to consider the complex interplay of digital technology with personal and socio-economic factors. Moreover, the community studied here can be characterised as heterodox (i.e., Lee, 2009). Such a heterodoxy refers to the presence of diverse and sometimes conflicting viewpoints *within* the community and *outside* of it (intra-communal and inter-communal), reflecting a broader spectrum of ideologies and beliefs than typically seen in more homogeneous groups. This heterogeneity is an important characteristic that deserves further attention in the literature, as it highlights the diverse approaches and motivations of individuals within politically engaged virtual communities, often simplified to the binary models (left-right communities) (i.e., Forchtner, et al., 2018).

## The duality of technological impact

My interviewees also focused on the negative aspects of the impact of technology on themselves, but also on other people in the community. They pointed out that the current model of the Internet is changing the way people interact virtually, making the message shallower and thus creating information bubbles and a kind of tabloidisation of content across the community. My interlocutors indicated from the outset ways of dealing with information bubbles, with some even explicitly mentioning that they belong to them consciously, partly due to limited exposure to other political ideas conflicting with their views. In this way, this work extends Pariser's (2011) considerations by showing that information bubbles can be a conscious choice, not necessarily just subconscious or unconscious. This, therefore, extends the research done by Cardenal et al. (2019), who found that search engines and social media are largely not providing net-neutral content. The evolution of community dynamics in response to technological changes is an ongoing process. While earlier iterations of the internet fostered open dialogue and decentralised information sharing, current social media algorithms and platform designs can sometimes reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, aligning with the problems observed by Sirbu et al. (2019). Community members are thus continually adapting to such novelties.

My interviewees explicitly acknowledge that they consume most of their daily information on their own, sometimes ending up in information bubbles of their own accord, or consciously exposing themselves to the outer bubbles. This is aligned with most of the current research on the 'opt-in'- a type of bubble (i.e., Arguedas et al., 2012). My interviewees also commented on the changing standards of communication, which were rather subject to the implementation of new platform solutions, but which are reflected in the community itself. This led several of them to speak directly about the fact that they had started to increasingly separate the virtual aspect from so-called real life. In their view, the community cannot function only in the virtual space but must have an impact on the real world – whether in the form of social interaction or the form of effective protest. They emphasised the necessity for the virtual community to exert an impact on the real world.

## Fractal Heterodox Communities and Networked Individualism

The interviewees' emphasis on the internet's role in democratising access and facilitating community integration resonates with Castells' (2004) theory of 'network society'. Castells argues that the internet has transformed society into a network in which power and information flow through interconnected nodes. The virtual libertarian community, as described by the interviewees, can be seen as such a node. Throughout our discussions, my interviewees highlighted what they perceived as the most significant threads of their technological experience, however, as our conversations unfolded, it became evident that their lived experiences were often more profound and far-reaching than they initially assumed. In a sense, they embarked on this journey with me, gaining awareness of the broader impact that technology had not only on their membership within the libertarian community but also on other dimensions of their lives. In such a way, the advent of the internet was viewed by many as a game-changer. They saw the internet as a medium that significantly democratised access to information, removed geographical limitations, and ultimately facilitated full community integration at both local and global. The transformative role of technology in shaping social interactions, communication patterns, and community dynamics, aligns also with the concept of 'networked individualism' proposed by Rainie and

Wellman (2012). This theory suggests that technology, particularly the internet, has shifted social structures from densely knit, bounded groups to networked individuals. In this sense, my interviewees were acting closely to the concept of networked individuals, in which the intentionality of performing certain social actions is getting more variable due to ubiquitous possibilities brought by the digital connection. The interviewees' experiences of enhanced connectivity and communication within the virtual libertarian community reflect this shift. The importance they placed on such understood technological development was evident in their narratives, where they often characterised the Internet as a vital space for connection, communication, and collaboration with their peers. It also provides a theoretical framework for understanding the personal and socio-economic factors that my interviewees identified as influential in their participation in the libertarian virtual community. The model proposed in the previous chapters called fractal heterodox community, aligns with the notion of *networked individualism*. Fractal communities, like the virtual libertarians I talked with, embody a decentralised structure where individual *nodes* operate autonomously yet are interconnected through shared goals and values. The internet fosters such an individual agency within a broader network, enabling individuals to engage dynamically in social, political, and information and knowledge exchanges. This mirrors the concept of networked individualism. The fractal nature of these communities, with their fluid and adaptable organisation, reflects the shift from traditional, bounded groups to more flexible, individual-centric networks – often created around specific themes – facilitating *personalised engagement models*. Individualisation is manifested here not only in the organisational form but also in the orientation or ideological plane of such a group. Heterodoxy, emerging from the difference between mainstream virtual communities and the views adhered to by my interviewees, shows that such a mis-categorisation can tend towards simplification, for example by classifying and co-identifying the actions of my interviewees' communities as extreme right-wing, which most often is at odds with the accepted political and motivational credo of these individuals.

The interviewees themselves claimed that libertarian activity was often confined to the Internet, but in parallel they cited many stories that would contradict such assertions. However, as the interviewees themselves emphasised, their activities as virtual libertarians, are primarily social (building and maintaining interactions with other libertarians) and informational (promoting the libertarian idea on various levels). Sometimes many of them seek other ways to pursue their vision of this philosophy. They then line up with other groups at street protests, participate in virtual interactions that are not entirely legal, or seek to influence national policy through citizen initiatives. This study can be seen as an extension of the Bennett, et al. (2012; 2013) work on the role of digital technologies in enabling the rise of online social movements and disrupting conventional forms of political involvement. The current study further explores the individual experiences within these movements, providing a more nuanced understanding of political engagement in the digital age. This dimension of the community's actions, points to my words quoted in the previous chapters, about it being able to switch the mode towards a more goal-oriented group.

In such a view, belonging to different social groups is much more individualised in the digital age. In this case, part of the community of virtual libertarians can dress in the robes of a social movement as part of the self-fulfilment of individuals striving for libertarian change, but due to the highly individualised approach of these individuals, it is not a social movement in the conventional sense of this term. Saunders (2007) pointed out that social movements primarily want to achieve a specific political goal. In the age of the internet, many groups fit into these definitions. Very often, however, they are not social movements as such. My interlocutors indicate that the need to cope with the increasing control of the internet has led them to take to the street in protests and even to organise these protests within the group. However, this does not necessarily make them a social movement in the full sense of the word; rather, it is a short-term need or group activity.

## Fractal communities and super-connectedness

The community exhibits characteristics of a fractal community (i.e., Karatzogianni and Matthews, 2023). It was enabled by technological advancements. The fractal nature of the community is evident in its decentralised and self-similar structure at various scales. Individual members and subgroups operate autonomously (i.e., Wroclaw academic circle and LibNet) while reflecting the overall ethos (libertarian credo and/or Austrian school of economics) of the larger community. This structure is reinforced by the state of super-connectedness (Chayko, 2020), where members are in constant contact through various digital platforms, especially social media.

The hybrid media system plays a crucial role in shaping the above. It blends traditional and digital media and provides integrated platforms for community members to engage in communal activities (i.e., interact and integrate). This media ecosystem allows for rapid information flow and dynamic interactions. Similarly to Karatzogianni and Matthews (2023) observations, leadership roles are fluid and situational, allowing the community to quickly respond to changing circumstances. It is facilitated by the constant connectivity among members. The interplay of these elements - fractal structure, super-connectedness, and hybrid media system - enables the community to cross through conventional political alignments. This also coincides mostly with the core beliefs of my interviewees, who largely emphasise individualisation and competitiveness. Such a decentralised structure allows for various viewpoints to be employed within it, while the super-connected state ensures these views are instantly shared and further debated. Essentially, such a system allows for a truly heterodox community to emerge.

## Interplay of the offline and online

In the narratives shared by my interviewees, the focus was often not solely on the technology itself but rather on the events and experiences that unfolded within its context. Technology served as the platform through which they lived their experience with other members of the community, seamlessly integrating the virtual realm into their social lives. Often, they only realised during the conversation that there was a kind of integration between these planes that made their

experiences seamless. When asked what importance they attached to technology as such, several of them had to collect their thoughts without having a direct opinion on it. Others, expressed a clear viewpoint from the beginning, highlighting that technology, particularly the internet, had become a transformative force in their lives. For these individuals, technology served as an operational space for social networking, facilitating job opportunities, relationship formation, connections with others, and personal growth through learning new things. The interplay between online and offline engagement, as experienced by the interviewees, is yet again reminiscent of Rainie and Wellman's idea of networked individualism (ibid.). They argue that individuals today navigate both online and offline networks to form connections and gather information. The interviewees' experiences of living in both realms reflect this dual engagement. Importantly, my interlocutors seem to also confirm the words of Turkle (2011), who assumed that virtual interactions are not always sufficient for individuals who may feel isolated as a result. The experiences of several interviewees indicate that, in addition to valuable online interactions, the face-to-face encounters with community members helped them by directly influencing their decisions (i.e., to take professional risks or to improve social interactions). The amalgamation of digital and physical realities is a key aspect of my interlocutors' experience. This interplay is not merely a parallel existence in two separate realms, but rather a continuous flow between digital and physical spaces. People I spoke with told me that their online engagements often spill over into real-world actions and vice versa. For instance, discussions initiated in online forums may lead to offline meetups or political actions. Conversely, real-world events are frequently live-streamed or discussed in real-time on digital platforms, creating a feedback loop between online and offline spheres. This blending of realities has deep implications for how community members perceive and engage with their social and political environment. It challenges traditional notions of community and political participation, creating new forms of civic engagement that transcend physical boundaries, serving as a great example of *digital* activism, while still maintaining a connection to localised and more tangible actions.

The stories shared by my interviewees revolved around their interactions within the community and with community members. These experiences were facilitated by technology, particularly the Internet, which served as a conduit for their social interactions. Through these narratives, it became evident that virtuality and interactivity were natural elements of their social lives, intertwining with their offline experiences. For many interviewees, these virtual experiences held significant social importance, acting as key integrative experiences in their lives. They deeply engaged with and through virtuality, recognizing its various facets and the influence it had on their lives in both planes. Nevertheless, some interviewees chose to maintain a clear separation between their offline and online worlds from the outset, while others eventually decided to delineate these two realms of experience. They felt the need to separate these worlds due to concerns about the potentially detrimental impact of technology or its potential to overshadow their offline lives. However, regardless of this division, all interviewees acknowledged the profound impact that their experiences with technological change had on them. In these threads, my interviewees were quite clear about the strategies for separating these two planes of social interaction - digital and non-digital. In this way, they are in control of their actions and minimise the negative aspects of virtuality that Zuboff (2019) writes about.

## Reflections, Limitations and Future Studies

The main idea behind the choice of methodology was to be able to give voice to the individuals who, together and separately, form the community; whilst focusing on the specific phenomenon that unites these voices. I opted for narrative methods, specifically the ENI funnel approach, for data gathering. This approach not only fulfilled my research goals but also exceeded them. While most applications of similar methods I've seen are in management research, I'm confident they can be effectively applied to online group research as well.

This work is pragmatically classified under the digital politics field, as it fundamentally embraces the diverse aspects of the digital realm. I hold the view that the study of the Internet, given the intertwined multidimensionality of digital phenomena, allows for a more flexible application of research methods. This work,

which needs to interpret phenomena typically associated with sociology or political science in the context of enabling technology, validates this perspective. This is emphasised by my interlocutors and will be emphasised by me: the above work would not be if it were not for the technology in which my interlocutors' interactions were embedded.

The funnel-like structure of the method led to some significant insights. Firstly, it made my interviewees feel more comfortable, both in terms of the interaction and the narrative, enabling them to confidently recount their journey towards social engagement. This, in turn, provided me with a wealth of information about their perceptions of the community's formation. They focused on informal memories of individual events, which they deemed critical to their sense of belonging to the community. This gave me a deeper understanding of their interpersonal relationships, and attitudes towards various innovations, virtual life, and work. Technology, the central theme of this work, was merely an adjunct to the multifaceted narratives of my interviewees. Each of these stories fits into the broader context of the community and the narrower context of both technological and personal, physical experience.

However, the ENI method had its limitations. Its semi-structured nature often prevented me from deviating from the path and drawing deeper conclusions that might have been possible with longer interviews. It also restricted me from asking many quantity-based questions, which could have provided more numerical data, crucial for certain types of conclusions. Therefore, I leave these areas open for future research that explores both the individual understanding of the phenomenon (particularly from a psychological perspective) of this group and the quantification of their members' preferences and opinions. In essence, this issue is a primary concern for social scientists studying a phenomenon like a virtual community. The challenge lies in deciding where to place the focus, which perspective will yield the most information about the phenomenon, and which omitted method could add nuance where it might be missing. While the ENI method has allowed me to explore a lot, it also paves the way for further research related to the more detailed individual experiences of internet users in these types

of social groups, as well as expanding the volume-level understanding of their choices and attitudes.

Hence, after spending several weeks reading the collected interview material, the decision was to move the data analysis of these interviews into thematic analysis tracks. This is a pragmatic decision, driven by the premise of this work. I was keen to trace the phenomenon experienced by my interviewees, and the specificity of ENI - as well as other purely narrative methods - placed more emphasis on the narrative or the way it was conveyed in the interview. Thematic analysis changed the optics of data analysis and allowed common threads to be followed, but also other types of conclusions to be drawn. It allows for the exploration of the broader social and cultural contexts in which these phenomena occur. By examining the themes and patterns that emerge from the narratives, the study was able to shed light on the social implications of technological advancement, the role of virtual communities in shaping social and political movements, and the impact of these movements on the community of Polish virtual libertarians. These results are devoid of generalising potential due to the narrow group of interviewees, which is not a volume representation of the community. However, and importantly, the method allows for the outline of an individual's perception of several socio-political issues and therefore provides an excellent starting point for further analysis of this, and other similar, groups. By identifying and analysing themes across the narratives, this approach helps reduce the impact of individual biases and interpretations on the collected data. It also allows for a more systematic and rigorous analysis of the data, enhancing the reliability and validity of the study's findings.

Building upon the theoretical model presented, it's important to note that the methodology employed in this study aligns well with the theoretical model of fractal heterodox communities. The use of the ENI funnel approach for data gathering, as mentioned in the previous fragment, allowed for a nuanced exploration of individual narratives within the virtual libertarian community. This method proved particularly effective in capturing the fluid and adaptive nature of this community. It enabled participants to focus on their journeys towards social

engagement and their perceptions of community formation. The semi-structured nature of the interviews, while limiting in some respects, provided valuable insights into the narratives of community members, highlighting how technology serves as an adjunct to their personal experiences rather than the central focus. This aligns with the theoretical model's emphasis on the amalgamation of digital and physical realities in shaping individuals' perceptions and interactions.

In summary, such a multi-tool approach provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon in the eyes of my interviewees. By emphasizing the importance of building rapport and trust with participants, and using open-ended and non-directive questions, this approach allows for a rich and detailed exploration of participants' experiences. Additionally, using thematic analysis, allows for a more systematic and rigorous analysis of the data, enhancing the reliability and validity of the study's findings.

Given the findings of this study, there are several areas that I believe warrant further exploration. Primarily, this work has highlighted the issue of a morphic form of virtual grouping that can fluidly alter its characteristics to achieve a specific objective, whether political or social. Such a formation simultaneously embodies a community and a social movement, which redefines our understanding of both terms. This is largely a continuation of the research assumptions pursued by Castells and his colleagues, who focused on the phenomenon of individualism in the assortment of social groups in the digital age. It suggests that in the contemporary internet landscape, these two terms can be interchangeable, contingent on the context. However, to substantiate this, further research would need to extend beyond the virtual libertarian group – a group that is quite specific due to its high level of political and social self-awareness. I would recommend not only continuing qualitative research in this area but also conducting a comprehensive quantitative study to verify whether this observation holds in the broader context of virtual communities and social movements.

The second area that calls for additional research is the virtual libertarian community itself. My interviewees recounted the history of this community as they experienced it, not as it objectively occurred. This narrative requires further

elaboration and investigation. While some of these threads hold objective value - especially since some of the interviewees were personally responsible for certain events – they only represent a fraction of the entire history of this community.

Lastly, this work also uncovers numerous topics within the field of Internet studies. My interviewees discussed processes of logging off, both the positive and negative facets of virtual integration, the mediatisation of the Internet, the collective responsibility for content creation, and by extension, the entire medium, among other topics. All these subjects merely introduce many significant issues, the essence of which lies in their individual understanding. Therefore, it's crucial to view them as a stepping stone towards understanding the process of an individual's virtualisation and above all the role of digitisation in changing social belonging, whether in the form of communities or other forms of social grouping.

## Contributions

This study offers a range of perspectives from members of the Polish virtual libertarian community, focusing on their personal experiences with technological advancements within this group and their assessment of how these advancements have influenced the group.

While this work does not claim to provide comprehensive answers about this community, it does initiate a crucial dialogue on the influence of technological experiences on the development of virtual communities. The discussions have yielded a wealth of valuable insights into the history of Polish virtual libertarians. This includes key events since the advent of the Internet in Poland that were pivotal to its development, the impact of various facets of virtuality on both individual and group experiences, the motivations behind my interviewees' participation in political and social activities, and their daily personal interactions with other community members.

The analysis unveiled five key components that played a significant role in shaping the individual experiences of my interviewees, with an additional set of five key components which they believed influenced the overall experience of technological change within the community. By examining these ten components, a

comprehensive understanding of both the individual and collective dynamics surrounding technological advancement among my interviewees was achieved:

**Individual level experience:**

The integral role of technology in real-life experiences: Technological change was perceived as an integral part of interviewees' lives, serving as a backdrop for their participation in the virtual libertarian community. It added a multifaceted dimension to their offline experiences, indicating the high importance of technology in shaping their social interactions.

Virtual space of interactions: The interviewees perceived the advent and subsequent normalisation of the internet as crucial in enabling the creation and maintenance of social connections within the community. This was further amplified by the advent of mobile technology, which facilitated virtually continuous access to the community and its content. The virtual libertarian community served as a central and immersive space for my interviewees' social interactions, engagement, and the formation of social connections that extended beyond geographical boundaries. This provided a sense of community and belonging, allowing my interviewees to connect with others who shared similar beliefs and values.

Driver for integration: The virtual experiences within the community were perceived as very important by my interviewees, highlighting the depth and influence of virtual interactions they are having with their online friends. It aided the formation of friendships and professional networks, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared purpose.

Impact on the real world: Despite their extensive virtual engagement, interviewees believed the virtual community needed to exert an impact on the real world. This involved participation in street protests, involvement in potentially illegal virtual activities, and efforts to influence national policy, showing that with time, their activities extended beyond the virtual realm.

<u>Technological concerns:</u> The interviewees acknowledged and emphasised the profound impact of technological change on various aspects of their lives, recognising its significance and lasting effects. They pointed to the transformative power of technology and the significant influence it had on their experiences within the virtual libertarian community. They recognised the need to critically evaluate and navigate the implications of technological advancements while also appreciating the benefits and positive outcomes that technology brought to their lives. These concerns also led some members to increasingly separate their virtual experiences from their real-life activities.

Key insights derived from the narrators' perspectives on the impact of technological advancement on their experience within the community, can be summarised as follows:

<u>Technology as a facilitator and catalyst:</u> The interviewees consistently reported that technology, particularly the internet and digital platforms, significantly transformed their experiences within the libertarian community. It facilitated connections and communication among community members, eased access to information, and allowed for the formation and expansion of the community. It also helped in breaking geographical barriers, enabling them to engage with libertarian ideas at both a local and global scale.

Blurred lines between virtual and real life: For many interviewees, the virtual experience provided by technology had become deeply intertwined with their offline lives. The integration of their online and offline experiences was often seamless, resulting in a transformative influence on various aspects of their lives, such as networking, career opportunities, relationship formation, and personal growth. However, some individuals maintained or gradually instituted a clear separation between these two realms due to concerns about the potentially detrimental impact of technology or its potential to overshadow their offline lives.

<u>The duality of technological impact:</u> Despite the numerous positive impacts reported, the interviewees also pointed out several negative implications of

technology. They highlighted issues such as the creation of information bubbles, the tabloidisation of content, and the changing standards of communication imposed by social media platforms. They also emphasised the importance of the community's impact on the real world, implying that the virtual community must be more than just an online space; it should have a tangible effect on real-world issues and scenarios.

**Group level experience:**

Increased access and connectivity: Many narrators highlight those technological advancements, particularly in the form of the internet and mobile access, have first allowed for, and then significantly increased connectivity within the community. They emphasize that over time, wider access has facilitated easier communication, networking, and collaboration among community members.

Broadening access to information: According to the narrators, technological advancements have played a crucial role in broadening access to information and knowledge. They mention media platforms like online libraries, digital repositories, and alternative publishing channels that have provided the community with access to previously inaccessible sources of information. The self-educational nature of the group also emerges in the interviews as they mention individuals and groups who are actively involved in promoting awareness of the idea, if only by sharing knowledge on websites, forums, and within different media.

Strengthening the integration of the community: Narrators also note that technology has played a role in strengthening the integration of the community. Online platforms and social media have provided spaces for members to interact, share ideas, and engage in discussions. This has fostered a sense of belonging among community members.

Interplay of the offline and online: Several narrators suggest that online tools and the community gathered around them have been instrumental in pursuing offline activities, both political (i.e., protests and promotion of the idea in the third sector) and personal (i.e., integrating with an offline libertarian community offshoot). This highlights the interconnectedness between online and offline engagement.

<u>Evolving identity and integration:</u> The narrators acknowledge that the impact of technological advancement goes beyond the virtual community itself. They discuss how it has influenced their personal development, allowing them to integrate their libertarian beliefs into their broader identity and engage with the larger society in a meaningful way. They also mention that the community has become so important that it has transcended the boundaries of virtuality and has become a real, or rather offline community, as well.

The key insights derived from the narrators' perspectives on the impact of technological advancement on the whole of the community can be summarised as follows:

> Technology has significantly transformed communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing within the community, enabling greater connectivity and intellectual growth.
> Online platforms have empowered community members to express their views, amplify their voices, and engage with a wider audience, contributing to the rise in popularity of this community.

> Striking a balance between virtual and real-world interactions is crucial for maintaining community cohesion, fostering relationships, and aiming at tangible change.

The interviewees highlighted the pivotal role of technological advancements, especially the emergence and normalisation of the internet and mobile technology within the Polish context. This technological access and connectivity have enhanced the community's integration. Simultaneously, the digital realm's expansion has significantly broadened access to information and enabled community members to engage more actively in promoting libertarian ideas. This further strengthened community integration and aided the development of a strong sense of belonging among members. The narrators also underscored the intriguing interplay between online and offline engagement, indicating that their virtual interactions have extended to and impacted their offline activities. Lastly, they acknowledged the

transformative influence of their virtual community participation on their personal development. These themes, taken together, enrich our understanding of how technology impacts group dynamics and shapes individual identities within the libertarian community, contributing to the wider discourse on virtual communities, social movements, and identity formation (i.e., Castells, 2012). The concerns raised by the narrators regarding information bubbles, polarisation, and overreliance on online engagement echo the discussions on the potential drawbacks of technology-mediated communities.

These insights have broader implications for understanding the evolving nature of communities in the digital age. They highlight the potential of technology to facilitate collective action and knowledge sharing within communities. They also underline the importance of integrating online and offline interactions to ensure the long-term sustainability of the community.

Building upon the empirical findings, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of virtual communities by proposing and applying the concept of 'fractal heterodox communities'. This model posits that technological advancements over the past three decades have fundamentally reshaped how interactions are performed and perceived, enabling the formation of communities that transcend conventional limitations. These fractal heterodox communities are characterised by decentralised and fluid structures and the ability to operate across digital and physical realms. Heterodoxy may result from a non-alignment with the mainstream definition of a type of community and may refer to the binder of these communities (e.g. political views or consumer preferences). The study demonstrates how these communities leverage a state of 'super-connectedness', facilitated by hybrid media systems, to foster multifaceted interactions spanning social, economic, political, and cultural domains. This theoretical framework not only clarifies the dynamics observed within the community that my interviewees were members of but also offers a valuable lens for examining other technology-mediated social formations in a digitalised world. Integrating this model with the empirical findings allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how technological advancements shape both individual experiences and collective

dynamics in virtual communities, contributing to the broader discourse on digital sociology and political engagement in the 21st century.

This study has exceeded initial expectations, largely due to the abundance of data gathered from the interviews. This has allowed for the creation of a unique, unprecedented sketch of the history of Polish virtual libertarians, albeit from the viewpoint of a select few participants. It paves the way for potential future research and serves as an excellent case study, offering insights into the processes of virtual community formation from the unique perspective of the participants themselves.

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# APPENDIX

## Codebook

### Introduction:

- This codebook was intended to guide the coding process for this research on the Polish virtual libertarian community, using Episodic Narrative inquiry (ENI) and inductive thematic analysis.
- The codebook contains the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis through thematic analysis.

### Categories and Themes:

1. <u>Origins</u>

   *NOTION: This group serves to contextualise the subsequent analysis, it does not shape the analysis, that is, this categorisation is not used at a later stage.*

   Details: The emergence of libertarianism among community members in the virtual contexts.

   Common theme groups:

   > **Proto_Libertarians:** Early adopters of libertarianism in the community, active since 1990s and beginning of the 2000s.
   >
   > **Activists:** individuals who became libertarians through activism and political activities.
   >
   > **Intellectuals:** individuals who were introduced to libertarianism through reading and intellectual discourse.
   >
   > **Social_Media_Libertarians:** individuals who discovered libertarianism through social media platforms.

   Relevancy to the research questions: These themes relate mainly to the first research question. They explore the origins of the community's members and the way they came to adopt libertarianism as their philosophy. They trace initial impact of the technology on their virtual beings. They also touch upon the second research question, as they trace the intellectual roots of several community members, as well as their initial assessment of the social media impact on the community.

2. <u>Belonging</u>

   Details: Developing a sense of belonging in the technological contexts.

   Codes and themes:

**Socialisation:** The role of family and education in shaping members' beliefs, as well as their shared political attitudes

- *Families*:  The influence of family members on interviewees' beliefs
- *Schools*: The role of education in shaping interviewees' beliefs
- *Political_Attitudes*: The shared political attitudes and beliefs.

**Binders:** The factors that bind members to the community

- *Networking*: The importance of networking in building relationships within the community.
- *Integration*: Different aspects of building a feeling of integration within the community.

Relevancy to the research questions: The first theme [Socialisation] relates to the first research question as it examines the impact of the upbringing and initial socialisation processes (*[Families], [Schools]*) of my interviewees. It traces the impact of the families and schools on developing their attitudes. Additionally, it traces the emerging political attitudes of my interviewees (*[Political_Attitudes]*) which expands on their worldview development, and the way both the technology and the community impacted it. The second theme touches on both questions. On one hand it examines how internal interactions enabled the community to develop (*[Networking], [Integration]*) therefore providing context for the second research question. However, it also provides an understanding of the individual perception of the networking and integratory mechanisms within the community.

3. <u>Enabling</u>

Details: Impact of the technology on interviewees lives as well as enabling the community's growth and development.

Codes and themes:

**Access:** The technological infrastructure that enabled the emergence of the community, as viewed by the interviewees

- *Internet_Access*: The role of Internet access in enabling the community to form and communicate.
- *Mobile_Access*: The impact of mobile devices on community interaction.
- *Information_Access*: The role of access to information in shaping members' beliefs.

**Platforms:** The platforms that facilitate communication within the community.

- *Old_Media*: Traditional media platforms that were used to disseminate libertarian ideas.
- *Pre_Social*: Early social media platforms used by the community.
- *Sharing_Platforms*: Contemporary social media platforms that enable the sharing of libertarian content.

**Social_Media:** The impact of social media on the community.

- **Facebook_Groups**: The role of Facebook groups in facilitating community interaction.
- **Network_Effect**: The impact of network effects on the community.
- **Risks**: The potential risks associated with using social media for community interaction.

## Online_offline

The interplay between online and offline interaction within the community.

- *Online_offline*

Relevancy to the research questions: To a large extent, this entire category relates to both research questions. On the one hand, it allows us to understand access processes both from an individual perspective and in the context of the community (*[Internet_Access], [Mobile_Access], [Information_Access]*), but it also focuses on the media themselves, i.e., the interactional space for this community, also in individual contexts and in a group perspective (*[Old_Media], [Pre_Social], [Sharing_Platforms], [Facebook_Groups], [Network_Effect], [Risks]*). It also enriches this discussion with the perspective of the interrelationship of virtual and offline spaces, which addresses both the individual experience and the perspective of the impact on the whole community in the short and long term (*[Online_offline]*).

## Coding Procedure:

- The data was analysed using thematic analysis.
- The themes and subthemes emerged from the data after reading through it several times (inductive approach).
- Each excerpt of data was assigned one or more codes based on the themes and subthemes that emerge from it.
- Each code was defined using the descriptions provided in this codebook to ensure consistency in coding across all data sources.

# Figures

### Figure 1 – Web Periodisation

| WEB 1.0 - STATIC WEB<br>PRIMARILY READ-ONLY WEB | WEB 2.0 - SOCIAL WEB<br>PRIMARILY READ-WRTIE WEB | WEB 3.0 - SEMANTIC WEB<br>PRIMARILY READ-WRITE-EXECUTE WEB |
|---|---|---|
| THE PRIMARY CHARACTERISTIC OF WEB 1.0, AS NOTED BY VISWANATHAN ET AL. (2010), WAS THAT IT SERVED AS A COMMUNICATION PLATFORM PRIMARILY FOR WEBSITE AND NETWORK OWNERS, CHARACTERIZED BY UNILATERAL AND INFLEXIBLE DISTRIBUTION OF HOMOGENEOUS INFORMATION. THE INFORMATION PRESENTED ON WEB 1.0 WAS SIMPLE, NON-INTERACTIVE, OR WITH A LIMITED INTERACTIVITY. USERS WERE NOT ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN SITE CREATION AND OPERATION BEYOND BEING RECIPIENTS OF THE CONTENT. DURING THAT PERIOD, WEBSITES WERE MORE AKIN TO INFORMATION PORTALS, WHERE CONTENT WAS DISTRIBUTED THROUGH A FEW STATIC HTML SITES SERVED FROM THE FILE SYSTEM ON THE SERVER, RATHER THAN UTILISING A RELATIONAL DATABASE SYSTEM (I.E., OSUDA-GENSELEKE AND LEDISI, 2018). | ADVANCEMENTS IN THE PROGRAMMING LANGUAGES ALLOWED FOR GREATER INTERACTIVITY OF WEBSITES. ITIM O'REILLY ENVISIONED IT AS A NEW WEB CHARACTERISED BY PERSONALISATION, SHARING, AND COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPATION (O'REILLY & BATTELLE, 2009). THIS PHASE IS OFTEN DESCRIBED AS A WEB WHERE USERS ARE BOTH CREATORS AND EDITORS OF CONTENT, AND RECIPIENTS OF IT (VISWANATHAN ET AL., IBID.). WEBSITES DURING THIS PERIOD INCORPORATED VISUAL FRAMEWORKS, INCLUDING RICH INTERNET APPLICATIONS (ALSO KNOWN AS 'RICH MEDIA') LIKE FLASH AND MEDIA WIDGETS. **THIS PHASE IS SOMETIMES CALLED THE SOCIAL MEDIA PHASE. CONTENT WAS SERVED FROM RELATIONAL DATABASE SYSTEMS (I.E., OSUDA-GENSELEKE, AND LEDISI, IBID.).** | WEB 3.0, OR THE SEMANTIC WEB, PROVIDES ENHANCED AND SEAMLESS INFORMATION ACCESS FOR END-USERS THROUGH PROGRAMMING LANGUAGE ADVANCEMENTS AND ADVANCING TECHNOLOGIES (BURKE, 2017; UGARTE, 2017). IT IS CHARACTERIZED BY PORTABILITY, PERSONAL FOCUS, AND DYNAMIC, AND CONTEXTUAL CONTENT (VISWANATHAN ET AL., IBID.). SOME ARGUE IF IT SHOULD PRIMARILY BE ASSOCIATED WITH BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY, THE DECENTRALIZED WEB, WHICH USES CRYPTOGRAPHY TO LINK BLOCKS OF RECORDS (NARAYANAN ET AL., 2016). THIS ENABLES DIRECT INTERACTIONS, LIKE TRANSACTIONS, AND INVOLVES USERS IN INFORMATION OWNERSHIP. **IT CAN BE DESCRIBED AS A PEER-TO-PEER AND MACHINE-TO-MACHINE WEB (I.E., BURKE, UGARTE, IBID.).** |

*Sources: Viswanathan et al., 2010; Osuo-Genseleke and Ledisi, 2018; O'Reilly and Battelle, 2010; Burke, 2017; Ugarte, 2017; Narayanan et al, 2016).*

Figure 2 – Age and Gender Group of the interviewees

| | GENDER | AGE | | GENDER | AGE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MS | M | 20s | AC | M | 30s |
| MG | M | 30s | AR | M | 30s |
| ML | M | 30s | BS | M | 20s |
| MA | M | 30s | BG | M | 40s |
| NG | M | 20s | EP | F | 20s |
| NS | M | 20s | GB | M | 30s |
| PJ | M | 20s | IS | M | 20s |
| RG | M | 30s | JS | M | 50s |
| SG | M | 30s | JSP | M | 30s |
| SW | M | 40s | JBW | M | 40s |
| SS | M | 30s | LB | M | 30s |
| TD | M | 20s | LA | M | 30s |
| TG | F | 20s | LS | M | 30s |
| TP | M | 30s | MM | M | 50s |
| TM | M | 30s | MC | M | 40s |
| UD | M | 20s | MD | F | 30s |
| WP | F | 20s | MB | M | 30s |
| ZS | M | 20s | MT | M | 30s |

Figure 3 – Mueller's Six Steps of Conducting the Episodic Narrative interview

| STEP # | SUMMARY |
|---|---|
| SELECT A PHENOMENON OF INTEREST | RESEARCHER MUST IDENTIFY THE SPECIFIC PHENOMENON THAT THEY WISH TO BETTER UNDERSTAND AS A RESULT OF THE INQUIRY. |
| DESCRIBE INTERVIEW PROCESS | PARTICIPANTS ARE PROVIDED WITH A SUMMARY OF THE EPISODIC NARRATIVE INTERVIEW STRUCTURE AND PROCESS. |
| DEFINITION OF THE PHENOMENON | THE RESEARCHER REQUESTS THAT THE PARTICIPANT DEFINE OR DESCRIBE THE PHENOMENON OF INTEREST. |
| REQUEST: STORY ABOUT THE PHENOMENON | THE RESEARCHER REQUESTS THAT THE PARTICIPANT TELL A STORY ABOUT A SPECIFIC, BOUNDED EPISODE. |
| REQUEST: STORY ABOUT AN EPISODE | THE RESEARCHER REQUESTS THAT THE PARTICIPANT DEFINE OR DESCRIBE THE PHENOMENON OF INTEREST. |
| ADDITIONS OR AMENDMENTS | THE PARTICIPANT SHOULD HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO ADD TO OR AMEND ANY PARTS OF THE NARRATIVE THAT THEY HAVE SHARED. |

*Source: Mueller, 2019*

Figure 4 – ENI-Driven interview Questions and Prompts

| | INTERVIEW QUESTION | PROMPTS |
|---|---|---|
| **INTRODUCTION** | TELL ME ABOUT YOU AS A VIRTUAL LIBERTARIAN | - |
| **DEFINITION** | WHAT DO YOU THINK WAS THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON LIBERTARIANS IN POLAND | HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE THE IMPACT OR CHANGE? |
| **EPISODE** | CAN YOU TELL ME A STORY ABOUT THE COMMUNITY? | I.E., NOTION OF WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENED, WAY OF EXPERIENCING IT, INITIAL CONTACT WITH THE COMMUNITY, APPROACHING CONVERSATION WITH THE COMMUNITY, MEETING FRIENDS |
| **PHENOMENON** | COULD YOU EXPAND THIS STORY BY DEFINING THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN IT? | I.E., USING DEVICES TO ACCESS TO THE INTERNET, NATURE OF THE TECHNOLOGY, TOOLS USED FOR COMMUNICATION |
| **CONCLUSION** | BEFORE WE CONCLUDE THIS INTERVIEW, IS THERE SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR TECHNOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE IN THIS COMMUNITY THAT YOU THINK INFLUENCE THE CONVERSATION AND WE DID NOT HAD A CHANCE TO DISCUSS? | HAVE YOU CHANGED THE WAY YOU WANT TO DESCRIBE THE IMPACT OF THE TECHNOLOGY ON THE COMMUNITY? |

Figure 5 – Description of the thematic categories

| CATEGORY | DESCRIPTION |
| --- | --- |
| ORIGINS | This category pertains to the origin stories of the interviewees and their beginnings in the virtual libertarian world, with four groups of interviewees categorised based on their experiences - the proto-libertarians, the activists, the intellectuals, and the libertarians of the social-media era. |
| BELONGING | This category deals with the sense of community belonging that the interviewees had and the significance of technology in creating and sustaining that sense of belonging. |
| ENABLING | This category pertains to the impact of technology on the community, including how it enabled the community's growth and development, and the positive impact it had on the members' lives. |

Figure 6 – Thematic map



**THE VIRTUAL LIBERTARIAN COMMUNITY'S EXPERIENCE**

Origins
Initial, broad exploration of the interviewees' origins in the community

Proto-Libertarians
- Activists
- Intellectuals
- SM Libertarians

Belonging
Secondary, narrower exploration of the interviewees sense of belonging

Socialisation
- Families
- Schools and Education
- Political Attitudes

Binders
- Networking
- Integration

Enabling
Tertiary, narrowest exploration of the insights gained from the previous two categories

Access
- INTERNET
- MOBILE
- INFORMATION

Platforms
- OLD MEDIA
- PRE-SOCIAL
- SHARING

Social Media
- GROUPS
- NETWORK EFFECT
- RISKS

Online & Offline
- ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Figure 7 – Example code generated in phase one using code-matrix A

| CODE | THEME | CATEGORY | PARTICIPANT | SAMPLE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| [Integration] | Binders | **Belonging** | MM | **"We have a group of users with whom we meet quite regularly.**At least once a year, sometimes two or three times. We are meeting in Poznań or Warsaw (...) we have a place near Kalisz where we try to be at least once a year (...) usually there is an 'old team', although from time to time, people do come from outside this circle." |

Figure 8 – Example code generated in phase one using code-matrix B

| PARTICIPANT | CATEGORY | THEME | DESCRIPTION | INFLUENCE | SAMPLE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AC | Socialisation | Familial narrative [Families] | Prevailing narrative within family | Direct impact on evolving political views and subsequent internalisation of libertarian ideas | "I don't want to go all the way back to my grandparents, but to the first point where things really started to happen. I come from such a family, my mother was a lawyer, now she's retired. My dad was a maths teacher, and the house was always quite political (...) **this house was always soaked with memories of communism, and it was not a good memory.**" |

Figure 9 – Example code generated in phase one using code-matrix C

| PARTICIPANT | CATEGORY | THEME | DESCRIPTION | SAMPLE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| LS | Enabling | Importance of the internet access [Internet_Access] | The narratives underscore the role of internet access as a catalyst for the formation and development of the virtual libertarian community. | "**Many people had to go to libraries** (to access the internet in the 1990s and early 2000s) (...) **I think that** (because of that) **some** (people) of my generation may have had a **problem with getting online, and continuing online life, participating in this kind of community.** That's why there are a lot of young people whose presence is more visible (now)'. |

Figure 10 – The organisation of the codes

| Category | Theme | Subthemes |
|---|---|---|
| Origins | Origins | [Proto_Libertarians], [Activists], [Intellectuals], [Social_Media_Libertarians] |
| Belonging | Socialisation | [Families], [Schools] |
| | Binders | [Networking], [Political_Attitudes], [Integration] |
| Enabling | Access | [Internet_Access], [Mobile_Access], [Information_Access] |
| | Platforms | [Old_Media], [Pre_Social], [Sharing_Platforms] |
| | Social Media | [Facebook_Groups], [Network_Effect], [Risks] |
| | Online & Offline | [Online_Offline] |

Figure 11 – Mural 'Bitcoin'



*Source: Free-Market Simpson, 2021*

Figure 12 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Proto-libertarians'

| Generated Codes | Associated Theme | Category | Participant | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| [Integration] | Binders | Belonging | MM | "We have a group of users with whom we meet quite regularly. At least once a year, sometimes two or three times. We are meeting in Poznań or Warsaw (...) we have a place near Kalisz where we try to be at least once a year (...) usually there is an 'old team', although from time to time, people do come from outside this circle." |
| [Networking] | Binders | Belonging | JS | "The contact with the ISIL was mainly through the Internet, because people were from other countries. Back then it wasn't that easy to travel. I remember going to Amsterdam and Rome by bus. The Internet was very useful (...) the Internet helped in getting in touch with people." |
| [Information_Access] | Access | Enabling | JS | "At first, I didn't know the name 'libertarianism'. I only learned about it in a pamphlet that was published underground in Poland. It was called, I think, "ABC Libertarianizmu" or "Czym jest libertarianizm?" by David Bergland. It was a booklet. And basically, I look at it and it was what I believe in. What I recognized as anarchism only under a different name. So, I figured that it's basically the same thing. I internalised that, and I started to take a little bit more interest in it." |
| [Internet_Access] | Access | Enabling | SG | "Jacek (Sierpiński) got on the Internet faster than I did. In general, among Polish anarchists he was one of the first people who had the Internet at the time, who dialed into the Internet via this modem. I - since I didn't have my own computer to begin with - used the Internet whether at various friends' places or at university, so it wasn't something that would somehow make a person get more involved in the Internet. So, in my case, this kind of use of the Internet on a larger scale, whether for ideological or any other purpose, also starts somewhere from 1997-98, when I had my first desktop computer." |
| [Pre_Social] | Platforms | Enabling | JS | "I started to publish in Mać Pariadka and in An Archel (...) I uploaded them all online, when I was creating my website. There was a large list of mine articles. Then the website libertarianizm.pl was founded, which was supposed to be a portal for libertarians." |
| [Facebook_Groups] | Social Media | Enabling | AR | "The Libnet? I hope you'll find someone who was a part of it even from before Facebook. There was this online, libertarian forum – which is still active to this day by the way - where I was never active. I occasionally looked there to see what it was like, but Facebook took over." |

Figure 13 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Activists'

| Generated Codes | Associated Theme | Category | Participant | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| [Integration] | Binders | Belonging | MA | "A forum of Janusz Korwin-Mikke's sympathizers was created, where at least one third of the members were libertarians, including me. And there we were already vigorously arguing with the more conservative part of the libertarian environment. Yes, all those individuals who later became part of the libertarian milieu were forging there (...)" |
| [Networking] | Binders | Belonging | JSP | "Around 2004 we started meeting in my dad's restaurant in Katowice, called Bohema, with about half of the young Koliber members. We were in high school, 18-20 years old. Through meetings with Teluk and his people, they acquired libertarian views - often paleolibertarian" |
| [Political_Attitudes] | Binders | Belonging | MS | "I didn't agree with him on everything from the very beginning, because (...) my father is an immigrant from an Arab country, and as you know, Mr Korwin expressed himself (negatively about this culture) (...) But the idea of free market appealed to me very much" |
| [Information_Access] | Access | Enabling | BS | "We were all stung by the Korwin's ideas. But it goes away at some point (...) the libertarian worldview is still instilled, but the rest is gone" |
| [Pre_Social] | Platforms | Enabling | JSP | "Someone - a colleague from another high school - found me (...) and found some other people who also had some sort of avatar *(on the forum)* that they were supporting the UPR or capitalism. We would probably never have found each other (...) Thanks to the Internet, thanks to this high school forum, we were able to identify that there were people with similar views, because each of us felt alone in these views" |
| [Facebook_Groups] | Social Media | Enabling | MA | "That was my first contact via the forum of Janusz Korwin-Mikke's sympathizers, which later evolved into another forum Frizona.pl. That was the end of the decade of the early 2000s, the turn of the 2010s. That's when Frizona was most active (...) later everything moved to Facebook, so this is like another chapter in the development of this community" |

Figure 14 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'intellectuals'

| Generated Codes | Associated Theme | Category | Participant | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| [Schools] | Socialisation | Belonging | BS | "I had classes with both (dr Machaj and prof. Kwasnicki). To be honest, it was a breakthrough moment. Fifteen minutes that changed my approach to freedom (...) Witold gave us a political test at the end of our first class (...) I saw where I was placed - in this quadrant of conservatism – and where Witold showed his position - he was 100 out of 100 in freedom, total extremity (...) And I think the biggest shock was with the question 'do people have to have passports?'. And I said: 'Well, yes! I mean, how does it even ... this has to be regulated!'. Witold disagreed. And for me it was like 'Oh snap, how can this be?'." |
| [Political_Attitudes] | Binders | Belonging | MB | "I came across the website of the Polish Mises Institute, and a text by Mateusz Machaj, about how the A-Team from the popular TV series is an example of an anarcho-capitalist organisation; how it creates a private order and pursues justice on its own. I was intrigued. I couldn't tell how much of it was intellectual play, and how much was taken seriously with the use of some extreme anti-state arguments, but somehow I started coming back to this site." |
| [Integration] | Binders | Belonging | AC | "Firstly, there was a moment when the Instytut Misesa website was developing very intensively (...) that was the moment when I had the impression that some kind of online community was beginning to take shape. Even before Facebook, in fact. Because FB already existed, but such things ... at least I had the feeling that they weren't happening on FB yet (but rather) in the comments on the pages of the Mises Institute." |
| [Information_Access] | Access | Enabling | MB | In 2007 I asked my mom for a Christmas present, and she bought me the *'Human Action'* by Ludwig von Mises published by the Institute. After reading it, a lot has changed for me (...) I read all the texts on the Institute's website from the beginning of the site, and the books that were recommended there - i.e., Hoppe or Rothbard. It was much more economics books than libertarian books. But I was becoming more and more libertarian and getting closer to anarchism or anarcho-capitalism." |
| [Facebook_Groups] | Social Media | Enabling | ML | "It was also easier to organise, meet somewhere in one place, organise a conference, a congress, a lecture (...) to a large extent it all revolved around these groups on Facebook(...) You could say that during the first years, if something wasn't on Facebook, it couldn't be found anywhere. If someone wasn't on those groups or at least follow them (...) you could practically say he was an outsider." |

Figure 15 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Libertarians of the social media era'

| Generated Codes | Associated Theme | Category | Participant | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| [Integration] | Binders | Belonging | MD | "I think the Internet and Facebook are just having a gigantic impact on me (...) most of the people I started talking to and meeting, were well-read, they were studying economics, social sciences, political science. They were wiser. I was coming to listen to them" |
| [Information_Access] | Access | Enabling | AR | "The Internet was a window to the world. It gave us access to the information to which we had not previously access to, nor couldn't we come to those conclusions on our own. In the press that I came across in the newsstand, or in the television that I watched somewhere in the early 2000s, there were only few available titles, channels. There was no access to information" |
| [Internet_Access] | Access | Enabling | AR | "I'm from the generation that didn't wake up at the time of the political breakthrough but woke up together with this Internet breakthrough in Poland. I witnessed the changes, the birth of various portals or communication platforms. Many of the tools or spaces I used, and which infected me somewhere with the idea of freedom – or at least showed me the first path - they don't exist on the Internet anymore." |
| [Mobile_Access] | Access | Enabling | WP | "I use a smartphone mostly. I occasionally use laptop, but still, the phone is the more affordable option. I have it always with me. If I get a notification that someone has added a post to *Niskie Składki* or *Neoliberawka* (...) I can check it almost instantly" |
| [Facebook_Groups] | Social Media | Enabling | MS | "A bigger turn towards individual freedom for me, and that whole libertarian approach, started with Facebook groups: JEBAWKA, Atomowa Alternatywa, Nieprzyjaciele Niewoli. Well, those were the groups that I started participating in (...) some things appealed to me more, some less." |

Figure 16 – The influence of Familial Socialisation on the Adoption of Libertarian Values

Figure 17 – The influence of Schooling and Educational Socialisation on Adoption and Reinforcement of Libertarian Values.



INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL AND EDCATION LEADING TO ADOPTION AND REINFORMECEMENT OF LIBERTARIAN VALUES

Families

Socialisation

Schools and Education

Impact of the Intellectual discourse on shaping views

Criticism of the public schooling system

Strong intellectual and academic influence

Political Attitudes

Belonging
Secondary, narrower exploration of the interviewees sense of belonging

Networking

Binders

Integration

Adoption and reinformcement of classic liberal and libertarian values

Seeking a virtual libertarian community

Figure 18 – Factors influencing political attitudes and their effects on belonging to a community.

**FACTORS INFLUENCING POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND THEIR EFFECTS OF BELONGING TO A COMMUNITY**

Focus on intellectual pursuit and education as a form of civic engagement

Engagement in protests activities especially through digital mobilisation

Reluctance towards voting and organising within political institutions

Political Attitudes

Families

Schools and Education

Socialisation

Belonging
Secondary, narrower exploration of the interviewees sense of belonging

Networking

Binders

Integration

The group is transitioning between functioning as a community and a social movement depending on the context and goals.

Figure 19 – The influence of socialisation factors on the formation of my interviewees' political views and the impact of such views on the search for communities on the Internet.

| Participant Category | Theme | Action involved | Influence on the interlocutor's decisions | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Socialisation | Familial narrative [Families] | Prevailing narrative within family | Direct impact on evolving political views and subsequent internalisation of libertarian ideas | "I don't want to go all the way back to my grandparents, but to the first point where things really started to happen, I come from such a family, my mother was a lawyer, now she's retired. My dad was a maths teacher and the house was always quite political (…) **this house was always soaked with memories of communism and it was not a good memory.**" *(AC)* |
| | | Negating family political views | Transitioning from familial influence to contrasting, libertarian beliefs | "I was brought up in the Catholic faith, and through cultural influences - school influences, family influences – such left-wing sensitivity was installed in me. However, it was rather misunderstood. It meant that the state must help the poor, the state must take from the rich. Scrooge McDuck-like fairy tales (…) that combination of a Catholic conservatism and collectivism continued and stuck with me – actually, until my undergraduate studies." *(BG)* |
| | Impact of schools and education [Schools] | Criticism of the schooling system | Seeking an intellectual position that stands in opposition to that forged in public schools | "I always drew a cartoon about how school is a prison, and we are are imprisoned here by the evil Pharaoh – the Minister of Education; and that we want to escape from this prison. Because I didn't understand what it was all about. The (experience) was a bit physically unpleasant for me.' *(TG)* |
| | | The impact of tutors on intellectual pathways | Internalisation of intellectual values in line with those proposed by the tutors | "Fifteen minutes that changed my approach to freedom, to this idea in general. Witold (Kwaśnicki) gave us a political test at the end of our first class, a political compass (…) (it) contained probably only ten questions: five regarding economics and five regarding worldview (…) I saw where I was placed - in a quadrant of conservatism – and where Witold showed his position was. He was 100 out of 100 in freedom, total extremity. I was shocked." *(BS)* |
| | The emergence of libertarian views [Political_Attitudes] | Socialising with other secondary school students in newly emerging regional-school online forums | Meeting other like-minded people and subsequently creating a branch of an organisation that promotes free-market | "The forums were very important to me in terms of activism (…) if it hadn't been for the internet forum of the Katowice's high schools - there was such a thing that different high schools were on the same forum; and not for the fact that - now we're talking about strict libertarianism, we're not talking about the idea of freedom more broadly - the fact that I had a gif with an UPR flag next to my avatar; if it hadn't been for that (…) we would probably never have found each other." *(JSP)* |
| | | The influence of family, school and eventually public figures on the formation of political views | Established political views foster the search for a virtual group sharing similar attitudes | "I didn't agree with (Korwin) on everything from the very beginning, because (…) my father is an immigrant from an Arab country, and as you know, Mr Korwin expressed himself (negatively about this culture) (…) But the idea of free market appealed to me very much, and so, I slipped through the middle school (…) as a determined free-marketeer. The biggest turn towards individual freedom and that whole libertarian approach started with Internet groups: JEBAWKA, Atomowa Alternatywa, Nieprzyjaciele Niewoli." *(MS)* |

Figure 20 – The impact of networking factors on the value of interactions within the community.



THE IMPACT OF NETWORKING FACTORS ON THE VALUE OF INTERACTIONS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

Binding the community membership

Impact on building a sense of belonging

Families

Families

Political Attitudes

Socialisation

Belonging
Secondary, narrower exploration of the interviewees sense of belonging

Networking

Providing opportunities for personal growth

Paving the way for professional stability and advancement

Strong interactions on both private and professional levels

Binders

Integration

Figure 21 – Factors influencing community integration.



FACTORS INFLUENCING COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

Belonging
Secondary, narrower exploration of the interviewees sense of belonging

Families

Families

Socialisation

Political Attitudes

Networking

Binders

*Impact on building a sense of belonging*

*Binding the community membership*

Integration

Use of a distinct language

The mocking nature, in part due to links to the troll-net

Expression through different art forms

Figure 22 – integration processes within the community and their impact on interviewees' experiences.

| Participant Category | Theme | Action involved | Influence on the interlocutor's decisions | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ZS | Private networking [Binders] | Participation in events organised by people from the community | The decision to go away allowed the interviewee to get to know his wife-to-be, while also activating layers of inner development. | "Because I went to the States, then to Germany for a conference, and then to Prague. And it was there that I met my present wife (...) liberalism, especially in its online version, has a taste of a bit of personal development. There is an emphasis on individualism, on the fact that you have to fight for yourself, that you have to develop yourself in order to rely on yourself. It all came together so nicely and I think that it was a real turning point in my life. That I took matters into my own hands, I took my fate into my own hands. Mentally, I simply started to take responsibility for my life." |
| BG | Professional networking [Binders] | Bringing people together in professional networks | Facilitating business problem through the use of intra-group contacts | "Many of the people I met in those groups, even if we haven't been in touch for years - it's great networking. It really is. I had so many nice meetings thanks to this - with some guy with whom 5 years ago I talked on one of the Facebook groups. Or another situation just recently. A friend started a business, and she had some problem. I knew that a friend from one of the libertarian groups had the solution to this problem. I connected them and yesterday I got a message that they helped each other." |
| MM | Distinct language and communication manner [integration] | Use of the phrasing that is specific to this micro-group | Using distinctive community language to describe situations, often limiting the ability of outsiders to understand the premise | "See, there are these LOLcontent communities (on Facebook) whose target are gimbaza kids; and there is a hardcore community - to which I belong. There are also gamiturowcy (the suiting people), as we call them – all those talking about the Austrian school, libertarians from SL..." |
| MA | The role of art in the community [integration] | Creating art to promote libertarian thought | The creation of a cultural musical project, which is ridiculed by some, that is known throughout the community | "I just wanted to do an anarcho-capitalist band that would be like an alternative to punk or anarcho-communist bands like Rage Against the Machine. That was the main inspiration – or rather counter-inspiration - for my project. In 2008/2009 I started to record material for the first album. It all came out very amateurishly, but in some circles it's cult material. Tracks like 'Rozstrzelać Skarbówkę' (Shoot the Treasury), and that kind of stuff, were hitting hard on anarcho-capitalistic tones, in this total negation of the state as an element contradictory to the natural order. This is where I managed to make my mark in the Polish libertarian field." |

Belonging

Figure 23 – Summary of threads leading to "Internet Access" code.

| Participant | Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| LS | Enabling | Importance of the internet access [Internet_Access] | The narratives underscore the role of internet access as a catalyst for the formation and development of the virtual libertarian community. | "Many people had to go to libraries (to access the internet in the 1990s and early 2000s) (...) I think that (because of that) some (people) of my generation may have had a problem with getting online, and continuing online life, participating in this kind of community. That's why there are a lot of young people whose presence is more visible (now)". |
| MC | | The generational differences in access [Internet_Access] | The stories highlight a generational gap in internet familiarity and accessibility. Older generations experienced internet access as a privilege, while for younger ones, it was a 'natural thing'. | "I wanted to say that the internet has given me a lot. Simply as a libertarian. Because I've met a lot of great people and learned a lot of things. But at the same time, I realize that it is a tool which helps us a lot and which harms us a lot. (...) I see the weakness of the internet. And I'm afraid that people who are 20 years younger than me don't see this weakness. Because for them, the internet is a natural thing. For me it wasn't (...) I didn't grow up with the internet, which was completely different back then. It was just ridiculously grandfatherly before there was even a Google search engine. It was incredibly hard to find anything. Incredibly hard.". |
| ML | | Transformative role of the internet [Internet_Access] | The internet has played an instrumental role in creating a shared virtual space, enabling the exchange of ideas and fostering the sense of community among libertarians. | "In fact, if someone wants to join this movement, or simply get interested in it – and has not had any experience with it before – they can do it through the virtual realm, by accessing some forums, websites of Facebook Groups. (...) If someone is now a first-year student, or is a student in general, and has some broad libertarian interests – and wants to get interested in libertarianism – they will inevitably look for it on the Internet.". |
| ML | | Inclusivity [Internet_Access] | The narratives depict that the increased internet accessibility, together with the development of the new platforms, has allowed for a broader and more inclusive community, though challenges persist. | "You could say that during the first years, if something wasn't on Facebook, it couldn't be found online (...)If someone wasn't on Facebook in the early 2010s) you could practically say he was an outsider. There was practically no way for them to find out about (libertarianism) (...) what was happening in the so-called real world - not in the virtual world, but in the real world - was a derivative and fruit of what was happening on the internet" |
| TD | | Future Concerns [Internet_Access] | Fears are raised about potential restrictions or regulations on internet access in the future and their impact on the virtual community and information exchange. | "I'm afraid of government control of the internet (...) traditional television is practically dying and, in a few decades, I suppose it will be a memory. And the internet will then be under greater control.". |

Figure 24 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Mobile Access'.

| Participant Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|
| MS | Enhanced accessibility and constant connectivity [Mobile_Access] | Smartphones and affordable mobile internet have changed how my interviewees access content and communicate. The transition from PCs to mobile devices has expanded their interaction capabilities. | "You could have used it (mobile) anywhere. At any time. There was no problem with the internet – it's hard to find a smartphone that doesn't work well with Facebook. And in the past, it was all about hardware and internet limitation." |
| TP | Evolving communication practices [Mobile_Access] | Mobile technology, especially smartphones, has revolutionized communication within the community. Instant messaging and social media platforms enable immediate and direct interactions, fostering long-term virtual relationships. | "(I am) maintaining a contact through communication software, for me (it) is purely smartphone thing. Ninety percent of this is done via smartphone, and not even a tablet. I have it too, but it's not convenient for it. The communication is strictly a smartphone thing (...) (it is) a revolution because the type of device I use to connect to the internet and communicate, has changed." |
| TD | Change of the media landscape [Mobile_Access] | The infrastructural advancements have paralleled the evolution from local to international platforms. | "The changes themselves seem to be related to the development of the technological market, i.e. greater availability of laptops, smartphones (...) I stopped consuming traditional media such as television quite early on, so I had to fill it with new media - Youtube or streaming platforms, which were gaining popularity at the time." |
| AR | Rise of social media [Mobile_Access] | The social media platforms, enabled by mobile technology, have provided community members with a space to create and share content, fostering user interaction. | "This is the revolution that social media or Web 2.0 brought us: that everyone could not only be a recipient of the content, but also its creator – unfortunately not many of us are taking advantage of; we are primarily sharers or commentators." |
| WP | Merging physical and virtual [Mobile_Access] | Mobile technology has bridged the divide between physical and virtual realms, allowing users to stay connected with their virtual communities wherever they go. | "If I get a notification that someone has added a post to one of the Facebook groups, I can check it very quickly. This also gives me a very smooth access to all the news. Honestly, I usually find out from these groups if something interesting happened in the economy or some scandal broke out in the world. There is a post right away, because someone from these tens of thousands of people who are members of those group, watched some news or read some articles and decided to share it there." |

Enabling

Figure 25 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'information Access'.

| Participant | Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MC | Enabling | Evolution of information access [Information_Access] | Changing landscape of information access and its role in shaping individuals' intellectual development. | "When I was their (younger libertarians) age, I didn't have such opportunities to have ease in acquiring information or knowledge. There was simply no internet. Or if there was, it was incredibly poor, if you look at it in the context of how it looks like today. So, this is the thing that makes me different. I think it is just a generation difference now, to be honest." |
| JS | | Content creation and dissemination [Information_Access] | The internet has significantly increased the ease of information dissemination, comparing it to traditional media. | "The possibilities of getting the message out are simply incredible, compared to the way you used to have to send out paper versions of newspapers, or sell it somewhere: on some marketplaces, or in a very limited circulation. Well, that's basically how Mać Pariadka was distributed. Mainly through trading on some marketplaces. And sometimes it was also in bookstores, but in very few. In newsagents as well. And suddenly the internet came to life and gave the possibility of reaching an increasing number of people. More and more people had access to the internet." |
| RG | | Content creation and dissemination [Information_Access] | The internet has significantly increased the ease of information dissemination, comparing it to traditional media. | "Now, it's much easier to create, it's also much easier to send that data out into the world [...] now, it is available to almost everyone. There are pros and cons of course. The plus side is that everyone can be heard, everyone can create something for others and share their thoughts. And on the other hand a lot of content is being made. At the moment we are no longer fighting over information, which in human history, it seems, was natural. Now there is an overwhelming amount of information and overweight." |
| JBW | | Information availability [Information_Access] | The digital was a crucial factor in knowledge development, facilitating a broader reach and engagement inside and outside the community | "It is probably due to the fact that libertarianism is a social philosophy which has some immanent cosmopolitan or semi-cosmopolitan elements, so it quite naturally helped me to tighten up and build contacts with the American environment on an ongoing basis" |

Figure 26 – The three dimensions of access and its impact on my interviewees' experiences

# THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF ACCESS AND ITS IMPACT ON MY INTERVIEWEES' EXPERIENCES

Tertiary, narrowest exploration of the insights gained from the previous two categories

## Enabling

### Origins

THE ORIGIN STORIES OF MY INTERLOCUTORS IN THE COMMUNITY (PARTICULARLY PROTO-LIBERTARIANS AND INTELLECTUALS) TOUCHED ON ISSUES OF ACCESS - BOTH TO VIRTUALITY AS A FORM OF INTERACTION AND THE INFORMATION AVAILABLE THROUGH IT.

### Belonging

SCHOOL AND FAMILY EXPERIENCES INFLUENCED THE SEARCH FOR A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY EMBODYING THEIR POLITICAL BELIEFS. THIS HAS BECOME A VIABLE OPTION WITH THE SPREAD OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA, WHICH HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE TO BUILD INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WHILST SHARING INFORMATION MORE EFFECTIVELY.

### Access

**INTERNET**

INTERNET ACCESS HAS BEEN INSTRUMENTAL FOR MY INTERVIEWEES IN THEIR EXPERIENCE AS VIRTUAL LIBERTARIANS, FOSTERING SHARED SPACE FOR IDEA EXCHANGE AND PROVIDING TOOLS TO MAINTAIN INTERACTIONS. INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY HAS BROADENED COMMUNITY INCLUSIVITY.

**MOBILE**

MOBILE TECH. HAS FUNDAMENTALLY RESHAPED MY INTERVIEWEES EXPERIENCES, OFFERING ENHANCED ACCESSIBILITY, EVOLVING COMMUNICATION PRACTICES (ESPECIALLY SOCIAL MEDIA), AND EFFECTIVELY MERGING THE PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL REALMS BY ALLOWING CONSTANT CONNECTIVITY.

**INFORMATION**

THE INTERVIEWEES STRESS THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF DIGITAL INFORMATION ACCESS IN THEIR INTELLECTUAL GROWTH. THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION CHANGED CONTENT CREATION AND DISSEMINATION, RESULTING IN INFORMATION AVAILABILITY THAT VASTLY EXCEEDS TRADITIONAL MEDIA, FACILITATING BROADER ENGAGEMENT

### Platforms
- Old Media
- Pre-Social
- Sharing Platforms

### Social Media
- Groups
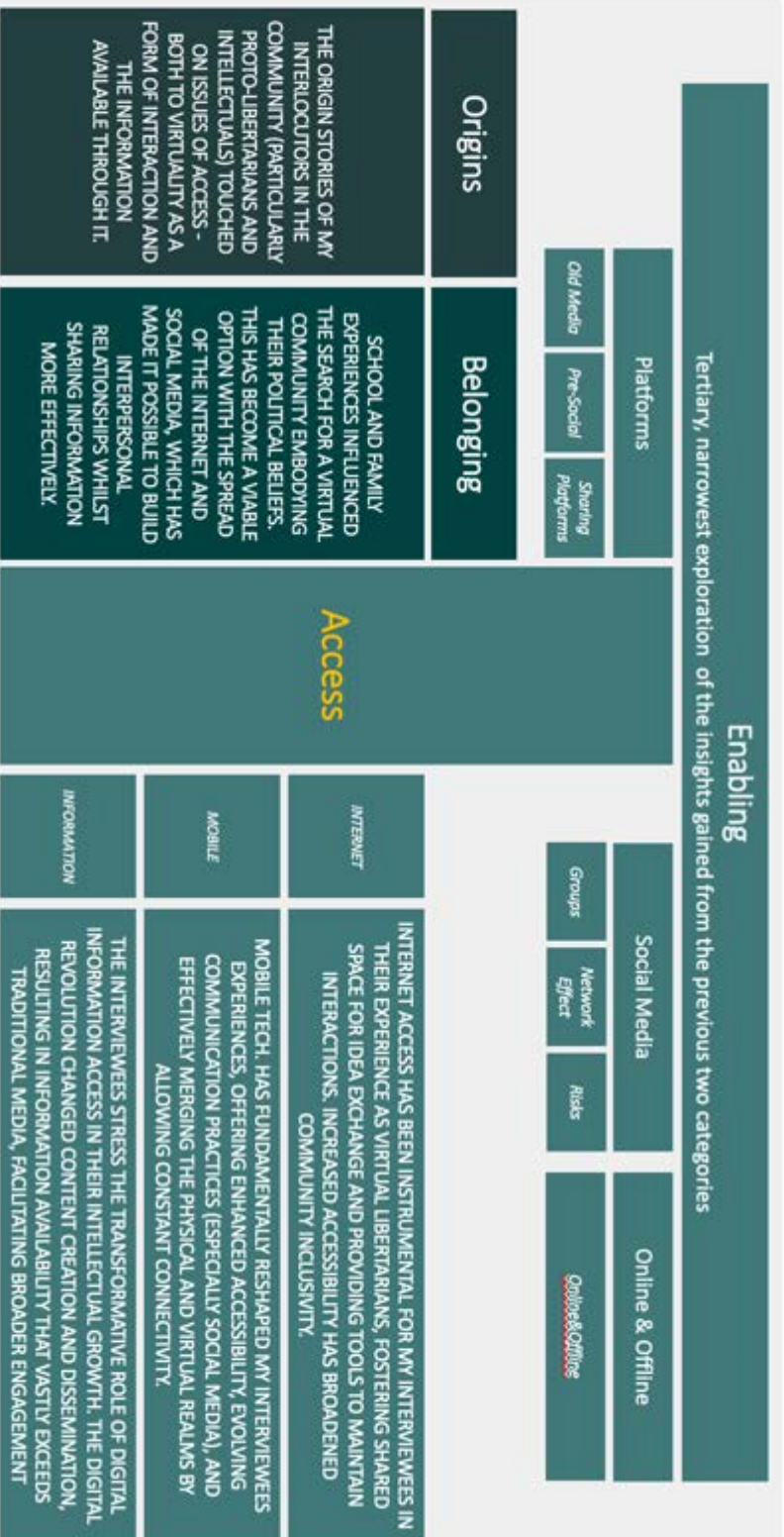- Network Effect
- Risks
- Online & Offline

Figure 27 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Printed Press and TV'.

| Participant | Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SS | Enabling | Hybridisation of media platforms [Old_Media] | It encapsulates the idea of how traditional media forms provided foundational audience and content for digital engagement, contributing to the development of virtual communities. | "Back then, the newspapers, or the printed press, and the internet worked very well together. There were even libertarian-themed magazines in the paper, briefly but there were available. There was an irregular magazine, dozens of pages of very interesting scientific content. It was called Mind Fuck. What's interesting is that it was a fully printed magazine, not digitised, and yet there was an issue where most of the content was about cryptography." |
| JS | | The role of print media [Old_Media] | Impact of print media, particularly home-grown libertarian magazines in the early 1990s, in cultivating an audience for libertarian content and fostering a sense of shared identity. | "[Mac Pariadka and An Arche! were) a kind of a newspapers, or a discussion forums in print. There were articles, discussions, some announcements, and so on. It didn't have much reach, but it reached the people who wanted it. And then, when the internet went live (...) I uploaded them all online, when I was creating my website. There was a large list of articles there." |
| MC | | The role of TV [Old_Media] | The role television played in broadcasting libertarian content to a wider audience and creating recognizable figures within the libertarian community. | "If it wasn't for TV-libertarianism, I wouldn't be an internet libertarian. I would be one of the anonymous libertarians (...) (it) was just easier for me to pass my message to others – whether libertarians or free-marketers or conservative libertarians or free-market conservatives. I just had it easier because they had already seen me. They had seen me on television." |
| MC | | Generation-dependent influence [Old_Media] | It notes how older members of the community often cite the impact of traditional media on their path to digital engagement, while younger members lean more towards digital platforms. | "Back then, television was much-much more popular. And back then teenagers watched television. Today, hardly anyone in their teens cares what they showed on TV, because there are YouTubers, simply put. This is more attractive for them, more interesting. I have no problem with that. Today I would not be able repeat what I have done. Television today is not the gateway it once was. It is something important, it is an incredibly important medium and very influential, but if we talk about young people, it is not very interesting for them." |

Figure 28 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Pre-Social Media Platforms'.

| Participant Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|
| Enabling (MM) | Role of mailing discussion groups [Pre_Social] | The primary space of communication and connection within the early virtual libertarian community as per interviewees | "(Around) 2000 or even a little earlier, I got to this mailing list. It was still the time of such mailing lists, where things were discussed with an emailing address – as they say, 'gimby nie znajo' (…) we just started (…) discussing random topics. This list was hosted on Yahoo servers, unfortunately they are not existing anymore (…) this list was called Libertarianizm_PL (…) there were two lists before - it was a combination of two previous lists. There was a group of people, including Jacek Sierpiński; some people I met later they were active on the Web. It was the first such virtual community. (…) sometime around 2005, someone told us that there was an alternative to this list, the first libertarian forum" |
| SW | Role of forums [Pre_Social] | The critical platforms for libertarians in the mid-2000s. They provided a more manageable, coherent means of communication compared to mailing lists, and acted as an essential space for ideological discussions. | "The second element was the forum, but in a way this forum was even more a form of being a libertarian (that allowed) expressing one's newly acquired views than acquiring any knowledge. Because, even though the knowledge appeared, there was so much non-substantive content on this forum, or content that was so skewed that I even see it now as a test of whether you really are a libertarian, because it was very easy to get discouraged on the basis of this forum, and those who survived the baptism of some stupid things written there, had to notice quickly (…) this forum was more an expression of a desire to be in the community than a desire to gain knowledge." |
| SG | Role of websites [Pre_Social] | Websites played a pivotal role in storing and promoting libertarian content during the pre-social media era. Content was mainly translations and authored articles by Polish libertarians, with some sites resembling online magazines. | "JS also got very much involved in (websites), and he started his own at some point. I think he had two websites, one more ideological and the other focused on random things, which was more loosely related to capitalism itself. And he also started to help a lot of people on the Internet who weren't sure what it is all about. I was more passive about it, but, as I say, it opened up a lot of new possibilities for me, both in terms of contact with people and reading texts." |
| IS | Adoption and evolution [Pre_Social] | The libertarian community had to adapt to the changing nature of communication platforms. As forums and websites became less popular, social media (especially Facebook) took over. | "And then there was the Libnet forum, where I didn't write either - it was dying out by then, because FB was born and absorbed the energy that the internet forums had before, but I read a lot of interesting and inspiring things there. I am just thinking of the old Libnet forum, in libertarian circles, surrounded by a peculiar and deserved cult." |

Figure 29 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Sharing Platforms'.

| Participant | Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MA | | Emergence of the sharing platforms [Sharing_Platforms] | The increased number of communication platforms for sharing libertarian ideas led to the simplification of content creation and distribution whilst allowing for new ways of interacting. | "The advent of YouTube and the ability to access hours or more of lectures and talks, for free … It's possible that it was a revolution on the scale of the printing press. It was that access that to me was revolutionary. That a person had a direct, free access to some things, and did not have to send a letter with a stamp – or even dollars attached to it – to get some content (...) it was enough to visit the website or the YouTube channel. So, starting from 2006, this became part of my daily routine." |
| TP | Enabling | Changes in media consumption [Sharing_Platforms] | The rise of platforms like YouTube revolutionised the accessibility and consumption of content. It was easier to consume and share, thereby reaching a wider audience and contributing to the continued popularity of libertarian ideas. | "Because, from my perspective - and I think this is kind of the trend as well – is that the video content is easier to consume. And it's also much easier to watch a vlog or a podcast whilst eating a lunch. Even if it only pops up as a suggested material on YouTube when the algorithm suggests something similar (...) The libertarian content, especially when it comes to the written words, was quite hermetically sealed on dedicated sites. With platforms like YouTube, we have one space and a very wide range of available topics for a wider audience." |
| NS | | Virtual libertarian trend on sharing platforms [Sharing_Platforms] | This theme encapsulates the early libertarian popularity driven by selected influencers on traditional media and newly emergent internet platforms like Wykop.pl and YouTube. | "I started to learn about this libertarian idea from its proponents (...) I watched interviews and lectures – it was probably mainly MC, who was then a top libertarian name in Poland (back then)." |
| JBW | | Specialization and community growth [Sharing_Platforms] | Sharing platforms allowed for a broader and more diverse discourse on libertarian philosophy, leading to an increasingly diverse community of followers. | "(Libertarianism is) a phenomenon that is increasingly more popular rather than elitist (...) the larger the group, the more it has developed quantitatively and became more and more specialised (...) let's say that some were more interested in philosophical issues, others in economic ones. When all those bitcoins and blockchain cryptocurrencies were created, some of (those people) were more interested in (digital) IT or financial issues." |

Figure 30 – Evolution of media platforms and their impact on my interviewees.



EVOLUTION OF MEDIA PLATFORMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE LIBERTARIAN COMMUNITY

**Origins**

IN THE CHAPTER TOUCHING ON THEIR BEGINNINGS IN THE COMMUNITY, MANY OF MY INTERVIEWEES EMPHASISED THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN SHAPING THE USABLE SPACE FOR THEM AND THE COMMUNITY. THE OLD MEDIA WAS A KEY ASPECT OF INITIATING COMMUNITY, THE FIRST INTERACTIVE MEDIA BONDING IT, AND SHARING MEDIA PERPETUATING IT.

**Belonging**

THE MEDIA ALSO FEATURED IN A CHAPTER TOUCHING ON ISSUES OF BELONGING. IT WAS THANKS TO THE MEDIA THAT MANY OF THE PROCESSES MENTIONED BY THE INTERVIEWEES COULD TAKE PLACE - SUCH AS SEEKING INFORMATION, MAKING CONTACTS AND PROMOTING IDEAS.

**Platforms**

**Old Media**

OLD MEDIA SET THE GROUNDWORK FOR MY INTERVIEWEES' DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT BY PROVIDING CORE CONTENT AND AUDIENCE. IT FOSTERED COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND EASED THE DIGITAL TRANSITION. HOWEVER, ITS IMPACT WAS MORE PRONOUNCED AMONG OLDER MEMBERS.

**Pre-Social**

PRE-SOCIAL PLATFORMS WERE ESSENTIAL IN INITIATING CONTACT AND ENHANCING INTERACTIONS AMONG MY INTERVIEWEES. SERVING AS THE MAIN INTERACTION HUBS, THEY ADDRESSED PREVIOUS MEDIA LIMITATIONS AND SIGNIFICANTLY SHAPED COMMUNITY'S DIRECTION BEFORE THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA, DESPITE THEIR EVENTUAL DECLINE.

**Sharing Platforms**

THE EMERGENCE OF SHARING PLATFORMS, ESPECIALLY YOUTUBE, TRANSFORMED CONTENT DISTRIBUTION, ACCESSIBILITY AND COMMUNITY INTERACTION. THIS SHIFT BROADENED LIBERTARIAN ENGAGEMENT AND EXTENDED ITS REACH BEYOND SPECIALIZED LIBERTARIAN SITES.

**Access**

Internet | Mobile | Information

**Enabling**

Tertiary, narrowest exploration of the insights gained from the previous two categories

**Social Media**

Groups | Network Effect | Risks

**Online & Offline**

Online&Offline

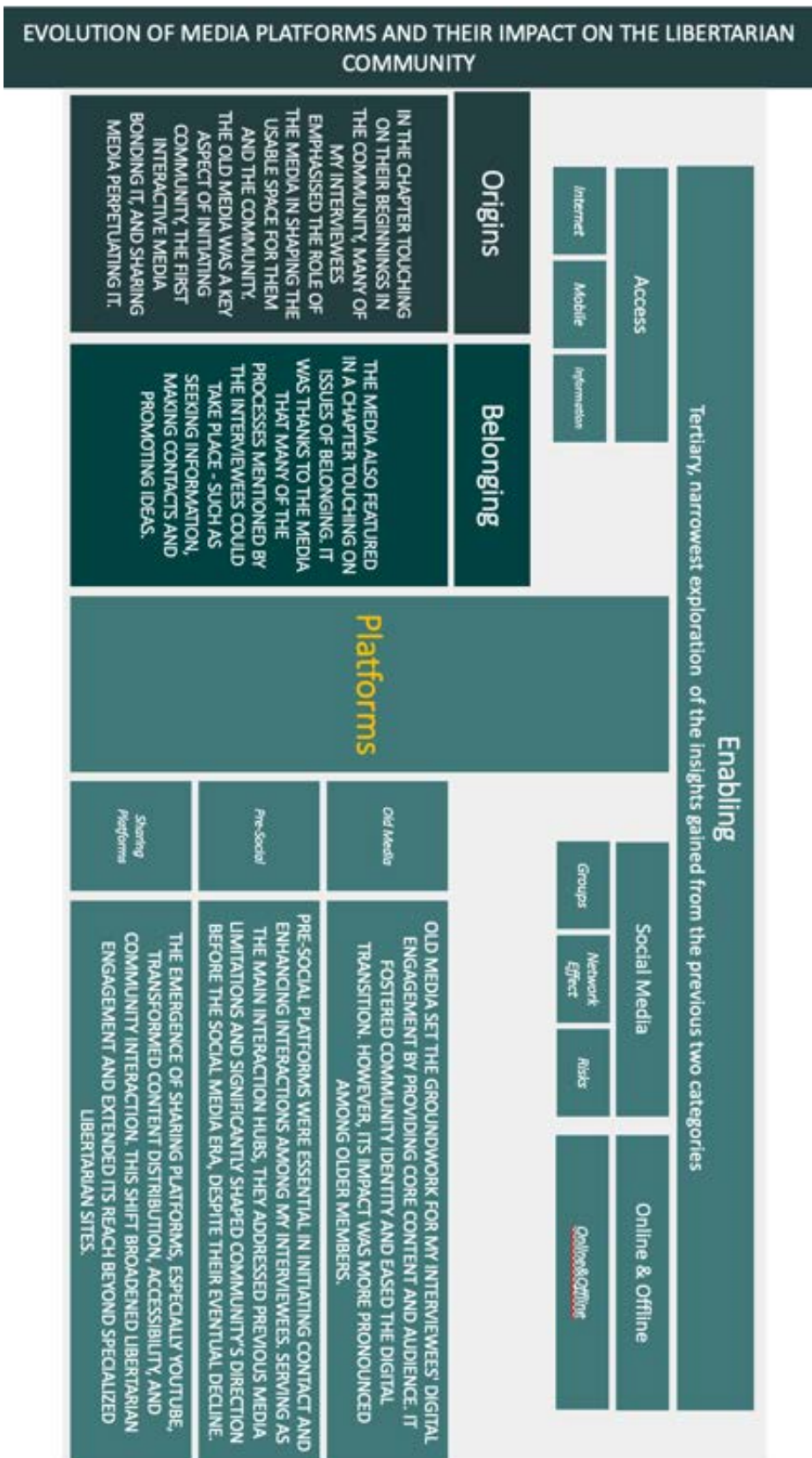
Figure 31 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Facebook Groups'.

| Participant | Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TM | Enabling | Transition to Facebook [Facebook_Groups] | Facebook Groups emerged as a pivotal feature that simplified communication. It lowered entry barriers, enabling wide access and audience reach, and allowing people without specialist knowledge to create and manage discussion spaces. | "And then Facebook came along, and it really became the centre of this community. It became the centre of communication. There are jokes that if Facebook was switched off, the Polish libertarian community would collapse after a week, because they simply wouldn't have a platform to communicate." |
| MS | | Catalyst for community engagement [Facebook_Groups] | Facebook's broad user base and continuous connectivity, especially via mobile devices, were seen as key factors that engaged more community members. | "[The most important factor in my belonging to the community was] definitely how Facebook has evolved and what it is now. Well, the vast majority … I don't know if I know anyone who doesn't have a Facebook from my peers; and how it's easily accessible. Anyone can post what they have in mind in there. Everyone can have a group there too. And it's so starting to bring people together." |
| LB | | Change in the way of communication [Facebook_Groups] | Facebook, with its multi-dimensional focus, fostered diversified discussions on political, economic, and social topics. This represented a significant shift from the one-dimensional focus of earlier platforms, contributing to a broadening of discourse in the libertarian community. | "When Facebook became a thing, all sorts of changes started to take place. First, people started to post texts that were not only meant to be solely pictures of events but were also focusing on various kinds of political or economic opinions. This provoked discussions that previously, and less frequently, used to take place during the beer-meetups." |
| MC | | Replacement of pre-social platforms [Facebook_Groups] | Facebook Groups emerged as the new hub for community interactions, rendering older communication forms like chat rooms and online forums obsolete. This shift was seen as a major factor in Facebook's dominance over other online platforms for my interviewees | "Facebook used to be smaller than it is now (…) Facebook groups used to be much less popular. If people discussed things with each other, it was mostly on forums (…) (it) has factually eaten up online forums. It has channelled a huge amount of communication between people. (…)Facebook groups used to be much less popular. If people discussed things with each other, it was mostly on forums. You couldn't observe anyone in those (media) because Facebook didn't offer that option (yet)". |

Figure 32 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Network Effect'.

| Participant Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|
| JBW | Dominance of social media platforms [Network_Effect] | The network effect was seen as a key factor in the rise and dominance of social media platforms, particularly Facebook. As more users joined these platforms, their value and utility increased, leading to a decline in the use of other media platforms. | "This is where the so-called network effects came into play more and more. That is to say, at a certain point, there was a consolidation in terms of communication platforms, online platforms, there were fewer and fewer of them. And they began to attract more and more users. We know how the principle of network effects works. A given good or service is the more useful it is, the more valuable it is, the better it fulfils its function the more users use it. And at some point Facebook did indeed dominate this space." |
| AR | Transformation of user interactions [Network_Effect] | As the user volume on Facebook increased, it shifted from a recipient model to a creator model, enabling users to not only consume but also create content. | "Then, this is the revolution that social media or Web 2.0 brought us: that everyone could not only be a recipient of the content, but also its creator – unfortunately not many of us are taking advantage of; we are primarily sharers or commentators." |
| AC | Demographic shifts and changing user attitudes [Network_Effect] | The interviewees observed demographic shifts among Facebook users, with younger users losing interest in the platform. They also noted a change in user attitudes towards communication on the platform, with increasing instances of unpleasant, aggressive, and rude behavior. | "Fact (is) that FB is now for old men. In Poland, I have the impression that this trend is slowly catching on, but when I talk to friends in the States who are a bit older than me and, for example, have children who are ten years old, a ten-year-old there would sooner jump off a bridge than get on FB. FB is for old people." |
| Enabling | | | "I'm a bit on the fringe, between those younger people who seem to know only the world of Facebook or mostly know the world of Facebook, and those older people who just started completely offline (...) the younger people, they have already started from that FB world. And I have the difference that, because I was already a bit older when the FB world started, at the beginning I was still, of course, rather young, but at that time the FB was small, in inverted commas. Now that it is big, I have the impression that it has revealed all its dark side (...) So it |
| AC | The dichotomy of online and offline worlds [Network_Effect] | The interviewees noted a generational difference in the perception of online and offline worlds. Older users saw a clear demarcation between these worlds, while younger users were perceived to identify more deeply with the online world, experiencing both its positive and negative aspects more intensely. | seems to me that younger people may have this problem, that they don't have this perspective yet. They live it a lot more (...) I have the impression that those people who identify themselves deeply with the online world, they may associate it much more intensely than I do, with both the good things and the bad things." |

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**Figure 33 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Risks'.**

| Participant | Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TD | | Tabloidisation of content [Risks] | The rise of social media has led to a tabloidisation of content, with a focus on sensationalism over substance. This has led to a decline in the quality of content discussed on these platforms. | "The internet has changed too. There is less and less written text. We rely more on images, on video. And this can actually cause discomfort. We can see this, for example, from the development of platforms that are becoming increasingly popular. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok – where text is practically irrelevant, unless it appears on video. This is such a form of simplification, dilution of the message." |
| TM | | Dependence on the platform [Risks] | The geographical dispersion of the community makes the absence of the internet or Facebook potentially detrimental to the community's ability to function on such a scale. | "Then Facebook came along, and it really became the centre of this community. It became the centre of communication. There are jokes that if Facebook was switched off, the Polish libertarian community would collapse after a week, because they simply wouldn't have a platform to communicate. It should be remembered that this community in Poland is quite geographically dispersed. That is, for example, in Krakow there is a generally quite strong, numerous, close-knit community – and in fact, about every third libertarian I meet is from Krakow, if not more. Sometimes from Wrocław. But in Gdansk, where I'm from, the circle is very narrow." |
| PJ | Enabling | Information bubbles [Risks] | Users intentionally operate within information bubbles, selecting groups according to their ideological prejudices. This leads to a certain level of polarisation within the community. | "It seems to me that FB and social media bringing all these groups together into one network – making it so that people could participate in a lot of different networks through one portal – made it much more efficient to communicate (...)[however] it could actually, and can still, drive people in information bubbles, because people enter these groups and choose groups according to their various ideological prejudices. It may be - and this can be observed with libertarian groups on Facebook - that these groups are not only profiled in terms of various other preferences, but also, for example, they are very strongly profiled in terms of libertarian beliefs, around morality." |
| AR | | Content availability [Risks] | The shift to social media platforms has resulted in a significant amount of content not being indexed by search engines like Google, making it difficult to access past discussions and content. | "[If you post on Facebook] it isn't something that you come back to after two weeks (...) [with time it] fall down on the Facebook wall. (...) People are getting wasted on Facebook, contributing to pointless discussions (...) walls of texts are created on Facebook groups, good ones. Nice arguments, (clearly) laid out. That should be on some websites today and get a proper editing. (It should) be googleable" |

Figure 34 – The impact and influence of social media (especially Facebook) on my interviewees' experience as virtual libertarians.
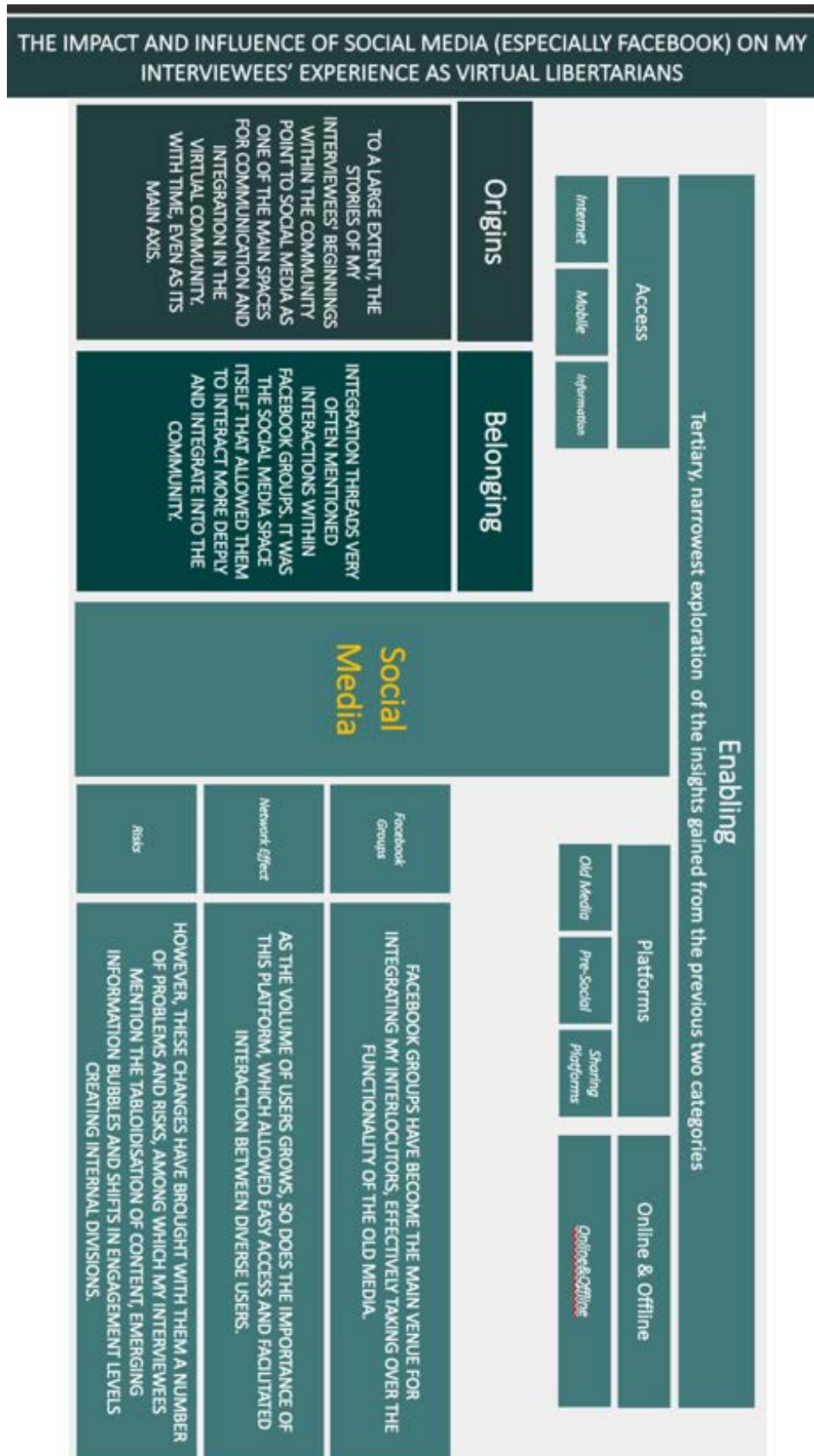
**Figure 35 – Summary of the codes arising from the subsection 'Virtual and non-virtual space'.**

| Participant | Category | Theme | Description | Sample from participant stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| AC | Enabling | Transition from virtual to physical [Online_Offline] | Several interviewees contemplate their journey from virtual participation to real-world engagement within the libertarian community. They emphasize the significance of transitioning their online connections into tangible, offline interactions. | "It also meant that I had a lot of friends who I met first on the Internet and then only in person. You met someone in person because you exchanged a few words. You already associated a name and then when there was some offline event, people wrote to each other (...) also the beginnings of personal relationships, which could be transferred - although not necessarily - offline." |
| AR | | Emphasis on real-life networking [Online_Offline] | Multiple interviewees highlight the significance of nurturing real-life connections over virtual ones. The notion that a truly effective network extends beyond the digital realm resonates strongly. This perspective aligns with broader societal shifts where offline social interactions are perceived as more substantial and genuine. | "Real social network is where we are most active, and I think the most powerful. We also have the biggest influence. I can say that I see every libertarian in Warsaw once a month for a beer meet-ups." |
| GB | | Complex personal identities [Online_Offline] | A recurrent theme observed among the interviewees is the multifaceted nature of their identities, which extends beyond their affiliation with libertarianism. While they proudly identify as libertarians, they emphasise that it is just one facet of their lives. They value diverse social interactions and seek a harmonious balance between their libertarian interests and other aspects of their lives. | "I have friends who are not libertarians, I like to meet with such friends. I have friends who I don't talk to about libertarianism, and I'm very happy that I don't talk to them about libertarianism. Sometimes when I have been around libertarians for too long, and yet another discussion about monarchy versus democracy starts – the fifth day in a row – it just makes me tired (...) My jokes aren't just about libertarianism. My metaphors and analogies are not just libertarian related. If I'm walking down the street and I see a bank, then I don't pull out the garlic and the cross because fractional reserve is tucked away in that bank. Who knows, maybe that also suppresses my experience of being a fully-fledged libertarian?". |
| NG | | Interplay of online and offline [Offline_Offline] | While the internet serves as a platform for networking and disseminating ideas, the practical application of my interviewees beliefs typically takes place in the offline realm. This perspective suggests that the internet plays a supporting role by facilitating connections and information sharing, while real-world actions and interactions offer tangible opportunities for these ideas to be put into practice. | "This impact of new technology on libertarians is a double-edged sword. It allows easier access to like-minded people, despite physical distance. That is, it expands our bubble, makes people aware that there are many more people thinking this way. And that is certainly an advantage (...) to what extent can the Internet be a tool for the propagation of free ideas, and to what extent can it be a tool for real life, real, physical life? I am convinced that the two must go hand in hand. And if people in real life share both how they live and what they say, they promote this idea. The Internet alone is certainly not enough." |

Figure 36 – The interplay of the online and offline realms for my interviewees' participation in the community.



INTERPLAY OF THE ONLINE AND OFFLINE REALMS FOR MY INTERVIEWEES' PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMUNITY