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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

An Ethnographic Comparison Between Iceland and Germany

Julia Tiemann-Kollipost
Political Participation in the Digital Age

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Table of Content

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1 Introduction

It was a Thursday in late April 2016. And like most Thursdays since completing the main part of fieldwork in late 2014, I checked both websites that I've been researching for the last four years. I just did not feel comfortable about completely losing track of the fields, and their easy accessibility was just too seductive to not return to them, at least for a few moments each week. So I did as I almost always did that day: clicked on the two symbols in my browser's bookmark bar to load both websites in adjacent tabs and then opened the Excel document in which I keep track of any interesting actions and changes.

Starting with the Icelandic website Betri Reykjavík, I copied and pasted titles and links to the three new ideas that users had set in during the last few days. One user suggested installing a play area for dogs between BSÍ, the central bus station and the recreational park area of Hljómskálagarðinn (cf. Thoroddsen). Another user urged the construction of an underpass for pedestrians and cyclists under Borgarvegur street in the Grafarvogur neighbourhood (cf. Sigurðardóttir). The third idea raised awareness of the fire hazard caused by arson in mailboxes overflowing with newspapers and thus suggested terminating delivery of the free dailies (cf. Hjálmarsson). I also checked the numbers of ideas "officially in progress", "officially successful› and "officially failed" and noticed that nothing has changed in any of the three categories in the last week. I also check the categories of ideas "trending", "top read", and "top voted". The idea about moving the domestic airport out of the city centre has been heading the "trending" list for 20 months; joined there by constructing a golf course in the Fossvogsdalur neighbourhood for the last eight months. Those ideas are amongst the most contested on Betri Reykjavík, for almost exactly as many users voted for as against them.[1] So it's no surprise that the idea of moving the airport is also at the top of the most read ideas; together with a suggestion to rename one of the pubs Bravó and Húrra in the city cen-

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1   While 133 users voted for moving the airport, 132 voted against it (cf. Sigurðsson).

tre to prevent confusion between the two (cf. Andrés Ingi) and the proposal to allow free parking for small cars in the city centre (cf. Ástgeirsson). The first two ideas have been the most read for the last eight months. This week the ideas that received the most votes were a suggestion to install bicycle pumps throughout the city (cf. Aradottir Pind), fees for the use of studded tires on cars (cf. Þengilsson), and the cleaning of cycling paths to avoid accidents (cf. Ágústsdóttir).

Closing this tab and opening the LiquidFriesland tab, I am shocked. My browser tells me that there is no website available under that URL. I retry by clicking on the symbol in the bookmark bar without success. Next, I go to the website of the district of Friesland directly and try to access LiquidFriesland *that way. I have no luck, instead I stumble over a press release, stating that* LiquidFriesland *was terminated at the end of April. I cannot believe it! What I had often nervously joked about has come true: one of my two fields has gone offline. What does that mean for my research? Should I look for a new field and start all over? Should I just stop pursuing my PhD?*

These initial emotional reactions occurred naturally. However, things quickly shifted back into perspective: of course, the dissolution of a research field shapes both research and analysis. But never does it automatically lead to the end of its investigation. In other words, *LiquidFriesland* going offline was to be regarded as just another observation of the field, and was to be analysed and understood as such.

Furthermore, this incident perfectly illustrates what is perhaps the main challenge of research in, on and about the Internet: it changes quickly. Over the past two decades, Information and Communications Technologies – or ICTs – have arguably permeated most parts of people's everyday lives across the globe. Working, learning, shopping, dating, and training are just a few activities that are now also and increasingly happening online. Websites and applications remain beta versions forever and change nearly daily to better suit the demands of their users. Ever decreasing in size, digital devices have found the way from data centres over workplaces into the home, and increasingly frequently, into people's pockets and hands.

However, it is not only leisure activities likes those mentioned above which are also increasingly taking place in digital space. ICTs are also posing a tremendous challenge to traditional media, predominantly through the runaway success of Social Media and, with it, the dissolution of the information monopoly once held by professional journalists and news outlets. At the same time, civil and political activities as diverse as voting, signing petitions, and taking part in boycotts are now increasingly being done online. ICTs also hold unique opportunities for

citizens to have a more direct influence on political decision-making processes by suggesting ideas on how to improve everyday life in their area. That is the case in the research fields *Betri Reykjavík* in Iceland's capital, and *LiquidFriesland* in the district of Friesland in northern Germany.

There are several things we need to understand better about these developments. First, we need to better understand how ICTs influence citizens' information collection regarding political news. The ways in which people completely shift their information collecting to online outlets (both of traditional and Social Media), or in which they combine online and offline media, or in which they completely ignore ICTs in information collecting, has consequences for citizens' information practices. Here information is to be seen as a prerequisite to political participation. Investigating people's information practices allows us to reason about citizens' general dispositions toward political participation as well as the likelihood that they will engage in online modes of participation.

Second, we do not know enough about how ICTs influence citizens' repertoires of political participation modes. Knowing whether citizens' repertoires of political participation modes broaden because of ICTs would help to more closely assess if ICTs really only facilitate "slacktivism" (cf. Serup Christensen, 'Political Activities on the Internet') or if online participation modes make it possible to take part politically in new, meaningful and flexible ways.

Third, changes in citizens' political participation practices around ICTs have not been comprehensively researched. Do people participate more frequently because of the opportunities provided by ICTs? Do ICTs facilitate the integration of political participation into citizens' everyday lives, including for those who were previously not involved for whatever reason? Do citizens perceive changes in their own political efficacy, both internally and externally? Whatever the case, if we do not develop further understanding on how ICTs affect citizens' participatory practices, we will not only be able to project both the state of digital democracy in Germany and Iceland today, but will also be better able to utilise the potential of ICTs to mobilise citizens to participate politically over the longer term.

Fourth, by looking at how citizens use and make sense of online participation tools like *Betri Reykjavík* or *LiquidFriesland*, we can gain valuable insights about this mode of online political participation. With such knowledge, we could develop guidelines for both politicians and administration, as well as programmers on how to design and implement effective citizen/user-friendly online participation tools. This is also the reason why investigating the interfaces, that is the communication and interaction between the three prime actor groups – users/citizens, programmers, and politicians and administrators – in online participation tools like *Betri Reykjavik* and *LiquidFriesland* is worthwhile. It is only by learning more about the conflicts, irritations, and good moments in interactions between

those actors that we can further develop online participation tools that fit citizens' needs and that they therefore see as worth incorporating into their everyday lives.

Studies by political scientists or communication scholars on political participation often lack the micro-perspective on those that actually take part, those that choose to participate in one way or another, those that mix-and-match modes of participation right through the artificial boundaries of offline and online worlds, always true to their everyday lives. The micro-perspective offered by Cultural Anthropology does indeed have important and insightful contributions to make to the study of political participation. Focusing on the actual participants, listening to their stories, their descriptions and their reasonings promises to open a hitherto strongly under-researched dimension, that of participants' diverse motives for and perspectives on political participation: "[e]thnographic research on virtual worlds provides a perspective no other approach to technology and society can offer: it can demonstrate imbrications of technology, culture, and selfhood with significant and enduring social consequences" (Boellstorff et al. 195).

This book makes a further contribution by taking a comparative approach to investigate two online participation tools, the Icelandic *Betri Reykjavík* and the German *LiquidFriesland*. By adopting a mix of both face-to-face and online ethnographic methods to learn about, speak to and understand users, programmers, and politicians and administrators connected to the tool, I set out to determine the tools' relevance both to political decision-making processes and people's everyday lives. By referring back to data I collected about *Betri Reykjavík* in 2011–12, and by checking the fields and remaining in contact with interlocutors after the main fieldwork phase ended in 2014, it has been possible to observe cyclical changes and challenges the fields have had to face over a period of several years. As I broached in the vignette at the beginning of this introduction, one research field, *LiquidFriesland*, was even investigated over its complete lifecycle – from launch to deletion.

This study has its roots in two main areas of academic research: political participation, and Internet and Politics. Online participation tools like *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* question established classifications of participation modes and definitions of political participation. In that way, I argue that online participation tools do have a strengthening effect on direct, participatory and deliberative strands of democracy, thus chipping away at the hegemonic aspirations of representative democracies established both in Iceland and Germany.

Seen from both a technological and a societal perspective, ICTs – and first and foremost the Internet –have forever altered the ways in which people communicate, interact, and generally take part in life. So-called Social Media generally "offer numerous benefits, including the abilities to carefully craft a public or semi-public self-image, broaden and maintain our social connections, enhance

our relationships, increase access to social capital, and have fun" (Baym, 'Social Networks' 400). Instead of characterising those changes in information and participation practices as either good or bad, this book suggests a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which Social Media differ from other media. Moreover, it examines the evident suitability of Social Media to accommodate political practices, as well as motivating and engaging people in political participation.

Regarding the outline of the book, a chapter on the state of research follows this introduction. It focuses on research in the areas of political participation and on the intersection of the Internet and politics. The research fields *LiquidFriesland* and *Betri Reykjavík* are then discussed in detail. Following that, the methods employed in this study – participant observation, interviews, and focus groups – are presented and contextualised. The last chapter of the book is concerned with the study's results and their discussion. Here, the focus is on political participation repertoires today, the enabling versus the simulation of (online) participation, political participation in times of crisis and times of affluence, and the role of geographical proximity in (online) political participation. The "insertions" in the book, "Doing Ethnography I-III", aim to condense the meta-commentary and my reflections regarding the respective chapters to follow: research fields, methodology, and results and discussion.

2 State of Research

In this chapter, I look at the two main research areas that this book draws on and contributes to: political participation, and the Internet and politics. As there are comparatively few cultural anthropologists working in either area, this chapter outlines the potential contribution that an anthropological gaze can make.[1] The cultural anthropological perspective differs here to political or media studies perspectives insofar as it sees the everyday of the users/actors as central, and is therefore only indirectly interested in media-technological artefacts themselves (cf. Schönberger 202).

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1   Of course, that is not to say that politics or digitalisation are not objects of their own anthropological research tradition. There have, for example, been three recent anthologies on anthropological research in political fields (Fenske; Adam and Vonderau; Rolshoven and Schneider). The study of questions relating to gender (for example in the DFG-research group Recht – Geschlecht – Kollektivität: Prozesse der Normierung, Kategorisierung und Solidarisierung led by Beate Binder at Humboldt-University Berlin), protests (e.g. Schönberger and Sutter, Kommt herunter, reiht euch ein), and policies (e.g. the DFG-research group Participative development of rural regions. Everyday cultural negotiations of the European Union's LEADER program led by Ove Sutter at Bonn University) are research areas with long and on-going traditions in the discipline. In regards to digitalisation, the German Association of Cultural Anthropology and Folklore Studies' (dgv) "Digitization in Everyday Life" section in particular has been an incubator for diverse anthropological approaches to digitalisation. Its publications have included Koch's anthology Digitisation. Theories and Concepts for Empirical Cultural Research (2017).

2.1 *Update Loading?* – (Re)defining Political Participation

Political participation is the central issue of democracy.[2] As such, this chapter summarises research on political participation in three parts. Firstly, it provides an historical overview of the foci of traditional political participation research, that is the recording and classification of various modes of participation as well as the examination of favourable conditions for political participation. Secondly, it shows how new modes of participation coming out of the political and societal changes of the last century have forced scholars to update hegemonic, conservative definitions of political participation. Thirdly, it examines how definitions of political participation are central to democratic theory discourse, and in doing so, shows how online participation tools such as *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* challenge the status quo, representative democracy.

2.1.1 Foci of Traditional Research on Political Participation

Since its beginnings in the 1940s, political participation research has tended to focus on two key areas: the recording and classification of the various modes of political participation, and the examination of participation and the conditions which facilitate it (cf. Soßdorf 77). In the following paragraphs, I look at both areas in detail.

The recording and classifying modes of political participation dates back to the beginnings of research in this area. At the outset, research centered on voting behaviour and elections. The focus on election-centred modes of political participation such as contacting politicians or political parties, as well as engaging in election campaigns, continued into the early 1960s. However, as various societal and political changes unfolded, the spectrum of modes of political participation began to expand enormously. From the late 1960s onwards, other modes of political participation had moved to the forefront. Protests, demonstrations, sit-ins, and boycotts were only a few of the modes that developed during the heyday of

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2   Since both research fields, *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*, are identified as venues of political participation directed at influencing concrete local political decision-making processes (see chapter 4, Research Fields), the research focus here is on political participation. While there are relatively few cultural anthropologists working in the field of political participation, it is part of a substantially larger body of literature on the concept of participation in general, and in which there are a number of (social) anthropologists working (e.g. Cornwall). However, the research area of political participation, including the literature predominantly authored by political scientists, is best suited to the research questions at hand.

the civil rights and student movements, as well as the New Social Movements of the 1970s. With a postmaterialist change of values in the 1990s, modes of civic engagement and voluntary work have also increasingly become understood as political participation (cf. Norris; Putnam; cf. Verba, Schlozman, et al.). More recently, van Deth has argued that the newest developments predict the continued dissolution of boundaries both between societal spheres; and of differentiation between the different roles which these spheres designate for citizens (cf. 'Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft' 172).

Since the beginnings of research in this area, it has been customary to further characterise and categorise the different modes of political participation along binary lines: constituted/non-constituted, legal/illegal, legitimate/illegitimate, and conventional/unconventional. Naturally, authors dealing with the categorisation of modes of political participation did not consult all of them simultaneously and equally. These binary classifications have long been the standard tool-kit for scholars researching political participation and remain so today, with most reproducing these classifications in an unquestioned and uncontested manner in their work (cf. Haunss 34).

In the following, I will outline how these classifications developed conceptually, before suggesting that they should, in fact, be treated with caution. While accepting that classifications and taxonomies always work with simplified and unrealistic ideal types (cf. Schmidt-Hertha and Tippelt 25), one must nevertheless be wary of the normative potential of classifying modes of political participation along those lines. In this case, questions of agency and authority in particular have to be considered. Or, in other words: who has the agency and the authority to decide what is a legitimate form of participation, and what is not?

It is nevertheless rewarding to take a brief look at these binary categorisations, especially as they have the longest tradition in this area of research. The question of legality and illegality appears to be relatively undisputed, at least within democratic societies. In most cases, acts and modes are participation can be classified according to a country's laws. The same can said of constituted/non-constituted modes, especially as few modes of political participation are actually established in law, one being the right to vote. Kaase argues that the costs and consequences for participating in constituted ways are especially low, since a binding rule establishes the context of participation for all participants (cf. 147).

Defining the legitimacy/illegitimacy of political participation is more problematic. In my opinion, due to its' extreme subjectivity, legitimacy is the most diffuse and problematic of these binary criteria. As (il)legitimacy appears to be the aggregated expression of attitudes of individual citizens toward a specific mode of participation (cf. Kaase 148), logically one should never be able to speak of (il)legitimacy as an established criteria; rather, there should be as many versions of

(il)legitimacy as people making up their minds about each, single specific act of political participation. Nevertheless, it is unusual to read of multiple legitimacies from people with different point of views. Rather, one is usually presented with a few dominant voices that exert power and interpretational sovereignty by either deeming an act of political participation legitimate or illegitimate. This can have far-reaching consequences for the groups of actors involved. For example, insecure and timid participants at a demonstration may withdraw from participating in similar events after a politician publicly deems it illegitimate. It becomes clear then that framing or classifying modes of political participation as (il)legitimate raises a number of problems and questions around agency, authority, and interpretational sovereignty.

By introducing the binary of conventional and unconventional political participation, Barnes and Kaase aim to combine the legal constitutional and legitimacy dimensions. For the authors, conventional modes of political participation are centred around established institutionalised elements of the political system that appear established, without being institutionalised themselves (cf. Kaase 148). In contrast, they define unconventional participation as "behavior that does not correspond to norms of laws and custom that regulate political participation under a particular regime" (as cited in de Nève and Olteanu 15). Soon after the release of the work, Barnes and Kaase were criticised for failing to adequately operationalise the unconventional dimension. Not only did the unconventional dimension mix political activities with differing degrees of 'legitimacy', but also with differing legal statuses (cf. Kaase 148).

Indeed, the question of convention is context-dependent and changeable, since cultural, political, societal and social processes are decisive in the public perception of a participatory mode (cf. de Nève and Olteanu 15). In that way, many acts of participation that may have once been viewed as unconventional become conventional over time (cf. Hoecker 10; cf. Fuchs as cited in de Nève and Olteanu 15). Thus, the relevance and analytical gain of categorising acts of political participation according to their (un)conventionality has been increasingly questioned (cf. Hoecker 10; cf. Haunss 35). Although de Nève and Olteanu's updated definition of unconventional participation is interesting, it does not appear to offer enough to justify categorising participation into conventional and unconventional modes.

Overall, the analytical gain offered by all four prominent categorises of political participation is questionable. Classifying acts as (il)legitimate and (un)conventional raises complicated entanglements regarding questions of agency, authority, and interpretational sovereignty. Indeed, the characterisation of political acts along all these dichotomies appears especially hopeless in the light of today's rapid expansion of the repertoire of political participation modes (see upcoming subchapter). Nevertheless, it is important to understand and contextualise typol-

ogies and categories as the central approach to (political) participation research across a number of disciplines, including social anthropology (e.g. Cornwall). My findings and analysis will show that these categorisations of political participation remain deeply entrenched in the views of politicians and administration, programmers, and citizens (prospective users).

The second key area of political participation, the examination of favourable conditions for political participation, is far more contested than that of recording and classifications of political participation. Over the years, scholars have developed various models with differing degrees of empirical cogency and theoretical strengths. For the sake of concision, only the in my eyes most promising model to date, Verba et al.'s *Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM)* is explained here.

CVM draws together and refines two other approaches, *the Socio-Economic Standard Modell (SES)* and *Rational-Choice-Theory (RC)* (cf. Verba, Schlozman, et al. 525). Verba et al. point out that resources like education, income, and social status (the core assumption of the SES-model) cannot alone explain levels of political participation. Not only do the authors expand the definition of socio-economic resources to include time and civic skills (communicative and organisational competences), but they also add two other variables, motivation and network (cf. 267ff.).

The motivation variable is made up of four concepts, each of which has been widely investigated within political participation research: political interest, political information (in the sense of knowledge), political efficacy, and political identification. First, political interest is the central factor within the motivation variable. Countless empirical studies have found that "[c]itizens who are interested in politics – who follow politics, who care about what happens, who are concerned with who wins and who loses – are more politically active" (Verba, Schlozman, et al. 345). Second, political information describes the knowledge of everyday political events, structural or institutional contexts, as well as political actors (cf. Soßdorf 82). Third, "the sense of political efficacy", which was first investigated by Campbell et al. in the 1950s, is defined as "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process" (Campbell 187). Campbell et al. found that citizens who judge themselves to be politically competent and see the political system as open to the individual exertion of influence are more likely participate politically (cf. 189). Other researchers further developed Campbell et al.'s unidimensional concept of political efficacy to differentiate between internal and external efficacy (cf. Chamberlain 2f.). Here, "external efficacy" refers to the belief that the political elites and the political system are responsible and responsive (cf. Stark 77), and "internal efficacy" describes the belief in one's own ability to influence political matters. While the various influences of the Internet on political participation will be dealt with elsewhere,

it is interesting to note here that both Serup Christensen (cf. 'Slacktivism' 15) and Colombo et al. (in an investigation of 15 countries) (cf. as cited in Escher, 'Mobilisierung' 461), found that Internet use increases both political interest and internal political efficacy. Fourth, understanding political identification as a kind of path dependency, Verba et al. investigated the strength of ties with a particular policy (cf. Soßdorf 82). Combining both the resource and the motivation variable, they state that "interest, information, efficacy, and partisan intensity provide the desire, knowledge, and self-assurance that impel people to be engaged in politics. But time, money, and skills provide the wherewithal without which engagement is meaningless" (354).

Verba et al. attribute slightly less importance to the facilitating effects of the network variable on political participation. In this context, a "network" refers to work surroundings, various forms of clubs and associations, and religious groups as both "training grounds for civil skills" and as "a site for political recruitment" (369). Drawing together all three variables – resources, mobilisation, and networks –, allows the researcher to reach detailed conclusions about the favourability of conditions for political participation in various settings. This will be shown at various occasions throughout this book. Nevertheless, causal links between these factors can never be unambiguously determined, as Brady et al point out: "[p]olitical interest and political efficacy, for example, certainly facilitate political activity, but activity presumably enhances interest and efficacy as well" (271).

2.1.2 New Modes – New Definition?
Defining Political Participation Through the Ages

A rapid growth in the modes of political participation has been detectable since research began in the 1940s.[3] The number of prevalent modes has naturally influenced work on defining participation throughout the decades. Nevertheless, Verba et al.'s definition of political participation, which remains the standard definition today, lists only seven different modes (cf. 51ff.). By the 1990s, however, scholars like Parry et al. had begun to list more than 20 different modes (cf. 39ff.). In 2014, van Deth points out that "the list of modes of political participation is long and

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3   Charles Tilly coined the term repertoire to describe the "variable ensemble of performances" with different targeted outcomes from which social movements pick and mix (3). It also appears to be a suitable term to describe the possibilities for the actions of individuals, which is the focus in this book. Repertoires evolve historically, both over the period that a social movement exists and within the biography of an individual, and they contain a variety of different modes of participation (cf. Schönberger and Sutter, 'Protesthandeln' 24).

gets longer almost daily", ('Map' 349) . According to van Deth, recognising a participation mode has become increasingly difficult these days because of the rapid expansion of diverse political activities all around the world (cf. ibid.). Because of this, an update to the definition of political participation appears imperative.

There is a number of reasons for the development of modes of political participation. In this section, I will provide a brief overview and possible reasons for the "waves" of expansion in the repertoire of political participation in the US and Europe, as well as a brief historic overview of research in this area. Political participation research initially developed out of the study of voting behaviour, especially in the light of suffrage, which meant the inclusion of ever-growing segments of society – including women, minorities, and younger people. In the 1950s, research began to focus on engagement within unions, political parties, and other associations, but these groups were still predominantly investigated for their effects on voting behaviour (cf. Stark 43).[4] Campbell et al. were the first to take other activities, albeit still revolving around the election as the prime mode of political participation (such as taking part in campaign rallies, donating money to candidates, or campaigning), into consideration (cf. 28ff.). At the end of the 1950s, Lane started to break away from the concentration on elections and investigated political participation modes such as approaching politicians, membership in political organisations, and taking part in political discussions (cf. as cited in Stark 46).

Although the modes of participation that scholars investigated continued to grow and resisted any long-term categorisation, the definition of political participation has remained surprisingly static and uncontested since Verba et al.'s original work was published. In different articles from the 1960s, scholars did make some minor alterations and did slightly expand their definition, but by and large, political participation was and is still seen today as "those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (Verba, Nie, et al. 46).[5] However, there are a number of problems with this insistence on a traditional defi-

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4   Markus Steinbrecher points out that many early modes of political participation already existed but were not taken seriously by most researchers because, at least in the public eye, they had not been properly institutionalised (cf. as cited in Stark 44). This suggests another fascinating research question, albeit one outside the scope of this thesis. Namely, an investigation of the reasons, structures, and contexts that bring scholars to include a certain mode of participation in their work, while excluding others, and by that significantly contributing to the framing of non-institutionalised modes of political participation as minor and of less importance, or as *illegitimate*.

5   In his article "Is it Time to Update the Definition of Political Participation", British political scientist Stuart Fox meticulously illustrates the short conceptual distance from

nition of political participation and attempts by scholars like Jan van Deth, who have dared to conceptualise an updated definition of political participation, have been especially fruitful.

When using a definition that has become cast in stone for over 50 years, researchers may face an imminent danger – that they (subconsciously) analyse the results of empirical investigations in a biased and restricted way in order to fit them into the predominant theoretical concept. Moreover, it can mean that researchers are blind to or have a blinkered view of developments that challenge these established concepts (cf. Theocharis and Deth 160).[6] No doubt the researcher will fit in with the scientific mainstream by sticking to established theory, but this will also limit the ability to generate new insights – surely the main aim of scientific and scholarly investigations.

An analytical blindness is evident in the minimal impact that the major societal and technological developments of the last 50 years have had on the definition of political participation. Those developments have fundamentally shaped the ways in which people see the world, see democracy, see policy(-making) and decision-making, and most importantly, take part (politically) within it. It is hard to believe that these changes have rarely even merited a footnote to Almond and Verba's 1960s "gospel" of participation. Van Deth points out that "(t)he continuous expansion of the modes of participation has confronted many researchers with the dilemma of using either a dated conceptualization excluding many new modes of political participation or stretching their concepts to cover almost everything" ('Map' 351). This becomes especially problematic once one recognises that "[i]f the definition and meaning of democratic engagement is constantly redefined, researchers cannot stick to measures and taxonomies of political participation that proved their usefulness decades ago: the conclusion we draw about the quality of democracy depend on our definition of democratic engagement" (Theocharis and Deth 159).

These observations inevitably hint at the need for a new, more flexible definition of political participation that includes the newer modes of participation that

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Almond and Verba (1963) to later texts by other authors on political participation in the United Kingdom.

6   This conservative approach towards a research area is exemplified by Hooghe's review of Jan van Deth's suggestion for updating the definition of political participation. Hooghe identifies some elements that van Deth discusses regarding defining any action as political participation as "indeed quite *unproblematic*" simply because they were already included in Verba et al.'s *classical* definition (339, my italics). To Hooghe, these elements would not need further thinking, because Almond and Verba had considered them decades ago. In contrast, he is highly critical of every element that van Deth adds in order to update Almond and Verba's definition to today's circumstances.

have evolved over the last few decades, but which still draws distinct boundaries. I agree with van Deth that the meaningfulness of stretching the original definition to accommodate new modes of participation has been long exhausted. Instead, it is time to leave behind "the conventional approach of presenting nominal definitions to solve conceptual problems" ('Map' 349). While Almond and Verba's ground-breaking 1960's definition will remain a corner-stone of political participation research, it is time for a fresh perspective on the diverse ways in which people participate today. Van Deth's operational map of political participation is one of the few attempts at updating this definition, and while it is not beyond question, it does provide an intriguing start to the conversation.[7]

Van Deth has developed a minimal *operational* definition of political participation which is comprised of four rules. Researchers can then "run" any given phenomena through the rules in order to determine if the activity should be defined as a mode of political participation (cf. 'Map' 354ff.):

- "Rule 1: Do we deal with behaviour?" (354)
- "Rule 2: Is the activity voluntary?" (354)
- "Rule 3: Is the activity done by citizens?" (354f.)
- "Rule 4: Is the activity located in the sphere of government/state/politics?" (356)

As van Deth points out "[t]hese four decision rules already suffice to reach *a minimalist definition of political participation*. […] [A]ll amateurish, voluntary activities located in the sphere of government/state/politics are specimen of political participation as defined by this minimalist definition" ('Map' 356). If the activity does not take place in the sphere of government/state/politics (rule 4), but fulfils one of the three following additional rules, it should as well be defined as participation:

- "Rule 5: Is the activity targeted at the sphere of government/state/politics?" (357)
- "Rule 6: Is the activity aimed at solving collective or community problems?" (358)
- "Rule 7: Is the activity used to express political aims and intentions of participants?" (359)

Consequently, "[a]ny activity that fulfils the first three rules – activity, voluntary, citizen – but is neither located in the political arena nor aimed at political actors or

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7   The conversational nature is enhanced through the rather innovative publishing format in which van Deth's thoughts were first published. Hooghe and Hosch-Dayican subsequently criticise the article, and in a rejoinder, van Deth replies to their criticisms.

collective problems can be depicted as a form of political participation if it is used to express political aims and intentions by the participants" (359). Indeed, van Deth's definitory questions allow the researcher a much clearer understanding of the activity one set out to study. It may be challenging or unusual in the political sciences to work without a concise, nominal definition. However, in light off the ever expanding and ever-changing repertoire of modes of political participation, the traditional ways of categorising and characterising political participation have ceased to be meaningful, and van Deth's operational approach may be exactly what is needed.

2.1.3 Political Participation –
the Centre of Democratic Theory Discourse

"Participation is at the heart of democracy" said Verba et al. in 1995 (129). Originally, this remark aimed at conveying the authors' convictions about the importance of the extensive integration of citizens and a vibrant repertoire of political participation modes within democracy. Slightly out of its original context, here the statement serves to frame the discussion on the role of political participation within democratic theories in order to illustrate the ways in which online participation tools such as *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* challenge the status quo of representative democracy. In the following, I will show how participation is the central point of difference between democratic theories. Democratic theories accounting for the relevance of political participation appear to differ in a variety of ways; not only in the weight they place on political participation in general for example, but also their inclusivity of more novel modes of participation, especially more recent, creative, and Internet-based forms of participation, as well as the different roles democratic theories envision for citizens.

There are as many as six major democratic theories competing within my research fields: representative-liberal democracy, participative democracy, deliberative democracy, direct democracy, liquid democracy, and digital democracy. All of them have influenced the creation, implementation, establishment and (ongoing) maintenance of the two participation tools studied. In this section, I focus on how these theories understand the importance of participation role within democracy. In doing so, it becomes again clear that political participation is a highly contested research area. In the analysis of my research findings (Results and Discussion), this awareness may serve to understand various processes, events, and decisions taken in both research fields.

In broad terms, the understanding of the role of participation within democracy differs in two perspectives. First, the instrumental understanding of participation sees democracy as a formal method for the formation of government. Second, the normative understanding of participation sees democracy as a lifestyle and way

of governing (cf. Hoecker). The instrumental understanding of participation is embedded in so-called empirical or realistic democratic theory. These euphemistic terms hint at this view's core criticism of normative and liberal democratic theories – as idealistic and as over-emphasizing the role of citizen participation in democracy. Instead, representatives of the instrumental understanding of participation see democracy as a mere method to achieve the formation of a government and safeguard efficient governability.

One of the, if not the, most prominent instrumentalist theorists was Joseph A. Schumpeter. To him, democracy was not the rule of the people, but the rule of politicians with the consent of the people (cf. Hoecker 4). That is, Schumpeter reduced the role of the citizen to voter. Moreover, the function of voting is not for the citizens to declare their interests, but to create and legitimate a strong and assertive government able to make decisions. Moreover, Schumpeter stressed that democracy as such does not imply any ideal values: neither citizen-responsibility nor extensive participation are part of democracy per se. In fact, Schumpeter took the idea of responsible citizens for fiction. Instead, he characterised citizens as having low senses of reality and responsibility, and as only capable of incoherent volition (cf. Lösch 18). Similarly, father of the widely-cited Rational Choice Theory, Downs argues that citizens are first and foremost self-interested and not interested in the common good. Downs thinks that issues related to society are only addressed as the by-products of people's actions, namely at that point that they coincide with private ambitions (cf. 193ff.).

Although Schumpeter and Down's works were first published (over) 50 years ago, the instrumental approach to participation persists both in theory and practice almost unaltered to the present day. Indeed, it is at the core of representative democracy as the predominant form of democracy across the globe, and as such the official form of government in both research fields in this thesis. The understanding of democracy as analogue to the market, as merely a competition between rival (party political) elites with citizens voting every four years, and otherwise pursuing their individual goals as more or less rational consumers appears to be reality today.

In contrast, the normative understanding sees participation as more than a method for establishing legitimacy, more than a means to an end. It stresses the intrinsic value of political participation and sees democracy as a process concerning society as a whole: democracy as a way of life (cf. Lösch 22f.). In this understanding, democracy extends beyond the political sphere and aims to facilitate socio-political participation in as many fields of society as possible. As a logical consequence, this approach sees democracy as transitive and flexible, as a work in constant progress (cf. Hoecker 6). Amongst the democratic theories that build on a normative understanding of participation are participative, deliberative, and direct democratic

theories. These approaches all try to work against the economisation of the political sphere; and by stressing that there would be no political community without participation and no political participation without community, they seek to counter supposed tendencies towards individualism and self-interestedness. On a national level, forms of democracy other than direct democracy will presumably remain supplements to representative democracy (cf. Lösch 23). However, this does not mean that they cannot be extensively developed and be given special importance at a state level. Indeed, at local and municipal levels, direct and participatory democratic elements are becoming increasingly popular in many countries.[8]

The most prominent proponent of the theory of participative democracy, Benjamin Barber, suggests a "strong democracy" which centres on the freedom of citizens to participate politically and on direct democratic self-government (cf. 209ff.). Barber suggests concrete reforms are needed to implement this project: as the base for community-building discussion processes he stresses the expansion of communication technologies, diverse offers of political information and political education, and the establishment of a general citizens' service: on the municipal level, local neighbourhood assemblies should gradually take over legislative competences, with municipal positions to be filled by lot combined with financial incentives (cf. Barber 291).

Of the theories I look at here, participative democracy theory appears to have the most optimistic image of citizens. Indeed, Barber is convinced that citizens are naturally capable of more and better participation, whereas other participative democracy theorists suggest that citizens will quickly acquire those competences once integrated into information and learning processes. As Schmidt points out, this theory of transformation into a responsible citizen resembles a modern variation of Rousseau's education programme, transforming the "Bourgeois" into "Citoyens" through a process of participation, deliberation, and public decision-making (cf. 'Beteiligungszentrierte Demokratietheorien' 241).

The new architecture of the public space as proposed by Barber would require a redistribution of agency and power, meaning an extensive change in conventional understandings of the roles of those governing and those governed in representative democracies (cf. Rosenzweig and Eith 12). Through his concept of participatory culture, media scholar Henry Jenkins has introduced ideas around participative democracy into cultural analysis. For Jenkins and Mizuko Itō, a participatory culture is "one which embraces the values of diversity and democracy through every aspect of our interactions with each other – one which assumes that we are capable of making decisions, collectively and individually, and that we

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8   See Kersting for an extensive report on the state of direct democracy in Germany across all levels of polity (cf. 'Direkte Demokratie').

should have the capacity to express ourselves through a broad range of different forms and practices" (2).[9]

A variety of participative democracy is deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy theorists see the formation process of political opinion and will as the most important aspect of democracy. In contrast to majoritarian democracy which legitimates decisions through votes, deliberative democracy stresses consensus: "an ideal deliberation aims to reach a rationally motivated consensus thanks to reasons that are persuasive to all" (della Porta, 'Deliberative Democracy' 62).[10] However, deliberative democracy's focus on public opinion formation is criticised by theorists of participative democracy because it is limited to the informal area of politics, and therefore does not include any direct and practical democratic decision-making competences on behalf of the citizens (cf. Rosenzweig and Eith 12).

Direct democracy is a variant of participatory democracy which has been implemented as a form of government. Of course, the frequency, weight and relevance of direct democratic elements within political decision-making processes varies greatly from electorate to electorate. The most prominent example of direct democracy is Switzerland, which offers citizens more occasions for direct participation than any other country in the world (cf. M. G. Schmidt, 'Direktdemokratie' 339).[11] In direct democracy, citizen participation plays *the* central role through

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9   However, Jenkins is also convinced that "while participatory politics does raise hope for fostering a more democratic culture, it cannot in and of itself overcome structural inequalities that have historically blocked many from participating in civic and political life" (161). Danah boyd points out that especially in times of digital culture, the rhetoric surrounding social media often highlights that technology is an equal opportunity platform; 'everyone' supposedly has the ability to have their voice heard. I think that this is seriously deceptive. I would argue that true participation requires many qualities: agency, the ability to understand a social situation well enough to engage constructively, the skills to contribute effectively, connections with others to help build an audience, emotional resilience to handle negative feedback, and enough social status to speak without consequences. The barrier to participation is not the technology but the kinds of privilege that are often ignored in meritocratic discourse. I do think that technology has opened up new doors to some people – and especially those who are marginalized but self-empowered […] – but it's important to recognize the ways in which it also reinforces other forms of inequalities that make it harder for some people to engage. (in Jenkins and Itō 21)

10   See James Fishkin's work for more in-depth research on the implementation of deliberation within political decision-making processes (When the people speak).

11   See Schmidt ('Direktdemokratie' 339ff.) for a detailed account and ranking of direct democratic elements in democratic states across the globe.

referenda, initiatives and petitions. Whereas representative democracy appears centred on people and parties, direct democracy focuses on decisions regarding subject matter (cf. Kersting, 'Direkte Demokratie' 308).

The electronically implemented liquid democracy relies heavily on deliberative democracy theory. The developers of *LiquidFriesland*, one of the research fields of this study, understand liquid democracy as "a democratic system in which most issues are decided (or strongly suggested to representatives) by direct referendum. Considering nobody has enough time and knowledge for every issue, votes can be delegated by topic. Delegations are transitive and can be revoked or changed at any time. Liquid Democracy is sometimes referred to as 'Delegated' or 'Proxy Voting'" (Interaktive Demokratie e. V. 5).

The spread of the Internet did not only enable liquid democracy, but also brought fresh impetus for the implementation of other participative democratic theories, such as "digital democracy" or "e-democracy". German political scientist Gary Schaal argues that, from a democratic theoretical perspective, the innovative potential of the Internet (in particular) is unexhausted and under-theorised (cf. 299). Whereas some scholars broadly understand digital democracy "as the increasing opportunities for political participation online" (Rose as cited in della Porta, 'E-Democracy' 87), others, like Schaal himself, define it as a democratic theory for which the inclusion of computers within the actual political decision-making process is constituent (cf. 281).[12]

The potential of digital democracy has been widely celebrated by scholars, activists, and programmers alilke. Linden has summarised these celebratory discourses as the five promises of digital democracy (cf. sec.3):

- *The promise of equality*: digital democracy seems to (at least partially) cancel out the (hierarchical) difference between those governing and those governed.
- *The promise of participation*: digital democracy makes the impression that everybody can participate anytime from everywhere.
- *The promise of information*: the Internet enables the availability of all relevant information for everyone.
- *The promise of responsibility*: technological advancements enable the communicative reconnection between representatives and those represented.
- *The promise of rationality*: digital democracy produces rational, best solutions that everybody supports through reasoned insight.

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12   With his blog entry "A Typology of Electronic Democracy", German political scientist Martin Hagen for an excellent round-up of the dynamics of the discourse on electronic democracy, including explanations of the various concepts behind it (n.pag.).

Throughout the book, the degree to which these promises of digital democracy are fulfilled will be illustrated with insights from the research fields.

Finally, I would argue that, first and foremost, the technology available today makes the modernisation of representative forms of democracy possible. While the expanded forms of online-deliberation or direct democracy still face massive technological and design challenges (cf. Zittel as cited in Escher, 'Mobilisierung' 451)[13], the spread of information and communication technologies does have palpable effects on political participation. Those effects will be the focus of the next chapter.

2.2 Internet and Politics

Over the last two decades, the Internet has not only transformed the ways in which people inform themselves and communicate with each other, but has also offered the potential to enrich existing political systems through new forms of democracy, as debates around digital and liquid democracy have illustrated (cf. Plaum 148). The hopes connected to electronic information and communication technologies were high.[14] In this chapter, the focus is on the depiction of ICTs' effects on political participation within the literature, which appears highly dependent on the authors' respective understandings of democracy, and with it, of agency. Subsequently, I focus on the special case of Social Media, looking at how the rapid increase in the use of Social Media for political purposes over the last decade has, both from a technological and a societal perspective, changed information and participation practices.

Instead of categorising these developments in information and participation practices as either good or bad which I see as an unproductive venture, this chapter provides a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which Social Media differs from other media. Social Media evidently has accommodated political participation modes. In studying this nexus, this book is explicitly positioned within the anthropological research tradition sketched out by Gertraud Koch:

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13   One should not forget that "the Internet has also reinforced the abilities of governments to control information and assert their power in more centralized manners", as Roy points out (84).

14   According to Escher, one can arrange these hopes into three categories: the improvement of governmental functions and services often discussed under the keyword e-government, the strengthening of representative democracy in the form of e-participation or online participation, and the enablement of direct democracy (cf. 'Beteiligung via Internet' 132).

Wer in der Europäischen Ethnologie, Empirischen Kulturwissenschaft, Kulturanthropologie und Volkskunde über Technik und Medien forscht, der bewegt sich in einer Forschungstradition, die wesentlich von Hermann Bausinger in seiner 1961 erschienenen Habilitationsschrift „Volkskultur in der technischen Welt" angestoßen wurde. Die Schrift war in ihrer Zeit Aufruf und Anstoß zugleich und begründete eine paradigmatische Neuorientierung der Volkskunde in ihrer Betrachtung von Technik, die bis dahin in einem antimodernistischen Reflex vielfach als Gegenpol zum Lebendigen und Kulturellen begriffen worden war. Bausinger hingegen zeigt, wie die Technik längst integraler Bestandteil der Alltagskultur […] ist […]. ('Empirische Kulturanalyse' 179)

Those in anthropology who are researching technology and media follow a tradition that was substantially initiated by Hermann Bausinger's 1961 habilitation "Volkskultur in der technischen Welt" (English title *Folk culture in a world of technology*). Both appeal and impetus, the paper was at the core of a paradigmatic shift in the discipline's view on technology which in an anti-modernist reflex has often been understood as the opposite of the living and the cultural. By contrast, Bausinger shows the ways in which technology has long been an integral part of everyday culture.

Those scholars who warn against simply dismissing online modes of participation typically do so by pointing to statistical evidence of the modes' actual effects. However, I believe that it is also important to look at online participation modes – in fact at all acts and forms of political participation –, from a different perspective, one that is lacking in most political science and communication studies work: the micro-perspective. This means looking from the perspective of those who actually take part, those who chose to participate in one way or another, those who mix and match modes of participation right through the artificial boundaries of the offline and online worlds and who, in doing so, always remain true to their everyday lives and experiences. Too often the reasonings and motivations of citizens as competent and self-determined actors become lost within stiff formalised survey questionnaires and research designs and the constant, stringent attempts of quantitative researchers to develop large-scale, comparable, representative research results. Bimber points out that "[t]he problem is not only conceptual but empirical" as many surveys "are election-centric, emphasizing tradition [sic] institution-oriented participation" (122). In focusing on the actual participants, listening to their stories, their descriptions and their reasonings, the cultural anthropological approach opens a hitherto strongly under-researched dimension, not only of participants' diverse motives for and perspectives on political participation, but also on their use of (Social) Media.

2.2.1 *Simply Slacktivism?!*[15] –
A Fresh Look at ICTs' Effects on Political Participation

This sub-chapter will concentrate on the impact of the Internet on political partici-pation as one crucial element of democracies. It will trace the hopes and fears that were initially connected to the Internet's spread into the political sphere, concluding that while the impact of the Internet on political participation has turned out to be more elusive and nuanced than obvious and extensive, it also cannot be contested.

Elections have been regarded with increasing categorical significance since literature on political participation began in the 1940s. Elections are not only regarded as extraordinarily significant in political practice and research, but also in the public perception. As constituted modes of participation, elections fulfil essential functions in representative democracies, such as the establishment and stabilisation of polity and the recruitment of political and civil personnel. Nevertheless, de Nève and Olteanu point out that this emphasis on elections is problematic, arguing that the power of citizens should not be reduced to their power as the electorate, as this neglects their other claims to power and say. Moreover, they argue, elections alone do not create an intact and high-quality democracy (cf. 19).

Indeed, the strategic heightening of electoral participation as a category results in a devaluation of online modes of participation. These are often characterised as a sort of second tier mode of participation, with actors often dismissed as "detached from formal politics and therefore do not aim to influence political outcomes, that they choose easily accessible digital forms of engagement over more effective traditional activities, and that they lack central political competences necessary to comprehend the functioning of the political system" (Serup Christensen, 'Slacktivism' 1). Online political activities are often criticized for only serving to increase the feel-good factor for participants. These prejudices against online participation modes cumulate in the generalised stigmatisation of online forms of participation as *clicktivism* or *slacktivism* (see Baringhorst et al.). These scholars do not consider a single click on *facebook's like*-button or on *Sign Here!* under a petition at *Change.org* as significant personal contributions by citizens. Indeed, although "'Participating' in Facebook is not the same as participating in a Free Software project, to say nothing of participating in the democratic governance of a state" (Jenkins 36), such acts of online participation are not as insignificant as is often understood (cf. Baringhorst, 'Internet und Protest' 105).

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15   The question "Simply Slacktivism?" is taken from Serup Christensen's 2012 article on the Internet and political participation in Finland.

The Internet has the potential to change the terms of political participation to a degree beyond that of any other societal or technological development since the beginning of participation research. As Mossberger et al note: "[t]he Internet's interactivity, diversity, flexibility, speed, convenience, low cost, and information capacity potentially allow the public to become more knowledgeable about politics and government [...]" (52). The opportunities opened up by the Internet result in high hopes for the political mobilisation and participation of citizens (e.g. cf. Escher, 'Beteiligung via Internet' 136). As such, the connection between the Internet and politics has become a key area of research (cf. Escher, 'Mobilisierung' 454; cf. Theocharis 235), especially among political scientists and communication studies scholars.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the growth and development of the Internet, scholarly understandings of its role in and impact on democracy and political participation has changed over the last two decades. As Linaa Jensen remarks, "[i]n early theoretical works the Internet was often regarded as something 'out there', good or dangerous for the democratic process, but radically different and isolated from mainstream political processes" (349). Similarly, Schaal argues that many theoretical contributions fail to systematically link reflexion on democratic theory with technological expertise. He argues that in research, the Internet is generally understood as an empty signifier for technological progress (cf. 300). For Henry Jenkins and Mizuko Itō, this approach seems especially careless at a time when

> more and more organizations, institutions, and businesses have embraced a rhetoric of participation, yet it is abundantly clear that not all forms of participation are equally meaningful or empowering. Many of the core debates of our time center around the terms of our participation: whether meaningful participation can occur under corporately controlled circumstances, when our ability to create and share content is divorced from our capacity to participate in the governance of the platforms through which that content circulates. (1)

Early research on the Internet and politics, as well as on the Internet generally – and other media too –, is characterised by radically normative views. In this period, the most prominent views on the effects of ICTs on politics were the replacement and the mobilisation hypotheses. Scholars like Benjamin Barber, who represented what later became known as the replacement hypothesis (cf. Althaus and Tewksbury), saw the Internet as a new public sphere that would replace many "traditional channels for political involvement" targeted both at information and participation, for example media or town hall meetings (Linaa Jensen 349). Amongst German-speaking scholars, it was especially popular to categorise people into one of three categories: *net-optimists*, *net-normalists*, and *net-pessimists* (cf. Escher,

'Mobilisierung' 449). Today, many scholars would agree that "although the Internet extends the media matrix available for political campaigning, agenda-setting and political participation", it supplements rather than substitutes other forms of political participation and other media as a source of information (ibid.).

In those early years, other scholars focused on the so-called mobilisation hypothesis. These scholars were optimistic that the Internet could help mobilise and politicise previously disengaged parts of society. However, in the last years this hypothesis could only be supported within concretely limited research fields and/or among low numbers of participants (e.g. Feezell et al.; Saglie and Vabo; Xenos and Moy). Indeed, most research has shown that only those already politically active in other ways use the Internet for further political information and participation. Hence, the Internet was simply reproducing and thereby reinforcing existing social biases, an idea commonly summarised as the "digital divide" (cf. Gibson et al. 561).

Whether one finds taxonomies like *net-optimists*, *net-normalists*, and *net-pessimists* (cf. Escher, 'Mobilisierung' 449) relevant or not, it becomes evident that their respective understanding of democracy, and with it, that of agency, play a key role in assessing what opportunities the Internet offers for political participation. As Escher illustrates, these understandings are heavily dependent on fundamental assumptions on the part of the researcher: are citizens responsible and competent to decide freely and independently, as in participative democratic theories, or do they need guidance and governance, as in liberal elitist democratic theory (cf. 'Mobilisierung' 451).[16] Depending on the perspective of the scholar, the diversity of information and enlargement of the political public sphere provided through the Internet was either welcomed for offering variety and for decentralising media and opinions, or condemned as overloading, spreading false information and anonymity, catalysing lobbyism, commercialisation, and centralisation (cf. 450).

As British political scientist Colin Hay notes that "[…] those with the most restrictive and conventional conceptions of political participation identify a strong and consistent pattern of declining political participation and engagement over time, whilst those with a more inclusive conception discern instead a change in the *mode* of political participation" (23). If one correlates this with the broad spectrum of perspectives towards the diversity of information and enlargement of

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16 The latter view on citizens of liberal democratic theory is also referred to in Michel Foucault's analysis of governmentality. Drawing especially on Christian pastoral power, Foucault compares governing a population to herding a flock of sheep (cf. Sarasin 181). Here, citizens need to be taken care of, guided, and looked after for a population to thrive. Unfortunately, a more thorough consideration of Foucault's theories goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

the public sphere just outlined, the diversity of research findings on politics and the Internet becomes understandable. As Anduiza et al. point out, "although the effect might be small at times, more evolutionary than revolutionary, and require certain conditions, it is rarely contested that digital media have an impact on civic and political involvement [...]. However, the mechanisms by which Internet use makes political engagement more probable remain somewhat elusive" (1). A key step in identifying these mechanisms is to broaden the scope for research, as Jorba and Bimber point out: "[i]f anything has been shown in a decade of research on digital media in the Unites [sic] States, it is that the effects on political participation and civic engagement are connected to people's attitudes, interest, and motivation rather than simply to reduced transaction costs or easier access to information" (22).

In any case, the enormous expansion of the repertoire of political participation through the Internet is clear, and many of these acts of online participation appear to be the direct equivalent to an offline act. For instance, sending an email to a political representative appears equivalent to sending a letter, and signing an e-petition to signing a petition on paper. Even political consumption that has recently gained public attention because of concomitant Internet campaigns, consisting of blog posts, vlogs, pictures, and all accompanied by hashtags, constitute a mode of political participation established long before the spread of the Internet (see for example Baringhorst, *Politik mit dem Einkaufswagen*; Baringhorst, 'Politischer Konsum').

However, it is only in the past few years that scholars have begun to increasingly argue that "digitally networked forms of participation do not establish an expansion of one of the available modes of participation. They create a new and distinct mode of participation […]" (Theocharis and Deth 158; cf. Gibson and Cantijoch; cf. Valenzuela). Here, it is crucial to note that terms like online participation, e-participation or Internet participation are very inclusive and therefore tend to lack definitory clarity. That is, by "digitally networked forms of participation", Theocharis and van Deth indeed mean the usage of social networking sites for political participation. In their large quantitative survey across Germany, the authors measured three items that they defined as part of a new and distinct dimension of digitally networked participation: commenting on social media on political/social issues, posting or sharing political links on social media, and encouraging other people to take action using social media (cf. Theocharis and Deth 151). Indeed, it is hard to think of offline equivalents to participation modes based on inherently novel technological phenomena such as social networking sites. Nevertheless, detailed differentiation of the researched modes of participation and the general field of research are necessary to avoid conceptual and analytical misunderstandings.

2.2.2 The Special Case of Social Media

An anthropological approach can contribute to conceptual and analytical clarity to research on Social Media by stressing both sociality and a comparative perspective. In other words, that is in understanding "the way in which people associate with each other to form social relations and societies" as "(t)he core to the study of social science" (Miller et al. 4). After focussing on the more general research context of the Internet and politics, this sub-chapter looks at Social Media as today's prime avenue for online political participation. Here, the benefits of a distinct anthropological perspective in research on Social Media will be discussed, as will the "vagaries of public semantics" revolving around the term Social Media (Miller et al. 9). Subsequently, I will provide a brief history of the Internet before it began to become dominated by Social Media in the public view. I will then outline one way of defining Social Media, that is, by highlighting key features in which the organisation of Social Media differs from other media. The concepts of *scalable sociality* and *polymedia* developed by the anthropological think-tank around Daniel Miller at University College London will feature throughout this section.

Generally speaking, social anthropological research usually incorporates a comparative approach to the study of socio-technological phenomena (cf. Miller et al. 24). Rather than placing the research focus on individual platforms, anthropological investigations tend to trace a certain phenomenon through multiple media. Miller et al. describe this as employing "[…] a theory of polymedia that recognises our inability to understand any one platform or media in isolation. They must be seen as relative to each other, since today people use the range of available possibilities to select specific platforms or media for particular genres of interaction" (211). Further, they remind us that "(i)t is the content rather than the platform that is most significant when it comes to why social media matters" (1).[17]

But what is Social Media? The term Social Media appears to be the colloquial expression for certain offers and forms of digitally networked media which facil-

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17   Miller et al.'s collaborative project Why We Post (at University College London) and the extensive book series of the same name that has resulted from it are illustrative examples of the anthropological approach to Social Media, which they understand as a "[…] study of what people post and communicate through platforms, of why we post and the consequences of those postings" (ibid.). Within the context of the Why We Post project, nine cultural anthropologists spent 15 months living in nine different communities around the world, researching the role of social media in people's everyday lives. Results were published in a number of different languages and were at least partly published as open access. For more information, see the website at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post (last accessed on 10 August 2019).

itate both the editing and publishing of content online, as well as the connection and exchange between people (cf. J.-H. Schmidt, *Social Media* 16).[18] Ebersbach et al. name six prototype-appliances dominating the Social Media-sphere according to their technical characteristics: wikis, blogs, microblogs, social-networking-sites (SNS), social sharing, and elements that many platforms deploy, such as crosslinking with RSS.[19] The final element cannot be allocated to a single one of the prototypes, but is rather a form of extension. Often, one can find combinations of several prototypes, such as blogs with a microblog extension (cf. Ebersbach et al. 37).[20] Social Media appears as a new form of communication that deviates from the traditional dichotomy of broadcasting and dyadic media. As Miller et al. point out "with the development of the Internet, this polarisation between public and private media started to change" (2). According to Baym, SNSs in particular "offer numerous benefits, including the abilities to carefully craft a public or semi-public self-image, broaden and maintain our social connections, enhance our relationships, increase access to social capital, and have fun" ('Social Networks' 400).

However, in academic circles, the term Social Media has become disputed and increasingly seen as misleading and ambiguous. The prime focus in the critique of "Social Media" is the central claim within the term: that the *social-ness* of digitally networked media marks it as unique and distinct from other media. This terms therefore suggests that other media exist which are not social, when media as means of communication are inherently linked to an exchange between people and in that way, media are social in their very essence (cf. J.-H. Schmidt, *Social Media* 16). As Baym argues, "(t)here is nothing more 'social' about 'social media' than there is about postcards, landline telephones, television shows, newspapers, books, or cuneiform. There are distinctive qualities to what we call 'social media' [...], but being social is not among them" ('Struggle for Society' 1). Further, Baym

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18   The term Web 2.0 is another oft-used expression. To a larger extend, the term Web 2.0 is used to describe technical, economic, and legal aspects rather than aspects concerning the sociality of its users (cf. Ebersbach et al. 27).

19   RSS (short for Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication] enables users to stay up-to-date with one's favourite websites without manually checking them regularly for new posts. RSS gathers headlines from those sites and feeds them to an app or website, a so-called RSS reader. That way, the user only needs to scroll through the RSS reader (for example Feedly or Bloglovin) to see all the new posts from their favourite websites. Subsequently, the user is either able to read the full article directly or is redirected to the corresponding website after clicking a headline in the RSS reader (cf. Gil).

20   For example, there may be a small frame at the right-hand side of the blog's starting page, displaying the blogger's latest tweets on Twitter or her latest posts to the image-based Social Media site Instagram.

criticises the often neglected neo-liberal connotation of the term "Social Media", arguing that it only "emerged at the time that companies began harnessing what people were already doing online" (ibid.).

In consciously using the emic term "Social Media" in their publications, scholars like Miller et al. thereby accept the "vagaries of public semantics" (Miller et al. 9). Used both by research participants and the general public alike, the term Social Media has become part of general language use and consequently brings a certain concision with it that other expressions, though potentially more correct or precise, lack. In this book, "Social Media" is used to refer to the distinct platforms – like *facebook* and *Twitter* – which epitomise the term in the public view; whereas the term "information and communications technologies" (ICTs) is used to describe the entirety of digital technologies and media through which people communicate.

Before going into greater detail in the comparison between Social Media and other media, I will here outline key differences between the early Internet, Web 1.0 so to speak, and the Internet after the arrival of Social Media, as this is helpful in evaluating changes and understanding the overall context.[21] As Baym points out: "[w]hen the first Internet connection was made in 1969 through what was then called ARPANET, funded by the US Department of Defence, no one envisioned that an interpersonal communication medium had been launched". Instead, the Internet "was developed to safeguard military knowledge", and "(f)or its first quarter-century, the Internet was text-only. With its limited social cues, it seemed a poor match for personal interaction. Yet it took mere months for its developers (who were also its primary users) to realise the medium's utility for personal communication. Within three years of the first login, email was in use […]" and the first mailing lists followed soon after (*Personal Connections* 13). The development of *Usenet* newsgroups in the early 1980s was another means of asynchronous group discussion with wide reach (cf. 14), and in 1985, one of the earliest still existing online communities, *Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (Well)* was founded in San Francisco (cf. Ebersbach et al. 22). Four years later, physicists around Sir Tim Berners-Lee at the Swiss physics laboratory *CERN* developed the World Wide Web. Baym stresses that "(t)his heralded a shift from communication that was purely text-based to multimedia communication, and gave rise to more new forms of mediated interaction" (*Personal Connections* 15f.). With the disconnection of ARPANET in 1990, the US government withdrew from further developing the Internet, an event which marked a watershed in the process of the Internet's commercialisation (cf. Ebersbach et al. 23).

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21 For a detailed, balanced, analytically sophisticated account of the Internet's history, see Janet Abbate's Inventing the Internet (2000).

After the "dotcom-bubble" burst in 2000, the first economic crisis of the IT-industry, Internet use did not decrease, rather new business concepts and offers emerged. The Internet has increasingly become seen as a platform to store content. For example, the most successful community-project platform ever, Wikipedia, was started in 2001. The restructuring of the Internet in this period became referred to as "Web 2.0", which is often seen as defined by interaction and communication in which the roles of recipient and producer can no longer be distinguished. In this understanding, users became 'produsers', both consuming and producing content within one and the same application and session (cf. Bruns; cf. Koch, 'Empirische Kulturanalyse' 185; cf. J.-H. Schmidt, Neue Netz 177). However, this simplistic view has become increasingly questioned:

> [o]ne might begin by questioning how much of Web 2.0 and online social networking is really new. As someone who has been studying online interactions since the early 1990s, I shake my head at the idea that the contemporary Internet is 'user generated' while that which preceded it is not. The very phrase 'user-generated' only makes sense when there is an alternative, in this case something like 'professionally generated for profit.' Until 1994, this alternative did not exist. On an Internet with no World Wide Web, sponsored by the United States government, all of the content was generated by the people, for the people. We only call Web 2.0 'user generated' because a well-established class of professional content providers now dominate the Internet. ('Social Networks' 384)

Inspired by Baym's critical stance, I look at the ways in which Web 2.0 media can be compared to and differentiated from both other media and face-to-face communication. Baym argues that these differences can be analysed in terms of interactivity, temporal structure, social cues, storage, replicability, reach, and mobility (cf. *Personal Connections* 7ff.). In her book *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, she makes it clear that "if we want to build a rich understanding of how media influence personal connections, we need to stop talking about media in overly simplistic terms. We can't talk about consequences if we can't articulate capabilities" (6). She then continues by asking: "What is it about these [*Social*, JTK] media that changes interaction, and, potentially, relationships?" (ibid.). Here, "personal connections" and "relationships" can simply be substituted according to research interest, such as in my case "information and participation practices".

In comparison to other forms of media, Social Media allow their users to talk back with unprecedented ease and speed. You do not agree with a newspaper article or TV report? Social Media makes it easy to address this immediately and facilitates discussion between you, other media users, and the authors/producers. A citizen of Reykjavík can easily start an initiative concerning the run-down

state of the playground in her neighbourhood. This will not take much longer than writing a customer review. Yet it could very well result in the replacement of a broken swing within a couple of months, provided that the initiative gains momentum and is endorsed by enough other *Betri Reykjavík* users that it makes it onto the city council's agenda and is approved by city councillors.[22]

Social cues are another important concept in differentiating media and in explaining the special role attributed to Social Media. As Baym points out, "(s)ome media convey very little information about the identities of those with whom we are communicating. […] In [those] lean media, people have more ability to expand, manipulate, multiply, and distort the identities they present to others. The paucity of personal and social identity cues can also make people feel safer, and thus create an environment in which they are more honest" (*Personal Connections* 8). But this feeling of security does not only effect honesty, as one email conversation I had with a *Betri Reykjavík* user revealed. Suffering from social anxiety, he told me he preferred to take part in political deliberation and discussion processes online because the Internet was a kind of safe zone where he could form friendships (that eventually lead to offline meetings), unlike in face-to-face situations.

Of course, online anonymity also opens up opportunities for online "terror" (Baym, *Personal Connections* 8), for example in the form of cyber-bulling, shit-storms, identity-theft, or trolling. Many online participation tool developers and political implementers therefore criticise anonymity as an untenable condition for participating in political deliberation or decision-making processes online. As such, and to ensure that they were seeking to act in their community's best interest and to avoid any destructive and potentially criminal uses of the platform, would be users of *LiquidFriesland* could only register under their real names and had to prove that they lived in the district of Friesland.

In another regard, with Social Media "(t)he gatekeeping function of mass media is challenged as individuals use digital media to spread messages much farther and more widely than was ever historically possible" (Baym, *Personal Connections* 10). In tweeting, writing a blog-post, or posting an initiative to *Betri Reykjavík* or *LiquidFriesland*, individuals can reach a much greater number of people over a much greater distance than ever before. Baym sees this as "a powerful subversion of the elitism of mass media, within which a very small number of broadcasters could engage in one-to-many communication" (ibid.). Transferred to the realm of politics and political communication, this means that Social Media offers a bridge between individual citizen and politics, a bridge which was once

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22   The chapter on Research Fields provides in-depth information on the workings of *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*.

reserved for the traditional authorities of political formation of opinion and inter-
est intermediation, such as political parties and unions (cf. Tenscher et al. 191).

By looking at different media through Baym's key concepts, a more nuanced
picture of what Social Media is begins to emerge. In order to describe this picture,
or "to define what is popularly called social media but also includes prior media",
Miller et al. suggest the term "scalable sociality" (3). They define sociality as "the
way in which people associate with each other to form social relations and soci-
eties" (ibid.). Situations are scaled from the most private to the most public, and
from the smallest group to the largest group: "At one end of both of these scales
we still see private dyadic conversation and at the other end we still see fully
public broadcasting" (3).

Of course, people also associate with each other to form social relations within
the context of politics, both online and offline. Online, sociality develops from
people engaging (with each other), discussing, deliberating, voting, and research-
ing information within various digital political formats. I find "scalable sociality"
to be a particularly valuable definition because it also includes prior media (cf.
Miller et al. 3). By including "prior media" in their study of Social Media, Miller
et al. acknowledge its ongoing influence and role in information, communication,
and participation practices and that, at least in most cases, connections with fam-
ily, friends, and acquaintances first developed in offline situations. In the same
spirit, boyd and Ellison "use the term 'social network site' rather than 'social net-
working site' to emphasize that these sites are more often used to replicate con-
nections that exist offline than to build new ones.[23] Their choice of noun over verb
positions Web 2.0 as an extension of pre-existing social phenomena rather than as
a transformation" (as cited in Baym, 'Social Networks' 386).

This thought also proves to be true in the realm of Social Media and politics.
Many studies have found that those citizens who engage, inform, and participate
around politics online were active and engaged in offline ways prior to the Internet
(e.g. see Emmer et al.; Kubicek et al.; Wimmer; Glaab). Once more, it becomes
clear that online participation tools work more as an extension of pre-existing
habits and routines – "social phenomena" as boyd and Ellison call them – rather
than a transformation or new formation of practices.

Moreover, the concept of "scalable sociality" offers a rare and refreshing
stance within the literature on Social Media and politics that, in my impression,
drastically overstates or underplays the possibilities for and influence of Social
Media on politics, and on political participation in particular (see chapter 2.2.1
Simply Slacktivism?!). Between the diametrically opposed publications of the

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23   Please note that the lower case printing of danah m. boyd's name in this thesis is not a
      mistake, but respects the style of writing the author herself chose (cf. boyd).

net-optimists and the *net-pessimists* (cf. Buchstein), there has been a lack of investigations in which emphatic involvement with participants in the field has been perceptible. Miller et al.'s *How the World Changed Social Media* is one of the few exceptions. Together with Baym (see esp. 'Call for Grounding') and van Deth (see esp. 'Map'), Miller et al. seem to be among the few to contribute a balanced view to the otherwise largely dichotomous depiction of Social Media, both in public media and academia, as either the saviour (e.g. see Dahlgren) or the final nail in the coffin of political participation (e.g. see Eisel).

By including prior media in their look at Social Media, Miller et al. also acknowledge that people rely on "polymedia". That is, people mix and match media in their information, communication, and participation practices. Most often, people do so without differentiating between reputed online–offline divides. Nobody uses just one medium for everything; rather, "the precise selection of social media within an environment of polymedia is based less upon technological affordances and more on local genres of social interaction or cultural significance" (Miller et al. 211). Miller et al.'s scalable society approach thus stresses the mundane and routine status of digital media "as they are increasingly embedded in everyday lives and social norms coalesce around their use" (Baym, *Personal Connections* 5). Consequently, in this book, I adopt Baym's suggestion that the emphasis and prime research interest should lie "on the mundane and the everyday, on how people incorporate digital media into their routine practices of relating and with what consequences" (ibid.).

As such, Social Media do not only change information practices, practices of information exchange and communication within political space, but also influence political decision-making processes by affecting relational structures between representatives and those represented in a number of ways.[24] Kneuer points out that parliamentarians and members of the government have become communication partners with whom citizens can directly and easily exchange ideas with through Social Media (cf. 'Wirkung' 14). Kneuer continues that today, parliamentarians and members of government may feel the urge (or the obligation) to actively use *facebook*, *Twitter*, blogs and other media to communicate with citizens (ibid.).

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24   As recent events have shown, Social Media sites have also been used to manipulate political elections. In 2018, whistleblower Christopher Wylie revealed that data about "50 million Americans and at least a million Britons had been harvested from Facebook and improperly shared with Cambridge Analytica", a data analytics firm working for Donald Trump's election team and the Brexit campaign. Information on friends, "likes, activities, check-ins, location, photos, religion, politics and relationship details […] was used to influence the outcome of the US presidential election and Brexit" by targeting voters through personalised political advertisements (Solon and Laughland).

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the two main research areas that this book draws on and contributes to: political participation, and Internet and politics. The anthropological gaze has been seriously under-represented in both research fields. This perspective opens up rich opportunities to explore these research areas both separately and in the places that they overlap, allowing the cultural anthropologist to make the research more diverse and empirical. The anthropological approach is valuable for the production and communication of knowledge for its emphasis on two key factors: comparison and sociality.

Firstly, in research on political participation in the digital age, the comparative perspective of cultural anthropologists means that rather than focusing the research on individual platforms, anthropological investigations tend to trace a certain phenomenon through multiple media, hereby drawing on Marcus' motto *to follow the people, follow the thing, follow the metaphor; follow the plot, the story, or allegory; follow the life or biography; follow the context* (cf. 106ff.). Miller et al. describe this approach as employing "[…] a theory of polymedia that recognises our inability to understand any one platform or media in isolation. They must be seen as relative to each other, since today people use the range of available possibilities to select specific platforms or media for particular genres of interaction" (211).

Secondly, a key characteristic of cultural anthropology is the focus on sociality, deeply intertwined with a firm belief in cultural relativism. This approach enables an empathetic and emic view onto research fields which is often paired with a micro-perspective both of and on the actual participants. In focusing on the actual participants, listening to their stories, descriptions and reasoning, this research opens a hitherto strongly under-researched dimension of diverse motives for and perspectives on political participation as well as Social Media use. Facilitated by the ethnographic method, which provides great depth, this micro-perspective approach tends to undermine popular assumptions around apparent social problems such as the oft-cited political apathy (ger. *Politikverdrossenheit*) or the degeneration of society to a mass of individualised, asocial *smombies*.[25] Together, the distinct characteristics of the discipline also mean that cultural anthropologists are well equipped to research areas not necessarily dominated by their peers. In the upcoming chapter, I focus on the websites *LiquidFriesland* and *Betri Reykjavík*, the central research fields in this book.

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25   "Smombie" is a portmanteau from the words "smartphone" and "zombie" and became Germany's annual youth word in 2015. It describes a slowly walking pedestrian paying exclusive attention to the screen in hand and not to his surroundings (cf. 'Jugendwort').

3 Doing Ethnography I:
Constructing Research Fields[1]

The last few decades have brought with them several major developments and challenges for ethnographers in conducting fieldwork. The most prominent of these have been increased mobility, and the growth and spread of information and communication technologies. Before introducing the reader to the actual fields and samples of this research study, I therefore discuss the three main challenges I encountered during this research project: the spatial boundaries of research in both online and offline fields, the temporalisation of field work, and the blending and blurring of originally dichotomous concepts of *home* and *field* within the ethnologic research process.[2]

It appears more difficult than ever for cultural anthropologists / European ethnologists to constitute or to clearly demarcate the boundaries of their fields.[3] Today, the scientific community typically considers field sites as changing, shifting, and being in a constant state of flux, as opposed to our predecessors, who

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1   This insertion entitled "Doing Ethnography" is the first of three throughout the book. These insertions precede the three key chapters on research fields, methodology, and analysis. The aim here is to condense meta-commentary and my reflections regarding the topics to come.

2   As I found out after writing this section, Michi Knecht also identified and discussed these three challenges in her 2012 article "Ethnographische Praxis im Feld der Wissenschafts-, Medizin- und Technikanthropologie".

3   The full name of the discipline I located myself in is cultural anthropology/European ethnology (as taught at Göttingen University). Generally, the debate about names and what they are about appears a constitutive element of the discipline after 1945 (cf. Bendix and Eggeling). In this study, I will for simplicity's sake use the name cultural anthropology.

conceived of research sites as static and geographically confined.[4] Today, cultural anthropologists rarely study cultural phenomena strongly tied to one, confined locality. As Michi Knecht stresses

> Das Feld der Gegenwartsethnografie hat seine früheren ‚naturalistischen' Konnotationen weitgehend verloren. Es wird nicht mehr bloß aufgesucht. Die Definition dessen, was das ethnografische Feld in einem spezifischen Forschungsprozess ausmacht, welche Orte und Beziehungen zu ihm gehören, wie seine Grenzen beschaffen sind, diese Fragen und Aspekte sind Teil des Forschungsdesigns, das sich in der Zusammenführung theoretischer Interessen und empirischen Wissens im Verlauf des Forschungsprozesses immer mehr konkretisiert. (88f.)

> The field of contemporary ethnography has mostly lost its earlier 'naturalistic' connotations. Researchers do not just go there anymore. The definition of what makes an ethnographic field in a specific research process, which places and relationships belong to it, the conditions of its boundaries – those questions and aspects are now part of the research design. By bringing together theoretical interests and empirical knowledge, the research design becomes increasingly concrete throughout the research process.

As Ulf Hannerz stresses, cultures "as collective systems of meaning […] belong primarily to social relationships, and to networks of such relationships. Only indirectly, and without logical necessity, do they belong to places" (39). Referring to the most prominent symptoms of globalisation, enhanced mobility and the spread of information and communication technologies, Hannerz notes that "the less people stay put in one place, and also the less dependent their communications are on face-to-face contacts, the more attenuated does the link between culture and territory become" (39). Or, as danah m. boyd poignantly sums it up: "Mobility complicated matters […], but mediated technologies changed the rules entirely" (27). Here, boyd directly addresses the role of digitalisation and medialisation of the everyday life of both researched subjects and researchers alike, which to her have "completely disrupted any simple construction of a field site" since "in a networked society, we cannot take for granted the idea that culture is about collocated peoples. It is not a question of mobility but of access to a hypertextual world. Geography can no longer be the defining framework of culture; people are part of many cultures including those defined by tastes, worldview, language, religion, social networks, practices, etc." (27). Already in the 1990s, US-American social

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4   In the neighbouring field of anthropology, the "criteria to define 'the field' by geographic location, a language different from one's own and a clear separation of home from the field" seems to remain even stronger (Caputo 28).

anthropologist Sarah Strauss had recognised the same trend: "a field site can no longer be seen merely as a geographical location, but rather may be viewed as an intersection between people, practices and shifting terrains, both physical and virtual" (171f.).

Some have argued that the challenges and difficulties of constituting one's field(s) or field site(s) multiply when researching on, in, with, and through the Internet. For example, Heike Mónika Greschke identifies the potentially premature assumption of the research field's boundaries as "(o)ne of the challenges of ethnographic research on the Internet"(44). However, I believe that defining the boundaries of a research field/project is complicated by definition, whether research is predominantly about the Internet or not. I do, however, agree with Greschke's assertion that "(d)efining the boundaries of the research project [...] becomes an ongoing task during the whole research process. It requires taking a set of decisions during fieldwork, regarding entrance and starting points, the traces to follow and when to stop fieldwork" (44). However, I do not see how these challenges apply solely to ethnographic research projects focusing on the Internet; rather, they are relevant to most research projects in today's globalised and interconnected everyday life – indeed, I would suggest that these challenges are not restricted to ethnographic research projects.

Nevertheless, ethnography in virtual contexts may appear challenging because of the potential methodological novelty it entails. Indeed, Gisela Welz stressed the lack of theorisation on the effects of ICT upon their usage in ethnographic fieldwork (cf. 'Lernkulturen'). It is significantly more challenging for researchers to master the methods of virtual ethnography, as they evolve parallel to the researchers and the researched subjects' ever changing social media practices in everyday life, and are thus intertwined with them or are overlapping with "private" uses of the Internet (cf. Boellstorff et al. 27f.). The digital has, in other words, become "a field in which we practice as much as we analyse" (Pink et al. 6f.).

Nancy Baym points out that online realms "are no longer contained within their own boundaries (if they ever were). What appear to be single online groups often turn out to be multimodal" ("Call for Grounding" 721). She criticizes communication studies, her own discipline, for having produced many tightly focused "studies of single web boards, newsgroups, chat rooms, social network sites" which have neglected to study "how individuals and groups link these contexts to one another as they traverse the Internet and meet the same individuals across multiple domains" (721). In this thesis, I try to put Baym's critique into practice: although I take the individual websites *LiquidFriesland* and *Betri Reykjavík* as vantage points for my research, I then follow people's patterns of information, deliberation, and participation practices from there, through online and offline scenes, and back.

While Knecht argues that the field must not be simply visited, I agree with British sociologist and social anthropologist Vered Amit who goes a step further:

> The notion of immersion implies that the 'field' that ethnographers enter exists as an independently bounded set of relationships and activities that is autonomous of the fieldwork through which it is discovered. Yet in a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be laboriously constructed, pulled apart from all the other possibilities for contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred. (6)

Similarly, Katharina Eisch argues that the field is primarily constituted only within dialogue and the personal willingness of researcher and the researched to become involved (cf. 35). In addition, Vered Amit points to the important but often forgotten fact that "the process of construction [of the field] is inescapably shaped by the conceptual, professional, financial and relational opportunities and resources accessible to the researcher" (6). In other words, both scholars indirectly suggest that the idea of objective field work completed by a neutral researcher is a chimera, and that this is rightly so, for an uninvolved researcher would ultimately produce little relevant data.

Scholars have adopted different strategies to enable them to construct research fields despite the inherent challenges and difficulties this entails. Perhaps the most prominent strategy is George Marcus' idea of a multi-sited ethnography. He suggested that rather than remaining bound to one field site, researchers should actually *follow the people, follow the thing, follow the metaphor*; *follow the plot, the story, or allegory; follow the life or biography; follow the context* (cf. 106ff.). Heike Mónika Greschke argues that "[m]ulti-siting […] becomes crucial in terms of moving around sites, relating sites of production and use, online and offline, and following traces across social networks and different media" (Home in Cyberspace 44). Here, the plural use of the word (field) sites hints lexically at the impossibility of constituting a research field strongly confined to one locality. Today, fields overlap and constantly refer to one another, drawing inspirations and influences from each other.[5]

Whereas novel modalities like multi-sited, mobile research have become widely established and become conventional within the spatial organisation of ethnographic fieldwork, this has not been the case for the new temporalisations of fieldwork.

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5   Following Christine Hine's suggestion, I use only the term "field" and not "field site". As Hine argues that the term "field" "is diffuse and only occasionally constituted as a whole and certainly not a place", it rather corresponds to my understanding ("Boundaries" 12).

There has been a trend towards temporally discontinuous fieldwork in recent years, but this is toward shorter, sequential stays in the field (cf. Welz, 'Pragmatik' 41).[6] There appear to be various reasons for this trend. One key reason comes from the possibilities and pressures on academia in today's neoliberalist world itself, with scholars today only rarely receiving funding for long-term research stays. At the same time, the structure of researched societies or social situations today favour, or even require shorter, more frequent field stays, since many research fields manifest themselves only temporarily or are ephemeral (cf. Welz, 'Pragmatik' 41).

Swedish social anthropologist Helena Wulff refers to this alternation between states of on- and off-fieldwork as *yo-yo-fieldwork*. Indeed, Wulff sees many advantages in this method, as it allows researchers to publish or present interim findings at conferences in between field visits, and to discuss with colleagues and experts of the research field or subject (cf. 122). However, temporally discontinuous fieldwork can also be demanding of researchers. Katharina Eisch, for example, points out that the empathetic involvement of the researcher is even more important in temporally discontinuous fieldwork than in single rounds of stationary data collection. According to Eisch, the researcher that gathers data in a temporally discontinuously manner must pay special attention to and deal with a lot of changes, be they in the field itself, in the living situations and living conditions of informants, or in the relationships between the researcher and actors in the field. The researcher therefore has to continuously maintain friendships and contacts in the field (cf. 35).

Moreover, as British social anthropologist Virginia Caputo recalls about the early stages of her research process, she felt insecure and self-conscious about her difficulties in keeping "the field and home conceptually separate and distinct in practice", because her research experience "was of continually coming and going to and from the field, to the point where, at times, the field became indistinguishable from home" (26). It was only as her research progressed that she realized that the difficulties she had in separating field and home were "an important part of the progress of research itself. Indeed, the interruptions experienced in practice became part of the resulting ethnography" (26).

As Wulff points out, even when the researcher "is temporarily physically away from the field, she is not so mentally" (122). Most often, "fieldwork is still going on through information and communication technologies when […] at home" (122). However, the views on usage of information and communication technologies during fieldwork and its implications differ widely among ethnographers. For example, upon comparing his field stays in Sri Lanka in the 2000s with those of

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6   In my opinion, the idea that a researcher needs spend a full year's cycle in the field in order to understand it remains strong in European Ethnology – although not to the extent that it does in Social and Cultural Anthropology (cf. Götz 102).

30 years earlier, British social anthropologist Bob Simpson found that the usage of information and communication technologies today made it more difficult to experience the distance between here and there, near and far which had once been a vital caesura within the research process: "In ever more powerful manipulations of time and space, what is far away can, at any point, seem to be more immediate than what is in front of one" (2). Simpson finds that research and his ability to engage in it are interrupted by *Skype*, email, and the interactive homepage of his home university:

> in order to experience fully the sensitive and subtle communications of those worlds [his research fields], other 'noise' – the daily routines of home and work […] – has to be screened out. Part of the attraction of fieldwork for me, then, is that it is a kind of experiment with selfhood – wiping the slate as clean as possible in order that others might write afresh on it. Yet this 'tuning in' seemed to remain elusive. Yes, I could have switched off all means of communication – but I didn't, and I began to wonder just how clean one can get the slate when it is so easy for the world 'back there' to intrude into 'the world out here', and what the implications are for the kinds of knowledge we might then go on to produce. (ibid.)

Not only access to computers and the Internet potentially interrupt and distract the researcher in the field. Virginia Caputo reminds us that already the use of earlier versions of ICT[7], like fax machines or even telephones, occasionally resulted in blurring of the boundaries between field and home: "my fax machine connected me with a supervisor overseas, and telephones calls at home connected me with key informants after I had left the field. At times, I did not need to physically travel to the field to be able to reach my key informants or for them to reach me" (26). So is it wrong to attribute the blurring of boundaries between field and home largely to the pervasiveness of the Internet? Have we succumbed to a tendency to ascribe things to technologies that "are better attributed to novelty and the ways in which cultures project their concerns onto technology", as Baym diagnosed in her "Call for Grounding in the Face of Blurred Boundaries" (720)? There is little question that the spread of the Internet in the 1990s

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7   As Nancy Baym reminds us, it is important to recall "that technology need not mean computing nor be digital. We have other precedents, and other technologies. Human communication and technology begins with the invention of writing. It includes pigeon training, ink, woodblocks, 16th-century books, and 17th- and 18th-century pamphlets. It includes photography, audio recording, radio waves, moving pictures, the telegraph, television, and countless other technologies, more of which have been forgotten than remembered" ('Call for Grounding' 720).

> produced an extraordinary array of hyperbolic proclamations about its potential impact on the world. The Internet, prognosticators stated, would solve long-standing problems of education, make bureaucracies function better, create a global community through increased connectivity, empower the disenfranchised, and forever alter the roles of consumer and producer. (Sturken and Thomas 1)

Nevertheless, I believe that the Internet and ICTs developed over the last two decades have certain characteristics that hold the potential to interrupt conventional sequences within research processes more than other technologies have done in the past. First, ICTs have become increasingly portable through the development of laptops, smartphones, tablets, and in so doing, have allowed access to the increasingly omnipresent Internet. Whereas many previous technologies were localised, physical things – a caller on a landline would simply miss you when you were out –, today, being able to reach someone any time of day or night is common in many societies, as are expectations that one will reply instantly to emails or *WhatsApp* and *facebook* messages. Second, information and communication have become increasingly multi-directional: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, or many-to-many (cf. Kneuer, 'Potential' 37). In that way, the researcher also receives masses of information and communication from individuals which is not personally addressed to her. The researcher sees *facebook* posts from field contacts in her timeline, regardless of relevance for her research or whether she is in the office or at home on the weekend. Third, information and communication have become increasingly concurrent and non-chronological. While you could only receive one fax at a time from one sender (in Caputo's example this was a supervisor), it is no problem to receive several emails or chat messages simultaneously from several senders, be it supervisors, friends, insurance agents, parents, or field contacts. Together, newer ICT like the Internet or smartphones blur boundaries of work and private spheres most especially through their omnipresence. Potentially, and more imminent and pervasive than ever before, the field is always *with* us – in the form of the Internet-enabled smartphone in our pocket.

In any case, ethnologic research fields no longer appear 'secluded' or 'far away', but have indeed become frequently intertwined with the everyday (working) lives of ethnologists (cf. Hess as cited in Knecht, 'Nach Writing Culture' 90). This has certainly been the case for me in this research project. Through ICT, the fields have become much more visible in my everyday life at home, especially through *facebook*. Through friendships with informants as well as subscriptions to various media outlets, citizen initiatives, and political parties, and even when I was away from them, the fields became highly visible in my *facebook* timeline.

Still, it was not always easy to keep up-to-date on the latest news from the fields without being there and purposefully doing research. On a number of occa-

sions, for example, paragraphs that I had just written were rendered obsolete or even factually false by *facebook* posts. Here, the question of when to end fieldwork becomes an act of self-discipline even more delicate than had once been the case. Similarly, Greschke argues that "(e)asy access to the field can lead to an endless extension of the researched period with the danger of generating a mass of data that becomes too large to cope with" (58). Once the ethnologist has declared the research period over, she must actively resist incorporating newer information that comes to her through ICTs.

The challenges detailed in this chapter were those that bothered personally me most during this individual research process. Of course, other researchers in other research fields and with other research questions will naturally encounter other challenges. Even someone attempting a replication of this study would likely face other problems than I had to. Nevertheless, I believe the challenges I faced are likely to be applicable to a wide range of researchers and research projects today. Globalisation, and with it increased mobility, as well as the spread and development of ICTs, have brought marked changes in how ethnography can, must and is being done. *Traditional* concepts of the "field" have been questioned, challenged, and redefined (cf. Hess and Schwertl 25). Amongst others, Hannerz has helped to change the persistent myths of fields as static and geographically confined, stressing that cultures are based on social relationships, and not geographical places (cf. 39). We have had to learn that even in online realms – where one may have initially expected a naturally confined field around an individually identifying URL to exist –, fields are no longer contained within their own boundaries, but refer to other websites, media, and people (cf. Baym, 'Call for Grounding' 721; cf. Miller et al. 211ff.).

As the spatial organisation of ethnographic fieldwork has been questioned, challenged, redefined – so too has the temporalisation of ethnographic fieldwork. Increasingly, the process of data collection has become temporally discontinuous, stringing together several shorter research stays in the field. This development has brought with it distinct challenges for the researcher, one of which is the blending and blurring of formerly dichotomous concepts of *home* and *field* within the ethnographic research process.

4 Research Fields

Having outlined the research questions and described the state of research in the areas of political participation, digital democracy, political communication and social media, as well as the challenges I see in doing ethnography today, I now turn to the research fields of the study. Both sub-chapters on the two fields have the same structure. First, I explain briefly how the online participation tools work. Second, I contextualise them within their context of origin, that is, I describe the central actors involved in the website's development, such as computer programmers, politicians and administrative personnel, as well as their users. Finally, I then discuss how I accessed the respective fields before introducing the actual sample and my sampling techniques.

LiquidFriesland and *Betri Reykjavík* are two independent websites with no connection to one another other than they share the same goal, to facilitate increased political participation amongst the citizens of their localised reference areas, the North-German district of Friesland and the region of the Icelandic capital of Reykjavík respectively. But it was never my intention to study the websites as entities as such, but rather the ways in which the citizens use and interact with them. In other words, the focus of this study is not on the websites but rather on the people involved – the users, programmers, administrators and politicians – and their practices. As people do not use only one website or, for that matter, one medium, I did not stop researching when a proposal on *Betri Reykjavík* linked to an article on a newspaper website, or when an interviewee told me about another website she uses to communicate with city officials and politicians. "What happens via new technology is completely interwoven with what happens face-to-face and via other media", as Baym points out ('Call for Grounding' 721). That is also the reason I gladly accepted the invitation to attend a podium discussion on political participation in the district of Friesland, and the reason I spoke to people who were not directly connected to the website in any way but who still seemed to have something fruitful to say about to my research questions. Instead of lingering on the initial internal need to constitute a field with clearly defined boundaries, I

thus followed "Hannerz's recipe for the study of cultural complexity" by focusing "on the interfaces, the affinities, the confrontations, the interpenetrations and the flow-through, between clusters of meaning and ways of managing meaning" (as cited in Hine, 'Boundaries' 7).

4.1 *LiquidFriesland*

It was "Hannerz's recipe" that helped me through the difficult period I had after discovering that one of my research fields, *LiquidFriesland*, had gone offline in Spring 2016. Here, Hannerz's suggestion helped me to understand that just because the website was no longer online, neither my research field was lost, nor my research pointless and in vain. I realised that my research field consisted of more than just the content found under that URL, www.liquidfriesland.de, but also included the people connected to the website and their information, communication, and participation practices, as well as their references to other websites, media, people – all of which had, of course, continued to exist after the website had closed.

I will go back to the beginnings of *LiquidFriesland* however to explain how it developed. Here, Sven Ambrosy played a key role. A member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, he has been Landrat, the administrative head, of the district (ger. Landkreis) of Friesland since 2003. As a reaction to the public discourse on new forms of participation in the *Stuttgart 21*-project[1], Ambrosy wanted to offer citizens an additional, modern, and flexible way to take part in municipal decision-making processes.[2] An article about the Pirate Party's usage of the open-source software LiquidFeedback started Ambrosy thinking whether it was possible to set up a similar tool in his district. Without further ado, Friesland's administration contacted *LiquidFeedback's* programmers, the Association for Interactive Democracy, to inquire about the possibility of collaborating. The programmers agreed to *LiquidFeedback's* application, the first on a municipal lev-

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1   Stuttgart 21 is a disputed railway and urban development project in the city of Stuttgart in the south of Germany. The project saw unusually high numbers of protesters from all levels of society. Around ten thousand people protested the conversion of the existing terminal station into a through station underground in 2010. On 30 September 2010, police took an especially hard-line toward the predominantly peaceful protesters, using water cannons and pepper spray and other measures. To subsequently include the population in the planning project, which had been neglected the commencement of construction, arbitration proceedings were conducted – a novel experiment in democratic participation in Germany (cf. Brunold).

2   Cf. Sven Ambrosy, telephone interview, 16 September 2015.

el, and things moved quickly: in May 2012, the programmers presented the project to politicians and an interested public in Friesland. Two months later, the district assembly voted unanimously for a one-year trial of the platform (cf. Landkreis Friesland, *Juni 2013* 4).3 In November that year, *LiquidFriesland* went online – promising to offer a space for citizens' opinions, feedback, and ideas, and to distribute information faster and more widely within Friesland.

I stumbled on *LiquidFriesland* only a few months after its launch while researching and browsing the web for a prospective research field that would be suitable for a comparison with *Betri Reykjavík* in my future PhD project. I had already conducted researched on *Betri Reykjavík* for my master's thesis. At first glance, *LiquidFriesland* had potential both in terms of the similarities it had to and striking differences it had from *Betri Reykjavík*. These will, of course, become clear throughout the book. Friesland's location in the north of Germany also made it easy for me to reach it on one- or two-day trip, and the working language of German also came in handy for me as a native speaker.

Nevertheless, my entrance into the Friesland field turned out to be rockier than in Iceland. That is, my initial attempt at accessing *LiquidFriesland* in 2013 was immediately thwarted: as I did not possess citizen status in the district of Friesland, I was not able to apply for an access code. I was therefore confined to guest access, through which I could read the initiatives and comments put online, but could not see the identities of those debating, or participate in the debate myself.

Thus, in a second attempt at entering the field, I approached *LiquidFriesland* from above, by sending an email to Landrat Sven Ambrosy about my plan to investigate the website as part of my doctoral thesis. In reply, I was invited by Friesland's then press secretary, Sönke Klug, to attend an event in Friesland at which Ambrosy and Klug gave a presentation on *LiquidFriesland* to some members of the city council of Seelze who were interested in implementing a similar platform in their city.[4] During that meeting, without ever having had a private word with Ambrosy or Klug, I was introduced to the visitors from Seelze as "our PhD candidate". It was only after the official event that I had the chance to speak to Sönke Klug one-on-one to discuss my dissertation project and ask the initial questions I had about the website.

In the aftermath and processing of this initial meeting, I also asked for full access to the platform – for research purposes only. Klug promised to discuss my enquiry with the programmers. After a fortnight, I was notified that I would not be allowed permission because the contract between the district of Friesland and their

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3   In June 2013, the future operation of *LiquidFriesland* was passed, but without a fixed term.

4   *Seelze Direkt* went online in July 2015 but in 2019 it had also been terminated.

user-citizens concerning *LiquidFriesland* would not allow for an exception to the rule that users must be registered citizens of the Friesland district.

Obviously, the lack of full access to *LiquidFriesland* fundamentally shaped my research and consequently, my thesis. Throughout the research process, I depended on the administration naming possible interlocutors of potential interest to me, which again, had a fundamental influence on my research as well as research findings (cf. Schwell). I was thus left with little control over decisions about whom to interview or not, since I had no possibility of finding out which users participated, in what ways, or at what frequency. In the end, I did manage to speak to a variety of user types, just as I had planned to do. Nevertheless, I have to presume that certain "hidden areas" (Mann and Stewart 90) remained, and getting to know of them would have shaped my research in another way.[5]

The workings of *LiquidFriesland*

So how did *LiquidFriesland* actually work? *LiquidFriesland* was a customized version of *LiquidFeedback*, a voting and communication platform originally developed for use within political parties (cf. Behrens et al., *Principles*).[6] The voting and communication platform aimed at enabling registered users to influence political decision making by discussing ideas, voting for or against others' petitions, or proposing motions. In order to go to the discussion stage, citizens' initiatives had to pass a quorum of ten percent, meaning that at least ten percent of the users subscribed to the particular thematic category that an initiative was assigned to must support or at least follow it (cf. Landkreis Friesland as cited in Diefenbach 33). Once in the *discussion* stage, other users could suggest changes to the initiative, which the author could, in turn, incorporate into her final proposal (see Figure 1). After some weeks, the initiative was transferred to the *frozen* stage: changes could no longer be made, and users would hold a final vote on the idea. Again, a ten percent quorum had to be met for the idea to be taken up for mooting by the district assembly in its regular meetings (cf. Diefenbach 33).

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5   Whenever I spoke about this field access dilemma, both users of the websites as well as members of academia frequently suggested I log into *LiquidFriesland* using somebody else's credentials. However, I decided against his practice for ethical reasons.

6   In the media and public opinion, LiquidFeedback is often falsely attributed to the Pirate Party, as it was the first party to use it extensively. LiquidFeedback was in fact invented by the Association for Interactive Democracy which is based in Berlin. The group has since distanced itself from the usage of their software by the Pirate Party (cf. Behrens et al., 'Piratenpartei').

Fig. 1: Starting Page of LiquidFriesland[7]

LiquidFriesland was *LiquidFeedback's* first application on a municipal rather than on the intraparty level that it was originally designed for. To suit the needs of a district administration, the programmers made a number of alterations to the software, the two most important of which concerned the registration process and the expansion of parties approved for submitting motions.

The registration process for *LiquidFriesland* consisted of three steps. First, the interested citizen completed an online registration mask, with her real full name and address. Second, the administration checked the identity of the prospective user: if there was a person of that name registered under the given address, the administration sent out a letter with an access code to log into *LiquidFriesland*. Third, the citizen logged in online using the access code, and could then set up a user profile. Hence, it took some time and effort to set oneself up for participation. The platform was also altered to include administrative motions (ger. Verwaltungsverfahren). With this feature, communication and participation in *LiquidFriesland* did not only

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7   Screenshot taken on 16 May 2015 at www.liquidfriesland.de/lf/index.html.

work bottom up, but also top-down. That is, the district administration itself could submit motions for citizen feedback before voting in the district assembly.

According to Sönke Klug, former press secretary of the district of Friesland, very few of the around 200 motions discussed in the district assembly each year were actually interesting, comprehensible, and relevant enough to make mooting them in *LiquidFriesland* pay off.[8] By the time it had closed, the administration itself had put up a total of 14 motions for discussion on the site (cf. Landkreis Friesland, August 2015 1), hoping for direct feedback from citizens before bringing up the topic for discussion in the district assembly. This version of the programme, customised for the use in municipalities, and launched in the Friesland district in late 2012, was later adopted and used by other municipalities in an almost identical form.[9]

Sampling Process

I sampled and contacted the three actor groups – users/citizens, programmers, and administration and politicians – in different ways. While the identities of users remained difficult for me to establish due to my restricted, guest access to the website, it was easy to identify the administrative officials and politicians involved, as they were public figures who had mostly already featured in the media.

Through Sönke Klug, it was also easy to establish the identity of the programmers, and I sent them an email asking for an interview at the end of September 2013. However, before agreeing to meet me in person, the Association for Interactive Democracy first wanted to speak to me on the phone a few days later to find out more about me and my research interests.[10] During that telephone call, one of the programmers and I set up a face-to-face meeting in Berlin on 1 November 2013.

I generally contacted administrators, district assembly and other politicians via email. I built up ongoing contact with Friesland's press secretary Sönke Klug via email and telephone throughout the years, meeting him occasionally when I was in Friesland to interview users, to conduct focus groups, or go to a panel discussion about *LiquidFriesland*. Klug also helped set up a phone interview with district head Sven Ambrosy, who could not meet in person due to time restraints.

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8   Cf. Sönke Klug, personal interview, Jever, 25 August 2015.

9   In early 2019, only *Achim Dialog* (launched in May 2016) still appears to be active, whereas *Seelze Direkt* (launched in July 2015), *Wunstorf Direkt* (launched in March 2015), and Bürgerplattform *ROW* (launched in March 2015) cannot be accessed anymore under their respective URLs. All websites were still online at end of 2016.

10 This may have had to do with the fact that the Association for Interactive Democracy does not give interviews to journalists or other media representatives, as the association points out in their Information Kit, an introductory pdf-guide downloadable from their website (cf. 11).

Finally, I interviewed individual users and recruited others for participation in one of two focus groups.[11] Due to my limited access to the website, I depended on the district's press secretary to suggest potential interviewees to me. His first two suggestions were no strangers to me, having recognised both from media coverage: one as the voluntary *LiquidFriesland* representative Djure Meinen and the other, Peter Lamprecht, as the author of one of the very first motions on *LiquidFriesland*.[12] Interestingly, the other two users I met for individual interviews were suggested to me by at least two of Klug, Meinen and Lamprecht. Even early in the fieldwork process, this showed me the limitations of recruiting participants solely based on references by Sönke Klug and the interlocutors he suggested. All of them were eloquent and experienced conversationalists that had already talked to journalists about their engagement at *LiquidFriesland*. To get more diverse and potentially less practiced views on the tool, but also on politics and digitalisation in general, I decided to expand my methodology by focus groups with "ordinary" citizens. I recruited participants for the focus groups by distributing flyers and putting up posters across Friesland. On two days at the end of May 2014, I drove across the district, distributing hundreds of flyers and dozens of posters to banks, cafés, cultural centres, supermarkets, and pharmacies in every larger village; an acquaintance in Jever distributed flyers to friends, neighbours, and relatives; and I also delivered flyers to the district administration who promised to distribute them within their branches. Generally, I was aiming to attract participants interested in talking about "Alltag – Politik – Beteiligung" ("The everyday, politics, engagement") and who were not already registered users of *LiquidFriesland*. I therefore carefully worded and designed the flyer and poster to avoid stressing my connection to *LiquidFriesland*. However, this sampling technique was not especially successful. In the end, only one focus group participant was recruited who was not already registered in *LiquidFriesland*. This also has to do with the fact that the district administration had emailed the flyer to all registered *LiquidFriesland* users.

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11   Most names of individual users of *LiquidFriesland* have been pseudonymised. Real names were used when either the participant explicitly wished so or if they were public figures and also speaking in their role as such, like politicians and programmers.

12   His initiative suggested the reintroduction of the old JEV-number plate, JEV meaning Jever, the administrative centre of the district of Friesland. In the first months after *LiquidFriesland*'s launch, Lamprecht quickly developed into a model-user of some kind for two reasons. First, he was not politically active prior to his engagement on *LiquidFriesland*. Second, media heavily stressed the fact that he was not disappointed after his motion had been dismissed; his quotation "Das ist halt Demokratie" (That's democracy, after all.) has become an aphorism favoured by many media outlets.

4.2 *Betri Reykjavík*

In contrast, gaining initial access to *Betri Reykjavík* was smooth. However, the sampling process did hold some surprises in store. *Betri Reykjavík* is an online participation tool programmed by Gunnar Grímsson and Róbert Bjarnason, Icelandic IT specialists and Internet pioneers working together under the registered name of *Citizens' Foundation*. The website is based on the open source software *Your Priorities*, which they developed.[13]

Betri Reykjavík went online in 2010, about half a year before municipal elections in Iceland's capital Reykjavík. Then in its early version and still called *Skuggaborg* (eng. *Shadow City)*, it offered a space to every political party running in the elections to promote their ideas and enter into discussions with potential voters. While not every party made use of this possibility, the *Best Party* participated eagerly, asking citizens for their ideas on how to improve life in Reykjavík. In the end, this public generated content became the *Best Party*'s programme, helping it achieve election victory with their head, actor and comedian Jón Gnarr, becoming major. Because of the *Best Party*'s heavy usage of the participation tool in its early days, *Betri Reykjavík* is still strongly associated with the party and their creative take on Icelandic politics – even though by 2014, Gnarr's tenure had ended, the *Best Party* had disbanded, and some of its former members had regrouped to form a new party, *Bright Future*. Today, the website *Betri Reykjavík* does not bear much resemblance with its predecessor from 2010. Areas designated to political parties have disappeared. Instead, every citizen can submit an idea, vote for or against ideas of other users, and comment on those (see Figure 2). The ideas are organised into eleven different thematic categories, for example urban planning, sports, or education.

Since October 2011, there has been an official collaboration between the *Citizens' Foundation* and the City of Reykjavík. At the time, the city signed a contract committing itself to deal with citizens' suggestions at the end of each month. Here, the five top priorities across the board and the top priority from each of the categories are said to be processed by an administration employee, and to then be decided on by the specialist councils within the city council.

To my knowledge, this official and binding partnership between a grassroots-movement and a government was the first in the world. But this partnership has not been without difficulties. Due of changing political majorities within the city council*, Betri Reykjavík* has been neglected by the administration from time

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13 Anybody can use *Your Priorities* free of charge to develop a participation tool to their needs, and many people from many parts of the world have already done so. The portfolio of tools that are created based on *Your Priorities* can be accessed at https://citizens.is/portfolio (last accessed 8 August 2019).

Fig. 2: Starting Page of Betri Reykjavík[14]
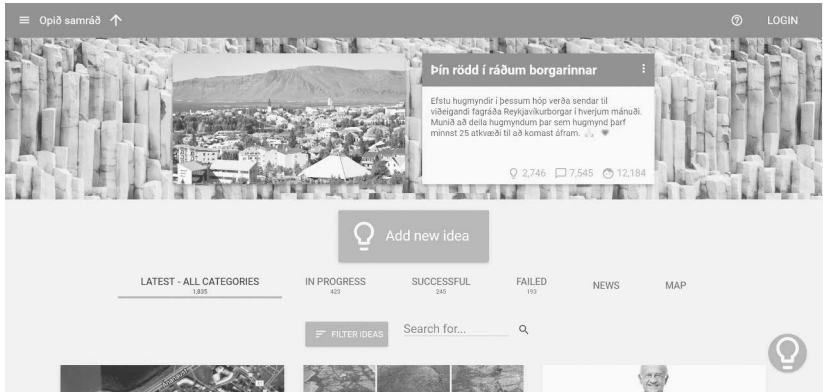
to time. At various times, the position of the administrator in charge of dealing with the incoming motions has been vacant for a couple of months. At one time, the motions were so backed up that no ideas from citizens were discussed in the city council for half a year. Consequently, the relationship between the *Citizens' Foundation*, the city administration and the city council has been rather tense at times.

Access to content on *Betri Reykjavík* is completely unrestricted; everyone who wants to can open the website and read everything there. To contribute one's own ideas as well as endorse or oppose a proposal by somebody else, a user must be registered. Registration is not, however, restricted in any way. People from all over the world can therefore quickly fill out the registration mask –name, email address, password, declaration that all information provided is correct (cf. 'Rules') –, and be ready to engage fully on *Betri Reykjavík*.

Although according to the rules, real names must be provided, it appears likely that some users have used pseudonyms, such as when usernames seem to be adapted from film stars or comic characters. It is, however, difficult to ascertain if user names are a person's real name or a pseudonym, as real names typically conform with the Icelandic naming system (first name plus patro- or matronym). Unlike in Friesland, there is no comparison of users' identities with registered citizens. In any case, given the smallness and close-knitted nature of Reykjavík society, most users seem to have registered under their real names to communicate openly with their peers, who they are relatively likely to have met in face-to-face situations.

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14   Screenshot taken on 3 May 2018 at https://betrireykjavik.is/group/47.

At the beginning of May 2019, more than 245 ideas from *Betri Reykjavík* had been classified as officially successful and implemented, for example like the extension of several playgrounds and adding more fruit and vegetables to school meals. Around 470 ideas were in progress at the time of writing, while roughly 200 ideas had officially failed for a variety of reasons. More than 14,000 users were registered with *Betri Reykjavík* at the time it was still possible to check on this number (2013); a feature that since has been disabled. In any case, the figure had limited meaningfulness, since it includes profiles of people who registered but were inactive or had never been active. It also reveals nothing about "lurkers" – users who follow discussions but do not register, as full access to the website is possible without registration.

Due to the free, full access, I obviously started my research as a lurker within *Betri Reykjavík* (see chapter 6.1 Participant Observation). I first became interested in the subject of digital democracy and the political culture of the digital in Iceland during research for my MA thesis in 2011, which I completed at the end of 2012. At the beginning of 2013, I decided to continue research in these areas, making it my PhD project. My general interest in Iceland however dates back to 2009, when I was enrolled as an ERASMUS-exchange student at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík. My fieldwork also included trips to Iceland in 2012 and 2014, and my data therefore includes experiences, observations, and data collection. Moreover, memories from 2009 make a somewhat historic comparison from 2009 to 2012 to 2014 possible; enabling me to perceive general changes over time in the cultural, political, and economic conditions of Reykjavík and Iceland.

After lurking on *Betri Reykjavík* for several days in 2011, I emailed programmers Gunnar Grímsson and Róbert Bjarnason to ask for a face-to-face interview. Second, in June 2012, I contacted 19 registered users *of Betri Reykjavík* through the tools' then personal message-feature (it was later removed). As establishing a sample of relatively active and engaged users seemed most promising for fruitful results, I contacted users ranked amongst the top-fifteen within the then three existing user rankings.[15] Most of the contacted persons replied within a few days, and in the end, I met nine of them for face-to-face-interviews in Reykjavík in July and

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15 In the early days of *Betri Reykjavík*, users were ranked into three categories: most influential, most talkative, and ambassadors. In the most-influential ranking, those users with the comments marked helpful by other users ranked highest. In the most-talkative ranking, users were ranked according the quantitative numbers of comments they had authored. Ambassadors were those users who were most successful in convincing other people to join *Betri Reykjavík* through the use of personalised links on social media, especially facebook or Twitter.

August that year. For my PhD research, I contacted these nine interviewees again, and was able to arrange meetings with six of them in 2014.

Aside from talking to users of *Betri Reykjavík*,[16] I also met with software programmers Grímsson and Bjarnason on a relatively regular basis. In 2012, I interviewed them twice. Two years later, I met them four times during the five-week period that I stayed in Iceland. In addition to two interviews, I was allowed to carry out participant observation at two meetings with their co-workers from France, the Netherlands, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

I also spoke to several political representatives in Iceland. In 2012, this was most notably the then mayor Jón Gnarr (*Best Party*), as well as Gísli Marteinn Baldursson, then city councillor for the Independence Party, and Jón Þór Ólafsson, founding member of the then newly established Icelandic Pirate Party. My 2014 research stay was planned to coincide with the municipal elections. That way, I could witness the atmosphere during election day, and experience the media coverage on-site first hand, and during the weeks of coalition consolidation and formation. Moreover, it was highly interesting to follow the first steps of the new municipality, such as which plans they had in mind for *Betri Reykjavík*.

Since it interested me to hear the opinions of all parties regarding *Betri Reykjavík* and their approach to electronic/digital democracy in general, and not only the voices of those who saw to its official incorporation into municipal decision-making processes back in 2011, I contacted all list leaders of the parties running for election in the municipal elections in the City of Reykjavík. Of course, this was an ambitious goal right from the beginning, since for the mayoral candidates, the days and weeks before and after the elections are probably the busiest in the legislative period. However, I did manage to arrange three meetings: with Halldór Auðar Svansson (Pirate Party), Halldór Halldórsson (Independence Party), and Dagur B. Eggertsson (Social Democratic Alliance), who at the time of the interview had already been the new mayor of Reykjavík for about two weeks. Halldór Auðar Svansson and Halldór Halldórsson both became councillors on the new city council, with the former also becoming director of the newly established governance and democracy council (Stjórnkerfis- og Lýðræðisráð). I also spoke to Birgitta Jónsdóttir, a member of Icelandic parliament Alþingi for the Pirate Party. One of the users interviewed in 2012 and again in 2014 had, in the meantime, become a politician: Þórgnýr Thoroddsen had joined the Pirate Party and in course of the 2014 election, became head of the sports and leisure council (Íþrótta- og tómstundaráð).

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16   Most names of individual users of *Betri Reykjavík* have been pseudonymised. Real names were used when either the participant explicitly wished so or if they were public figures and also speaking in their role as such, like politicians and programmers.

The sample also included two civil servants, Guðjona Björk Sigurðardóttir and Jón Halldór Jónasson, who, amongst other things, dealt with citizens requests on the online complaint-management tool *Borgarlandið*. I had never come across this tool, nor had Gunnar and Róbert heard about it, but Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, a user of *Betri Reykjavík* that I interviewed both in 2012 and 2014 told me that instead of using *Betri Reykjavík*, she had found herself frequently gravitating towards *Borgarlandið*. Consequently, I looked at the website and met up with the administrative staff managing the tool.

In the attempt to contextualize both my thoughts and my findings, I spoke to three Icelandic political scientists, Jón Ólafsson, Viktor Orri Valgarðsson, and Krístinn Már Ársælsson. The latter is also founder of the Association for Sustainability and Democracy (ALDA). I spoke to Hörður Torfason, who has become well-known as one of the first Icelandic LGBT activists and as the driving force behind the Pots-and-Pans Revolution, the protests in the wake of the financial crisis 2008–09 (see chapter 8 Results and Discussion, 8.4.3.1 Political Participation in Times of Crisis).

5 Doing Ethnography II:
Methods and Translating Them into Practice

It's late on the evening of Tuesday 8 October, 2013, and I'm sitting next to Susanne Engstler at her desk in her home. Together, we are staring at her computer screen. "Or rather like this?", she asks and looks at me. I don't know how to answer. In fact, I'm completely stunned. This evening, events come thick and fast. Only a moment ago, we were comfortably sitting on the couches in her living room, talking about LiquidFriesland *and how she used it. And now she is asking me for suggestions on how to word the initiative she wants to start on* LiquidFriesland*. In the initiative, she demands "complete access for scientists", or rather, complete access for me. Having herself completed a PhD, Engstler was furious upon hearing that I had to make do with guest access to the platform. Immediately, she got up and had us go upstairs to craft an initiative demanding full access to* LiquidFriesland *for scientists. So much for preferably having no influence on the field you're studying!*

How could I have guessed that a focused interview with a user of *LiquidFriesland* could end this way? Only an hour later, there was already a counter-initiative started by another user of the platform, arguing against Engstler's initiative. In the end, the idea did not reach the necessary quorum to qualify for discussion by the city council. Even if it had, the power to decide over access policies lies with the programmers of *LiquidFriesland*, and the city council could have done nothing to change it. Still, this incident perfectly illustrates the manifold layers of social situations ethnographic researchers are confronted with.

This vignette also illustrates how the researcher can, intentionally or not, influence her research. Since "(e)thnography is a lived craft rather than a protocol which can be separated from the particular study or the person carrying it out" (Hine, *Ethnography* 13), the usage of methods like elaborating research theses, constituting research fields, and collecting and analysing data is highly dependent

on the person of the researcher and is heavily shaped by her world views and attitudes, diverse social criteria (cf. Hauser-Schäublin 55), and "the conceptual, professional, financial and relational opportunities and resources accessible to the researcher" (Amit 6).

According to Tom Boellstorff et al., it is only natural that "all science contains strong elements of subjectivity in the sense that science results from the work of *subjects*, that is, scientists. Subjectivity is an inescapable condition of science" (41). Boellstorff et al. further stress that "no pure realm of objectivity exists in which the interests, biases, predilections, concerns, attitudes, dispositions, conceits, judgments, axioms, and presuppositions of investigators are absent and without impact", neither in qualitative nor in quantitative studies (41).[1] Subjectivity is not perceived as contradictory to the practice of science, rather, it is the meaningful implementation of cultural anthropology in practice, as Massmünster points out (cf. 536).

My own research is influenced by the fact that I did not get to know Iceland as a research field, but as a place of residence, as I had moved there in 2009 to study at the University of Iceland. I arrived little more than a year after Iceland had been first shaken by the effects of what was to become a severe financial crisis. After returning to Germany, I followed events in Iceland through media coverage and personal contacts. My way of addressing the field and engaging within it is thus inseparable from the experiences and knowledge that I gained about it long before I started doing the research.

Digital Ethnography?

Readers may wonder that the methodology-chapter of an ethnography that is investigating two online participation platforms is lacking distinct segments on the methods of so-called *virtual* or *digital ethnography*. Since the alleged dichotomy

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1   Consequently, thinking of quantitative research as objective is also a chimera in my opinion. A survey questionnaire is as influenced by the social and cultural background of the researcher creating it as an interview guideline, as is every piece of material and every finding interpreted from the survey. The homogeneity of the findings of quantitative research as opposed to the common heterogeneity of the findings of qualitative research is predominantly due to the limited and the predetermined answer options within a survey. However, this homogeneity is a simplistic fallacy since interviewees are not given the possibility to differentiate their statements as part of their complex everyday lives. The apparent objectivity of quantitative research and indeed all research for that matter, including natural-scientific research, has long been questioned, cf. Karin Knorr-Cetina, Epistemic culture: how the sciences make knowledge (cf. 241ff.), Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (cf. 1ff.).

of "*real* world vs. *virtual* world", of "*offline* practices vs. *online* practices" continues to lose relevance in people's everyday life, it also does so in its investigation. Ultimately, the same set of methods are employed in all ethnographic research, regardless of whether it is conducted in predominantly physical or in predominantly virtual research situations.

I am not in any way suggesting that guides and textbooks concerning the methodology of virtual ethnography have not been useful. On the contrary, I have heavily relied on them, and very much appreciate the work of authors like Christine Hine, Gabriella Coleman, Gertraud Koch, Robert Kozinets, alongside countless others, and what they have done for the establishment of research in virtually mediated fields. However, I do think they are mistaken in establishing a completely new methodology of virtual ethnography, and thus failing to identify the key-methods they describe for what they have been all along, the cornerstones of ethnography. The authors mentioned above have indeed begun to see that themselves, as some of their more recent publications show (Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet*; Kozinets, *Netnography Redefined*).[2] Similarly, Nancy Baym warns us not to rashly "take the stance that, since the Internet is new, old theory and methods […] have nothing to offer in its exploration" ('Qualitative Internet Research' 180), when in fact "old theory and methods" are all we need to be equal to the exploration of our multi-faceted research fields today.

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2   Even the titles of these works hint at this increasing consciousness. Hine stood back from her Virtual Ethnography (2000) and turned towards an Ethnography for the Internet (2015), and Kozinets felt the need to "redefine" (2015) his thoughts on Netnography (2010).

6 Methodology

Having clarified key terms and assumptions in the methodology of this project in *Doing Ethnography* II, I will now briefly outline the different methods employed during my research process, such as participant observation, interviews, and focus groups. As I have argued, it does not make sense to have one set of methods to explore the so-called "offline" lives of people, and a completely different set of methods to investigate the so-called "online" lives of people, since people "live everything at once"(Miller 28).

The term ethnography has come to describe various disciplinary purposes: that of knowledge production, that of genre and way of expression, and that of theory-generator (cf. Knecht, 'Nach Writing Culture'; cf. Knecht, 'ethnographische Praxis'; cf. Boellstorff et al. 15). Today, the discipline's core aim is to gain an emic understanding of contemporary everyday concepts of practices, discourse, knowledge, and assemblage (cf. Knecht, 'ethnographische Praxis' 5). This is mostly achieved through multi-perspective, multi-methodological access based on active and observing participation in the everyday lives of research subjects (cf. Schmidt-Lauber, 'Feldforschung' 219). In the course of the discipline's history, the conditions, practices, and conventions of ethnography have changed substantially (cf. Knecht, 'ethnographische Praxis' 3).

6.1 Participant Observation

Participant observation is typically identified as the key method of ethnographic fieldwork, and is commonly defined as "a total immersion in search of a holistic understanding" (Howell 16), meaning the direct participation and engagement of the researcher in everyday life within a specific research field and an empathetic and comprehending understanding combined with analytical distance (cf. Schmidt-Lauber, 'Feldforschung' 220). Schmidt-Lauber herself points out that because of the inherent ambivalence between closeness and distance in partici-

pant observation, it is a fundamentally contradictory approach and behaviour. On the one hand, the ethnographer focusing on closeness would sooner or later "go native" and herself become part of her research field (cf. Schmidt-Lauber, 'Feldforschung' 231); while on the other hand, somebody stressing distance would presumably never notice or witness crucial details (cf. Hauser-Schäublin 42).

In my opinion, this view is too binary and neglects the manifold nuances that are so characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork. There appears to be "no other form of scholarly enquiry in which relationships of intimacy and familiarity between researcher and subject are envisioned as a fundamental medium of investigation rather than as an extraneous by-product or even an impediment"(Amit 2). Or as Tim Ingold argues,

> there is really no contradiction between participation and observation; indeed, you simply cannot have one without the other. The great mistake is to confuse observation with objectification. To observe is not, in itself, to objectify. It is to notice what people are saying and doing, to watch and listen, and to respond in your own practice. That is to say, observation is a way of participating attentively, and it is for this reason a way of learning. (23)

I agree with Ingold, and see non-participant observation, which has become a recent trend (cf. Lamnek), as something of an oxymoron. Whether in face-to-face research situations or in online research situations, one cannot observe without participating. It could be argued that a structurally different "non-participant observation" – that is, lurking – is possible in online settings. However, on closer inspection, even lurking essentially becomes participant observation. Many early works on virtual ethnography (cf. Kozinets, *Netnography*; cf. Wellman and Haythornthwaite) depict lurking as a convenient method for the ethnographer to gain an overview of her prospective research field without visibly effecting it. Heike Mónika Greschke notes that "[w]ithout ever leaving her desk, she [the researcher] must only start her web browser, and then she is suddenly off exploring strange worlds 'out there.' Numerous public discussion forums, e-mailing lists, personal homepages, weblogs, MUDs, chats, etc. open up views of the beautiful new world of cyberspace" (40). Already, one becomes aware that turning on the computer, opening the Internet browser, typing an URL into the bar, logging in and then strolling through forums, agendas and discussions is not, in any case, non-participant behaviour.

Moreover, lurking could only ever be regarded as the starting point for an ethnographic analysis: its boundaries of interaction and for communication are too restrictive, and the data the researcher could extract from such research too limited. Greschke argues that

If one adopts lurking as a research practice, one should be aware that one takes only one possible position within a complex system of communications. Ethnographers who only adopt the role of the lurker may easily get access and a great deal of – even 'naturally occurring' – data (Silverman, 2007) at a low cost. What they see and what they are able to understand, however, remain as limited as nineteenth-century armchair ethnography. (43)

Further, in its etymological sense, lurking does not appear a fitting term for a research method. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* describes the verb "to lurk" first and foremost as "to wait somewhere secretly, especially because you are going to do something bad or illegal" (sec.1). Although another definition of the verb, "to read a discussion in a chat room, etc. on the Internet, without taking part in it yourself" has been added (sec.3), the term essentially never lost its dubious connotation. As such, even seasoned scholars of the field had to acknowledge the term's limited suitability in describing a research method (cf. Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet* 57).

6.2 Interviews

Hammersley and Atkinson argue that "[i]nterviews in ethnographic research range from spontaneous informal conversations in the course of other activities to formally arranged meetings in bounded settings out of earshot of other people" (108). This open definition of interviews is likely not one that everybody would agree on. Nevertheless, I refer to it here as it does foster the understanding that "[w]hatever their form, interviews must be viewed as *social events* in which the interviewer […] is a *participant observer*" (120; my highlights). In a practical and refreshing manner, Hammersley and Atkinson counter the chimera of individually and separately applicable methods often depicted in methodological textbooks. In doing so, they refute the idea that the researcher can simply apply one method in one situation and another in another situation, and that those methods would not overlap or inform each other in any way.

To my mind, a cultural anthropologist who can conduct an interview without being a participant observer seriously lacks a unique and fundamental quality of our disciplinary community, "the anthropologist's antennas" (Howell 17). Invited into a research participant's home for an interview, it is the cultural anthropologist's work to notice his taste in interior design, food and drink preferences, family structures, or communication patterns with other members of the household. Meeting up in a public café for an interview, the cultural anthropologist cannot help but notice the smell and sounds of coffee brewing, the cacophony it contributes to, combined with background music and the sound of other guests chatting,

the threadbare quality of the armchairs, the blackboard menu hanging behind the counter. Sitting opposite an interview partner for a prolonged amount of time, the cultural anthropologist surely notes his physical appearance, his way of speaking – is he slightly nervous or is he confident –, the condition of his clothing, the way he uses his body when he talks. The point I want to illustrate here is that the situational and flexible combination of different methods is a natural, if not constitutive characteristic and strength of being an cultural anthropologist. For me, like Howell, this methodological flexibility and open involvedness is at the core of "ethnographic fieldwork undertaken as an integral part of my anthropological identity – as the continually expanding source of my knowledge about human sociality and about human potentials: their dreams, longings, and practices" (19). Similarly, Hammersley and Atkinson stress that "ethnography is not just a set of methods but rather a particular mode of looking, listening, and thinking about social phenomena" (230).

Interviewing Techniques

Most of the interviews that I conducted for this study were focused interviews, and were influenced by Schmidt-Lauber's conception of qualitative guided interviews (cf. Interview) and Judith Schlehe's notions of thematic interviews. Although I brought a guideline with me to every interview, I rarely looked down at it. Schmidt-Lauber points out that

> (i)n contrast to the rapid question-answer cycle of (mostly quantitative) social science survey techniques, […] ethnographic interviews should encourage the interviewees to tell stories and leave much room for them to develop the situation and the course of the conversation while the interviewers should show as much restraint as possible, adjusting their comments to the course of the narrative and to the person of the interviewee. ('Ethnological Analysis' 569)

I also conducted some so-called expert interviews.[1] Like Warneken and Wittel, I am critical of the prevalent definition of expert interviews as primarily providing material that is not to be analysed hermeneutically, but rather as a source of in-

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1   Naturally the question arises as to how the term "expert" is defined here, and which participants I understand as experts in their fields. Bogner et al. make clear that the image of the expert is both constructed by the researcher and society, dependent on the specific research questions as well as the social representativeness of the so-called expert (cf. 11). First, I categorised as experts those people who are professionally involved with the designing and programming of the participation platforms, predominantly IT experts and software programmers. Second, I categorised as experts those people

formation to take at face-value (cf. 11). Agreeing with Dominic Boyer's line of reasoning, I treated "experts not solely as rational(ist) creatures of expertise but rather as desiring, relating, doubting, anxious, contentious, affective – in other words as human subjects" (38). For me then, interviews with experts were not simply sources of information, but were rather subject to the same processes of analysis as the other interviews.

These "expert interviews" were often marked by a palpable imbalance in conversation. Indeed, they resembled audiences granted to me, the researcher, rather than a conversation or exchange between equals. Warneken and Wittel cite Berthold Vogel, who described the mechanics at work in such situations as effects of paternalism (cf. 7). The effects of paternalism were characterized in my interviews by a demonstrative good naturedness on part of the male interlocutor toward my research and I, combined with permanent attempts to take over moderation from me, the female researcher, and the imposition of conversation content. Initially, these experiences were irritating and frustrating, but in the end I came to see them as "data in and of itself" (Schmidt-Lauber, 'Ethnological Analysis' 563; cf. Koch, *Technikgenese*).

The telephone interview is a format situated on the periphery of the ethnographic methodological canon. As mediated communication reduced to pure voice, it does not seem to fit the discipline's methodological demands to immerse oneself within the research field and with all senses for a prolonged period of time.[2] Although my initial research design did not foresee me conducting phone interviews, due to heavy time-constraints on their behalf, it proved to be the only way to speak to two informants during the research process. As the US-American communication scholars Kerk F. Kee and Larry D. Browning stress, phone interviews are first and foremost a 'practical', as well as 'time and cost-effective' mode for data collection.[3]

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that are professionally involved with local administration and municipal politics, such as politicians and administration employees.

[2] It was little surprising that searching for literature on "telephone interview" (Telefoninterview) in both English and German in the Virtual Library of Social and Cultural Anthropology (EVIFA), a mere 26 hits showed up. All but one publication was more than ten years old, and most were much older. Moreover, most centred on surveys conducted by phone, not qualitative interviews by phone. A Google Scholar search for "phone interview anthropology" in both English and German delivered no interesting results whatsoever.

[3] Whether one has teaching and administrative responsibilities at university, one's personal/family situation does not allow any absence, or one lacks sufficient funds for travel expenses – the telephone interview, like the email interview, allows the researcher

6.3 Focus Groups

Focus groups have been used within a wide range of academic disciplines. The method's historic roots lie in Anglo-Saxon market and advertising research from the 1940s, where test persons were presented with stimuli in the form of product packaging or advertising films and their reactions to it were recorded. The temporal point of view was the focus of researchers' attention, as the reaction of multiple test persons could be recorded simultaneously (cf. Loos and Schäffer 15). In the mid-1950s, the German Frankfurter Institut für Sozialforschung and other schools pushed for a new orientation toward group dynamics in focus group research. This new focus on group dynamics stressed the fact that individuals' opinions often only become apparent in discourse with others (cf. Loos and Schäffer 20). Since the early 2000s, focus groups have become increasingly popular in socio- and educational-scientific research, whereas they remain rare within cultural anthropologists' methodological repertoires (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 112; cf. Boellstorff et al. 105).[4] This may have something to do with the fact that "focus groups are artificially set up situations" (Kitzinger as cited in Jowett and O'Toole 458); although they may resemble participant observation when the conversation is flowing, they are not "natural" situations, but social situations created by the researcher, but then one-on-one interviews are so, too. Unlike focused one-to-one interviews, where the interviewee is encouraged to speak about all possible aspects, arguments and value judgments connected to a specific topic through a more or less elaborated and fixed set of questions, the discussion between participants within focus groups is guided by a few stimuli given by the moderator (cf. Zwick and Schröter 27). Here, stimuli are not restricted to questions, but also include the distribution of short articles to read and discuss, or the presentation of pictures or short video clips meant to stimulate exchange between the discussants. The main idea behind this method is to facilitate the effects of group dynamics, which are believed to have a positive influence on the participants' engagement and willingness to provide information (cf. Schulz 13). For example, new ideas and points of view may be stimulated by spontaneous comments within the group that would otherwise remain hidden or unrecognised in one-to-one interviews (cf. Schulz 12). While one-to-one interviews typically lead to deeper insights into

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to expand her (geographical reach) in data collection beyond what would otherwise be possible (cf. Kee and Browning 4). Telephone interviews also appear to me to be a chance for scholars with physical disabilities broaden the reach of their research.

4   Dissertations like that by Sabine Wöhlke are a rare exception. In Geschenkte Organe?, the German cultural anthropologist discusses ethical and cultural challenges in familial live kidney donations (cf. 67ff.).

the individual attitudes and experiences of interviewees (cf. Schulz 13), it is impossible to harvest as wide a range of opinions as in focus groups. In times in which opinions and attitudes are regarded as socially constructed, fragmented, and ephemeral, the method of the focus group does justice to this fact by paying close attention to the interaction process, deliberation, and the formation of opinion through mutual communication (cf. Littig and Wallace 10).

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, participant observation, interviews, and focus groups were identified as the methodological cornerstones of the investigation. Most importantly, the suitability of established methods of ethnography, regardless of whether one researches predominantly online or offline situations, was stressed. Alongside her participants, the researcher "lives everything at once" (Miller 28) during periods of participant observation. This is also true for interviews, which "must be viewed as social events in which the interviewer […] is a participant observer" (Hammersley and Atkinson 120). Once again, the chapter illustrates that "(e)thnography is a lived craft rather than a protocol which can be separated from the particular study or the person carrying it out" (Hine, *Ethnography* 13).

7 Doing Ethnography III:
## Making Sense of the Data

Concerning data analysis, I agree with Hammersley and Atkinson who point out "that there is no formula or recipe for the analysis of ethnographic data" (158). They warn against the impression created in some literature that there is such thing as "a standard set of steps" the ethnographer should follow to make sense of their data. Rather, data analysis is a highly emergent, contextual, and immanently personal process (cf. Boellstorff et al. 159).

The realisation that data analysis is an emergent, contextual and personal process is one of the main conclusions of the critically-reflexive *Writing Culture* debate of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Also known as the *Crisis of Representation*, the *Writing Culture* debate brought to the fore how all science is a contextual and social practice of knowledge production – or rather, of knowledge construction (cf. Hess and Schwertl 2). For the discipline of ethnography, the US-American historian James Clifford in particular illustrated how the practice of representation and the concrete processes of ethnographic writing are processes of construction, are *partial truths* or *true fiction* (cf. 22).

Ethnographic data analysis is not a distinct stage in the research process. Rather, the process is circular and iterative, and begins as early as "the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research problems, and continues through to the process of writing reports, articles, and books" (Hammersley and Atkinson 158). This circular and iterative process of data analysis appears central to US-American sociologists Barney Glaser's and Anselm Strauss' approach of Grounded Theorizing.[1] In this approach to data analysis "[t]heory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and

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1   Here, I take up Hammersley and Atkinson's suggestion to speak of "grounded theorizing" as an activity, thereby distinguishing it from the outcome of this activity, that is, "grounded theory" (cf. 158).

Fig. 3: Phases of Fieldwork in the Research Fields
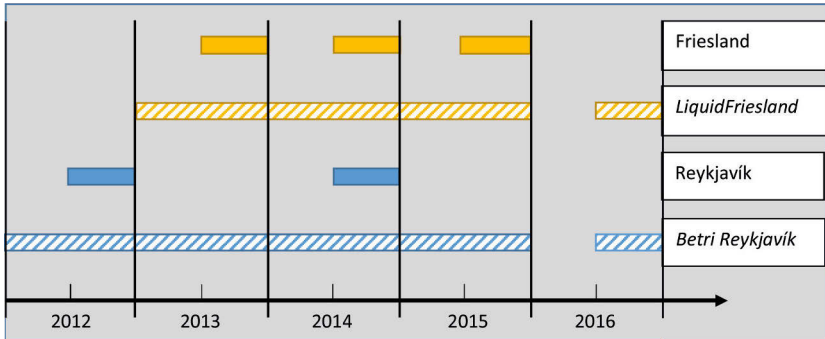
data collection" (Strauss and Corbin 273).2 Thus, Grounded Theory is a general method of on-going comparative analysis. Unlike the common sequential procedure in testing theories or hypotheses (operationalization, data gathering, data preparation, evaluation), generating theory from empirical evidence requires recurring cycles in which fieldwork, analysis, and interpretation are tightly knit (cf. Mey and Mruck 15).

This circular approach to on-going comparative analysis is the main point I took away from grounded theorizing for my research. As one can see from Figure 3, periods of data collection, especially in the physical fields, alternated throughout with prolonged periods of transcription and preliminary analysis.3 The easy accessibility of the websites allowed for prolonged on and off engagement with the research fields.

I mainly analysed my data using the computer programme MaxQDA (VERBI Software), which made it easier to gather, organise, and analyse the data, which ranged from interview transcripts to screenshots, to images or power point presentations. While there is certainly the potential to lose oneself in "playing around" with the myriad detailed functions the software offers, it does greatly assist the researcher in the exploration, interpretation, categorisation, classification, and

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2   Since their original publication in 1967, Glaser and Strauss have developed differing views on how to apply the Grounded Theory method, resulting in a split between their paradigms. However, for this study it suffices to refer to the overall concept. For an in-depth examination of the different nuances of Grounded Theory, see Mey and Mruck.

3   The bars indicate in which half of the respective year that fieldwork was undertaken. Notably the bars regarding fieldwork, especially in the physical fields of Friesland and Reykjavík, do not indicate the lengths of the stays. The hatching on the websites' bars signifies the prolonged, but on and off character of fieldwork.

construction of theory from data (cf. Hilpert et al. 176).[4] Many qualitative data analysis software programmers rely on grounded theorizing as the basic principle of data analysis (cf. Kuckartz 82).

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4   Boellstorff et al. stress the problematic nature of using qualitative data analysis program-mes in ethnography. These include "a tendency to believe that qualitative analysis software is somehow more 'objective' than hand coding and analysis", as well as the fact that "the situated and contextual nature of ethnographic research and analysis defies standardization and mechanization. It is erroneous to assume that a piece of technology (which, incidental-ly, is made by people) can do the interpretative work of a thoughtful human mind" (165f.).

8 Results and Discussion

Simply looking at individuals acts of political participation, such as marching in a demonstration or signing an e-petition, is not enough to understand how people's participation repertoires are influenced by ICT. Indeed, as information, communication and participation are all mutually dependent and interactive, one also has to research people's information and communication practices.

Consequently, one focus of my research is on participants' information practices, and their practice in terms of navigation and sense-making where a seemingly infinite amount of data is available and accessible online, and in which agency in producing information has shifted dramatically. Thus I attempt to simultaneously look at participants' use of traditional offline, online, and social media – something which has rarely been done before (cf. Strömbäck et al. 2).

After outlining the most common modes of political participation, I also look at (online) political participation from three different perspectives: the continuum of online participation (between empowerment of the citizens and the simulation of participation), differentiating between participation in times of crisis and in times of affluence, and participants' preference for participation at the local rather than national or international level.

8.1 Political Participation – A Definition?

Interviewer: When did you start to be interested in politics?

Guðrún: I'm not interested in politics.

Interviewer: What are you interested in then?

Guðrún: Surroundings, solutions – things that have always been done THAT way, but is it possible to do it THIS way? Like that. Politics are way down at the bottom.[1]

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1   Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

In only my second interview in 2012, Guðrún's statement that she was not interested in politics put me off my stride for a moment. What I had imagined to be a clever opening question that would surely initiate a lengthy narration about her political activity resulted in a declamatory one-liner. Despite being one of the most active users of *Betri Reykjavík* – with many initiatives and comments on diverse topics put into the system –, Guðrún was apparently "not interested in politics".

For many years now, Guðrún's statement has had me thinking about how the (scientific) vocabulary of scholars does not necessarily conform with or to participants own interpretations. The academic sets out to investigate a theoretical set of practices or a theoretical concept within a field, and yet has only a sketchy understanding of how actors in the field itself understand the topic. As is clear from the example above, my understanding as the researcher, and Guðrún's understanding as the researched about her practices, did not exactly coincide.

As Miller et al. illustrate through the term "Social Media", researchers may decide to accept the "vagaries of public semantics" in defining one's research topic, pointing out that this "definition is not absolute, nor does it contain firm boundaries; rather it is a heuristic device which helps to clarify the parameters of our study" (9). Keeping this in mind, I took pains to avoid constructing the research objective at my writing desk. As such, in the course of fieldwork, the research objective *political participation* was transformed into numerous phrases that came from participants themselves, such as *taking part in politics and society*, *engaging politically*, *engaging civically*, *being interested in what is happening in the municipality*, *being an activist*, and *being a politician*. Indeed, all those attributions and activities, apart from *being a professional politician*, fit well into van Deth's map of political participation modes (see chapter 2.1.2 New Modes – New Definition?), thereby assuring me that my research was still firmly grounded within research areas and fields.

In other words, "political participation" appeared to be an abstract term which participants seldom identified with – even though they talked extensively about their activities, activities that I would have immediately categorized as modes of political participation. This becomes especially visible in Þórgnýr's case. In 2014, I asked him about his new positions as a deputy city councillor, chair of the sports and leisure council, and vice chair of the culture and travel council in Reykjavík:

> This is what happens when you start poking your nose at things you shouldn't be poking your nose at […]. I suppose it takes me being opinionated, but self-diagnosed apolitical. So *Betri Reykjavík* was a fine venue for me to actually take part in discussion I was interested in. But it turns out, that I was involved in some activism with some friends and I didn't really connect it to politics at the time. It is kind of a naive, very tight perspective I had on things […] and before I knew it, I was running for parliament last year. And I

was just filling in on the list, to be honest. […] And done, here I am. That's a little bit of a change and I was a LITTLE BIT surprised about that.[2]

As a result of these insights, I was able to create a multi-faceted work on how people are taking part in shaping the conditions of their, as well as their families' and friends', day-to-day world. Van Deth notes more than 70 modes of political participation, including such diverse activities as voting in elections, *buy-cotts*, and guerrilla gardening (cf. 'Partizipationsforschung' 11). As such, I see no sense in drawing strict arbitrary lines between what "political participation" is or is not. Indeed, I would always argue for a more inclusive measurement system. For me, the key factors in defining "political participation" are interest, engagement and commitment to the democratic community and to society, in whichever modes that they may appear – rather than a restrictive, scholarly label.

8.2 Information Practices through the Ages

With the spread of the Internet, the sheer mass of information available has grown exponentially. Not only has the technological capacity to store seemingly infinite amounts of data been created (cf. Reichert), but agency in producing information has also shifted immensely, with vocational journalists losing their interpretational sovereignty and countless semi-private bloggers (cf. Al-Ani) and citizen-journalists (cf. Meikle) entering the stage. This development has been widely featured both in academic and societal discourses. Often neglected in these discourses is, however, the changing role and position of the reader/user. Consequently, this chapter investigates the information practices of readers/users and their navigational and sense-making practices while simultaneously using traditional offline, online, as well as social media. Ultimately, thinking about information practices is important for the overall investigation of political participation in the digital age to "examine how people combine the use of offline and online media and how their "political information repertoires" or "news diets" influence political participation (cf. Strömbäck et al. 2).

8.2.1 Defining Information Practices

The term "information practices" first came to me during analysis as a working title to group the various practices of participants revolving around information. It was only later that I found out that there was indeed a whole theoretical complex

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2   Þórgnýr Thoroddsen, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 19 June 2014.

connected to investigating the "practices of information seeking, retrieval, filtering, and synthesis" (Talja and Hansen as cited in French and Williamson 738). Although information practice research most often focuses on information or library sciences, its findings have been invaluable for my work too.

There are basically two theoretical strands in information practice research: information behaviour, and information practice. In my research, I draw particularly on information practice, as it

> 'assumes that the processes of information seeking and use are constituted socially and dialogically rather than based on the ideas and motives of individual actors. All human practices are social, and they originate from interactions between the members of community.' In this way, the concept of practice shifts the focus away from the behavior, action, motives, and skills of monological individuals. Instead, the main attention is directed to them as members of various groups and communities that constitute the context of their mundane activities. (Tuominen et al. as cited in Savolainen 120)

This definition puts information practice in line with social constructivist thought, stressing with Anthony Giddens "the dialectic between structure and action by emphasizing the role of actors as knowledgeable individuals routinely and reflexively monitoring the ongoing flow of everyday action in social contexts" (as cited in Savolainen 120). French and Williamson furthermore point out that "[p]eople often follow a messy and iterative path when engaging with information and knowledge, what Pescosolido et al. (1998) called 'muddling through'" (739), and what I refer to here as a mix-and-match mentality.

8.2.2 Information Practices Today: A Mix-and-Match Mentality

The information practices of many people today are no longer limited to reading the only local daily newspaper in the morning. It has been replaced by a multi-method approach combining different media formats and media outlets for each of the formats into "personal news repertoires" (Strömbäck et al. 1). Within these "personal news repertoires", "the Internet is one among several media used by 'media omnivores'", as Linaa Jensen remarks (1).

A selective mix-and-match mentality appeared to be a constituent element of interlocutors' information practices in both of my fields. In Friesland for example, the young mother Anna Wagner-Becker subscribes to *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Having to weigh up costs, she and her family decided on the nationwide newspaper over a local one. As such, she reads the online version of the regional *Nordwest*

Zeitung to inform herself about local and regional issues on an almost daily basis.[3] Hans Meyer subscribes to Nordwest Zeitung in its paper format. Since retiring, Meyer 'treats' himself to two daily published nationwide papers, *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Rounding out his analogue information base, Meyer also 'noses through' through the free weekly newspaper *Friesländer Bote*.[4] He does not read online news services. Each day, Heinz Schulz visits the websites of the daily Die Welt, as well as the weeklies Der Spiegel and Focus, since according to him, every newspaper reports on different topics from different angles.[5]

In the Icelandic field, participants appear to mix-and-match from more diverse media formats. Fewer people depended on print newspapers, and most tended to compare and contrast several online news outlets and blogs. If participants did read a newspaper, it was most likely to be the daily *Frettablaðið*, which is free and distributed across many parts of Iceland six days a week.[6] In fact, Iceland is "the country with the highest market share of free newspapers" (Bakker 6) and has only one subscription-based daily newspaper, *Morgunblaðið* (cf. 43).

Guðmundur Kristjánsson exemplifies Icelandic information practices: "I almost never read a physical newspaper, but maybe the headlines, maybe on the first page […]. It's very hard to not get it through your door, so I pick it up and sometimes I read through it or just try to read some headlines."[7] Rather, Guðmundur follows

> some people on *facebook* to see what they are doing. And there are also groups on *facebook* that somebody would post in topics of interest or something like that, so I use that a lot. I'm not so much drawn to blogs, there are one or two I sometimes look up and also some post lists, so I get an email notification about things. And that is [it] – emails and *facebook* is probably most important.[8]

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3   Cf. Anna Wagner-Becker, focus group, Varel, 9 September 2014.

4   Cf. Hans Meyer, focus group, Varel, 9 September 2014.

5   Cf. Heinz Schulz, focus group, Varel, 9 September 2014.

6   Due to budget cuts in the wake of the crisis 2008–09, and because home delivery in a sparsely populated country like Iceland is often expensive, the paper has been offered with a distribution cost (€0.18 per copy in 2010) added for the more remote parts of the country since autumn 2009. Theoretically, retailers can choose between selling the paper or giving it to their customers, but in my experience, copies are handed out for free, as the availability of the paper also generates traffic, that is additional sales, to the stores (cf. Bakker 6).

7   Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 22 June 2014.

8   Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

This quotation shows that in Iceland, *facebook* serves as "an active forum for debate among both citizens and public officials" (Freedom House, 'Iceland Press 2012')[9] and "[b]logs are a major source of news and information" (Freedom House, 'Iceland Press 2016'). Guðrún Sigurðardóttir's information practices are a case in point, as she receives "one newspaper. But I read or glance of three others. Blogs, here and there, one article here, one there. But there is no blog that I read every day or every other day, it's just random".[10]

This mix-and-match mentality fits with the notion of bricolage. Borrowed from the French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, bricolage describes "a mode of cultural assemblage at an opposite pole to *engineering* [italics in the original]. Where engineering requires pre-planning, submission to various laws of physics and the organisation of materials and resources prior to the act of assembly, bricolage refers to the creation of objects with materials in hand, re-using existing artefacts and incorporating bits and pieces" (Hartley 22f.). As an intellectual activity, bricolage has been interpreted as employing the knowledge that one already has, and to mixing-and-matching capacities and access ways, and to using that knowledge freely, so that new insights and/or horizons of meaning can be revealed (cf. Jonas and Jonas 239). Generally, bricolage may be comprised of practices such as "remixing, reconstructing, and reusing of separate artefacts, actions, ideas, signs, symbols, and styles in order to create new insights or meanings" (Deuze 70).

Participants can thus be understood as *bricoleurs*, extracting and combining the information relevant to them from diverse media formats by multiple approaches, for example by mixing one or two local online sources with a national newspaper, different print newspapers (both daily and weekly) and newspaper websites, combining information from the online presences of nationwide newspapers with bits and pieces from personal blogs and their *facebook* walls. Indeed, the individual potential for the recombination of offline and online media as well as practices are seemingly endless, and result in highly individualised information practices and bodies of knowledge. According to Dutch media scholar Mark Deuze, digital culture in particular consists of the practices and beliefs of the bricoleur whose activities should not, however, be confused with boundless freedom and endless creativity:

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9   The important role that facebook plays in Icelanders lives is also confirmed by statistics. In 2014, 84.3 percent of Internet users stated that they had used social networking sites like facebook or Twitter within the last three months (cf. Statistics Iceland, Online Communication).

10   Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

> The bricoleur's strategies are constrained not only by pragmatic considerations such as suitability-to-purpose and readiness-to-hand but by the experience and competence of the individual in selecting and using 'appropriate' materials" (Chandler, 1998, online). Here we can also observe how bricolage simultaneously consists of repurposing and refashioning the old while using and making the new. (71)

That way, information practices seem to take place within a context of 'tradition' and 'innovation', of 'old' and 'new', of 'persistence' and 'dissolution', and by that can be identified as subjects to socio-cultural change. But German cultural anthropologist Klaus Schönberger warns against interpreting this context of change as a dichotomy or a dialectical interplay (cf. 207). Rather, he argues for understanding socio-cultural change as a fundamentally open and combinatorial process.

Schönberger further characterises this context of change with the conceptual pair *persistence – recombination*. In doing so, he points out that some practices do persist despite changing technological circumstances, effectively moving along or floating along (cf. 207). In the field of information practices, this means that although the Internet has become available to increasingly larger parts of the population, this does not automatically mean that everyone at once and completely shifts their information practices into online realms.

That is, individuals' information practices do not necessarily follow the socio-technological enabling potential of media formats, nor do they necessarily follow hegemonic societal co-texts, discourses, or narratives about web-based information practices. Rather, information practices take place and are shaped on the basis of already existing social structures and connected social praxis, or what Schönberger calls persistence (cf. 207).

These information practices can also be seen as tinkering or "the meticulous and ongoing process of adapting, meddling with or adjusting something in order to make repairs or improvements" (Damsholt and Jespersen 25). In their study on ethnological perspectives on innovation, Damsholt and Jespersen point out that to understand "how adaptations or transformations to everyday life come about" tinkering "is far more relevant than the idea of a sudden break" (25). To the authors, innovation is "an ongoing tinkering with and within an established order" (27). Here I would argue that innovation is congruent with what Schönberger describes as socio-cultural change: it "is only thought to be possible if it can be integrated with the constitutive logics of everyday life" (Damsholt and Jespersen 23). That is to say, regularly consulting online media formats will only become part of participants' repertoires of information practices if these formats suit the individuals' everyday lives in various respects, for example revolving around the formats' usability, content, and reliability.

8.2.3 Filtering, Sorting, Contextualising –
Information Practices Evolving

As I argued in the preceding sub-chapter, actors are in the daily process of select-
ing and mixing-and matching various information articles from a vast array of
media and media formats. Participants do so consciously and with varying degrees
of competence. Especially in times of post-truth, actors must increasingly make
a concentrated effort to evaluate items of information regarding their plausibil-
ity and credibility.[11] This chapter will illustrate the ways in which participants
have incorporated the Internet, online media and online communication into their
everyday information practices, thereby maintaining abilities that were part of
their empirical knowledge long before the spread of the Internet, and combining
those with the formation of new skills in information practice.

The gigantic flood of information the Internet brings with it presents actors
with a number of challenges. Today, actors must master practices that were
not needed as much a few decades ago. Filtering, sorting, and contextualising
have become an integral part of people's everyday information practices, as this
interview excerpt from Peter Lamprecht illustrates (the italics mark the practices
that are increasingly part of citizens' new skill sets):

> Das Internet insgesamt natürlich, bietet erheblich mehr Informationsmöglichkeiten.
> Man muss natürlich immer auch so ein bisschen *berücksichtigen*, von WEM lese ich
> WAS WO. Das ist ja die *Kunst* das hinterher zu *filtern* und *einzuordnen*, das ist natürlich
> auch so eine Sache noch. Ich kann auf alles Mögliche reinfallen, im Internet kann ich
> viel posten und loswerden. Ob das dann so seine Richtigkeit hat ist auch *immer die*
> *Frage*. Und je mehr Möglichkeiten ich zum Informieren habe, desto leichter kann ich
> auch mal Fehlinformationen aufsitzen und es ist nicht unbedingt einfacher geworden
> sich *qualifizierte* Informationen zu beschaffen. Wenn man mal sieht in Forenbeiträgen
> und und und, wo man dann durchaus mal *gucken muss* […] wer initiiert da was und
> muss das entsprechend dann auch *einschätzen*. Aber insgesamt bietet das Internet schon
> eine Menge Möglichkeiten, die vor zwanzig Jahren in dem Sinne überhaupt noch nicht
> so waren. Wo ich vielleicht überhaupt mal in der Zeitung was gelesen hatte um mich
> schlau zu machen, da sind die Möglichkeiten natürlich deutlich verbessert worden.[12]

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11   It would go beyond the scope of this paper to further discuss the concept of post-truth,
     especially since it only became a major issue in Germany in 2016 (cf. Schaal et al.),
     two years after fieldwork was completed. I consider two editions of the journal Aus
     Politik und Zeitgeschichte (APuZ) especially suitable for further information, No. 44-
     45/2017 Wandel des Politischen? and No. 13/2017, Wahrheit.

12   Peter Lamprecht, personal interview, Jever, 16 September 2013.

Generally, the Internet enables considerably more opportunities for information. How-ever, you do have to *consider* WHAT you are reading WHERE and by WHOM it is written. It is a skill to *filter* the information and *categorize* it; that is a bit tricky. One can fall for all kinds of stories; I can post and tell a lot on the Internet. *If that is correct is another story*. The more opportunities I have to collect information, the easier it is to be taken in by incorrect information. It has not necessarily become easier to obtain *qualified* information. If you take discussions in online forums for example, you must *identify* the people initiating them to be able to *evaluate* the information. All in all, the Internet still offers a lot of opportunities that did not exist twenty years ago, when you read a newspaper at the most to inform yourself – here, the opportunities have improved substantially.

Because of the substantial flood of information that the Internet theoretically pro-vides, actors must consciously decide how much information they need about a topic and how much time they are willing to spend on it, as the focus group par-ticipant Helmut Weber points out:

Wie viel Zeit nehme ich mir denn heutzutage, um informiert zu sein? Reicht mir diese Information, die ich bekomme, tagtäglich nach dem Frühstück oder während des Früh-stücks, Tageszeitung erstmal aus, bin ich damit erstmal zufrieden? Sage ich mir, *Jo, bin ich erstmal zufrieden*. Entdecke ich ein Thema, das mich wirklich bewegt, wie zum Beispiel das Fracking hier regional gegeben, dann stochere ich nach.[13]

How much time do I devote to being informed these days? Does the information that I get after or during breakfast through the daily newspaper suffice, am I content with that? I say to myself, *yes, I'm happy with that for now*. If I then come across a topic that really moves me, like fracking here regionally, then I investigate.

Sometimes, this reduction to two or three interest areas is not voluntary. Rather, many research participants complain that to be sensible and effective with their time, they must limit their interests and consequently their information tech-niques, and even more so their participation behaviour. If only time would allow, they would immerse themselves in more topics, gather more information, form opinions on them, and/or be more active regarding those issues. However, for most people most of the time, this is simply not practical or compatible with work-ing full-time, caring for a family, and pursuing other recreational hobbies. Thomas Fischer vividly describes how he reads news, and how he restricts himself:

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13   Helmut Weber, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

Ich zweifle erstmal grundsätzlich das an, was da steht und ich sag, ‚Hmm, da muss ich mal nachgucken, ist das denn so?!' Kann ich aber nicht, kann ich nicht überall, sondern bei den Sachen wo ich sage das kann aber eigentlich nicht sein oder da gucke ich mal nach. Das kann ich nicht bei allen Sachen machen, weil dann müsste ich hauptberuflich irgendwie Informationsjunkie werden und nichts Anderes mehr tun und nicht mal dafür würde meine Zeit ausreichen, auch wenn ich nicht mehr schlafen täte.[14]

First, I question everything that I read and think that I have to look into it, is that really the case?! But I can't, I can't do that for everything, just for the things that I don't think can be possible, so I look them up. But I can't do that for every issue, because then I would have to become a full-time information junkie and do nothing else and even then, my time wouldn't suffice, even if I did stop sleeping.

Participants routinely weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of a respective media or piece to ultimately judge whether the information can be *trusted* and *relied* upon. Fischer points out:

wenn man die Zeitung liest, wird man auch plus minus desinformiert, ich versuche, also ich benutze viel das Internet mich zu informieren, und ich gehe da immer, ich weiß nicht ob das bekannt ist, auf die sogenannten *Nachdenkseiten*, also diese kommentiert/ ist eigentlich eine kommentierte Presseschau, würde ich es mal nennen. Und da tue ich mich viel um und versuche zumindest, mir rauszuziehen, was mir zumindest wahrscheinlich vorkommt.[15]

When you read the newspaper, you will be more or less disinformed. I try to, so I use the Internet a lot to inform myself and I mostly visit, I don't know if you are familiar with it, the so-called *Nachdenkseiten* (literally Think-about or Reflection Pages), which is what I would call an annotated press review. That is what I visit a lot and at least try to distil what appears reasonable.

Peter Lamprecht, points out that one cannot avoid consulting different information sources, and that each source has weaknesses.[16] In my opinion, such a view would have been quite unusual 15 or 20 years ago, when (vocational) journalists held an information monopoly and consequently had the opinion hegemony (cf. Al-Ani). In the quest to determine reliable information sources, traditional media like newspapers do not fare well with participants today. As they have in many places

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14   Thomas Fischer, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.
15   Thomas Fischer, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.
16   Cf. Peter Lamprecht, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

around the world, traditional media sources are on the decline in the district of Friesland. Despite continually losing subscribers,[17] the district still has three daily newspapers, while many other districts no longer have any.

Focus group member and former journalist Wolfgang Müller says that he has quit reading newspapers, because he thinks they no longer provide information but rather disinformation. In his eyes it has become increasingly difficult to grasp "the big picture", because newspapers only show one side of the coin.[18] Likewise, Thomas Fischer said that he only reads the local section of a newspaper to find out about events like the next performance of the choir or the carnival agenda. For Fischer, contention and debate have vanished from newspapers, which have basically been reduced to a place where unaltered press releases from press organisations or statements from people somehow influential enough are printed. To Fischer, the established newspapers have become 'mere royal correspondents'.[19]

In Iceland, personal links between newspapers and individual politicians and influential businesspeople have threatened unbiased and balanced reporting for decades.[20] The situation fills Gunnar Grímsson with indignation:

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17 Cf. Sönke Klug, personal interview, Jever, August, 25 2015.

18 Cf. Wolfgang Müller, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

19 Thomas Fischer, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

20 For example, Morgunblaðið, the newspaper with the second highest circulation in Iceland, is owned by a company controlled by some of the country's major fishing corporations (cf. Ohlsson 43). Moreover, the paper is currently edited by the former conservative prime minister Davíð Oddsson, who happens to have been the country's longest serving prime minister (1991–2004). He was also the mayor of Reykjavík (1982–1991). Even more controversial was the fact that after his time as prime minister, he chaired the board of governors of the Central Bank of Iceland until 2009, when he resigned due to protests against his involvement in the economic crisis in Iceland. At Morgunblaðið, Oddsson fired a number of experienced journalists, leading to accusations that Icelandic media owners take part in manipulation for political ends, and protecting special interests rather than safeguarding professional and balanced reporting (cf. V. Árnason et al.).

We don't have a decent media, we just don't. […] The best newspaper in Iceland is actually *The Reykjavík Grapevine*[21]. And next to it is *DV*,[22] which is also the closest thing that we have to yellow press. But it's still true that they are the ones going in for the kill and say there's something wrong here and dig up the dirt and tell us about that. And *Grapevine* is the best in doing factual non-bias, no, obviously biased in one way: THEY TALK TO BOTH SIDES."[23]

Many participants see the Internet as a possible solution to the lack of balanced information. For Fischer, the Internet is a kind of

Segen, weil ich Information da noch finden kann die ich noch nirgends sonst überhaupt bekomme, es gibt unheimlich viele Sachen, Kampagnen, Initiativen. Was weiß ich was *Ärzte ohne Grenzen*, was *Campact* alles macht, was *Attac* alles macht, die Nachdenk-seiten, wie auch immer, das kann man da alles lesen. Das kriege ich aus der *NWZ*, aus der *Zeit*, aus *Spiegel* sowieso gar nicht mehr, das kriege ich da alles gar nicht mehr mit.[24]

blessing, because I am able to find information I wouldn't get anywhere else. There are so many causes, campaigns, initiatives – say *Doctors without Borders*, or what *Campact* is doing, what *Attac* is doing, the *Nachdenkseiten*, whatever – you can read about all of it on the Internet. I won't get information like that from the *NWZ* (*Nordwest Zeitung*), or *Die Zeit*, *or Der Spiegel* – they wouldn't even report on such topics.

Another focus group participant, Christa Hoffmann, points out that interests control all news sources. She personally would pick and mix from different sources and try to make her mind up about a certain issue. She stresses that one has to consult several information sources to find out what is behind that issue.[25]

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21   The Reykjavík Grapevine is an English-speaking newspaper being published every two weeks from May to October, and monthly from November to April. According to their self-description, they especially cater to tourists in Iceland, delivering "comprehensive content on all of the main topics of discourse in Iceland at each time: in cultural life, politics or general social affairs" (sec. bottom banner).

22   Indeed, DV is identified by unbiased observers as "historically one of the country's main outlets for investigative and critical reporting" (Freedom House).

23   Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview I together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 12 July 2012.

24   Thomas Fischer, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

25   Cf. Christa Hoffmann, focus group, Varel, 9 September 2014.

Another method of informing oneself, and one barely mentioned in the literature, is attending council or committee meetings to gather first-hand knowledge about specific topics:

> Entdecke ich ein Thema, das mich wirklich bewegt, wie zum Beispiel das Fracking hier regional gegeben, dann stochere ich nach. Wo kann ich nachstochern dann? Dann gehe ich zu den entsprechenden Ausschusssitzungen, wo ich gerade vor kurzem in Neustadt-gödens gewesen war und habe in der Hinsicht Informationen bekommen, die ich vorher in den Medien, die ich lesen oder sehen durfte, nicht erfahren konnte.[26]

> If I do stumble upon an issue that really concerns me, for example fracking here in the region, then I investigate. Where can I investigate? I can go to the respective committee meetings, like I have been to in Neustadtgödens just recently, where I found out information that I didn't get to know about from the media that I was able to read beforehand.

Some participants did not attend political decision-making processes only from a passive stance as observer/audience, but also as active members on political committees. Here, information gathering and participation took place simultaneously. Those people believed that they could only gain information on all aspects of a topic by actively taking part in the political process:

> Bei mir [ist] im Moment so der Punkt da, tatsächlich so das Gefühl da, nicht die richtigen Informationen zu bekommen und daher [bin ich] auch so ein bisschen auf der Suche und am gucken, wie KRIEGT man denn tatsächlich die Informationen, die man braucht um sich das gesamte Bild zu machen. Und da gibt s eigentlich nur den Weg, tatsächlich auch sich so ein bisschen in den kommunalpolitischen Prozess zu begeben. Man muss ja nicht gleich in einer Partei sein, aber dass man in Ausschusssitzungen geht. Wir hatten in Varel das große Thema *Famila*-Erweiterung […]. haben nämlich auch noch ein Geschäft in Varel, sind also auch noch unmittelbar betroffen von so einer Geschichte. Das heißt wir sind in Ausschüsse gegangen, in Ratssitzungen gegangen und haben da natürlich auch versucht, uns zu BETEILIGEN. Und wie Sie schon sagen, Beteiligung fängt erstmal damit an sich zu informieren, was überhaupt läuft, was der Kenntnisstand ist.[27]

> Lately, I have been at a point where I feel I do not get the right information and therefore, I am looking for the place where I DO get all the information that one needs to

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26   Helmut Weber, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

27   Wolfgang Müller, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

> form an opinion about a certain issue. Actually, there is only one way – that of becoming part of the local political process. You don't have to be a member of a political party right away, but to go to committee meetings. In Varel, the expansion of *Famila* (supermarket chain) was a huge issue. We also have a shop in Varel, so we are directly affected by such an issue. For us, this meant going to committee meetings, going to council meetings, and we just tried to PARTICIPATE. And like you say, participation begins with informing oneself about what's going on, what do we know at this stage.

Here, information practice and the mode of political participation intersect. Both quotations illustrate, to differing degrees, how political participation can also become part of people's information practices.

8.2.4 Excursus: Journalism in the Internet Age

The temporal restriction and specialisation in a few selected issues which is necessary today (and has been at least since the flood of information that the Internet has brought with it) is not only an issue which 'normal' citizens encounter in their information practices, but also one that journalists, a group of actors of pivotal importance in the dissemination of political decision-making processes and their outcomes, must face.

When focus group participant and former journalist Wolfgang Müller started working at the newspaper, *Ostfriesen-Zeitung* in 1987, he found that the general amount of information was relatively manageable. However, this has changed tremendously through time. Today, there is simply too much information available, due to the Internet in general, and major Social Media platforms like *Twitter*, *facebook*, which themselves have increasingly become information sources to journalists.[28]

Müller, who also has several years' experience participating on local political committees, stresses that today, one can no longer be an expert on several political issues at once. He believes that one must become a specialist, simply because becoming thoroughly informed would consume almost impossible amounts of time. He also points out how the conditions in which journalists work have changed today:

> Ich habe früher noch das Glück gehabt, ich konnte noch investigativ arbeiten. Das heißt mein Chefredakteur hat gesagt: ‚Wolfgang Müller, du kriegst jetzt zwei Tage, geh mal dieser Geschichte nach.' Und man hat nochmal irgendeinen Schweinehund ausgraben können und mal eine Schweinerei aufdecken können, gerade im Kommunalpolitischen. Und da passiert so viel, auch heute, wo es nicht mehr in der Zeitung steht, jederzeit.

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28   Cf. Wolfgang Müller, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

Nur heute haben die Kollegen [...] nicht mehr die Zeit, nicht mehr die Energie und auch nicht mehr die Erlaubnis/weil es eben Zeit und Energie und Geld ist, diesen Geschichten nachzugehen. Das heißt, das Investigative, das Nachforschen, die Wächterfunktion auf unterster Ebene ist nicht mehr gegeben.[29]

In the past, I was lucky – I was still able to work investigatively. What I mean by that is, my chief editor would say: 'Wolfgang Müller, you have two days, look into this story'. So you were still able to expose a swine, expose a scandal, especially in local politics. There is so much happening in local politics, still today, constantly, but it's not in the paper anymore. The colleagues don't have the time, the energy, the permission anymore, because it costs time and energy and money to investigate those stories. What I mean is that investigations, looking into things, being watchmen at the local level is not fulfilled anymore.

Aside from the challenges that come with managing the flood of information, journalists also face a broader societal shift in the way that "today's digital environment has dramatically altered the contours of media presence and ownership, the ethos of media coverage and behaviour" (Roy 90). Before the Internet became part of our everyday, Roy points out that the

journalistic ethos partly underpinned the functioning and stability of representational democracy in two important ways: firstly, professional journalists acted as key intermediaries between politicians and political processes and the public at large, and secondly, journalists and politicians themselves colluded either formally or discreetly and indirectly in determining the relative boundaries between public and private space. (90)

I am not suggesting that vocational journalists loss of interpretational sovereignty and the entrance of semi-private bloggers onto the stage (cf. Al-Ani)[30] has shaken representative democracy to its foundations, but that conditions for foundational elements like the freedom and neutrality of press are shifting. This shift can be seen in Iceland, where a 2015 study found that "bloggers and social media commenters may have [the] biggest impact on what Iceland's journalists say—and don't" (Baumhardt). As professor of journalism at the University of Akureyri Birgir Guðmundsson said in conversation with Baumhardt: "journalists working in the country's mainstream newsrooms are holding back or omitting information, perspectives and worthwhile investigations in pursuit of fitting a more politically correct narrative. [...] this narrative is reinforced via social media, where popular

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29   Cf. Wolfgang Müller, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

30   For a concise overview on the state of citizen journalism today, see Allan and Thorsen.

bloggers and commentators function as 'shadow editors' of journalists" (Baumhardt). Here, it becomes clear that the Internet does not only present citizens with new challenges regarding their information practices, but journalists also face increasing challenges both in reporting and in the destabilisation of their previously established roles in a democratic democracy.

8.2.5 Conclusion, or: Today's Citizens – Informed Better Than Ever?

Considering today's "high choice, hybrid and fragmented media environments" (cf. Chadwick in Strömbäck et al. 3), I argue that filtering, sorting, and contextualising information have become parts of citizens' new skill-sets in information practice. Possibly more empowered and better informed than ever, participants confidently mix and match information from different media formats and media outlets, both online and offline. Especially in the Icelandic field, information through Social Media has taken on a particularly important role.[31] Even before the debates around "post-truth" had begun, many participants' accounts from both fields questioned the depth and neutrality of information traditional media outlets and journalists, illustrating a decreasing level of trust in them, and possibly leading to increasingly pluralised mix-and-match information practices.

Moreover, the digital components of information repertoires hold special potential for political participation. The Canadian sociologist Shelley Boulianne found that the distinct social networking characteristics explain why people who use Social Media for information are more likely to engage politically. Strömbäck et al. summarize her work

> in an online environment, news is coming from trusted sources such as friends and acquaintances, and the information might be encountered unexpectedly in the sense that people are not looking for it but might still be exposed to political information when friends or acquaintances share political news […]. Second, because the information is coming from people's own networks, such information might mobilize citizens to become politically active to a larger extent than information coming directly from news organizations. Third, online information might be contagious, in the sense that seeing others reading news or participating in politics can be engaging by itself […]. Fourth,

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31   That brings with it another set of questions, such as the homogeneity of information provided through the algorithms running social networking sites, such as facebook, where "you tend to never see stuff you don't agree with. And that is not a very healthy political debate", as Icelandic politician Birgitta Jónsdóttir pointed out; personal interview, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

in a digital environment, networks are often larger. This increases the likelihood that people are being confronted with content from weak ties, which facilitates information flows and makes it more likely that people are exposed to politically relevant news. (4)

As one of *Betri Reykjavík*'s programmers points out, around 70 percent of people visiting *Betri Reykjavík* "come from *facebook*. If you want to promote a cause of your own, you put in the idea on *Betri Reykjavík* and then you use *facebook* […] to get a lot of support for your idea, to be active and promote it outside the system as well".[32] Similarly, Strömbäck et al. found a "positive relationship between a social media news repertoire and both offline and online participation" (16). This effect was only observed with Social Media, and not with the online use of more traditional news outlets, suggesting that social networking characteristics "are more mobilizing than traditional online or offline news", both for modes of online and offline political participation (16).

8.3 Communication within Online Participation Tools: Software is Politics

Next to information, communication is a prerequisite of political participation. This chapter shows that communication within online participation tools, as a novel mode of political participation, causes various challenges both for users and for administrators and politicians. Especially from users' perspectives, online participation is characterised by opacity in moments that transparency, openness, and directness would have been expected (cf. Bimber 122; cf. Jenkins and Itō 24). Transparency, openness, and directness is also lacking in administrations' and politicians' communication towards citizens, as they continue to adhere to traditional practices of political communication.

These issues also manifest themselves in rather unintuitively designed websites which provide little space for debate and deliberation amongst users, despite having originally been presented as venues for discussion and consultation. Incoherent public relations work by *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* also causes confusion amongst registered users, the public, and the media. Ultimately, for online participation tools to develop and become established, a growing and on-going commitment from both politicians and programmers is needed. Politicians, in particular, need to be open to changes and to the restructuring of both political culture and political communication (cf. Rosenzweig and Eith 12).

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32 Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 12 July 2012.

8.3.1 *"There is a black box at that stage"*[33] – The Opacity of Communication in Online Participation Tools

In popular discourse, measures of digital democracy are often linked with catchy keywords like transparency, openness, or directness. Political scientist Markus Linden, for example, has identified five common promises in digital democracy, namely equality, participation, information, responsivity, and rationality (see State Research, 2.1 Political Participation). In most cases, however, the practical reality of communication in online participation tools linked to municipal decision-making processes looks rather different.

Focusing on the experiences of participants who had proposed an idea (or set an idea in, as it was referred to), this chapter shows that they faced important moments of opacity, confusion and conflicts at the following stages:

- immediately after they set their idea in,
- after their idea was sent to the city council / a committee,
- and once they were informed about the outcome.

Users' ultimately experienced these moments as discouraging, which has negative effects on both the effectiveness and relevance of the respective online participation tool. In this section, I primarily look at the Icelandic rather than the German sample, as *Betri Reykjavík's* less restrictive structure and larger user base made it more likely to cause users moments of confusion and conflict.

Users who submitted an idea to *Betri Reykjavík* faced the first significant moment of confusion and conflict once they had set it in. For most, initial feelings of accomplishment and responsibility began to wane within the first few weeks. Guðmundur's experience was typical: "It [the idea he set in] is a big issue and there are I think 70 people who have promoted it. It hasn't moved [...], nothing has come from *Betri Reykjavík*, nothing. So it is a little bit irritating, you put something in, but you get no report, you get maybe a lot of supporters only, but you get no response from the government."[34]

Due to *Betri Reykjavík*'s extremely stripped-down structure, it is not clear at all how long it will take for the idea to be sent to the committee in charge or in fact, if it will ever be sent at all. This has its roots in the specific design of *Betri Reykjavík*: there is no restriction or time frame on how long an idea will remain open to discussion and voting. In practice, this can mean that ideas that are set in, gather momentum and generate a number of votes may be sent to the committee in

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33   Kristínn Már Ársælsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 20 June 2014.
34   Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

charge within a month or two.[35] However, it can also mean that it may take years for an idea to eventually make it to the top-15 which are sent off to city council.[36] Being successful to the degree that it is sent off to city council is the "only way out" of the system for an idea. As the life-span of ideas is unrestricted – they are never archived or deleted –, less popular ideas simply float endlessly around the system and remain unresolved.

Of course, this opacity not only effects users' experience of the platform, but also its effectiveness and success. For many users like Guðmundur, the impression that nothing was happening with their ideas was highly demoralising. The programmers also seemed aware of the problems that the open time frame caused, as Róbert Bjarnason said:

> We definitely want to work with the city and trying sort of to evolve the concept. And we thought about maybe splitting it into a few parts, having like four times a year, having like a three-step process or something. For you have one month to add ideas and then one month to vote for them and debate them, or like one month to add and debate and then one month to vote and debate, so you couldn't be able to vote on them in the first part. And then one month for the city government to give some sort of an answer back.[37]

None of these plans have been put into practice at the time of writing, almost five years after the interview.

However, I do not think that the open time frame of *Betri Reykjavík* as such poses the main disturbance for user experiences, but rather that they are not provided with enough and/or clear information about how the platform works. Several users have reported that they searched in vain for guidance or manuals on how to use the website. The only available guidance is a vague, half-page process

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35 For example, user Sunna set in the idea "Tröppur opp Vatnshólinn við Háteigsveg" (eng. Stairs up (the hill) Vatnshólt from (the street) Háteigsvegur) on 4 February 2016. One month later, Unnur Margrét Arnardóttir, clerk of the City of Reykjavík, posted the notice to the idea that it had been forwarded to the recreation and leisure committee (cf. sec.news).

36 For example, user Sigurbjörg Ása Óskarsdóttir set in the idea "Svæðið milli Vesturbergs og Bakka" (eng. Land between (the neighbourhoods) Vesturberg and Bakkar) on 27 May 2016 and 16 months later, Unnur Margrét Arnardóttir, clerk of the City of Reykjavík, posted the notice to the idea that it had been forwarded to the planning committee (sec.news)(sec.news)(sec.news).

37 Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview V together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

description – provided that they find the tiny question mark in the top right corner (see Figure 2, 57). For example, Guðrun reports that she could no longer navigate the site after the layout had been changed: "I didn't go there for a few weeks. And then I don't know if there was a trial run or […] instructions somehow. There was nothing when I checked. And I was trying, and everything was so difficult and ehh, I just stopped it".[38] Back in 2012, Guðrun had told me that although she was not especially skilled in using computers and technology, that "the beginning [i.e. start using *Betri Reykjavík*] is easy: just create an account and start writing or either support or against something. That's no problem".[39]

It often remains unclear to users why changes, such as the deletion of features and the addition of others, were made. No explanations or information is provided by the programmers, and they seemed unaware that unexpected changes had caused problems: "In terms of user interface we have only been sort of simplifying and the new version which hasn't been deployed yet […], is even simpler, and definitely that is the way to go. Unfortunately, it means that you remove some of the functionality".[40]

Interestingly, the example of *LiquidFriesland* shows that PDF-manuals, face-to-face introductory workshops with volunteer *LiquidFriesland* representative Djure Meinen, and video tutorials are not enough to sustain an online participation tool. First, users still criticised the fact that there was no direct helpline to a contact person:

> Es müsste eigentlich vorne noch mit drinstehen, auch in *LiquidFriesland* gleich, wenn man sich einloggt, gleich dann einen Link gleich zu dem Mann wo man dann auch mal meinetwegen Fragen stellen kann. Ja, das wäre praktisch ... Dann könnte man auch mal nachfragen, ,Das und das habe ich noch nicht verstanden, wie ist das eigentlich gedacht?' Und das fehlt einem vielleicht auch, so der Ansprechpartner.[41]

> Right on the starting page of *LiquidFriesland* there should be a link to someone you could ask. That would be practical, if you just could enquire: 'I did not quite get this feature, what are the actual intentions behind it?' And that is what is perhaps lacking, a point of contact.

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38   Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 30 May 2014.

39   Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

40   Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview V together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

41   Susanne Engstler, personal interview, Varel, 8 October 2013.

Second, those broad offers of help did not stop *LiquidFriesland* from being closed down due to, amongst other things, low user numbers. Users of *LiquidFriesland* did not face the same level of opacity as their Icelandic counterparts after they had set in an idea, since each user idea had a six week life span (cf. Landkreis Friesland as cited in Diefenbach 33). Rather, authors of ideas in *LiquidFriesland* faced a different potential problem, that their idea would not even be allowed to discussion. Those which did make it to discussion would then find that the framework for discussion and deliberation in *LiquidFriesland* was rather limited (see chapter 8.3.3 *"Trying to improve the debate"*). In the admission stage, the first of four steps, an idea on *LiquidFriesland* could only be voted for or against (see chapter 4 Research Fields, 4.1 *LiquidFriesland* for more detailed information on the workings of the tools). It only graduated to the second stage, discussion, if a quorum of ten percent of all users invested in the issue supported it (cf. Landkreis Friesland as cited in Diefenbach 33). Only then, the idea went on to stages three and four, verification and voting (cf. Behrens et al., *Principles*).

In contrast to *Betri Reykjavík*, which has become quite confusing over time with around a thousand ideas floating about indefinitely, *LiquidFriesland* was always tidy, as few of the ideas set in actually made it to the discussion stage. It is perhaps unsurprising that the elaborate process ideas have to undergo acts as a deterrent to prospective users and challenges even adept Internet and computer users, as web designer Ursula Thoms recounts:

> Mein Arbeitskollege hat auch Zugangsdaten sich schicken lassen, der ist auch reinge-gangen und hat dann festgestellt, dass die Oberfläche ihm nicht so zusagt. […] Wir müssten durchaus gut klarkommen mit Oberflächen, ich habe allerdings auch tatsäch-lich Schwierigkeiten gehabt, wenn ich Sachen gesucht habe; wenn ich Sachen gemacht habe, kam andere Sachen da heraus, die ich nicht erwartet hatte. Habe ich so gedacht, ‚Meine Güte, wenn du sogar mit deinem Background hier hängst, wie verloren sind dann vielleicht andere?' Also, rein technisch war das für mich nicht so der Bringer.[42]

> My colleague also requested login data and after logging in he saw that the surface did not appeal to him […] We should be able to manage such surfaces quite well [due to their background in web design], but I had real difficulties when searching things and when I tried to do one thing, something else happened. I thought to myself: 'Oh my goodness, when you with your background get stuck here, how lost are others?' So, from a technological perspective, *LiquidFriesland* did not do it for me.

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42   Ursula Thoms, personal interview, Varel, 9 October 2013.

Another moment of opacity awaited *Betri Reykjavík* users whose idea was amongst the monthly most popular and was consequently sent to the committee in charge. From then on, it comes under the websites *in progress* section and from there, it is neither clear how long it will take the committee to deliberate on it, as there is no prescribed timeframe in which officials have to react, nor exactly how this deliberation process will take place.

In our 2014 meeting, Guðmundur recalls that

> I haven't been much involved in *Betri Reykjavík*. But just between you sent me your first email [that I would come back to Iceland for additional interviews and would like to meet him again after our initial encounter in 2012] and now, they sent me an email saying: 'This issue that you voted for or commented on […] has been processed and we're trying to implement it, trying to get it done.' But the last comment on that article, that idea was two years ago, so that's very slow. […] I think that's why it's probably losing interest, because you get feedback so slowly for it. Just two years later, you have forgotten the idea and [….] you don't think it's working. And then two years later, ah, wait, it works. And then you maybe not did anything there for two years because you didn't get any feedback.[43]

However, the users of *Betri Reykjavík* do not only feel left out in the rain by the processing time of their ideas, but also by the actual decision-making processes their ideas are subjected to. Users are only told which committee is deliberating on their ideas, and this often reveals little, as this category usually matches with the thematic category they set their ideas into in the first place. Interim work stages, like phases of researching or meetings with experts, are not communicated via the website. Kristínn Már Ársælsson points out that

> [t]he problem is that you put forward an idea and you can get enough likes to get it to the next stage, but there is a black box at that stage. You don't see what happens, somebody comes along and analyses your idea, you don't know anything about it, and it can get kicked out of the process without you getting information on why. You don't get the chance of restructuring your idea. For example, if you put forward an idea and they say this is impractical, then you don't know about it. Instead of what they could do, is that they let you know this is impractical, because of A, B, C, and then you could restructure your ideas: 'Oh okay, I understand, so my counter proposal is to change the idea like this and then it should go through.' So, there is a black box there where I think you need more interaction between city officials and the people who are putting in ideas. I think that is the major issue.[44]

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43   Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 22 June 2014.

44   Kristínn Már Ársælsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 20 June 2014.

Here, Kristinn Már hints at another facet in the users' loss of agency – the impossibility of talking back. Talking back or interactivity is arguably is one key characteristic of online communication technologies (cf. Baym, *Personal Connections* 7), and is severely restricted in *Betri Reykjavík* due to the opaque decision-making processes. Users do not have the opportunity to alter an idea or reply in any way to the committee's decision. The committee's decision appears to be a closed and final statement, although in many cases the ideas are not completely implemented or even sufficiently investigated. Here, the inexperience and inflexibility of the administration as a bureaucratic institution to handle non-linear communication processes with citizens and interactivity becomes visible (see 8.3.2 *"There really isn't a conclusion, but it sounds as if there is"*).

In *LiquidFriesland*, users are allowed to make changes to their ideas, but only in the discussion stage. At that point, other users can propose amendments and the original author can take on the feedback and incorporate it into the idea. Interactivity is given here, but it is only horizontal. There is no option for users to react to the district assembly's decision once the idea has been discussed in one of their sessions.

Another factor adding to the opacity and confusion for users is that even ideas that could not be acted upon – for example, as they do not fall under the jurisdiction of the City of Reykjavík or the district of Friesland –, would still go through all process stages. This is quite often the case, especially in Friesland, as the political level of a district and its jurisdiction appear difficult for many citizens to grasp (see chapter 8.5 The Role of Geographical Proximity in (Online) Political Participation). In *Betri Reykjavík*, the author is only informed that their idea could not be acted upon on the formal log extract on the idea's news wall – a process which may well take years. The same is true for unrealistic ideas, a process criticised by the *LiquidFriesland* programmers:

> Eine Verbesserungsmöglichkeit seitens der Verwaltung wäre bereits vor der Abstimmung in den Dialog mit den Teilnehmern zu treten: Im Falle unrealistischer Vorschläge könnte die Verwaltung ihre Einschätzung bereits während der Diskussion den Teilnehmern kommunizieren und damit auf eine realistisch umsetzbare Lösung hinarbeiten. […] die Verwaltung [sollte sich] frühzeitig genug in die Debatte einbringen. Bürger erst abstimmen zu lassen und ihnen dann (also nachdem die Abstimmung der Bürger vorbei ist) zu erklären, warum der Vorschlag nicht umsetzbar ist, kann eine vernichtende Wirkung auf die Motivation haben. (Behrens)

> One improvement through the administration would be to step into dialogue with participants before the voting: in the case of unrealistic suggestions, the administration could share their assessment in the discussion stage and therefore work towards a more
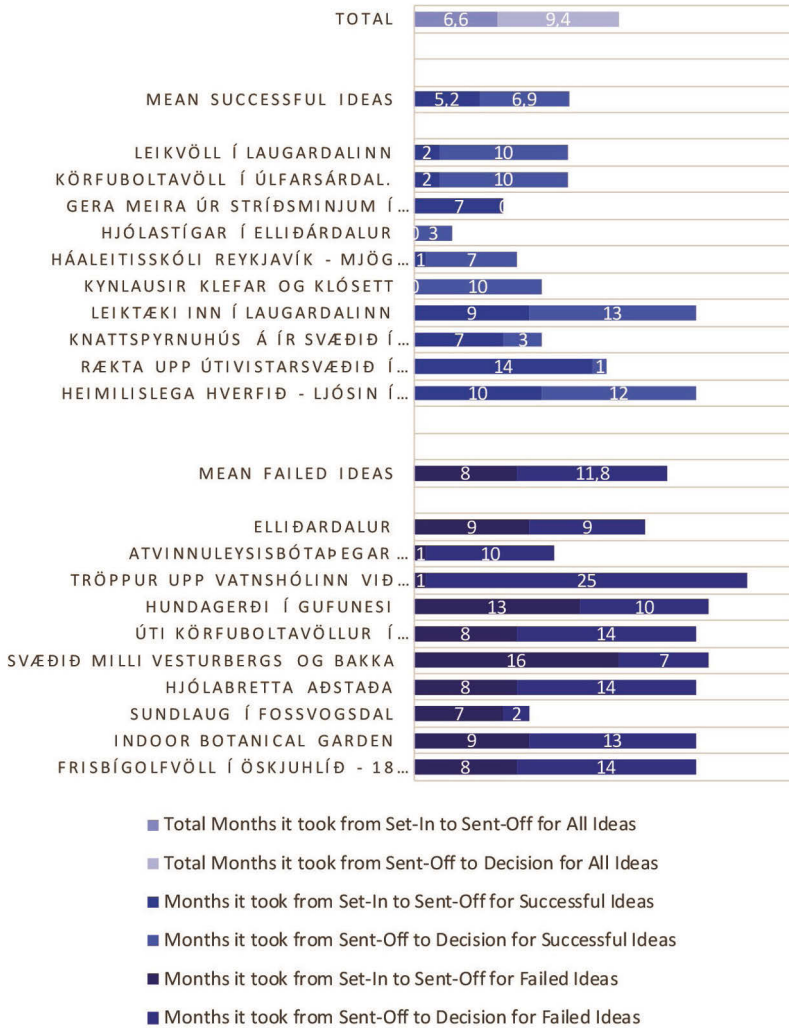
> realistically implementable solution. […] the administration should contribute to the debate early on. To let citizens vote and tell them only afterwards that the suggestion is not implementable can have a devastating effect on motivation.

Although this initially sounds like a good idea, I believe that it is unrealistic. A pre-selection in terms of content may have been possible for the few ideas that came in through *LiquidFriesland* and because Sönke Klug, press secretary in charge of adapting the users' ideas for deliberation through the district council, was a unique allrounder with close ties to councillors and the head of the district Sven Ambrosy. But I cannot imagine this approach working for *Betri Reykjavík*, where a number of ideas come in on an almost daily basis. This kind of pre-selection by an administrative clerk is surely an excessive workload and, most probably, beyond their professional competence. In my opinion, the suggestion by *Liquid-Friesland*'s programmers shows a lack of understanding about the workings of a local administration and political decision-making processes. A city clerk neither could nor should be in a position to decide if an incoming idea is realistic or not. In proper process, standing committees and experts need to be consulted. At the same time, the jurisdiction of the City of Reykjavík and the district of Friesland are clearly defined, so an administrative clerk should indeed be able to determine if an idea falls under the jurisdiction or not, and consequently could inform users much earlier in the process, thereby avoiding frustration and demotivation.

The final moment of opacity and confusion in users' experience is when they are informed about the outcome of their idea. First, although on clicking the question mark symbol in the top right corner of the *Betri Reykjavík* starting page one is informed that "these ideas, along with the arguments and discussions about them, are addressed in the appropriate standing committee as soon as possible. They should preferably be addressed within one month" ('About Better Reykjavík'), my research shows that this is rarely the case (see Figure 4)[45]. Indeed,

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45   This table shows the latest ideas that had either succeeded or failed on *Betri Reykjavík* and the time frame for each of them – from the day its author set it in, to the day it was marked as being sent to the appropriate standing committee, to the day the standing committee's decision was posted to the idea's news wall in *Betri Reykjavík*, (rather than to the day the committee decided on the idea due to a lack of data). This table only includes those of the latest ten ideas in either the successful or failed section for which all three dates (set in, sent off, decision) were made available on the website. There are however newer ideas for which not all dates were accessible on *Betri Reykjavík* and which therefore were not included in this table. The titles of the ideas are given as in the original, regardless of misspellings, abbreviations or colloquialisms. The table is based on the latest ideas that had either succeeded or failed on *Betri Reykjavík* as of April 2018.

Fig. 4: Time Frame of an Idea from Set-in to Decision on Betri Reykjavík

- ■ Total Months it took from Set-In to Sent-Off for All Ideas
- ■ Total Months it took from Sent-Off to Decision for All Ideas
- ■ Months it took from Set-In to Sent-Off for Successful Ideas
- ■ Months it took from Sent-Off to Decision for Successful Ideas
- ■ Months it took from Set-In to Sent-Off for Failed Ideas
- ■ Months it took from Sent-Off to Decision for Failed Ideas

standing committees took nine and a half months on average to decide on the 20 ideas that I examined closely.[46]

More precisely, it took the committees one year on average to decide on the ideas that they turned down, and around seven months for ideas they accepted. One can only conjecture as to why this is the case; it appears probable that it is easier for committees to approve a citizen's idea when it is similar to its already existing agenda. Many ideas marked successful are accompanied by an answer from the committee stating that the idea was already planned under this or that act (which had already been passed) and would be implemented soon. This was the case for five of the ten successful ideas that I investigated more closely. Another common reason given for an idea's success – two of the ten investigated – is that similar ideas had already been processed through the annual participatory budget of *Betri Hverfi* (eng. *Better Neighbourhood*).[47] The most common answers to ideas that eventually fail are that their implementation would exceed the allocated budget or that they do not fall under the City of Reykjavík's or the district of Friesland's jurisdiction.

It may be possible to answer ideas with one prominent suggestion more easily and quickly than those that include several suggestions around the same geographical location but are otherwise thematically unconnected. However, practice reveals that ideas that contained several suggestions could be processed relatively quickly, provided that one of those suggestions was similar to the committee's existing agenda. In their answers, committees would tend to refer only to that suggestion, while the other suggestions would either be ignored or a comment would be made that they have to be looked into.[48] In contrast, ideas around topics the

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46 The 20 ideas I examined closely for this were the latest ideas in both the 'failed' and 'successful' categories in June 2018.

47 The answers to both the ideas "Rækta upp útivistarsvæðið í Úlfarsárdal" (eng. Cultivate the outdoor area in Úlfarsárdalur) (cf. sec.news) and "Leiktæki inn í Laugardalinn" (eng. Playground in Laugardalur) included references to *Betri Hverfi* (cf. sec. news). The annual online participatory budgeting programme *Betri Hverfi* has been taking place since 2011. 450 Million ISK (more than 3.6 Million Euro) "is allocated by citizens each year to implement crowdsourced ideas from the citizens to improve the various neighbourhoods of Reykjavík. To date, 608 ideas have been approved (2012–2017)" (Citizens Foundation, 'Portfolio: My Neighbourhood'). The tool was renamed Hverfið Mitt (eng. My Neighbourhood) in 2016. In this thesis, the original name *Betri Hverfi* is employed, predominantly because fieldwork took place at a time when the participatory budgeting programme was still called *Betri Hverfi*.

48 For example, the idea "Hjólastígar í Elliðárdalur" (eng. Cycle paths in (the valley) Elliðárdalur) was answered by prominently replying to one suggestion, and stating that the other suggestions needed more research (cf. sec.news).

committee is not already working on may take longer to look into and to reach a decision. These ideas may differ drastically from the committees' current thematic focus, or they may be expressed in a fashion alien to the administration.

Cooperation between programmers and administration

Cooperation between the programmers and the city administration did not always work smoothly. For example, there was a period of at least six months in which the city administration did not process a single idea from *Betri Reykjavík*. This was due to personnel shortages and a high turnover in the clerical position responsible for handling the ideas. Róbert remembers that "basically they had this one employee, […], doing half position, but he was sort of moved to do something else for six months and nothing happened. And they did not even update the status of the ideas that went into the committees".[49] This, of course, caused massive delays in the processing of ideas. This was not only a moment of opacity, confusion and conflict for the users of *Betri Reykjavík*, but also for the programmers, as they do not have any influence on the (temporal) process in which the ideas are processed by the committees. Moreover, the programmers reported communication difficulties with the politicians in charge: "It's not because the people in the administration aren't real nice and it's good working with them, but they don't make the decisions. I mean, we had to send them an email with '*Betri Reykjavík* is dying' in order to get a meeting with the politicians. We're not gonna do that every half of year from now on".[50] These differences between cooperation partners *Citizens' Foundation* and City of Reykjavík have not gone unnoticed by the participants: "I can see that this website is obviously run by somebody that's not their job, not their main job, because then it needs more work, it needs more time, I think".[51]

Finally, every once in a while, ideas seem to get *lost*, and even the committee cannot explain why it took them so long to answer. This was the case for two of the twenty ideas I looked at more closely: the idea "Tröppur upp Vatnshólinn við Háteigsveg" (eng. Stairs up (the hill) Vatnshólt from (the street) Háteigsvegur) was first sent to the recreation and leisure committee, who in turn forwarded it to the planning committee. In the end, the idea was answered 25 months after it had been sent to the city administration (cf. Sunna, sec.news). This delay was even surpassed by that for "Færanlegur kaffistandur í Grafarholtið yfir sumarið" (eng. "Movable coffee stand in Grafarholt during summer"). Although the idea quick-

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49 Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview IV together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 10 June 2014.

50 Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview V together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

51 Freyja Kristinsdóttir, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 23 June 2014.

ly became popular among users of *Betri Reykjavík* and was sent to the planning committee within around six weeks, it was apparently lost for three full years before the planning committee eventually rejected it (cf. Friðriksdóttir, sec.news). Without doubt, processing periods that long have a massive negative impact on people's motivation and desire to continue using the tool, and obviously reduce its credibility in general. *Betri Reykjavík* programmer Róbert Bjarnasson sees this similarly: "I think many people are also a bit burned. They spent a lot of time on taking part and then it's like a slap in the face for the city not to give answers and things like that".[52]

While Róbert Bjarnasson is certain that it is the city administration's fault that ideas are not processed in a timely fashion, for platform users it is not exactly clear where, how or why ideas become stuck in the system: Are software issues responsible for the lack of dialogue? Or have poorly developed algorithms left semi-popular ideas skittering around the *Betri Reykjavík* platform forever? Or is it the fault of the city administration that cannot keep up with the speed users set ideas in? Participants drew their own conclusions about the delays:

> I think they [the city administration] didn't think it through enough. They thought it great to get the response from the people, but they didn't think it through how they want to process everything that came through. Maybe they got a lot more feedback then they thought they would and just couldn't handle the amount of ideas that were coming in, so they still are trying to get through the back of it?[53]

I believe that this insecurity contributes to people's doubts about online participation tools in the stricter sense, and about digital democracy in general. While the time delays in the examples above do appear to be extreme, several participants did report process times of around two years.[54]

Users of *LiquidFriesland* did not face the same degree of time delays from the administration. The communication channel between users of *LiquidFriesland* and their district administration seemed more direct, which may have been because citizens' ideas were only being submitted to one political body, the district assembly, as opposed to the City of Reykjavík with its many standing committees. In most cases, the district assembly had reached a decision within a few months of it being submitted.

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52   Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview V together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

53   Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 22 June 2014.

54   Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 22 June 2014.

I assume that the processing time also has a lot to do with the will of the respective administrations to use the platforms as tools for digital democracy. The fact that *LiquidFriesland* was largely initiated by the district of Friesland itself, whereas the City of Reykjavík only agreed to incorporate *Betri Reykjavík* in their decision-making processes, certainly played a role here. Moreover, the number of ideas that came in each month through *LiquidFriesland* was significantly lower than through *Betri Reykjavík*. During *LiquidFriesland*'s lifespan, from the end of 2012 until August 2015, a total of 85 initiatives made it through to discussion by the district administration (cf. Landkreis Friesland, *August 2015* 5–10). In contrast, as the City of Reykjavík, had processed 438 ideas since 2011, with a similar number in progress at the time of writing (2019) (cf. 'Starting Page'). In other words, the district administration of Friesland did not have to face the same level of challenges as the City of Reykjavík.

Moreover, statements of the Reykjavík city officials rarely include exact time frames for implementation, with references instead made to distinctive planned projects put into practice. *Betri Reykjavík* user Per Hansen does

> not think that we get to know about the process, not enough. It is discussed in the city council and they produce a short text like two or three sentences and then you don't know what is going to happen. Some things are actually executed, or they say we have done this already and it's actually right, I agree. But I think there should be some kind of reference number, or they should update the issue when they do something, correlate it somehow, take it one step further.[55]

Here, Per Hansen also hints at the city administration's vagueness in replying to the ideas. The fact that the administration is not bound to deal with a user's idea in its original wording and has the right to change ideas considerably (cf. 'About Better Reykjavík'), means that vague, roundabout answers are the norm. The administration seems to cherry-pick elements of user's ideas to answer, while ignoring other elements. Programmers Gunnar and Róbert see calculated purpose in the way committees word their replies. In the next-subchapter, I will take this apparently strategic vagueness as an opening to discuss bureaucracies' habitus of communicating, both within online participation formats in the narrower sense and in their attitude towards and handling of digital democracy in more general terms.

In this sub-chapter, I illustrated how online participation tools linked to municipal decision-making processes like *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* do not fulfil the promises of digital democracy. These promises – equality, participation, information, responsivity, and rationality (cf. Linden) – cannot be fulfilled

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55   Per Hansen, personal interview, Reykjavík, 23 July 2012.

because users face repeated moments of opacity, confusion, and conflict. These moments of opacity, confusion and conflict show that successful online democracy can function in a sustainable long-term manner only if it is accompanied by extensive changes and restructuring of both the political culture and political communication (cf. Rosenzweig and Eith 12). Business as usual does not work for any of the actor groups studied, that is users, programmers, and politicians and administrators. Rather, these groups must adapt and open up to each other's differing communication and work habits. This, of course, is easier said than done. In the next chapter, I will investigate the habitus of politicians and administrations once online participation tools and digital democracy have been introduced.

8.3.2 *"There really isn't a conclusion, but it sounds as if there is'*[56] – Bureaucracy's Dealings with Online Participation

In the previous sub-chapter, I looked at users' perspectives and how the expected increase in transparency and openness of decision-making processes through the platforms was thwarted, or at least diminished, by opacity and lacking accountability. I now turn to look at the administrations of the City of Reykjavík and the District of Friesland. I look at both users' and programmers' experiences of communication with the administration. It becomes apparent here that online participation is not only a learning process for users and programmers, but also for the administrations and politicians who receive and are responsible for the possible implementation of citizens' input. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that online participation constitutes a new mode of political participation that does not conform with established bureaucratic procedures in municipal and district administrations.

As I suggested in the previous section, both users and programmers criticised the vague and evasive answers given by city administration. For example, *Betri Reykjavík* programmer Gunnar Grímsson pointed out that administration personnel "tend to answer questions in a sort of roundabout way and then you come back and take a look and there really isn't a conclusion, but it sounds as if there is a conclusion. It is a technique".[57] His colleague Róbert Bjarnason adds that the city administration's "answers have been sort of quite holey, they have been written in

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56   Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview I together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 12 July 2012.

57   Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview I together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 12 July 2012.

a sort of bureaucratic language".[58] In part, this vagueness is connected to the administration having the freedom to change users' ideas "considerably" (cf. 'About Better Reykjavík'). In that way, the administration does not need to answer each suggestion precisely, but may, one could argue, cherry-pick elements to answer, while ignoring others.

Indeed, cherry-picking seems to be a common practice when one examines the administration's answers on the idea's news wall. In the following, I will illustrate this approach based on an idea by *Betri Reykjavík* user Ingibjörg Gísladóttir. In autumn 2014, she suggested turning a popular foot path in the recreational area Valley of Elliðaár (south-east of the centre of Reykjavík) into a two-lane path, one for walkers and one for cyclists. This would create more space for the different groups and help avoid accidents. Phrased as a functional one-liner, the idea got a detailed, yet almost meaningless answer in January 2015:

Þakka góða umræðu um það sem betur má fara á göngu- og hjólastígum í Elliðaárdal. Það er fagnaðarefni að stígarnir eru vel nýttir á góðum degi til fjölbreyttra ferða og útivistar. Mikilvægt er að mismunandi hópar taki tillil hver til annars, sérstaklega verða hjólandi að gæta varúðar. Það er á dagskrá að beina hjólandi umferð frá sameiginlegum göngu- og hjólastígum í auknum mæli á Rafstöðvarveginn og yfir Elliðaárnar á brú neðan við Rafstöðina. Fleiri möguleikar um sérstaka hjólastíga eru til skoðunar. (Ólafur Bjarnason as cited in Gísladóttir)

Thank you for a good discussion about how to improve hiking and cycling paths in the valley of Elliðaár. It is a cause for rejoicing that the trails are well used on good days for a variety of journeys and outdoor activities. It is important that different groups take care of each other, those bicycling must be especially careful. It is on the agenda to increasingly redirect bicycle traffic from joint walking and cycling routes onto (the street) Rafstöðvarvegur and across the river Elliðaár onto the bridge below Rafstöðvarvegur. More possibilities for special cycle paths are under review.

The vagueness in the administration's answer is obvious here, and elsewhere. They point out that something similar to what the idea suggests is planned, but there is no specific mention or reference back to the actual proposal – a two-lane path through the valley; nor is there any specific information about when the bicycle traffic will be redirected, who is conducting the review process, if a citizen can take part, or when the process will be completed. There is no practical outcome or operational intent in the committee's statements.

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58   Róbert Bjarnasson, personal interview V together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 18 July 2012.

Indeed, for many participants this opacity and vagueness frustrating. For instance, Björn Levi Gunnarsson reports that the typical reaction to a statement by a committee would be 'Oh, it got discussed in a committee. Yay! What does that mean?' [laughs] […] It's just a notification, and a notification you can't click on, like on *facebook*, were you can actually see the comments, because there are no comments."[59] Björn Levi further criticises the linear, non-interactive communication process built into *Betri Reykjavík*. For him, "definitely more of a conversation kind of platform would be the next step to take it in." Here, he primarily sees the obligation to act with the city administration and politicians: "There isn't anything coming from the municipality, from the city into the system, saying like 'Hey, we'd appreciate like votes or comments on these things we're working on'. So, more interactivity. At the moment, it's just like you put things in and there is SILENCE and you get occasional notifications 'Yeah, it is gone into a committee.' Then nothing."

From the perspective of users and programmers then, it seems as if a "technique" or a kind of communication strategy is at work in the administration's vague statements[60]; and that this strategy may be facilitated by the rules of *Betri Reykjavík* which enable the administration to cherry-pick parts of the users' ideas. In many cases, the administration's responses are little more than bland statements acknowledging the gist of citizens' ideas, but without any commitment or promise to take concrete action. One could argue that this kind of regular interactive communication between citizens and city officials, as inscribed in the online consultation forums, is a completely novel mode of political participation and communication for politicians and administration. They are used to these forms of bureaucratic decision-making processes and how they are communicated. While in many cases the administration's answers in *Betri Reykjavík* would benefit immensely from being more concrete and specific, it does not necessarily follow that there was any ill intent behind them. Nonetheless, it also seems reasonable to interpret this evasive and vague communication behaviour in another way, and to see it as a sign of a general disgruntlement amongst politicians and administrators with the increased participation of citizens in decision-making processes and political communication.[61]

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59 Björn Levi Gunnarsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 4 June 2014.

60 Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview I together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 12 July 2012.

61 In the next sub-chapter, I will go into greater detail about the ways in which the software design of *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*, commissioned by politicians, reflects their displeasure with substantial changes in political communication and decision-making processes.

It is important to note that the statement posted to the *Betri Reykjavík* news wall about a committee's decision on an idea is, in most cases, not specifically worded to address regular citizens. Normally, it is simply an excerpt from the minutes of the committee meeting where the idea was discussed. In any case, administration and politicians still have to learn that regular citizens may think and communicate differently, not least because they are not familiar with (being integrated into) political decision-making processes.

In *LiquidFriesland*, the function to feed decisions back to the citizens did not exist at all. Instead, users had to look those up on a separate website within the district of Friesland domain. In terms of the usability and intuitiveness of the tool then, this is problematic – especially as very few of the participants I spoke knew about the other website. Anna Wagner-Becker, who was an active user of *Liquid-Friesland*, regrets that she never found out what happened to her idea, despite checking the platform several times.[62] Susanne Engstler, herself a member of the local village council and an active *LiquidFriesland* user, describes the extremely complicated process she thought was necessary to find out about a district council's decision on a specific topic:

> Kriegt man auch nicht mit, auch die Initiatoren für eine bestimmte Initiative, die würde das doch bestimmt interessieren, wie die [Ratsmitglieder] dafür abgestimmt haben. Das muss man aber mühsam verfolgen, wenn das dran ist. Dann findet man zwar die Sitzung, welche Ausschüsse Sitzung haben. Dann werden ja auch relativ spät die Tagesordnungen angenommen, eine Woche vorher oder. Und dann müsste man sich jede Tagesordnung angucken; ‚Wann ist denn endlich mein Thema dran?' Das ist ja auch nicht/das geht ja auch nicht gleich online, dass das den nächsten Tag dann reingebracht wird, sondern wie sie das verteilen, weiß ich auch nicht.[63]

> One is not informed, I'm sure that the initiators of a certain initiative, they are surely interested in the way the councillors have voted. But you have to carefully follow it, when it is coming in. You find out about the meeting, which committees are meeting. But then the agendas are agreed on relatively late, a week or so beforehand. And then you would have to go through the agendas, so 'when is my topic finally going to be discussed?' That is not put online right away, not on the next day, I am clueless to how they distribute that.

When I tell her that there is a website where all the decisions on initiatives from *LiquidFriesland* are listed, she is surprised and mildly disgruntled, suggesting that

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62   Cf. Anna Wagner-Becker, focus group, Varel, 9 September 2014.

63   Susanne Engstler, personal interview, Varel, 8 October 2013.

a link to that website should be prominently placed on *LiquidFriesland*. Although she does not negate the possibility that up until then she had just missed the notice[64], this appears highly unlikely since she is an active and avid user of the tool, and generally appears on top of things.

In terms of the intuitive usability of the tool then, this appears highly problematic. Negative consequences appear inevitable, as one can see in the example of Ursula Thoms, who ultimately asked the administration to delete her *Liquid-Friesland* account, amongst other things because she was frustrated that she did not receive sufficient information about the outcome of initiatives.[65] At a closer look, this aspect again supports the view that the administration adheres to the established forms of communicating their decision-making processes, and struggles to see things from a user perspective. For users, it seems logical to search for the political decision on an initiative in the same space that it was submitted to, and commented and voted on.

Another factor adding to the confusion of active *LiquidFriesland* users and hindering the engagement of registered but passive users is that, unlike in *Betri Reykjavík*, one does not receive automatic email updates on the progress of an idea – not when another user comments on one's idea, nor when it is moved to another stage in the system. Rather, users themselves have to change the default notification settings to receive emails from *LiquidFriesland*. Several users I spoke to had had similar experiences to Susanne Engstler – that information on the default settings and notifications is not obvious during the registration process or in the tool's FAQs:

> Ja, erstmal muss man darauf überhaupt kommen. Vielleicht lag das auch daran, dass ich da nicht so geübt mit bin, aber dass man erstmal informiert wird, das war am Anfang das Problem. Also man klickte dann immer mal alle drei Tage oder pro Woche mal rein, mal gucken, was denn da so los ist, welche Initiativen es gibt. Oder ich habe jetzt ja auch selbst mal eine Initiative gestartet, da war man dann selbst auch interessiert, welcher andere interessiert sich denn auch dafür und so weiter. Aber bis ich dann erstmal drauf stieß, dass man sich auch immer per Email von *LiquidFriesland* benachrichtigen lassen kann – und ich glaube das ist ein Manko was ganz Viele noch nicht verstanden haben. Weil eigentlich gibt es einen ziemlich großen Kreis der Anmelder, es gibt aber an sich relativ wenige, die regelmäßig mitmachen […] und ich glaube, dass das auch ein Problem ist des Benachrichtigens, das denen noch nicht klar ist, dass man automatisch benachrichtigt werden könnte.[66]

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64   Cf. Susanne Engstler, personal interview, Varel, 8 October 2013.

65   Cf. Ursula Thoms, personal interview, Varel, 9 October 2013.

66   Susanne Engstler, personal interview, Varel, 8 October 2013.

You actually have to come up with the idea first. Maybe the reason is that I'm not that [tech] savvy, but getting informed was initially quite a problem. Basically, one just logged in every three days or once a week to see what was going on, which initiatives there were. Or I have recently started an initiative myself, so of course one is interested in who else is interested in the initiative and so on. But once I found out that you could opt in for email notifications from *LiquidFriesland* itself – I think this is a flaw which quite a lot of people have not understood yet. Because, actually a lot of people have registered, but only a few do take part regularly […] and I think this is also a problem of notification, that many have not found out yet that you can be notified automatically.

The consequences of this unfortunate default notification settings can be drastic. For users, having to look through all the websites' categories to see if there is something new and interesting are time-consuming and annoying tasks that de-streamline their experience. For more committed users, it may take some time before they stumble on the settings themselves, and they may have been more active if they had received email notifications about new ideas or discussions. Moreover, new users may assume that they will receive automatic notifications if new ideas are added, especially given the low number of total initiatives that were being set in. It appears likely that newly registered users were confused or even scared off by the lack of *LiquidFriesland* activity round-ups coming into their inboxes, and consequently rarely if ever visited the site again because they thought that nothing was happening on it. Users may have even forgotten about their registration, having not received any kind of prompts to visit and become active on the platform. These hypothetical effects of the modest default notification policy built into *LiquidFriesland* may be interpreted as a side effect of the overstimulated times we live in today. Each day, one receives countless (spam) e-mails encouraging one to 'click here, buy this, read that'. Perhaps, then, it is difficult to keep an online service in mind that does not automatically call attention to itself.

However, measures of participatory and digital democracy do not only challenge administration and politicians to think and communicate in new ways, but also citizens submitting their ideas. Citizens must train their argumentation skills and learn how to formulate their ideas precisely, and perhaps even to articulate them in the 'language of politicians'. The US-American political scientist Benjamin Barber is convinced that citizens are naturally capable of more and better participation, while other participative democracy theorists suggest that citizens will quickly acquire those competences once integrated into information and learning processes. Björn Levi Gunnarsson believes that readying citizens for deliberative

democracy is "a step by step process, you can't just jump into the deep pool, you have to learn how to swim first".[67]

Aside from mastering appropriate syntax and diction, it also appears challenging for regular citizens to assess the municipal budgeting and budget plans that play a, if not the, central role in political decision-making processes. This is illustrated by Ursula Thoms, who despite being a web designer and having used all the support offered by the district of Friesland to find her way around *LiquidFriesland*, says that she gave up trying to understand how it worked in detail. She muses that regular citizen's apolitical-ness and inexperience is probably difficult to understand for people professionally engaged with politics. In this respect, Thoms is stressing that a lack of formal political experience does not mean that she has no opinion, or that she cannot voice her opinion, but that she may not be able to voice it in a way politicians are used to.[68] Generally, my findings support Jenkins' and Itō's argument that "true participation requires many qualities: agency, the ability to understand a social situation well enough to engage constructively, the skills to contribute effectively, connections with others to help build an audience, emotional resilience to handle negative feedback, and enough social status to speak without consequences" (22). Further, they think that "(t)he barrier to participation is not the technology but the kinds of privilege that are often ignored in meritocratic discourse. I do think that technology has opened up new doors to some people [...] but it's important to recognize the ways in which it also reinforces other forms of inequalities that make it harder for some people to engage" (22).

As noted earlier, it was not only users but also programmers of *Betri Reykjavík* who were dissatisfied with the city administration's communication: "We were trying to set up a meeting with the city officials and then we sent an email basically saying, because we saw that the users were going down, so we sent an email with the headline '*Betri Reykjavík* is dying' […] And this actually got us a meeting with everybody."[69] The administration's irregular communication pattern highlighted once more to Gunnar and Róbert that *Betri Reykjavík* did not have the status they felt it should have within the administration. For them, the main illustration of this was the turnover of clerks (due to the precarious nature of the position) in charge of processing ideas coming in from the website and preparing them for discussion in the standing committees:

67   Björn Levi Gunnarsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 4 June 2014.

68   Cf. Ursula Thoms, personal interview, Varel, 9 October 2013.

69   Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview IV together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 10 June 2014.

One thing that's been really bad for *Betri Reykjavík* is maybe another facet of not enough dedication on the part of the city is that we had four different people from the City of Reykjavík being on the project [in three years]. So we had one woman there starting it, […] and I think *Betri Reykjavík* hadn't even opened by the time she left. Then we got a guy […] and it wasn't even a formal allocation of resources of even a fifty per cent job. The reason that changed was that I got angry at meeting after meeting, seriously, I was just shouting, *What the hell are you going to run this if you don't have a person doing it?* and stuff like that. And then there was one guy who came in in some kind on unemployment system where you could have money from the government and partial money from the city and that was sort of an in-between-thing and he stuck around until he got an offer for a real job, so he understandably left because this was a very unsecure job, because it wasn't long term or anything. And then we got Hilmar, and he stayed on for quite a while. It was during Hilmar […] that I rammed it through to get it a fifty per cent position. […] And now we have this woman called […] Unnur Magrét."[70]

Moreover, it was only at a meeting with officials that the programmers learnt that

our contract had lapsed, for like one year we had been without a contract. They still paid us a little bit for the hosting and stuff but we signed like an emergency […] six months contract to extend it and we were thinking maybe we should just refuse to sign the contract before the elections, maybe we should just go to the media, tell them how they really promised everything about e-democracy and then nobody can take a meeting with us.[71]

Unlike the previous contract signed with the then municipality under Jón Gnarr in 2011, this was not a collaborative contract:

We have like a renewal of the original agreement which was after long negotiation. It went away from being a collaboration agreement to sort of […] standard contractor agreement, which, to obvious reasons, is the thing the city is used to doing. […] We sent off a nice, long, sort of everybody-agreement, it was still in legalese, but the content was: 'we are working on this together and you supply that, and we are supplying that and de-de-de', […]. And then a new lawyer at city hall went through it and as usual, she

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70   Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview IV together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 10 June 2014. It appears as if the employment situation has been improved. In 2018, three clerks posted news and decisions from the committees to the news walls of ideas in the name of the City of Reykjavík.

71   Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview IV together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 10 June 2014.

was just doing her job. But that resulted in removing almost all of the obligations of the city. And ours as well, it was turned into a standard contract saying 'You are running this website and we are paying you for it'. A bit more, I'm obviously simplifying things a bit, but what that resulted in is that they removed the word collaboration where it is certainly placed in the document, because it wasn't that kind of agreement anymore.[72]

It becomes apparent here that integrating citizens to a larger extent and on a regular basis through online participation tools constitutes a major challenge for administrations. Gunnar and Róbert recognise this: "It is really difficult for the system, for the bureaucracy, for the administration, it's really difficult to get something like this [*Betri Reykjavík* with its regularly incoming ideas] throwing into their sort of normal procedures. Everything running smoothly and all of the sudden, you get something that sort of collides with a lot of the sort of established things that you're used to."[73]

The challenges described in this sub-chapter illustrate that there were a lot of ongoing conflicts, uncertainty and unsolved issues at play in the maintenance of *Betri Reykjavík*, at least when compared to *LiquidFriesland*. It becomes apparent that the establishment and support of the platform in the municipal decision-making processes, as well as the mindsets of politicians and administration, are central elements in the successful functioning of the tool. *LiquidFriesland* was an online participation tool that was realized from the top-down. Consequently, it was never endangered by the administration's and/or politicians' indifference towards its functioning, or the processing of citizens' ideas coming in through it.

In the case of *Betri Reykjavík* – which was initially a grassroots initiative by the *Citizens' Foundation* –, however, cooperation with the city was only a belated step. First and foremost, it was developed and thought of as a political statement, both a protest against and an answer to the nepotism that had brought Iceland to an almost complete breakdown on all levels in 2008–09. Gunnar and Róbert may have had little knowledge about the workings of municipal decision-making processes or the ways in which administrations operate. Riding the wave of societal rage over the economic crash and the nepotism underlaying society, the economy and politics within Iceland, Gunnar and Róbert came up with a website that hit a nerve with a great number of fellow citizens. Having been hit hard by the crisis

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72   Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview III together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 30 May 2014.

73   Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview IV together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 10 June 2014.

themselves, they could easily understand the rage of their fellow citizens who felt failed by their elected politicians.[74]

Even today, there is still a struggle to completely and sustainably incorporate *Betri Reykjavík* into the municipal decision-making processes that had been agreed on, at least on paper, long ago. Indeed, as the unnoticed lapse of the contract between *Betri Reykjavík*'s programmers and the City of Reykjavík showed, not even on paper.[75] For the *Citizens' Foundation*, "it is definitely an uphill battle, [...] especially with the city [...] failing to give it [*Betri Reykjavík*] enough attention and answering". [76] Based on these experiences, Grímsson is always at pains to point out during *Citizens' Foundation* presentations or workshops that "one of the best ways for people to make their e-democracy is to get the bureaucracy, the administration to commit on helping you and taking on the issues."[77] As formats of digital democracy enable and force a relationship based on partnership between citizens and state, this new organisational format results in power shifts which both parties must be willing to face (cf. Geiger 103).

In contrast, *LiquidFriesland* was implemented by administration and politicians with a good knowledge of the ways in which municipal decision-making processes and administrative procedures work. This knowledge was used by the Association for Interactive Democracy to adapt *LiquidFeedback* for use on a district level. *LiquidFriesland* then both depicts the complicated and lengthy decision-making processes and reflects the programmers' strong principles in regards to verifying participants and secret ballots (cf. Behrens et al., *Principles* 53). In my opinion, however, it is the citizens – the prospective users of the platform – who become lost in this process of verification. When users have finally found their way into the platform after the complicated and time-consuming registration process, they have often lost their motivation to use the tool because it is complicated and alien to their every-day lives.

To maintain users interest and interaction through the platform, politicians and the administration in particular need to rethink and adopt a simpler language that allows communication in all directions to become as smooth as possible. As critics of online participation often stress, it would still exclude parts of society. This an

74 Cf. Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview IV together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 10 June 2014.

75 Cf. Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview IV together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 10 June 2014.

76 Róbert Bjarnasson, personal interview V together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

77 Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview IV together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 10 June 2014.

issue too large to be debated here. Yet it is also a fallacy to suggest that there are no obstacles regarding access and participation in *offline* political decision-making processes.

Interim conclusion

It is difficult for the tools to become and to remain an established part of the citizens' participation repertoire when programmers either abandon their own creations or lose interest in their maintenance. Rather, online participation tools require constant attention und support, both from the technical and from the political and administrative sides. Staffing, commitment, and know-how are needed to maintain an online participation tool that is close to the citizens' everyday lives, that accommodates their needs in a way they feel the urge to use it regularly. If this is not the case, if such online participation tools are poorly maintained and lack commitment from those who operate them, they will not become more broadly accepted by society in the long term and will therefore not become a regular part of citizens' participatory repertoire.

It is certainly not enough to have a site programmed and to then leave it without maintenance, and to then somehow hope for the best. That is not the way digital democracy will work. Although computers are involved, it does not follow that such tools or digital democracy in general function automatically, without human care and commitment. Ideally, citizens, programmers, and politicians and administrators would work together on drafting and building a participation tool that does justice to all participants needs and wants: programmers and their principles, politicians and administration who want a tool that reflects the long, complicated process of decision-making, and the citizens who want a tool that is transparent, intuitive and easy to use, and similar to other web applications they use on a daily basis. Volunteer representative Djure Meinen, for example, had several ideas about how to improve *LiquidFriesland*.

> Es müsste die Software attraktiver werden, sie müsste/also ich sag' ja immer, sie kann nicht viel einfacher werden, weil Demokratie nun mal kompliziert ist und insofern kann man demokratische Prozesse auch nicht viel einfacher abbilden als in *LiquidFriesland*. Aber man könnte natürlich trotzdem über Usability im weitesten Sinne nachdenken: sich vom Design her etwas gefälliger aufstellen, so typische Usability-Guidelines einhalten, wo muss ein Knopf hin, damit der User den wichtigsten Knopf als erstes sieht, Hilfen prominenter anbieten – das ist glaube ich ein wichtiger Faktor.[78]

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78   Djure Meinen, personal interview, Varel, 16 September 2013.

The software would have to become more attractive, it would have, I always say, the software cannot get much easier, because democracy as such is complicated and, in that way, democratic processes cannot be depicted much more easily than they already are on *LiquidFriesland*. But of course, one could think about usability in the broader sense: a more pleasant design, where does a button have to go so that the user sees the most important button first, help-manuals could be positioned more prominently – I think those are important factors.

True, these findings may pose serious challenges, but online participation tools will only have the chance to become firmly established in the repertoire of political participation if those challenges are met head on.

8.3.3 *"Trying to improve the debate"*[79] – Online Participation Tools Are (Not) Places for Discussion and Deliberation

Another cause of confusion and conflict – aside from a lack of transparency and the administration struggling to implement online participation tools in their decision-making processes – were the differing expectations and hopes of the actor groups towards the possible extent of informed communication. As Klaus Schönberger points out, within

> eine[r] kulturwissenschaftliche[n] Technikforschung […] besteht nach wie vor die Aufgabe, den Sach- und Dingaspekt verschiedener Ausformungen von Technik angemessen zu fassen. […] Auf dieser Basis kann empirisch gefragt werden, in welcher Weise technische Vorgaben (etwa in Form von Software) und Handlungs- und Kommunikationsmuster welche soziale Praxis ermöglichen, unterstützen, beschleunigen, verlangsamen oder behindern. (Schönberger 210)

> anthropological technology studies the task remains to grasp the aspects of object-ness and thing-ness of different formations of technology. On this basis, it can be empirically investigated in which ways technological standards (in the format of software, for example) as well as action and communication patterns enable, support, accelerate, slow down, or hinder social practice.

Through their software design, both *LiquidFriesland* and *Betri Reykjavík* appear to favour individualised actions like voting and the setting in of ideas over in-

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79   Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview V together with Róbert Bjarnason, 18 June 2014.

teraction and communal actions like commenting and discussion. Whereas users hoped for debate and deliberation, that did not appear to be the prime goal of programmers and politicians. This sub-chapter will show that it seems reasonable to believe that politicians and administration, as commissioners of those platforms, are at least partially responsible for these issues.

"It is an idea gathering thing and an idea prioritization, but last but not least it is trying to improve the debate", *Betri Reykjavík* programmer Gunnar Gríms-son states. Indeed, the website is officially described as the City of Reykjavík's "online consultation forum" (cf. 'About Better Reykjavík'). The reality of the tool means that the terms debate and consultation can only be understood here in diluted terms. That is, the city "has consultations" with its citizens in that they provide the platform for citizens to set in ideas. However, we have learnt in the preceding sub-chapter that the city administration has only demonstrated interest in its citizens' ideas to a limited degree. From the users' perspective, consultation, debate, and deliberation barely take place, as becomes clear in Björn Levi Gun-narsson's statement: "it is a glorified idea-box, really. It's an idea-box, it is a public pin-board, where people can read and re-pin, put a new pin on a cork with a new idea".[80] Krístinn Már Aðælsson sees *Betri Reykjavík* similarly:

> I think it is a good tool to collect ideas. I don't think there is a lot of deliberation there, at least not from my experience. […] There are numerous occasions where an idea has got enough likes and […] got into the voting phase without having a deliberation or there is no argument for and against, for example. You can go through the whole process without getting an argument against or making a pro and con analysis. You just have to put forward your idea and if you get enough likes, you can go the whole way.[81]

What I mean by deliberation here is the

> informed discussion between individuals about issues which concern them, leading to some form of consensus and collective decision. To come to a collective decision, minds must be changed as a consequence of deliberation: this is the key difference between deliberative theories of democracy and those in the representative or direct vein. Preferences are not just aggregated but revised in the light of a preceding debate. (Wright and Street 850f.)

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80 Björn Levi Gunnarsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 4 June 2014.
81 Kristínn Már Aðælsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 20 June 2014.

That way, deliberative theorists see the formation process of political opinion and will as the most important aspect of democracy (cf. della Porta, 'Deliberative Democracy' 62).

As on *Betri Reykjavík*, there was no space for discussion – aside from comments on specific proposed ideas – within *LiquidFriesland*, as Susanne Engstler points out:

> Das Problem ist eigentlich und das spiegelt *LiquidFriesland* auch wieder, man kann nämlich keine Diskussion anfangen. Das geht einfach nicht, so wie meinetwegen auf *facebook*. […] und das führt dann da ran an *LiquidFriesland*, weil man eigentlich nur mehr oder weniger die Initiative unterstützen kann oder man kann eine neue Initiative einbringen. Soweit ist man aber allerdings oft noch nicht. Wenn man wegen eigentlich so einer Diskussion auch da ist, dann wäre das erstmal gut, wenn man dort die Möglichkeit hätte, sich auszutauschen, bevor man eine Initiative startet. Man ist manchmal noch gar nicht so weit, dass man sagen möchte, da stehe ich jetzt voll dahinten.[82]

> Actually, the problem is, and that is visible in *LiquidFriesland*, that you cannot start discussions. It's just not designated, like on *facebook* for example. […] and this leads to *LiquidFriesland*, because basically all you can do is support an initiative or submit a new initiative. But often, one is not ready to do that just yet, because one originally came for a discussion, and that would be ideal as a first step, to have the possibility to deliberate before starting an initiative. Sometimes, one is not quite at the point where one would like to say one supports that idea fully.

Both *LiquidFriesland* and *Betri Reykjavík* do not appear to facilitate much discussion amongst users, but rather to encourage participants to add new ideas or to vote on others' ideas. Kristínn Már Aðælsson's and Susanne Engstler's accounts of the contradiction between what the tools ought to facilitate and which actions are possible in practice are not isolated cases. Rather, it stands to reason that "the democratic possibilities opened up (or closed off) by websites are not a product of the technology as such, but of the ways in which it is constructed, by the way it is designed" by humans (Wright and Street 850).

At least initially, however, users take *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* at face value, that is as "online consultation forums" (cf. 'About Better Reykjavík'), an "online participatory social network" (Citizens Foundation, '*Better Reykjavík*'), or an "Online Platform für Bürgerbeteiligung" (eng. "Online Platform for Citizen's Participation") (Landkreis Friesland, *August 2015*). For instance, *Betri Reykjavík* user Per Hansen thinks that "that's one thing that I feel should be developed

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or should work better, (it should) encourage discussion. Because people tend to just go through and click, yes – no. It seems to me that they don't bother to really dig into the issue and perhaps they are not taking the right decisions because they haven't been thinking about arguments for and against, (about) the background of the issue".[83] Closer inspection shows that both of Per's observations, meagre discussion and the uninformed voting on ideas, are promoted by the specific design of the tools. The example of Anna Válsdóttir's idea "Knattspyrnuhús á ÍR svæðið í Skógarseli" ("Indoor football hall on the land of Íþróttafélag Reykjavík (Reykjavík Athletic Association) in (the area) Skógarsel") in Figure 5, First Look at "Knattspyrnuhús á ÍR svæðið í Skógarseli", idea in *Betri Reykjavík*, 118, illustrates the "role played by design in facilitating or thwarting deliberation" (Wright and Street 849).[84]

On opening the idea's starting page, there is little content visible aside from a title, a one-line description, an image and the voting buttons. The low information density of the ideas' start screens is furthered by the unusually large default view (see Figure 5).[85] Through clicking the heart-button, users endorse an idea, while clicking on the banned-button shows their disapproval. The speech bubble indicates that 18 comments have been made about this idea, but clicking on the speech bubble does nothing. Rather, to read the comments, one must scroll down.

Fig. 5: First Look at *"Knattspyrnuhús á ÍR svæðið í Skógarseli", idea in* Betri Reykjavík[86]

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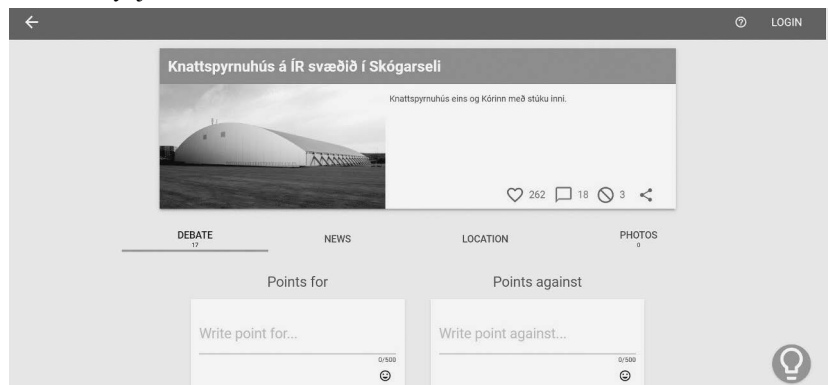
83   Per Hansen, personal interview, Reykjavík, 23 July 2012.

84   Translation: Indoor Football Hall on the grounds of the Sports Club Reykjavík in the Skógarseli area.

85   In fact, I got into the habit of scaling down *Betri Reykjavík* to 70 or 80 percent in my browser to see more content in a glance (see Figure 8, 122).

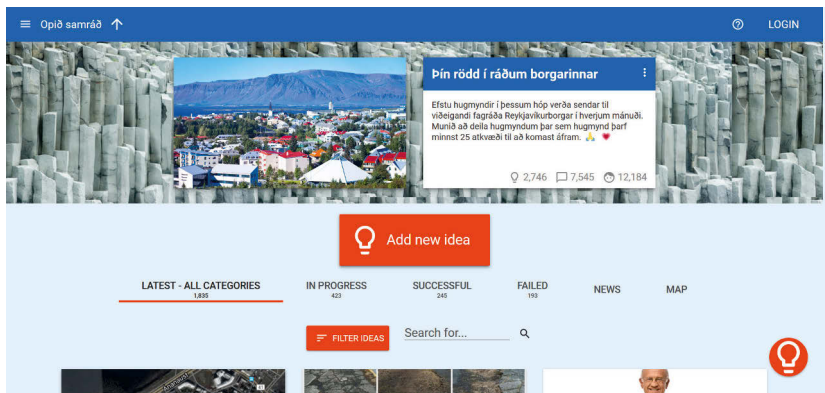86   Idea by Anna Válsdóttir. Screenshot taken on 3 May 2018 at https://betrireykjavik.is/post/9013.

Fig. 6: First Comments to "Knattspyrnuhús á ÍR svæðið í Skógarseli", Idea in Betri Reykjavík[87]
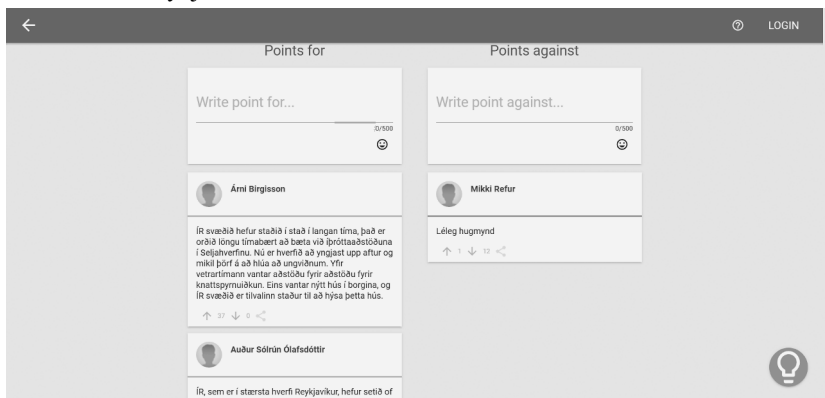
The sharing-button enables users to share the idea on their Social Media accounts. So for a start, it does not appear logical that there are four buttons, alongside one another and with an identical design, but that only three of them are responsive.

In this case, the description of the idea is particularly meagre. Barely a full sentence, it simply says "Indoor football hall with a round roof". If the user takes the structure of the website's design literally, she will indeed keep herself brief

Fig. 7: Starting Page of Betri Reykjavík *in Default 100% Viewing Size[88]*

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87 Idea by Anna Válsdóttir. Screenshot taken on 3 May 2018 at https://betrireykjavik.is/post/9013.

88 By scaling down, more content becomes visible. Screenshot taken on 3 May 2018 at https://betrireykjavik.is/group/47.

Fig. 8: Starting Page of Betri Reykjavík *Reduced*[89]
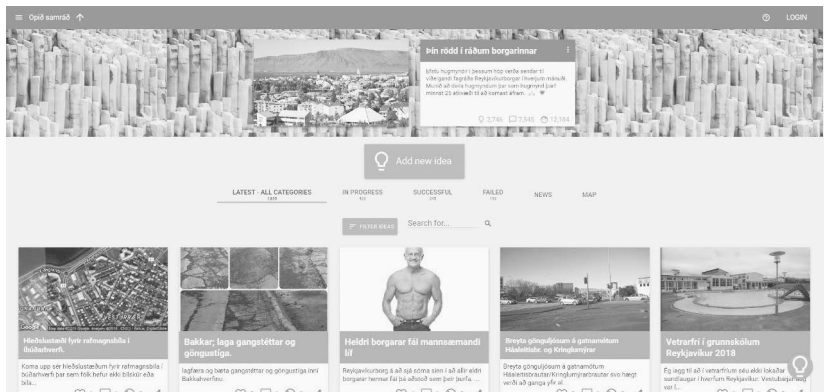
in the description and add her arguments in the *points for/against* section below (see Figure 5, 120). While this is not the case here, users generally do post for and against comments. However, those arguments are neither placed prominently nor arranged clearly, and one must scroll down to read all of them (see Figure 6, 121). This linear and chronologic design inhibits deliberation amongst the participants because it is impossible to answer or add a remark directly related to a point made by somebody else. Reading all comments, that is informing oneself about the issue

Fig. 9: The Overview of the Latest Ideas Added to Betri Reykjavík[90]

at question, requires more effort from users than adding a new point without having read an overview on the issue first. According to Barber, the design of online discussion forums like this facilitate "people talking without listening" (as cited in Wright and Street 852).

Furthermore, the low information density due to the forum's unusually large default view is not limited to the specific ideas' start screens. The low information density is especially conspicuous on the actual starting page of *Betri Reykjavík* (see Figure 7. 121). Purportedly showing the latest ideas set into the system, the starting page barely shows more than the default header of *Betri Reykjavík* and the prominent orange "Add new idea" button. The difference to scaling the website down to around 70 per cent is striking: suddenly, the latest ideas become visible (see Figure 8).

However, no web designers could rightly expect users to scale-down their website. This conveys the impression that if programmers and politicians had wanted to create an overview at first glance of the already existing ideas, *Betri Reykjavík* could have easily been designed that way. Rather, the opportunities for action available at first glance appear to be restricted to the "simple" quantitative, hence measurable, acts of voting and sharing (as implied by the prominently placed heart, banned, and share buttons), as opposed to the "more complicated" qualitative acts of adding points for or against – that is commenting and deliberation. Looking at online discussion from that perspective, an essentially pejorative description like *clicktivism* suddenly seems appropriate. This is carried to the extremes by the design of responsive heart, banned, and share buttons for each idea, even in the overview page of latest ideas (see Figure 9). This makes it possible to just "Click-and-Go" from idea to idea, that is from one colourful over-dimensional image to the next, without even having read the full description, let alone reading the key points for and against.

Again, the degree to which the websites design favours setting in new ideas over investigating and debating ideas that are already there is apparent in the large orange "Add new idea" button in the centre of the screen. It becomes apparent that exchange, networking, and deliberation in *Betri Reykjavík* are inhibited by design. Users' also found that discussion was further inhibited by problems with the search function in the past. Freyja describes searching as "also one thing that I found difficult […]. Because I was trying to search for ideas about dogs, and I didn't get all the ideas, even though I tried different words".[91]

It is indeed common to find multiple ideas revolving around a similar issue on *Betri Reykjavík*, such as the need for dog runs in Reykjavík, a topic near and dear Freyja: "I also noticed that in some neighbourhoods there were maybe three

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91   Freyja Kristinsdóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

ideas about the same thing. Because the people didn't see the ideas, so they started a new one".[92] Guðrun had similar difficulties: "the bad thing about this is that everybody is putting in their idea, they are not reading the others. So I might have five ideas basically about the same thing and instead of everybody getting behind that […]" one idea, support is dispersed.[93] Þórgnýr also criticised the fact that it was "not possible to combine cases. Sometimes somebody would put in a case that's already there. And that un-streamlines the whole experience for everyone and is actually sometimes quite annoying".[94]

Whereas searching for similar, already existing ideas does require a certain degree of reflexivity and initiative on behalf of the user, it surely would be possible to build in a reminder or even an interactive feature to the "Add new idea" webform that reminds the author to checking if his idea has already been submitted by another user. Instead, the design favours the production of non-referential, disconnected and superfluous rather than communally deliberated and informed content. Evidence for this can be found, for instance, in the placement of the "Add new idea" button on almost every page in the forum, unreliable search functions, and the lower priority placed on posts by others, be it ideas or comments, that are only visible through additional scrolling and clicking. As US-American political scientist Anthony G. Wilhelm puts it, the design decisions underlying this produce "self-expression and monologue, without in large measure the 'listening', responsiveness, and dialogue that would promote communicative action, such as prioritizing issues, negotiating differences, reaching agreement, and plotting a course of action to influence the political agenda" (as cited in Wright and Street 852). That is, the design encourages users to focus on their own individual ideas rather than interacting with the system and fellow users. This adds to the dispersion instead of the pooling of citizens' interests and forces, or as the British political scientists Scott Wright and John Street argue: "how discussion is organized within the medium of communication helps to determine whether or not the result will be deliberation or cacophony" (850).

Programmers of both tools stated that they had, in fact, intentionally restricted the possibilities for user discussions within the respective "online discussion forums". Andreas Nitsche, one of the programmers of *LiquidFriesland*, recounts that "we thought about if we wanted a discussion forum. We were sure that we needed discussion before voting took place. […] But do we want to build a discussion

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92   Freyja Kristinsdóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

93   Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

94   Þórgnýr Thoroddsen, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 20 July 2012.

forum? We said NO!"[95] Gunnar Grímsson and Róbert Bjarnason also stressed that they had intentionally omitted features facilitating discussion or the possibility of replying to someone's comment in the format of a (sub-)thread, as they did not want users to become "lost in comment threads where you have someone blogging about something or a news article or something and there's something lacking or someone comes in with a new insight and that's in the seventh comment".[96]

In other words, there is "an element of political choice in the creation of technologies" (Wright and Street 855). However, as Wright and Street point out, "[o]nline discussion forums can be designed differently – in ways that facilitate deliberation"(853). Indeed, *LiquidFriesland*'s programmers had made the conscious decision to focus their software on voting rather than on discussion:

> Erstens, eine gute Diskussion gut abzubilden ist ja sehr schwierig und dann ist es ja so, dass man niemanden zwingen kann, dann dieses eine System zur Politisierung zu nutzen. Und es gibt auch aus unserer Sicht gar keinen Grund dafür. Man kann in der Familie diskutieren, man kann am Stammtisch diskutieren, man kann Diskussionsrunden machen, man kann was in die Zeitung schreiben, einen Leserbrief, Diskussionen am Arbeitsplatz – also überall finden Diskussionen statt […]. Natürlich elektronisch in Foren so und so, aber jeder sucht sich wirklich seinen Platz, wo er diskutiert und das muss man auch nicht zentralisieren, das war so unser Ansatz dabei. Was man zentralisieren muss ist natürlich die Stimmabgabe für die Abstimmung. Weil das macht keinen Sinn, wenn jeder an seinem Ort abstimmt.[97]

> First, depicting a good discussion well is very difficult. Moreover, you cannot force someone to use this one politicising system. And from our point of view there is no need to do so. One can have discussions within the family, one can have discussions within one's group of regular contacts, […] one can write something in a newspaper, a reader's letter, discussions at the workplace – basically everywhere that discussions take place. Of course, electronically in forums and so on, so everyone has their own place to discuss, and there is no need to centralise this, that was our approach. What you must centralise, of course, is voting. It just makes no sense when everyone votes at one's place.

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95   Cf. Andreas Nitsche, personal interview together with Axel Kistner, Berlin, 1 November 2013.

96   Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview I together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 12 July 2012.

97   Andreas Nitsche, personal interview together with Axel Kistner, Berlin, 1 November 2013.

Here, the programmers sought to avoid confrontation by stressing the voting aspect of the website – users could debate and deliberate elsewhere.

This sub-chapter reveals two key aspects of online discussion forums that until now have largely been ignored by both the public and by academia. First, software design appears to be fundamental in determining whether "online discussion forums" encourage or discourage debate and deliberation amongst users. The layout, arrangement, size, and colour of both buttons and links determines their visibility and therefore their use. One becomes aware that information technology is not "given and determinant" but rather made by humans. Second, "websites (and, indeed, the architecture of the Internet itself) […], are the product of technical, political and other choices" (Wright and Street 850). In short, software design is politics. On *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*, it seems evident that political decisions were made to restrict the extent of actual debate and deliberation possible, both by politicians and programmers. Here, it becomes clear that communication within online participation tools is rarely clear and linear, and confusion and frustration await users who expect a place for "discussion, direct democracy; […] the open possibility of making yourself heard in an active way, not against, but really working with other citizens"[98].

8.3.4 *"So the people that work on it, are they just a company or are they like the city council?"*[99] **– The Public Relations of Online Participation Tools**

The preceding sub-chapters have focused on communication within and between the different groups directly involved with the platforms: users, programmers, and the administration and politicians. In this sub-chapter, I focus on public relations in terms of communication with exterior actors like the public and media. For online discussion and participation forums to thrive, it appears crucial to continuously develop and pursue planned communication and public relations campaigns. In the case of both platforms, it appears as if operators invested insufficient financial and human resources in promotion.

Most participants from both fields recounted conversations with family, friends, or colleagues who did not know that the websites existed or their scope. Anna Wagner-Becker recounts that nobody in her circle of acquaintances had ever heard of *LiquidFriesland*. Once, she shared an initiative from *LiquidFriesland* on her *facebook* wall with the appeal to her friends to take part in it. No one did.[100]

Indeed, many participants hold the low sums spent on marketing and the lack of advertising strategy responsible for the general lack of knowledge about the tools, as Susanne Engstler's statement illustrates:

Also, ich hoffe eigentlich, dass dieses Geld, das *LiquidFriesland* gewonnen hat, wirklich fast komplett eingesetzt wird um einmal Werbung zu machen [...]. Man stößt also zu wenig darauf, dass das bekannt gemacht wird. Es gab eine Umfrage auch die gestartet worden ist. *Deutschlandfunk* war da gewesen und hatte vorher eine Umfrage gemacht in den Fußgängerzonen hier in Friesland, was die Leute damit anfangen können; kein Mensch konnte was mit *LiquidFriesland* anfangen! Also alle die sie gefragt haben. Die hätten bestimmt jemanden gezeigt, wenn sie einen gehabt hätten, der das gewusst hätte. Aber so haben sie so drei, vier Beispiele gezeigt, wo die Leute nichts damit anfangen konnten.[101]

So I really hope that the money *LiquidFriesland* was awarded will be used to place some advertisements. [102] One comes across it too seldomly for it to become known to the public. There was a survey started by *Deutschlandfunk* [state-funded national radio station] in the pedestrian areas in Friesland about what the people know about *Liquid-Friesland*. Nobody knew anything about it! That is everyone they asked. They surely would have shown it if they had somebody who knew it. But they showed three or four examples of people who did not know anything about *LiquidFriesland*.

It becomes clear that, at least ideally, an ongoing and diversified advertisement campaign would be developed to make citizens aware of the possibilities for participation on online forums like *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*. As Guð-mundur points out:

I don't think they do enough to get people involved, new people involved. They are kind of relying on people will use it because somebody else is using it. So that is not happening enough. I think they have to be more initiative to get people involved. […] They had some initial effort to let people know it's there. […] they shouldn't stop advertising, always have something that would remind people of it.[103]

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101 Susanne Engstler, personal interview, Varel, 8 October 2013.

102 In 2013, *LiquidFriesland* was awarded the dbb Inovation Award which included 5000 euros prize money (cf. 'Dbb Innovationspreis: Gewinner Stuttgart'). The district tabled a motion in *LiquidFriesland* for the users to say what they would like the money to be spent on.

103 Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

Whereas *LiquidFriesland* user numbers peaked relatively early in its existence,[104] new users have continued registering on *Betri Reykjavík* throughout the years. Of course, the total number of registered users cannot be compared with the number of active users. Whereas the district of Friesland's revaluation reports gave detailed accounts on the (ever decreasing) number of active users, as opposed to those registered or those who did not complete all steps of registration, there are no such numbers available for *Betri Reykjavík*. Nevertheless, it appears likely that user activity has been higher within *Betri Reykjavík*, as the forum has continued to attract new users over the years.

In the case of *LiquidFriesland*, it appears as if encouraging additional users to register through an ongoing, widespread and concerted advertising campaign was not actually planned for by the district of Friesland's administration, as the following quotation by former press secretary Sönke Klug illustrates:

> Ich will ja was erfahren über das Thema Online-Beteiligung und es nützt mir auch langfristig nichts, wenn wir jetzt für ganz viel Geld, was wir nicht haben, jetzt Bandenwerbung bei den Fußballspielen der Kreisligamannschaften schalteten. Denn erstens glaube ich […], dass noch gar nicht klar ist einen wie großen Teil der potentiellen Interessierten wir möglicherweise schon in der Plattform haben. Ob der Anteil nicht vielleicht schon relativ groß ist, obwohl er in absoluten Zahlen relativ gering ist. Und die zweite Frage ist auch: selbst wenn es uns gelänge über Werbeversprechen oder irgendwo geschicktes Marketing Leute in die Plattform hinein zu holen, sie dazu zu bringen, sich einen Account zu besorgen, dann würden wir die Zahlen pushen, es würde aber eigentlich gar nichts aussagen über die Bereitschaft und auch Qualität von demokratischem Engagement und würde Karteileichen produzieren. Und Leute dazu zu bringen, ist ja schon aus demokratietheoretischer Sicht etwas fragwürdig.[105]

> The thing is, I want to get to know something about the topic of online participation. So in this respect there is no point in spending a lot of money, which we do not have, on perimeter advertising at local football league games. First, I don't think it is clear yet that we don't already have a relatively large number of potentially interested citizens on the platform already, even if it is quite low in absolute numbers. The second question is: even if we would succeed in getting people to join the platform through some advertising promises or intelligent marketing, then the numbers would not say anything about the willingness and also the quality of democratic engagement, it would merely produce inactive members. Moreover, getting people to join is questionable from the perspective of democratic theory.

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104 Cf. Sönke Klug, personal interview, Jever, 25 August 2015.
105 Cf. Sönke Klug, personal interview, Jever, 25 August 2015.

I find Klug's answer rather over-stated. When I asked about the low level of activity on *LiquidFriesland* during the weeks prior to our interview, he immediately responded by referring to perimeter board advertising. Moreover, making citizens aware of the existence of *LiquidFriesland* is not the same as persuading them to register. While Klug's answer does appear somewhat questionable, it does explain the administration's general attitude and rather passive approach to advertising beyond the launch period.

This and statements from several informal conversations with Friesland citizens not registered on the site reinforces the impression that it was a public relations coup for the district. The launch of *LiquidFriesland* attracted nationwide media attention to the site and indeed to the whole district. Sven Ambrosy implicitly suggests this in the following quotation:

> Wenn Sie Kommunalpolitik und Verwaltung in einem ländlichen Raum machen, der mit dem Geld auskommen muss, dann kommen Sie relativ schnell auf die Idee, Fördermöglichkeiten zu eruieren und auszuschöpfen. Unsere Fördermittelquote ist sehr ansehnlich, weil unsere Politik, Städte, Gemeinden und Landtag, einer Grundüberzeugung sind: eine gute Idee ist in Friesland nie an Geld gescheitert. Wir müssen eben nur gucken, wie wir die Finanzierung intelligent hinbekommen und da muss man sehr innovativ sein. Wenn Sie natürlich 08/15-Projekte machen, kriegen Sie keine Fördergelder. Wenn Sie innovative Vorzeigeprojekte haben, die sogar regionale Bedeutung haben, dann kriegen Sie Förderung hin. Also: man kann aus einer Not – wenig Finanzen, auch eine Tugend machen – sparsam sein und Fördermittel bekommen. Da muss man natürlich auch besonders aktiv sein.[106]

> If you are doing local politics and administration in a rural place, which has to make ends meet, you relatively quickly come up with the idea of determining and exhausting possibilities for funding. Our funding ratio is considerable because our politics, cities, municipalities and federal state parliament have one fundamental conviction: in Friesland, a good idea never failed because of money. We just have to see that we manage intelligent financing, being innovative while doing so. If you are doing run-of-the mill projects, you will not get any funds. If you are doing innovative showcase projects that may even have regional relevance, then you will receive funding. That is to say: you can make a virtue, getting funding, out of a necessity, little finances. Of course you have to be especially active.

As the activity on the website dwindled in the years following, press releases and other media articles also became increasingly rare. *LiquidFriesland*'s low pub-

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106 Sven Ambrosy, telephone interview, 16 September 2015.

lic profile decreased ever further. The almost complete lack of promotion from the district administration may have been exacerbated by the *Nordwest-Zeitung* (NWZ) daily newspaper's approach to the site. Asked about possible room for improvement regarding *LiquidFriesland*, Djure Meinen explains

> uns müsste es gelingen in den Medien, im Landkreis, stärker wahrgenommen zu werden. Was ausgesprochen schwierig ist, besonders hier im Südkreis wo wir nur die Nordwest-Zeitung haben, die uns erklärtermaßen nicht mag. […] Also bei der NWZ kann man sogar so weit gehen, dass was man sowas wie Sabotage unterstellt. Also, sie haben mit schöner Regelmäßigkeit immer dann eigene Umfragen gestartet, wenn in *LiquidFriesland* etwas Spannendes war und sie haben immer dann über *LiquidFriesland* berichtet, wenn sie dafür negative Aufhänger finden konnten.[107]

> We would have to manage to be perceived by the media in the district in a better light, which is particularly difficult here in the southern part of the district, where we only have the Nordwest-Zeitung, which openly dislikes us. Regarding the NWZ, one could go as far as to assume sabotage. Regularly, they started their own surveys when something exciting was happening on *LiquidFriesland*. And they always reported about *LiquidFriesland* when they could find negative leads.

Even *LiquidFriesland's* programmers were surprised by NWZ's portrayal of the site:

> Da gibt es aber auch eine Zeitung, die da boykottiert, das finde ich vollkommen absurd. Also, das sind so Effekte, da sind wir wirklich wieder überrascht, weil damit hätte ich jetzt nie gerechnet, dass so ein etabliertes Medium das regelrecht boykottiert und dann witziger Weise Dinge, die im System laufen dann auch noch in die Zeitung reinnehmen. […] Da ist jetzt unsere Vermutung, dass die vierte Gewalt im Staat womöglich Machtverlust sieht, selber dieser Spin Doktor nicht mehr sein kann und die Bürger selber basisdemokratisch darüber entscheiden, was sie interessiert und was nicht.[108]

> There is even a newspaper that is boycotting – I think that is totally absurd. These are affects that we are really surprised about, because nobody would have seen that coming, that such an established medium downright boycotts and then even includes the topics from the website in their newspaper. It is our assumption that the fourth authority in the state possibly fears the loss of power, not being able to be the spin doctor anymore and having the citizens at a grassroots level deciding what interests them and what not.

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107 Djure Meinen, personal interview, Varel, 16 September 2013.

108 Axel Kistner, personal interview together with Andreas Nitsche, Berlin, 1 November 2013.

In light of a lack of funds for ongoing advertising, Róbert Bjarnason points out that for *Betri Reykjavík*, "the thing is that at the periods that we had a lot of activities on *Betri Reykjavík* is when we've had some money personally to spend it on *facebook* advertisement and some promotions and things like that".[109] Djure Meinen's appears to make a similar comment about *LiquidFriesland:*

> man müsste vor allem auch Geld in die Hand nehmen. Und das ist natürlich schwierig, weil es schon schwierig ist, die Summen, die im Moment im Raum stehen im Kreistag durchzusetzen. Also, da geht es ja jetzt um unter 10.000 Euro im Jahr. Wenn man jetzt noch mal sagen würde wir wollen das Projekt jetzt noch mal pushen, wir müssen dafür nochmal 20.000 Euro mehr für die Programmierung in einem Jahr […] in die Hand nehmen, dann wird's glaube ich schwierig nochmal eine Mehrheit zu Stande zu kriegen."[110]

> First and foremost, one needs some money in hand. That is difficult, because it is already difficult to get the sums that are necessary at the moment through in the district assembly. And they are less than 10,000 euros a year. If one would say, we want to push the project again, we have to spend another 20,000 euros on programming within one year, I doubt we would obtain a majority.

With such a lack of advertising budgetary strategy, it is unclear why the function to collect "social points" was discontinued on *Betri Reykjavík*, especially since the incentive had been successful as a small, free advertising programme. At the same time, the discontinuation of social points further intensified the individualisation of political participation. Up until 2013, users of *Betri Reykjavík* had been awarded social points for activity on the site. As already pointed out, users were then put into three public categories according to the total numbers of their social points. Amongst other things, users gained one social point if either endorsers or opponents of their ideas found their argument helpful, and won an additional social point if both endorsers and opponents found the argument helpful (cf. 'Answers to Frequently Asked Questions'), or five social points when somebody they invited through a personalised link joined the site. Users could then spend their social points on 'advertisements', that is adding their idea to a rotating banner at the top of the page. Several interviews with participants back in 2012 showed that aiming to collect social points had shaped their activity on the site. Per Hansen, for example, "invited a bunch" of people to join *Betri Reykjavík* and "must admit" that he traced his number of social points and position in the former rankings: "it makes

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109 Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview V together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

110 Djure Meinen, personal interview, Varel, 16 September 2013.

me proud somehow that I'm close the top".[111] Jón Þór Ólafsson also thought that "it's good to have them [social points]. And I did invite people on board to get that. I did give an argument for some ideas that I liked, and I tried to do that well, because when people like your arguments you get also the points, and then you can use the points to buy advertisements. That motivation system, it works for me."[112]

Guðmundur Kristjánsson, himself a computer engineer, identified the gamification of political participation at play here: "I think they have taken it from the computer games. […] If you do it a certain way you get a badge. [...] people have to get, you know, teammates to win. So, they run the system with something like that. It's just, it makes it a little more fun […] it helps people to get started."[113] This is exactly what the programmers said they were aiming to do by installing this feature. Back in 2012, Róbert Bjarnason explained that "it's sort of a game within the whole project. [...] it's a system of virtual rewards" through which they had hoped to keep users continuously interested and motivated.[114]

It becomes apparent that both users and programmers appreciated the features of social points and rankings, amongst other things for recruiting additional users to the system. It is therefore unclear why both features were discontinued in 2013. Even in 2012, Róbert Bjarnason had pointed out that social points and ranking "is something to look after in the next version. We want to expand it a bit".[115] When I asked him about it in 2014, Róbert Bjarnason said that "in terms of user interface we have only been sort of simplifying and the new version which hasn't been deployed yet […] is even simpler, and definitely that is the way to go. And a lot unfortunately it means that you remove some of the functionality".[116]

Perhaps the users I interviewed were only exceptions to the general disinterest in social points and rankings. Indeed, most of the users I interviewed belonged to the top-15 in the rankings, meaning that were especially active, so it certainly

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111 Per Hansen, personal interview, Reykjavík, 23 July 2012.

112 Social points ensured the positioning within the "most influential" ranking (duglegasta fólkið). The more active a user, the more social points he receives and the higher his position in the ranking. Social points could also be exchanged for an advertisement highlighting a specific idea that is dear to the user and which was then displayed on the top of the starting page; Jón Þór Ólafsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 20 July 2012.

113 Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

114 Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview I together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 12 July 2012.

115 Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview I together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 12 July 2012.

116 Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview V together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

seems plausible that those at the top of the rankings were those most concerned with gaining and holding their position amongst the most influential users.

Still, the removal of the social points and rankings functions only adds to the general impression that the collaborative and deliberative aspects of *Betri Reykjavík* have waned over the years (see chapter 8.3.3 *"Trying to improve the debate"*). As Róbert Bjarnason himself points out in the quote above, increased simplicity comes decreased functionality. With the deletion of the "virtual rewards system", a major incentive for users to take the time to express themselves sensibly and convincingly in comments on others' ideas also vanishes. With the virtual rewards system intact, it is likely that one would have to carefully consider one's opinion on a certain issue to be able to write arguments that other users would mark as helpful. It is conceivable that the cessation of rewards has also led to users paying less attention to ideas before voting on them. Why bother visiting the idea's page, and reading through the idea's full description and the arguments for and against it, when one you could just click the heart or the ban sign on the starting page, and move on to the next idea?

In removing the "virtual rewards system" the programmers once again trimmed *Betri Reykjavík* down and reduced its quality as a discussion platform. With the removal of the one element oriented especially toward community and supporting rational and sensible discussion and deliberation, superfluous "click-and-go" decision-making was further encouraged and facilitated. The programmers provided no other justification aside from simplification for removing the rewards systems. Of course, there may have been other motives or factors at play. Whatever the case, the various decisions taken by programmers and politicians regarding the design of *Betri Reykjavík* led to an individualisation of political participation, and it morphed over time from a discussion and deliberation platform to a polling venue.

Betri Reykjavík and *Betri Hverfi* – one and the same?

Due to this, the significance of contributions through *Betri Reykjavík* to the political decision-making process within the City of Reykjavík appears to have dwindled over the years. Partly, *Betri Hverfi*, (eng. *Better Neighbourhood*), the annual participatory budgeting, took *Betri Reykjavík*'s place in citizens' perception. Since its launch in 2012, *Betri Hverfi* has continuously diverted attention from *Betri Reykjavík* to the extent that even regular *Betri Reykjavík* users were no longer sure what the difference was between the two sites. Users often thought both were one tool, or mistook one for the other. In 2014, programmer Róbert Bjarnason said that almost all of the city's budget for online participation measures – both in terms of advertising and the implementation of citizens' ideas – went towards *Betri*

Hverfi.[117] In the following section, I show how the complicated communication around *Betri Reykjavík* and the participatory budgeting tool *Betri Hverfi* further solidifies the impression that the public relations strategy was not planned in detail. In the end, this lack of planning means that marketing and advertising appears to do more harm than good.

Almost every *Betri Reykjavík* user I talked to confused it with *Betri Hverfi* or thought that the two were one and the same.[118] To illustrate, Dominique most definitely thinks of *Betri Hverfi* when asked if she still uses *Betri Reykjavík*, as one can see from certain signifiers in her answer: "I did it *last time*. I haven't done it *now*, as it was in *March*, the last possibility to express themselves for the *districts* in the city".[119]

The confusion between *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi* is problematic for a variety of reasons. For one, several users translated the annual three-week period in which they could allocate money to different projects in their neighbourhood through *Betri Hverfi* to *Betri Reykjavík* – that is, they thought it only made sense to participate on *Betri Reykjavík* during those three weeks of the year. Freyja expressed complete disbelief as she was informed that the city council actually debated the most popular ideas of *Betri Reykjavík* on a monthly basis: "THAT is not explained! [laughs] OKAY! […] And I always thought […] I don't want to spend any time here until just before the election. […] Then I put in the ideas and get people to see it, and you know, like it, and so it goes through. Because I did think the rest of the year is no use anyway."[120] Here, I suggest that a huge amount

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117 Cf. Róbert Bjarnason, personal interview IV together with Gunnar Grímsson, Reykjavík, 10 June 2014.

118 Here, recalling brief information on how to distinguish between *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi* may appear useful. In brief, *Betri Reykjavík* is a participation platform in which every interested party can put in ideas to increase Reykjavík's status as a city worth living. Those ideas can be commented on, and voted for or against by other users. Every month, the top (the ideas with the most support from users) ideas across all thematic categories (e.g. "construction" or "sport and leisure") are discussed by the city council in terms of their implementability. Each year, ideas concerning specific districts are taken from *Betri Reykjavík* and put into *Betri Hverfi*, the participatory budgeting programme, in which users can distribute a set budget of 450 million Icelandic Krónur (around 3.6 million euros) to different projects concerning the district their main residence is registered in (cf. Citizens Foundation, 'Portfolio: My Neighbourhood').

119 Italics added by the author. Dominique Pledel Jónsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 3 June 2014.

120 Freyja Kristinsdóttir, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 23 June 2014.

of potential participation fizzles out, because citizens fail to realise the different temporal external conditions for the two sites.

There is not only a lack of clarity regarding the different temporal conditions, but also about the geographical localities they target. Since 2014, one has only been allowed to participate on the *Betri Hverfi* subsite in the district of one's main residence. This is what Guðrun criticises: "I think they changed it in a way you can only say something about your own neighbourhood. I live in the east side and I couldn't say anything about this area [downtown Reykjavík] even though I work here, and I know things about this area. So, if that's true or if I just messed it up somehow, then that's not a good thing".[121] Unfortunately, this confusion has contributed to Guðrun's retreat from *Betri Reykjavík*, although she was had been an active member, setting in several ideas and frequently commenting and voting on other users' ideas before 2014.

The programmers are aware that there was a high probability that users would confuse the sites:

> That is a huge problem, that is totally understandable both from our point of view on how we did it and especially from the point of view of the citizens in how they perceive it. It's really difficult, I don't even know what would be the way to sort of distance it. I mean, one thing is obviously that a big source of confusion is that when we call out for ideas *on Better Neighborhoods*, we're using ten different sub-sites of *Better Reykjavík*. So, you are on *Better Reykjavík*, participating in *Better Neighborhoods* and it even looks like *Better Reykjavík* because the only thing that changes is the header. And the logo of *Better Neighborhoods* is almost the same as for *Better Reykjavík*. So just this one thing like changing the branding of sort of how it looks will definitely something that will be done.[122]

At the time of writing, nearly five years after this interview took place, only one significant change has been made to avoid confusion: *Betri Hverfi* (eng. *Better Neighbourhood*) had been renamed *Hverfið mitt* (eng. *My Neighbourhood*). By 2014, *Betri Reykjavík* had ceased to be a high priority for programmers Gunnar and Róbert, who stated that they were now deeply immersed in building other web projects.

Indeed, the future of *Betri Reykjavík* had become unclear by the summer of 2014, especially due to a change in the city government. Jón Gnarr, under whose watch *Betri Reykjavík* had been established, did not run for another term as mayor.

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121 Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 30 May 2014.

122 Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview IV together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 14 June 2014.

Eventually, his former deputy Dagur B. Eggertsson from the Social Democrats lead a coalition with the Green-Leftist Party, the *Pirate Party*, and the *Best Party*'s heir *Bright Future*. The new mayor summed up the atmosphere in the following way:

> we just had elections and we are using the opportunity to go through how we have been doing with *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi* […]. And the new coalition is created by four parties and so the PIRATES are coming in as a new force. First time in WORLD HISTORY I think that they are part of a majority government. We decided that the committee that has dealt with democratic issues will get a higher profile and more funding for them to elaborate on new ideas. We don't know to a full extent what those new ideas will be, but we have decided that this the right point in time to go through and look, okay how did *Betri Reykjavík* meet our expectations and *Better Neighbourhood*s as well and what would be our next steps?[123]

For example, head of the sports and leisure council in Reykjavík Þórgnýr Thoroddsen thought that the confusion between *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi* "is also a good thing, because that means we could just kill *Betri Reykjavík* and just integrate it into *Betri Hverfi*, just piece by piece. By just saying, well, we are expanding the *Betri Hverfi* thing"[124]. Nearly five years later, almost nothing has changed. With the administration of the platforms in flux, there has been no identifiable ongoing or consistent public relations strategy for *Betri Reykjavík*. The confusion between *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi*, the hold-up of ideas over several months, and the opaque workings of decision-making within the platforms in general all adds up to questions and doubt among registered and prospective users' about using *Betri Reykjavík*.

Another factor that contributes to the confusion and doubt about *Betri Reykjavík*, even for several registered users, is the lack of clarity about who actually operates the forum: "So the people that work on it [*Betri Reykjavík*], are they […] just a company or are they like the city council? […] Those who control it and sustain it?".[125] Back in 2012, Freyja had been one of the most influential users of *Betri Reykjavík* and was actively submitting ideas, commenting and voting on ideas of others about facilities for dogs and owners' rights. The fact that Freyja, a highly involved user, would not know who maintains and implements the platform surprised me. I had assumed that it was clear to users that independent programmers operate the platform and the city administrative personnel subsequently processes

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123 Dagur B. Eggertsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 27 June 2014.

124 Þórgnýr Thoroddsen, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 19 June 2014.

125 Freyja Kristinsdóttir, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 23 June 2014.

the ideas. However, many interviewees asked me if I knew who ran the platform, who would process their ideas once they were submitted, and who decides which ideas are listed on the city council's agenda – in other words, most of the key procedures of the platform were unknown to many frequent users. In this light, it appears even more astonishing that they did not lose interest sooner, but kept on submitting ideas, commenting on others, and voting for or against initiatives, when they did not understand to what ends.

There was a rather opaque and confusing genesis to *LiquidFriesland* that was not successfully solved by public relations until the end. It was clear to all participants that the tool was incorporated into the political decision-making processes of the district and that Landrat Sven Ambrosy had played the lead role in its establishment, simply due to his high visibility in the media around the launch of the website. In this case, it was the constant association of *LiquidFriesland* with the Pirate Party that caused confusion and conflict:

> Bisschen unglücklich finde ich den Namen, weil bei *LiquidFriesland* nicht unbedingt darauf kommt, dass das so ein Bürgerforum ist. Also, wer nicht ganz jung ist und zu den Piraten gehört, und der sich mit den Piraten beschäftigt hat, der kennt diesen Begriff eigentlich nicht so ohne weiteres. Mein Sohnemann konnte damit natürlich sofort was anfangen, aber ich nicht.[126]

> I think the name is quite unfortunate, because you would not guess from it that *LiquidFriesland* is a citizens' forum. Those who are not that young or part of the Pirates [party] or have not looked into the Pirates does not know about the term. Of course, my son immediately knew what it was about, but not me.

The "liquid" in *LiquidFriesland* is borrowed from *LiquidFeedback*, the name of the software it is based on. Programmed by the Association for Interactive Democracy, it was first set up within the German Pirate Party's decision-making processes. In 2012, the programmers of *LiquidFeedback* cut all ties with the German Pirate Party and officially distanced themselves from the ways it has been used by the German Pirate Party (cf. Behrens et al., 'Piratenpartei').[127] Elsewhere, the pro-

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126 Susanne Engstler, personal interview, Varel, 8 October 2013.

127 The programmers fundamentally belief that for online voting to be democratic, it has to be done with real names and not pseudonyms. The German Pirate Party however have not abided by this principle, but still continue to use the free software. For the good of all other users of the software and to continue their liberal licensing policies , the programmers were not able to stop the German Pirate Party from using LiquidFeedback (cf. Behrens et al., 'Piratenpartei').

grammers state that *LiquidFeedback* is "an independent project" and "NOT affiliated to any political party or movement" (capitalisation in the original, Interaktive Demokratie e. V. 11). They add that "[i]n particular it has neither been 'developed by/for Pirates/the Pirate Party' nor 'advanced/enhanced by/for Pirates/the Pirate Party'" (11). The vehemence with which the programmers deny the link between their software and the Pirate Party is striking, but it also appears to be a hopeless task at least inside Germany. With the launch of *LiquidFriesland*, many media outlets used the apparently attractive image of "pirates", in the double connotation of urban computer nerd and seafarer, taking over the rural maritime region Friesland.[128] Generally, the association of *LiquidFriesland* with the Pirate Party led to suspicion amongst participants. For example, Peter Lamprecht explained that he originally registered in *LiquidFriesland* out of curiosity, to see what the spin-off from the Pirate Party's way of handling things was all about.[129]

In this sub-chapter it has become clear that there are different reasons for the lack of consistent public relations strategies for *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*. For *Betri Reykjavík*, the lack of clarity about its role and the fact that it could not become firmly establishment within municipal decision-making processes, an issue also caused by a change of government in city hall, hindered the development of a coherent public relations strategy. The development of a coherent strategy was further inhibited by uncertain financial structures and governmental responsibilities difficult to understand. Further, competition between the similarly designed participatory budgeting subsite *Betri Hverfi* added to a confusion amongst *Betri Reykjavík* users and non-users alike.

In the case of *LiquidFriesland*, the administration's unwillingness to publicize the tool beyond the launch, as well as negative press by the district's main daily newspaper lead to confusion around the website. There can be little doubt that this confusion was partially responsible for the decrease in popularity amongst users and a loss of relevance in political decision-making processes. These cases reveal how important a consistent and constant public relations strategy is for the "success" of online discussion and participation tools. There must be clarity about the operators, workings, rules, goals, and roles in political decision-making processes to enable tools like *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* to occupy a relevant and sustained role as a mode of political participation.

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128 A selection of headlines playing on the image of pirates/the Pirates: „*LiquidFriesland*: Friesen auf dem platten Land überholen die Piraten" (Bewarder), „Piratenideen in der Provinz: Alle Friesen an die Laptops!" (Reinbold), „Neue Fans von „Liquid Feedback": Von den Piraten lernen" (Erb).

129 Cf. Peter Lamprecht, personal interview, Varel, 16 September 2013.

8.3.5 Conclusion

This chapter set out to illuminate the various communication processes that are part of the online participation tools *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*. It showed that communication within online participation tools, a novel mode of political participation, caused challenges both for users as well as administration and politicians. Expecting transparency and openness in political decision-making processes through their participation in the platforms, users are instead confronted with opacity and a lack of political accountability through the various steps their suggestions go through.

To a large degree, this has to do with the fact that administration and politicians seem to adhere to established forms of communicating their decisions. In doing so, administration and politicians struggle to see things from a user perspective. It becomes apparent that online participation is a learning process, not only for users navigating the tools, but also for the administrations and politicians responsible for receiving, replying to, and possibly implementing the citizens' input.

These issues are further complicated by differing expectations and hopes about the possible extent of informed communication between the different groups of actors. *LiquidFriesland* and *Betri Reykjavík* users had hoped for more debate and deliberation – ultimately not only with other users but also with administrators and politicians –, but neither programmers nor politicians were prepared to commit to that. Rather than facilitating communal interactions, like commenting and discussing, the software design emphasized individualised actions like voting and the setting in of ideas.

Furthermore, the public relations approaches of both sites' administrators appear to lack planning, coherence and funding. Even amongst registered users, there was a large degree of confusion about who operated the sites, how they worked, what rules there were, what they were established to do, and the different roles in political decision-making processes. I believe that well planned and constructed communication and public relations strategies are crucial both for the ongoing success of online discussion and participation forums, and for their establishment in the repertoire of political participation. Politicians and administration have to be willing to accommodate changes and the restructuring of both political culture and political communication (cf. Rosenzweig and Eith 12) for online participation to become firmly established:

> Because people just know that's possible, it changes the way community just thinks and because the community does think differently, everything else has to adapt. We're in the middle of that now, we're not there yet, we haven't figured out how we're thinking differently or even if it, if it's still in the process and we haven't fully realized what this

means, and there are a lot of new kind of technologies that will enhance this process. So, we don't know where it's gonna end, but we're already that far along that we have to start catching up politically, you know, systematically, to that new way of thinking.[130]

8.4 Political Participation in the Digital Age

After elaborating on information and communication practices as prerequisites for political participation, this final analysis chapter concentrates on political participation. The chapter starts with an overview of the most prominent modes of political participation in participants' repertoires. Once more, it becomes strikingly apparent that the development of ICTS and the Internet furthers citizens' opportunities to adopt a mix-and-match mentality: in a bricolage fashion, citizens combine modes of political participation across ("physical" and "virtual") spheres according to their respective political objective and to how they perceive a mode's internal and external efficacy. Special focus is also placed on the continuum of online political participation between empowerment of the citizens and the simulation of participation, and the participants' preferences for participation at the local political level. Aside from the general analysis of political participation repertoires today, a large part of this chapter deals with analysis of participation in times of crisis in contrast to participation in times of affluence. Adapted from US-American sociologist Harold R. Kerbo's work, this concept has proven tremendously fruitful in characterising the different notions of political participation in the two research fields, and at explaining general societal and political phenomena over the last decade, such as political disinterest.

8.4.1 Political Participation Repertoires Today: A Mix-and-Match Mentality

Going to the polls, sign a petition, be in a flash mob, buy eco-friendly products, contact a politician, found a local citizens' group, take part in political party work, demonstrate, support an interest group – as Jan van Deth points out, the list of modes of political participation has become extremely long and is growing longer (cf. 'Partizipationsforschung' 169f.). Like their information practices, people's political participation repertoires appear to be constituted by a selective mix-and-match mentality. In this chapter, I provide a brief round-up of the most prominent modes in interlocutors' participation repertoires. These are voting, political party engagement (including running for an elected office), initiatives/working groups,

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130 Björn Levi Gunnarsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 4 June 2014.

demonstrations, petitions, the online participation tools *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*, and the online participatory budgeting tool *Betri Hverfi*. This chapter focuses on the participants, touches on their overall experiences with these different modes of participation, and the ways in which participants incorporate a certain mode both into their participation repertoire and their everyday lives.

Just as it is one of several media used by "media omnivores" (Linaa Jensen 1) which they combine to form their own "personal news repertoires" (Strömbäck et al. 1), the Internet is also one venue where people participate politically, through different participation modes, and in doing so, aim to influence political decision-making processes at various levels. As Stark notes, participants mix-and-match the modes of political participation that they deem promising in achieving their specific goal and in accordance with their personal resources, social surroundings, and individual values (cf. 64). In the manner of a bricolage, participants reuse, recombine, and remix modes of participation that they have been actively relying on much of their adult lives together with more novel modes of participation (which obviously include the myriad online modes now available to many). In this way, participants become *bricoleurs* with highly individualised repertoires of participation modes.

In other words, these modes of online participation do not replace but rather supplement other modes. Indeed, much of the "hype" and the fears connected with the replacement hypothesis (see chapter 2.2.1 *Simply Slacktivism?!*) can be refuted by insights into socio-cultural change in Schönberger's work and the transformation of everyday life in Damsholt's and Jespersen's work. Put simply, these scholars conclude that change simply does not happen overnight. Even if it may have become technologically possible, established modes of political participation will not simply be replaced by online equivalents, or significantly more numbers of citizens will participate. Rather, modes of online participation may become part of citizens' repertoires in a fundamentally open and combinatorial process (cf. Schönberger 207) – on the premise that they "can be integrated with the constitutive logics of everyday life" (Damsholt and Jespersen 23).

8.4.1.1 Voting

In both Reykjavík and Friesland, voting is (still) the most dominant mode of political participation, as several interlocutors pointed out. For Landkreis Friesland's former press secretary Sönke Klug, voting still remains a civic duty for most citizens (ger. "eine staatsbürgerliche Pflicht")[131]. Hans Meyer similarly argues that citizens should remember to show respect: respect for the luck they have in living in a democracy in which one can delegate responsibility by giving politicians

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131 Sönke Klug, personal interview, Jever, 25 August 2015.

a mandate for a certain period of time, and also the luck one has in being able to withdraw that mandate.[132] For Hörður Torfason, the right to vote "is the most precious thing you have as a person." To honour this, he suggests making voting in elections compulsory: "I think we should go and put in LAW, that if you don't vote, you will get a fine. Even if you […] put it [in] empty, that is a way of showing it. But you should be obliged to go there and vote – you belong to society. And you can't just pretend to be neutral, no one is neutral."[133]

These observations from my fields correlate with most of the literature. In an overview of several European comparative studies, Jan van Deth concludes that voting is the prime mode of political participation in Europe (cf. 'Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft' 173). The high relevance of voting in citizens' participation repertoires finds expression in high voting rates. As can be seen in Figure 10, voting rates in general parliamentary elections in Iceland have been over or around 80 percent over the last twenty years, with peaks in 2003 (87.7 percent) and 2009 (85.1 percent).[134] Voting rates in general elections in Germany have been around ten percent lower than in Iceland, dropping to their lowest level in 2009 with 70.8 percent, but going up again to 76.2 percent in the last election in 2017.[135]

However, local body elections in both fields do not seem to draw as much attention as general elections. While voting rates in the municipal elections in the Reykjavík Capital Area dropped almost twenty percent (82.6 to 62.9 percent) from 2002 to 2014,[136] voting rates in the district of Friesland appeared to be on the rise.

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132 Cf. Hans Meyer, focus group, Varel, 9 September 2014.

133 Hörður Torfason, personal interview, Reykjavík, 24 June 2014.

134 Statistics are only as good as their cultural contextualisation. While it would go beyond the constraints of this chapter to go into details about what might have influenced citizens' decisions (not) to vote in the specific years, these numbers will play a role in chapter 3.3, where I deal with the relevance of times of crisis and times of affluence on political participation.

135 Figure compiled by the author using official statistics on general elections in Germany (Der Bundeswahlleiter), on local elections in the district of Friesland (Landkreis Friesland, 'Wahlen'; Landesbetrieb für Statistik und Kommunikationstechnologie Niedersachsen (LSKN) 11), on local elections in the Reykjavík capital area (2002; 2006; 2010; 2014) and on general parliamentary elections in Iceland (Votes Cast) from Statistics Iceland.

136 Unfortunately, there were no coherent numbers to be found on voting in the 2018 municipal elections in the Reykjavík capital area at the time of writing. Accounts vary between 62.7 percent (cf. RÚV) to 67 percent (cf. Ćirić), which would either mean that the percentage of voters remained unchanged, or rose by five percent. Due to these discrepancies, I decided to exclude the 2018 election in my round-up.

Fig. 10: Participation in General and Local Elections in Iceland and Germany
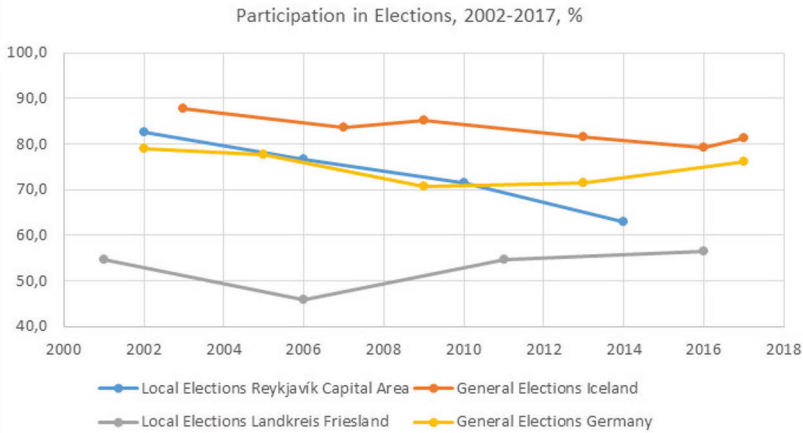
Indeed, voting rates in Friesland went up ten percent between 2006 and 2016 (46 to 56 percent), but were still around 20 percent lower than for general elections.

Without going into much detail about the reasons for these numbers, I think it is safe to say that, at least for some parts of society, local elections appear to be seen as less important than general elections. There are numerous and for the most part conflicting analyses of the apparent reasons behind decreasing turnout in local elections (cf. Altenbockum). In Reykjavík and Friesland, there are two commonly cited reasons for this decrease. First, that the quality of life in their municipality was so good that people saw no reason to vote. For instance, asked about possible reasons for the low voting rates in the municipal elections that had taken place just days before, Kristinn Már Ársælsson explained that the turnout for

> the parliament elections are still at a high level. There is a very low decline. There is a decline, but it is way smaller as at the municipal level. And the things that they decide upon in parliament, are way more influential for our lives. For example, the health care system, taxes – these are directly influencing our day-to-day lives or level of quality of lives. At the municipal stage, it has been just too long since they implemented day care, we have swimming pools in every neighbourhood in Reykjavík, which is ridiculous. Just the quality, the level of quality of life in municipalities is properly, their influence on our daily lives is just way less.[137]

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137 Kristínn Már Ársælsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 20 June 2014.

Second, another common explanation for low turnout in local elections is that participants were discontent with their action and impact frames through voting at the ballot, and were resorting to other modes of participation, such as the work in initiatives or starting petitions. Both these interpretations can, for example, be seen in the following quote from former Reykjavík mayor Jón Gnarr, referring to his personal life:

> For my parents, who are born around 1920, […] voting was very important to them, of almost spiritual importance. It's like going to vote was like going to church. It's just your responsibility as a healthy human, you vote. And I had these debates when I had got the right to vote, I said, 'Pf, no, I'm not going to vote, I don't care'. Then they said, 'but you have to go. You have to show up, you cannot just be nonchalant'. But then I look up at my kids, and I have loads of children, and they are between twenty and thirty, they're not so interested in voting. Because it's 'uncool', it's 'boring', and it 'doesn't change anything'.[138]

8.4.1.2 Political Party Engagement

Several participants have been directly involved with electoral politics within political parties. Several have won mandates on councils or committees. For example, a participant in the focus group in Varel had been in the district assembly in Friesland for around five years, and had stood (unsuccessfully) for the state parliament (Landtag) of Lower Saxony, both in 2013 and 2017. After almost 30 years of involvement in different political initiatives and as a member of the Green Party, a participant in the Jever focus group was elected to the city council of her hometown Varel in 2016. As was Djure Meinen, whose quote simultaneously points out that today, those who decide to engage within a political party are a minority:

> [Ich habe] mich immer politisch interessiert und auch politisch geäußert, also letztlich bin ich immer ein politischer Mensch gewesen. Hier in Varel war's dann plötzlich so, also im Grunde musste man ja nur Piep sagen und im Grunde war man schon dabei. Also die Zahl derjenigen, die sich wirklich politisch aktiv engagieren wollen, ist wirklich extrem gering. Je kleiner die Partei, desto weniger werden das und bei den Grünen musste man eigentlich nur sagen, ich würde gerne bei euch mitarbeiten und am liebsten gleich auch mal ein Amt übernehmen und damit ist man dabei. Weswegen ich eben auch seit September 2011 im Rat der Stadt Varel bin.[139]

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138 Jón Gnarr, personal interview, Reykjavík, 9 August 2012.

139 Djure Meinen, personal interview, Varel, 16 September 2013.

> I have always been politically interested and spoken my mind, so actually I've always been a political animal. Here in Varel, all you had to do was say one word and you were in. The number of people who really want to participate is extremely low. The smaller the party, the less people are interested. So with the Green Party all you had to do is say I want to take part and also take up a post and you're in. That is also why I've been a member of the Varel City Council since September 2011.

In these cases, holding a mandate is seen as part of political party engagement, although most definitions of political participation "explicitly refer to citizens in order to differentiate the relevant behaviour from the activities of politicians, civil servants, office-bearers, public officers, journalists, and professional delegates, advisors, appointees, lobbyists, and the like" (van Deth, 'Map' 354). However, none of the participants referred to in this chapter are professional politicians, and most are unpaid for their elected position, holding it alongside their regular job.

In Iceland, two participants became members of political parties between fieldwork in 2012 and 2014. Both did not only become members, but also actively engaged in party work right away. The software engineer Guðmundur programmed a mobile phone app for the *Dögun* party campaign in preparation for the 2014 municipal elections. He also agreed to fill the party's list of potential candidates for the city council: "I was asked to be a part of the *Dögun* party and I did that. I was supposed to be tenth or something, […] but they asked me to be higher on the list, so I ended up fourth or fifth on the list." As it was highly unlikely from the beginning that *Dögun* would win many seats – it was a new party standing for the first time –, Guðmundur was not elected into city council. Still, he saw the whole experience positively, had "a lot of fun", and in comparison to the interview two years earlier, I had the feeling that the joy, affirmation, and self-confidence that radiated from him was due to this experience. [140]

Another participant became a member of the Pirate Party. He received a mandate in the parliamentary elections of 2013 and, after being elected in the 2014 municipal elections, was appointed head of the sports and leisure council as well as vice head of the council for culture and travel. In his account, it becomes visible that, at times, all it takes to participate politically are personal connections and serendipity:

> I was involved in some protests, as a matter of things in the whole Wikileaks thing. When she [Birgitta Jónsdóttir] [141], Smári McCarthy and some others started forming the

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140 Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 22 June 2014.

141 Birgitta Jónsdóttir was parliamentary chairwoman as well as general chairwoman of the Icelandic Pirate Party on and off between 2012 until 2017. In 2017, she withdrew

> Pirate Party, I was invited to those meetings and I never showed up. You know, didn't have time, didn't have interest, I was like, 'Baah, political stuff', didn't have much interest. Eventually, they finished the preparations and they had the founding meeting and I had decided not to go, but I was JUST in the neighbourhood at that time. So I showed up for the founding meeting and I realized, 'Wow, there is a bunch of people here I know' and at first, I started hanging out with them just a little bit and before I knew it, I was running for parliament last year! And I was just filling in on the list, to be honest. I was just like 'Oh, I'm gonna help them out, I'm just filling the list. I'm just gonna be on the list somewhere low'. But I got voted into second place in North-East. I had said something like that 'Can I take the North-East, my dad lives there, I have some connection there'. You know. And, ja, then I was like 'That's pretty cool', so let's go all in. And done, here I am. That's a little bit of a change and I was a little bit surprised about that.[142]

Several other participants have had negative experiences in party politics and have since retreated from further engagement. Active participation in a political party is challenging and time-consuming work: formal requirements are to be fulfilled, the proceedings and structure of committees need to be understood, and one needs a thick skin to endure the often personal comments made in debates and committee meetings. As Wolfgang Müller said:

> Es schrickt viele ab die sagen, ‚da wie das da läuft in Varel, Da kannst du mal hingehen, das ist ein Abenteuer'. So. Aber nur für Leute die wirklich auch erlebnishungrig sind. Alle anderen sagen 'Das tu ich mir nicht an'. Und genau das ist der Punkt, da muss sich vom Stil was ändern, von der Struktur was ändern. Die Verwaltung muss weniger Macht haben, die Ratsmitglieder müssten tatsächlich einfach auch besser honoriert werden und die Zeiten müssten angepasst werden, dass Bürger mal zu einer Ausschusssitzung kommen können. Um 17 Uhr können das die wenigsten, wir müssen immer den Laden zu machen, um da hinzugehen beispielsweise.[143]

> The way things are going in [the city council of] Varel scares many people off, saying *Just go and attend a meeting, quite an adventure*. But only for those who really are in search of a thrill. Everyone else goes *Spare me!* And this exactly is the point, the

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from politics, at least for the time being. She is a prominent public figure in Iceland; and outside the country, she is mostly known for her involvement with Wikileaks and for founding IMMI, the International Modern Media Institute which is "working towards rethinking media regulation, securing free speech and defining new operating principles for the global media in the digital age" (cf. IMMI).

142 Þórgnýr Thoroddsen, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 19 June 2014.

143 Wolfgang Müller, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

conduct needs to change, the structure needs to change. The administration needs to have less power, councillors have to be paid better, and times have to be adjusted, so that citizens can actually attend the committee meetings. Few have time at five in the afternoon. We, for example, have to close our shop each time.

While a number of participants were actively engaged in political party work, political parties across Europe are facing declining membership numbers (cf. Vetter and Kuhn). Like psephology, political party research is a complex research area of its own, so I can only be brief here. Niedermeyer points out that there has been a huge decline in member numbers for all but two German parties.[144] Since 1990, when West and East Germany were reunified, both the *Christlich Demokratische Union* (*CDU*) and *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland SPD* (the established major parties) have lost around half their members in percentage terms (cf. Niedermayer). The decline was even greater in the liberal *Freie Demokratische Partei FDP* (68 percent) and the Left Party *Die Linke* (79 percent) which are both established smaller parties.

For my research in Friesland, this incongruence suggests two possibilities. First, that my sample was disproportionally politically active,[145] or second, that while the membership numbers of political parties are falling, amongst those citizens that consciously become or remain party members, many are motivated to actively shape their membership.

Arriving at a general conclusion is further complicated by the fact that statistics on party membership in Iceland paint a different picture, where membership numbers in all major parties increased – at least between 1979 until 2010 (cf. Kristinsson 127).[146] Although no newer statistics could not be found, one can well assume that overall party membership has continued to grow based on the

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144 Only the Green Party and the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), a right-wing populist party founded in 2013, have recorded an increase in members (cf. Niedermayer).

145 Due to my sampling process, almost all participants were members of *LiquidFriesland* or *Betri Reykjavík*. This suggests that those citizens who are politically active often employ multiple modes of participation.

146 Unfortunately, newer numbers do not exist, as the author Helgi Gunnar Kristinsson pointed out in an email: "The data which I used was basically an estimate of self-reported membership according to the ICENES. I don't think I have any more recent figures, and, as you know, there are no official statistics". ICENES stands for Icelandic National Election Study, which has been conducted after every general election in Iceland by political scientists around Ólafur Þ. Harðarson since 1983. It "is an extensive study of the electoral and political behaviour of voters in Iceland. Research topics include voting behaviour, attitudes towards political parties and democracy, the most

foundation of a number of new political parties in recent years. In comparison to Germany, whose federal party system is characterised by stability and low fragmentation, the party system in Iceland has become increasingly pluralised into a very compartmentalised system – apparently an observation true for most of the Scandinavian countries (cf. Alemann 13). Alone in the last municipal elections in Reykjavík in 2018, 16 parties stood for election (cf. Fontaine, 'The Reykjavik 16'). Moreover, three of the eight parties currently forming the national government are *newcomers* which were founded between three weeks and one year prior to elections in autumn 2017 (cf. Fontaine, 'Elections '17').

8.4.1.3 Initiatives / Working Groups

In this sub-chapter I move away from electoral participation to look at working groups or citizen initiatives, a mode that several participants were engaged in. In 2012, Guðmundur described the beginnings of his increasing political interest and participation:

> Before / in the collapse, I wasn't very much involved in anything, […] but after that I was participating in a group that was looking into the financial system and something like that and tried to come up with better solutions than we had, just to see how stupid some part of the financial system is. So I got involved in that group, and [...] they just had a meeting there and I went there and looked what were they talking about and try to get to know somebody and so on. That's why I also started using *Betri Reykjavík*, I saw something that could go better in the system.[147]

It was in this working group on financial reforms that Guðmundur met those who later founded the political party *Dögun*, which he later joined:

> I had been involved in this financial reform group. And we made a website and […] and I tried to come up with ideas to improve the financial system. […] We had meetings in common places, all the groups. So, that was the venue for the starting of the political party, *Dögun*. So I was just a lot around in that meeting place, so I got involved in the other / when they were trying to make their mission statement or what you call it. So, I just, because I was around a lot, I got to know them, so I just was kind of dragged into that also. Because they wanted to get information about what we thought about the

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important political tasks, participation in primaries and other issues on the political agenda" (The Social Science Research Institute).

147 Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

financial system, so they wanted to change that also and wanted to see what we had. It was […] how I got involved with that party.[148]

The following example illustrates perfectly how some working groups/initiatives thematically overlap and that being active in one working group can lead to subsequent engagement in another. Dominique Plédel Jónsson, who amongst other things is the director of *Slow Food Iceland*,[149] became active in a working group on urban agriculture only after she was invited to give an expert talk about Slow Food's stance on it:

> I was in a group of people/it was open, not framed or anything, but they wanted to look into urban agriculture. And then the group, they asked me to talk about Slow Food and the way Slow Food was active in that. Okay, I did it. And then it started. And I took part in the demand to the city, to get green space which is unused in town. And to be able to grow things, you know. And they had a lot of ideas and discussion and on *facebook*, the group is quite interesting in fact. And you know, people really focusing. And all of a sudden, the application was agreed. So, everybody just started and went in this small spot, a nice space within the city. The municipality went for it, WITH the people.[150]

What catches the eye here in these two examples is again the role of social connections and networks in mobilising people for political engagement, but also motivating already active people to continue to engage politically. These two quotes also reveal how the immediate neighbourhood or quarter is a frame of reference and action, and has a mobilising effect on participants. In both cases, participants were mobilised to participate through another different participation mode by peo-

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148 Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 22 June 2014.

149 According to its international website, Slow Food is a global, grassroots organization, founded in 1989 to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, counteract the rise of fast life and combat people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from and how our food choices affect the world around us. Since its beginnings, Slow Food has grown into a global movement involving millions of people in over 160 countries, working to ensure everyone has access to good, clean and fair food. Slow Food believes food is tied to many other aspects of life, including culture, politics, agriculture and the environment. Through our food choices we can collectively influence how food is cultivated, produced and distributed, and change the world as a result ('About Us').

150 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 3 June 2014.

ple they had met in other surroundings (see chapter 8.5 The Role of Geographical Proximity in (Online) Political Participation).[151]

Several participants regularly attended neighbourhood citizen council meetings, which are a common form of working group in Iceland. After attending the neighbourhood council, Freyja registered and became highly active on *Betri Reykjavík*:

> I went to a meeting in my neighbourhood, […] in every neighbourhood there's a council and they were talking about this website now, that was just before Christmas. And I was living in Hlíðar, which is around Klambratún […]. And they were talking about that everyone should go and vote on *Betri Reykjavík*, because they wanted ideas through for this area. And then I suddenly realised, 'Oh, okay! 'Because me and a few other dog people were wanting to get some dog runs in Reykjavík. So I thought 'Well, that would be a good place to try to get something through'.[152]

As in a number of other cases, one mode of participation (attending the neighbourhood citizen council meetings) facilitated Freyja's engagement through another mode (setting in, commenting on and voting on ideas by others on *Betri Reykjavík*). Seeing her ideas on *Betri Reykjavík* lead to the construction of several dog runs across Reykjavík, Freyja became motivated to further expand the modes of participation in her repertoire.

While such experiences of success had prompted Freyja and several other interlocutors to further expand their participation, this was not the experience of all the participants who had become involved in different initiatives. Those participants who had been involved in several different initiatives or had been on working groups for a long time tended to be disappointed and disillusioned with the lack of attention paid to citizens' input within established structures of representative decision-making processes, as Karin Schmidt's illustrates:

> Wir haben das ja in dieser Agenda 21-Phase auch eben erlebt, sehr stark, das war ja eben das Konzept, wo Bürger dann auch auf die Kommunalpolitik einwirken, zusammen mit Kommunalpolitikern Arbeitsgruppen bilden und ihre Ideen einfließen lassen. Das Ding ist gescheitert! Das hat nicht funktioniert, weil die Kommunalpolitiker sozusagen auf

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151 However, the effects of the financial crisis in 2008–09 and its aftermath were crucial to Guðmundur's initial decision to participate politically. Guðmundur's case is one of many that strengthen the observation that crises have the potential to mobilise people not only for immediate actions, but also beyond (cf. chapter 8.4.3.1, Political Participation in Times of Crisis).

152 Klambratún is a park near the city centre of Reykjavík; Freyja Kristinsdóttir, personal interview I, 17 July 2012.

ihrem Status beharrt haben, nämlich ‚Wir sind diejenigen, die das […] zu entscheiden haben, und Bürger, du kannst dann gerne wieder an die Urne gehen und uns wählen'.[153] In the Agenda 21 era, we had an intense experience of the concept of citizens influencing local politics, forming working groups together with local politicians, and interpolating their ideas. That thing failed! It didn't work because the local politicians insisted on their status, basically saying 'We're those who make the decisions and you, dear citizen, are welcome to go back to the ballot box and vote for us'.

8.4.1.4 Demonstration

One participation mode that regularly acts as a starting point for further engagement is attending demonstrations. For example, it has been widely stated that for many Icelanders, participating in what came to be known as the Pots-and-Pans Revolution was a decisive politicizing moment.[154] As Bernburg and Víkingsdóttir point out: "[p]ublic participation in the protests was enormous, as was the level of support" (82). Studies conducted after the crisis suggest that around 25 percent of the inhabitants of the Greater Reykjavík area participated at least once in the protests, and 16 percent repeatedly did so (cf. Bernburg 239).[155]

Indeed, the Pots-and-Pans Revolution was a decisive moment in politicizing many of the respondents. Guðmundur, for example, "didn't care much about demonstrations or something before the collapse."[156] Many others were frequent participants in the protests, not least because the protests were essentially the only venue that one could get information about what was actually happening to and in the country. In other words, political participation also became an information practice. Hörður Torfason, the main organiser of the weekly protests from October 2008 until March 2009, recalls:

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153 Agenda 21 is a United Nations action plan which aims at leading municipalities and regions to sustainability. It resulted from the Earth Summit (UN Conference on Environment and Development) held in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 1992, and included numerous measures relying heavily on citizen participation (cf. Permien); Karin Schmidt, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

154 Large weekly protests outside Alþingi, the parliament building, began in October 2008. Eventually, the government stepped down due to the protests which became known as the Pots-and-Pans Revolution because protesters used kitchen utensils to make noise.

155 According to Bernburg's survey, around 57 percent of the respondents were in favour "of the actions of the protesters at the time of the demonstration" (82), another survey found support rates of up to 70 percent (Eva Önnudóttir as cited in Bernburg and Víkingsdóttir 82)

156 Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

I think it was the Eleventh of October, and at Saturday at 12 o'clock – I chose 12 o'clock because it's the lunch hour, and I said to people I will be there like 20 minutes. I have two questions, I asked people who came there or passed by, I asked 'Can you tell me what has happened in this country?' and 'Do you have any idea what we can do about it?' People were confused, people were angry; there was a lot of anger. Many many many foreign journalists trying to talk to people – it was a chaos. And I was there, I made a speech […] about the situation and I asked people to do a talk, step up and talk. We just used the benches there in front of parliament. And on Monday, the parliament members came out and I asked them, stopped them and asked them, and they said they didn't know, they had absolutely no idea what was going on. To me, that was a shock. I mean, these are the people who want to run our society and we trust them to do it and they have absolutely no idea what they are doing. I thought this calls for something more. So what I decided there and then, was to reach out to people, ask them to help me and put up an outdoor meeting. I found out […] people were willing to step up and make speeches, trying to explain to people, what was going on. And I rented car and sound equipment, I got permissions from police and the city authorities to do things like this and just arranging this whole thing.[157]

At demonstrations, one is likely to come into contact with others and learn more information that may lead to further engagement: a leaflet, a speech or a short conversation with the person standing next to you may well spark one's interest in finding out more, may well spark the motivation to do more. Reykjavík mayor Dagur B. Eggertsson believes that these protests "empowered and increased participation, at least in the short term".[158]

Participants also consider demonstrations a very effective mode of participation:

Ich wollte […] gerade dran erinnern/am heutigen Tage die Mutter aller Demonstrationen, was die gebracht hat! Hat natürlich einen Hintergrund und zwar in der Zielsetzung, die muss natürlich formuliert sein. Nur auf die Straße zu gehen und Radau zu machen halte ich auch für verfehlt. Für eine zielgerichtete Demonstration, für eine bestimmte zielorientierte Optimierung öffentlich das Wort zu ergreifen und auch ruhig mal auf die Straße zu laufen und auch mal Krach zu machen, hat mehr Wirkung als jede Petition, jeder Leserbrief oder sonst so etwas.[159]

I just wanted to say/on this day, the mother of all demonstrations, look what came of it! Of course, there was a background and the setting of a goal has to be well formulated,

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157 Hörður Torfason, personal interview, Reykjavík, 24 June 2014.
158 Dagur B. Eggertsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 27 June 2014.
159 Jürgen Schneider, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

of course. Just being out on the streets, making a racket – I don't see any use in that. Beginning to speak publicly for a goal-driven demonstration, for a distinct goal-oriented optimisation, whilst walking the streets and making some noise, has more profound effects than every petition, every letter to the editor, or what not.[160]

8.4.1.5 Petitions

Petitions were another mode of participation popular with interlocutors. As the following quotes imply, they normally signed petitions online today. According to Karin Schmidt, the Internet makes taking part in petitions much easier, and that she subsequently signs more than she used to.[161] To further facilitate the ease of taking part in petitions, some participants of the Varel focus group mentioned having subscribed to *openPetition*, a free platform that supports people in starting, disseminating, and handing over online petitions to decision-makers from politics, industry and commerce, as well as society (cf. 'Über uns').

In Iceland, Dominique points out that the planned felling of an old tree in the city centre became the focus of a heated public debate only after a petition against it was started on the petition platform *Change.org*:

> Now [after the crash] I feel like that people have the feeling that their opinion counts. And when you realize it, then you move. There is a sweet, but very limited question which is in the papers today, which is very typically of that. There is an old tree in *Grettisgata*, beautiful, hundred years old, and […] it was [...], I think the day before Christmas, something of that kind, when nobody reads the paper, when they announced that the tree was to be uprooted and two houses moved to build a hotel, one more [sighs]. But the people of the streets [near the tree], when they realized it, started a petition and […] straight away, it filled up and everybody on the street, everybody around wrote their names. That's something you wouldn't have seen in, well four years ago, let's say. Because then, it was the decision from the top and down, and you would be angry, send a letter to the papers, that's it. Now, you have really people reacting and taking charge in reaction and that is a very little example, but it's very typical, I think.[162]

Dominique initiated her account with her perception of people's understanding of their own efficacy increasing in the aftermath of the financial crisis: people engaged more because they felt their voices and actions could impact decision-making processes. Due to the simple numerical requirements regarding citizens' peti-

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160 On 9 October 1989, the largest of the "Monday Demonstrations" took place in Leipzig, leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall only a few weeks later (cf. Curry).

161 Cf. Karin Schmidt, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

162 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 3 June 2014.

tions to make it on the decision makers' agenda[163], as well as the ease and speed of signing petitions on the Internet, petitions are a participation mode that has the potential to profoundly influence citizens' internal efficacy.

8.4.1.6 Online Participation Tools:
LiquidFriesland and *Betri Reykjavík*

The primary advantage of modes of online participation appear to be that they are neither time nor location bound. One can participate from the comfort of one's own home, day or night. This opens up new opportunities for participation, especially for sections of the population that were hitherto excluded from political participation processes (cf. Coleman), such as people working shifts or long hours, at home caretakers unable to leave family members that need to be looked after, and physically and mentally challenged citizens or others for whom it is difficult if not impossible to attend committee meetings.

Karin Schmidt appreciated *LiquidFriesland* for just that,

> es ist etwas was mir leichter fällt, weil ich kann es zuhause von meinem PC ausmachen. Ich muss nicht irgendwo hinfahren, ich muss mich vielleicht mit Leuten nicht auseinandersetzen, mit denen ich mich gar nicht auseinandersetzen möchte und ich kann es zu den Zeiten machen wo ich es will/kann vielleicht auch nochmal zusätzliche Informationen bekommen. Ich kann dort, wenn man es sich durchliest was ist tatsächlich so bei uns im Kreis los/Das mache ich zum Beispiel regelmäßig mal, dass ich da einfach mal durchgehe und blick, *Ach, der denkt darüber nach, der denkt darüber* nach und bekomme so Anregungen. Das kann ich eben ganz bequem von zu Hause aus machen ohne wie früher eben halt Ausschüssen beisitzen zu müssen. Und ich weiß eben nicht, ob ich persönlich mir jede Ausschusssitzung antun würde. Aber diese Möglichkeiten, die man heute hat […], das finde ich ganz spannend.[164]

> It's easier for me, because I can do it from my PC at home. I don't have to drive somewhere, I don't have to argue with somebody I don't want to argue with, and I can do it at those times that suit me/might get additional information. When I go through it, I can read about what is going on in our council, which I do from time to time, to go through it [*LiquidFriesland*, JTK] and notice who thinks about what, and get inspired by that. That I can do from home without partaking in committee meetings as I did in the past.

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163 For example, a petition to the German Bundestag must have at least 50,000 signatories within four weeks after receipt to be publicly debated by the petition committee of the Bundestag (cf. Deutscher Bundestag).

164 Karin Schmidt, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

I doubt that I would do that to myself today. But these opportunities that one has today are very exciting to me.

For Karin Schmidt, who has participated in local politics for over 20 years – as a member of various initiatives and working groups, and most recently as councillor for the Green Party –, the increased use of online participation tools would be a welcome alternative to the occasionally hostile atmosphere in decision-making processes:

Man muss halt immer auch sehr viel Geduld haben und einen Biss haben um in so einem Gremium bestehen zu können und da finde ich müsste man anfangen und sagen, so wir müssen irgendwie eine andere Form finden. Und von daher hätte ich dieses *LiquidFriesland* in Varel wirklich gerne auf der Kommunalebene, da hätte man ganz viele kleine sachliche Anträge einbringen können ohne diesen ganzen Beleidigungsmüll drumherum. Sondern, dass man wirklich auf der Sachebene ist, nicht anfängt so das Persönliche/und wo man eben auch eine Sammlung dieser Sachfragen, die leider in diesem politischen Prozess sehr häufig untergehen, hat.[165]

You do have to be very patient and be determined to persist on such committees, and I think we should begin to look for another way to do this. And because of that, I would really like to have *LiquidFriesland* on a municipal level here in Varel, where one could have tabled a lot of small, objective motions without all the insults, but really be on a factual level without all the personal matters, where one could have all the factual issues that unfortunately often get lost within the political process.

Moreover, citing the potential of the "hive mind" effect, many participants appreciate the opportunity to discuss and deliberate with fellow citizens, even if it is only to a limited extent. Guðrún points out, "there are a million ideas out there and the people of the city council only have a small portion […] of it, but the people know what is going on in their immediate area and how to put that into the open, that this is the way to do that."[166] Helmut Weber has a similar perspective:

[ich] fand ich ja dieses Portal *LiquidFriesland* ganz gut, weil jeder Bürger die Möglichkeit hat, dort etwas reinzustellen, eine Sachkenntnis oder Kompetenz, die er vielleicht hat, zu formulieren und so auch der Politik oder den politischen Vertretern eine Unterstützung zu geben. Das ist oftmals vielleicht ja ein Aspekt oder das ist etwas was uns als Bürger bewegt um dort eben andere Momente reinzubringen und tatsächlich auch

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165 Karin Schmidt, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

166 Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

vielleicht so ein Stimmungsbild, ein Meinungsbild zu geben was die politische Arbeit von anderen oder politischen Vertretern auch unterstützen kann. Oder eben halt das man das ein bisschen weiter fasst, dass man das Knowhow, das man in einem Landkreis, in einer Kommune hat, tatsächlich auch nutzt […] und das fand ich an dem Portal eigentlich ganz schön.[167]

I liked the portal *LiquidFriesland* because every citizen has the chance to put something forward, an expertise or competence that he might have in there, and so can support the policies or the political representatives to get to know what's on the citizens' minds. To create a representation of public opinion, that might support the political work of others or political representative. In a broader perspective, to collect and use all the know-how that exists in the council, in the municipality – that is what I liked about the portal.

As pointed out in depth in chapter 2.2.1 *Simply Slacktivism?!,* the mobilisation hypothesis was prominent in the early days of research into Internet and politics. While proponents were optimistic that the Internet would help mobilise and politicise previously disengaged parts of society, data to support the hypothesis has only ever been found beyond concretely limited research fields and/or for low numbers of participants (e.g. Bengtsson and Serup Christensen; Feezell et al.; Saglie and Vabo; Xenos and Moy).

While not one participant in this study was completely politically disengaged before starting to use an online participation tool, engagement within online participation tools and the internal political efficacy participants drew from it further encouraged them to broaden their participation repertoire and to engage and participate politically beyond voting at the ballot. As Peter Lamprecht said:

[i]ch habe mich vorher nicht engagiert und wenn man das abstimmen oder mal eine Initiative bei *LiquidFriesland* zu starten, als politisches Engagement ansieht, dann hat das bei mir dazu geführt, dass man sich politisch engagiert. Und insofern glaube ich schon, dass es eine zusätzliche Möglichkeit ist/sie werden sicherlich nicht die alleinige bleiben können, aber es ist sicherlich ein zusätzliches Angebot und dafür finde ich es sehr sinnvoll. Weil, ich hätte jetzt auch nicht den Nerv und auch keine Zeit, in irgendwelchen Ausschüssen da rumzukaspern, aber wenn ich auf diese Art und Weise zumindest meine Punkte vielleicht anbringen kann mit der entsprechenden Anzahl an Unterstützern, dann ist das ja schon mal ein Schritt in die richtige Richtung. Das […] gibt mir ganz andere Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten als wenn ich nur weiß, dass ich jeden zweiten Dienstagabend 19.30 hier im Kreistag antanzen [kann].[168]

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167 Helmut Weber, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

168 Peter Lamprecht, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

I wasn't politically engaged before, and if you take the voting as well as the starting of initiatives on *LiquidFriesland* as political participation, very well, then this led to me participating. In this respect, I do think it is an additional opportunity, it will certainly not be the only one, but it is certainly a very useful additional opportunity. Because I wouldn't have the time and wouldn't be up to clowning around in committee meetings when I can bring across my issues with a fair number of endorsers, that is a step in the right direction. It gives me far more opportunities for action than showing up in city council every second Tuesday evening at 7.30pm.

Likewise, it was only through *Betri Reykjavík* that Guðmundur started to become more interested and engaged in politics:

if you wouldn't have this website then I wouldn't know where/how to get my ideas or you know my things that I would like the city to notice. So I wouldn't do it if I just had to write an email to somebody that I don't know who is or where is or how to find the email address and then the email would just be received and then deleted [laughs]. And at *Betri Reykjavík*, it's still in there.[169]

Here, Guðmundur is also making a reference to the accountability that online participation tools like *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* convey – and that many other participation modes do not. Everything is in writing and can be tracked: "[o]ne thing that is good about *Betri Reykjavík* compared to earlier attempts of getting feedback from the public is that you see what's going on, how things are followed through".[170]

8.4.1.7 Online Participatory Budgeting Tool: *Betri Hverfi*

The online participatory budget *Betri Hverfi* has been taking place annually since 2011. Each year, around 450 Million Icelandic Krónur (more than 3.6 Million Euro) "is allocated by citizens each year to implement crowdsourced ideas from the citizens to improve the various neighbourhoods of Reykjavík. To date, 608 ideas have been approved (2012–2017)" (Citizens Foundation, 'Portfolio: My Neighbourhood'). As Gunnar Grímsson told me in 2012, *Betri Hverfi*

actually came from the city. They have this annual neighbourhood pot which is dealt out every year. Usually, it has been the neighbourhood boards that have taken charge of how they got divided. So somebody […] came up with the idea 'Why don't we put this into *Betri Reykjavík*'? There was a threefold process actually: the ideas were called for on *Betri Reykjavík*, we've created a special part of *Betri Reykjavík* just for *Better Neigh-*

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169 Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

170 Per Hansen, personal interview, Reykjavík, 23 July 2012.

*bourhood*s and the ideas came in from there. […] And then the plan was to take […] the top ones and evaluate them, but what turned out was that all of them went through evaluation. […] And then after the evaluation there was this electronic voting, which was a totally separate system, a new voting system.[171]

Within this voting system, citizens could then prioritise the ideas according to their preferences (like for example facilities for children, facilities for dogs, facilities for athletes); and indeed, the majority of accepted ideas have been implemented within the same year.

The idea of incorporating residents into opaque budgeting process typically reserved for parliamentary elites was first carried out in the Brazilian town of Porto Alègre in 1989 (cf. Neunecker 204). Since then, it has enjoyed great popularity across the world. Users of *Betri Hverfi* hold the online participatory budget in high regard for two main reasons. First, it enables participation at the micro level: one can only take part for the district that is one's main place of residence. That way, participants can actively take part in shaping their immediate neighbourhood and surroundings and thus contribute to improving the lives of their family, friends and neighbours. Here, participants seem especially motivated to participate on the local political level rather than the state or national political levels (see for more detail chapter 3.4, The Role of Geographical Proximity in (Online) Political Participation). Part of this motivation springs from the visibility of changes implemented through *Betri Hverfi*, like new bike lanes, benches, or trees. Second, the three-step process as described above by Gunnar Grímsson, including deadlines by which certain tasks have to be completed, is expressed and communicated much more clearly than on *Betri Reykjavík*.

Contrasting participants' statements from 2012 and 2014, it becomes clear that participants' engagement with *Betri Reykjavík* had decreased while their engagement with *Betri Hverfi* had increased. Whereas *Betri Hverfi* was rarely mentioned by participants in 2012, by 2014, the terms *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi* had often become used synonymously to describe *Betri Hverfi*. As shown in chapter 2.3, since its launch in 2011, *Betri Hverfi* has continuously diverted attention and resources away from *Betri Reykjavík*, with participants often unaware that *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi* were two different tools.

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171 Gunnar Grímsson, personal interview II together with Róbert Bjarnason, Reykjavík, 24 July 2012.

8.4.1.8 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the participants, touching on their overall experiences with the most prominent modes of participation in their respective fields, Reykjavík and Friesland. It provided insight into the ways in which participants include those modes in their participation repertoire and in their everyday lives. The persistence of established political participation modes like voting or party work in participants' participation repertoires was also highlighted. Comparing Icelandic participants' accounts of their repertoires of participation in 2012 and 2014 revealed increased politicisation through the expansion in their modes of political participation. The participants did not, in fact, exclusively extend their repertories by 'simple', 'clicktivist' modes, but also by 'costly' modes such as taking up an electoral mandate (cf. Gladwell as cited in Baringhorst, 'Online-Aktivismus' 79).

The finding that all these modes of participation are practised in a fundamentally open and combinatorial process (cf. Schönberger 207) invalidates popular assumptions about the Internet, in particular, as responsible for an apparent degeneration of participation cultures and the political landscape in general (cf. Fox). Rather, as Stark argues, participants self-determinedly mix-and-match political participation modes that they deem promising in achieving the specific goal they are pursuing, in accordance with their personal resources, social surroundings, and individual values (cf. 64).

8.4.2 (Online) Participation: Enabled or Simulated?

This sub-chapter gathers together several discourses on the effectiveness of online participation modes. The attributions academics have found for those are highly heterogenous, ranging from enabling citizens to participate (more effectively) to stimulating citizens' participation in political decision-making processes and thus have a stabilising effect on existing representative power relations. Two practical examples from the fields, that is the scope of ideas put forward on the platforms *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*, and the general observation that online participation tools increasingly simplify and reduce their (perceived) aspirations from representing public political deliberation to dealing with complaints about broken local infrastructure, illustrate this continuum.

As I have pointed out, despite its prominence, there has been little evidence to support the mobilisation hypothesis, except in concretely limited research fields and/or for low numbers of participants (e.g. Bengtsson and Serup Christensen; Feezell et al.; Saglie and Vabo; Xenos and Moy). By contrast, however, there has been strong evidence for the general empowerment effect of digital infrastructures, both on already active citizens' political participation and on social movements (cf. Castells; cf. Escher, 'Beteiligung via Internet'; cf. Theocharis). According to

Klaus Schönberger, the potential to enable is inherent in online communication modes, since those contribute to the widening of possibilities for agency and an increased visibility of participants/activists through the simultaneity of persistence and recombination of existent social practices (cf. as cited Näser-Lather 1f.).

In the preceding chapter, I outlined the main ways in which the use of online participation tools had helped participants feel empowered. German political scientist Tobias Escher argues that Internet usage increases political interests as well as internal political efficacy (cf. 'Mobilisierung' 461). As Freyja points out, she felt empowered and encouraged that the ideas she had put into *Betri Reykjavík* had hit a nerve with a number of other users: "You feel real progress, [like you are] doing something that matters."[172] It was not only Freyja's internal political efficacy that was strengthened by this experience, but also her feeling of professional competence in discussions about her ideas:

> The few comments that came against it, there were not many, there were much more for, and the few comments that were against it, they were not very critical, they were very easy to fight against, to prove your point. It is really common. When people don't like dogs or are scared of dogs they put something irrational down and often you know, they probably haven't thought it through or something. I'm a veterinarian and I'm also a dog trainer, so its maybe easier for me to formulate a good response. [173]

However, on the whole, neither tool was initiated with any real, larger claim about implementing deliberative and participatory strands into decision-making processes, but to assure them that the respective administration was aware of the need to include them more in decision-making processes, and to show that the municipality was up-to-date and does offer online participation. As Thomas Fischer notes:

> Manchmal möchte ich ganz ketzerisch annehmen, dass so etwas wie dieses *Liquid-Friesland* jetzt, dass es genau wieder diese schlechte Politik legitimieren soll, weil ,Da machen die Leute ja auch mit und die dürfen ja auch mitreden, ne?' Über Krähen, über weiß nicht; kommt da ein kleiner oder großer Kreisel hin; wird das Haus rot oder grün; darf das Abfallding jetzt auch mittwochnachmittags aufhaben anstatt donnerstags – können wir alle super mitreden. […] Soll das nicht dazu dienen eben die Herrschaft dieser gewählten Kaste zu legitimieren oder wozu ist das eigentlich gut? Nur mal so.[174]

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172 Freyja Kristinsdóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

173 Freyja Kristinsdóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

174 Thomas Fischer, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

Sometimes I want to heretically assume that something like *LiquidFriesland* is supposed to legitimate exactly today's bad politics, because *'People do have a say and are allowed to take part, don't they?'* About crows and what not; whether a little or big roundabout should be installed; whether the house should be painted red or green; if the dump thingy is supposed to be open Wednesday afternoons instead of Thursdays – we surely all have to say something about that. Isn't that supposed to legitimate the power relations of the elected caste or what is it for? Just saying.

This apparent pseudo-participation, that is the attempt to cultivate an impression of openness while rulers are careful to retain decision-making in their own hands, reproduces and reinforces the status quo of power relations (cf. Heery and Noon). In this context, Jenkins and Itō criticises the "general rhetoric of participation", which often involves "'opportunities' for participation which do little to shift the balance of power, diversify the culture, or achieve any of the other democratizing effects I hoped for a decade ago when I wrote about a move towards a more participatory culture" (36).

This approach to pseudo-participation certainly has consequences for the design of municipal online participation tools, as Wright and Street point out: "[o]n the specific issue of public participation, councils have tended to commission sites that maintain existing institutional and cultural practices" (858). As discussed at length in chapter 2, Communication within Online Participation Tools, this results in the design of linear tools which offer little space for deliberation and discussion between users, but instead favour autotelic "clicktivist" actions such as liking, sharing, or voting up or down ideas.

In addition, the predisposition toward creating online participation tools which reproduce existing power relations also plays a significant role in limiting the scope of ideas that are put in and discussed on both *Betri Reykjavík* and *Liquid-Friesland*. For example, Birgitta Jónsdóttir regularly participated when *Betri Reykjavík* first went online, but she eventually stopped because she "felt the decisions being made there were minor stuff. Whereas with bigger stuff which people really wanted and were engaged in, and wanted to take further, it was very difficult to take it further. But we have now permissions to have chickens in the city!"[175] She feels that *Betri Reykjavík*

is sort of fake democracy, because we don't get to participate in the stuff that really matters. For example, when they were merging the schools, why couldn't we vote on that, you know? That kind of stuff is very important, and it would have actually forced them to be in much more collaboration with the people in the communities. And let's say, if it

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175 Birgitta Jónsdóttir, personal interview, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

would have been too expensive to run a school in a community we would have maybe been able to demand budgets from other projects for it. We should be able to have more influence on how the money is spent.[176]

Asked about the limited scope of the ideas discussed on *LiquidFriesland*, the press secretary of the district answered that

> Wir haben ja ungefähr 200 Vorlagen insgesamt im Jahr […] und nur ein kleiner Teil davon, aus unserer Sicht, ist irgendwo von so einem Interesse oder auch so greifbar oder auch von solch großer Relevanz, dass es sich lohnen würde, den dort diskutieren zu lassen. Denn der Gedanke dabei war ja nicht so eine Art Ersatzkreistag zu machen. Es gibt ja die gewählten Kreistagsabgeordneten, die sich durch alle diese 200 Vorlagen durcharbeiten, das ist halt auch mit viel Klein-Klein und auch Mühe verbunden.[177]

> We have around 200 motions in a year […] and in our view, only a small part of that is interesting, comprehensible, and relevant enough that mooting them in *LiquidFriesland* would have paid off. Because the thought was not to establish a deputy district council. Elected district councillors do exist that work through all of those 200 motions, and these come with countless detail and effort.

Moreover, he argued that (online) participatory budgeting tools simulate engagement and participation in decision-making processes, as the following quotation from Sönke Klug illustrates:

> Also, wir halten […] Bürgerhaushalte hier für eine ziemlich gemeine Geschichte. Es ist natürlich unheimlich ambitioniert gestartet, Porto Àlegre und so weiter. […] Worüber können Leute abstimmen? Freiwillige Leistungen. Stellen wir mal die ganzen freiwilligen Leistungen ins Netz. Praktisch fragen wir den Bürger: ,Wir müssen sparen, was davon wollt ihr streichen?' Und das ist gemein. Weil das ist eigentlich Aufgabe der Verwaltung und Aufgabe des Kämmerers im Besonderen, Sparvorschläge zu unterbreiten […]. Aber dem Bürger jetzt zu sagen, ihr dürft euch beteiligen und das was ihr machen dürft, ist euch selber das Zeug wegzustreichen, das wird niemand machen. Die Leute werden also/oder aber nach Interessenlage bekriegen. Also die Leute, die nicht ins Hallenbad gehen, die werden sagen, ,Ja, streicht doch das Hallenbad.' Und die Leute die in die Bibliothek gerne gehen, die werden sagen, ,Ja, die müssen wir unbedingt behalten, aber meinetwegen kann das Freibad weg'. Der Nutzen einer solchen Aktion erschließt sich mir nicht unmittelbar.[178]

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176 Birgitta Jónsdóttir, personal interview, Reykjavík, 18 June 2014.

177 Sönke Klug, personal interview, Jever, 25 August 2015.

178 Sönke Klug, personal interview, Jever, 25 August 2015.

So, we actually think participatory budgeting is quite mean. Of course, it started out really ambitiously in Porto Àlegre and so on. But what are people voting on? Voluntary services. So we put all the voluntary services in the web. Effectively, we are asking the citizens: *'We have to economize, what do you want to cut?' And that is mean. Because it is actually the tasks of the administration and especially the treasurer, to make cost-saving proposals. […] But telling the citizens that they are now allowed to participate and what they are allowed to participate in is to cut themselves services – nobody will do that. The people will be warring with one another according to their preferences. So the people who don't go the indoor pool will say, 'Cut the pool.' Those who like to go to the library will say 'Absolutely must the library be kept, but go and close the outdoor pool, from my perspective'. The value of such campaigning does not immediately reveal itself to me.*

All of these reasons illustrate difficulties in establishing and maintaining online deliberation. The effects of simulated participation and the consequential limited thematic scope of the discussion certainly contributed to an almost total lack of users on *LiquidFriesland* towards the end and to *Betri Reykjavík's* inability to attract more regular input from citizens.

8.3.2.1 Regression and Simplification of Online Participation Tools

A consequence of the questionable efficacy and relevance of online participation tools, also illustrated in the limited scope of initiatives, is the regression and simplification of online participation tools like *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*. In this sub-chapter, I will illustrate this regression and simplification by looking at the updated version of *LiquidFriesland* as well as the Icelandic online tool *Borgarlandið* (literally 'The City Land').

In the format of my research topic, *LiquidFriesland* was discontinued in Spring 2016. In December 2016, the URL *www.liquidfriesland.de* resumed working, but the new site bore almost no resemblance to the earlier version (see Figure 11, 164). Users could no longer register, nor deliberate in any form or communicate in any way with other users. Today *LiquidFriesland* can best be described as an open report-mapping software tool on which users can submit a form with suggestions or ideas to the council's committee (see Figure 12, 165). Those are either answered directly within a few days, or after being discussed at the appropriate committee's next meeting (see Figure 13, 166).

In the new version, the complexity of *LiquidFriesland* was greatly reduced. While the district's press secretary said there were no concrete plans to simplify *LiquidFriesland* to this extent, in August 2015, he contemplated a scenario which was strikingly similar to what later eventuated:

Fig. 11: Starting Page of the New Version of LiquidFriesland[179]

aus der Erfahrung, die wir mit *LiquidFriesland* gemacht haben, müsste man wahrscheinlich dann sagen/das Potential nach dieser Welle ersten Interesses, das Potential ist nicht so groß als dass es das rechtfertigen würde, als dass man so eine komplexe Möglichkeit wie *LiquidFriesland* zur Verfügung stellt, schätze ich. Wahrscheinlich müsste man sagen, wir werden versuchen müssen mit dem gleichen öffentlichen Effekt, also das man sozusagen den gleichen öffentlichen Zugang zu diesen Themen hat, aber mit weniger Komplexität irgendwo, diese Ideen einzufangen. Also, denn diese ganzen Möglichkeiten, die sie haben, der Interaktion, des Aufstellens von Alternativen – dahinter steckt komplexe Software. Sie müssen das auf einem Server betreiben, das

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179 Screenshot taken on 23 August 2018 at https://www.liquidfriesland.de.

Fig. 12: Form to Submit a Suggestion in the New Version of LiquidFriesland[180]

ist alles nicht zum Nulltarif zu haben. Möglicherweise müsste man dann mit der Einschränkung leben müssen, dass man dann sagt, wenn nicht so viel kommt an Ideen, sondern nur hier mal was, da mal was, dann wird man möglicherweise damit leben müssen, dass man mit diesen Ideen nicht so komplex spielen kann als Nutzer wie man das eigentlich wollte, aber sich dafür eben auch die Kostenseite angucken müssen.[181]

From the experiences we have had with *LiquidFriesland*, one would have to say that after the initial wave of interest, the further potential of the site was insufficient to justify offering such a complex opportunity. One would have to say that we should try to collect

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180 Form to Submit a Suggestion to the District Administration in the New *LiquidFriesland*. Screenshot taken on 23 August 2018 at https://www.liquidfriesland.de/tipps/ tipp_abgeben.html.

181 Sönke Klug, personal interview, Jever, 25 August 2015.

Fig. 13: Completed Suggestion in the New Version of LiquidFriesland[182]

ideas to the same public effect, but with less complexity. All those features you have now, the interaction, drawing up alternatives – there's complex software behind it. We have to run it on a server; all that isn't free. When the trend continues that there aren't that many ideas put in, one possibly would have to live with the restriction that users cannot play around as complexly as one would like to, but we have to keep an eye on the costs.

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182 Completed Suggestion in the new *LiquidFriesland* with Description and Picture of the Problem Submitted by a Citizen and Commentary by the District Administration. Screenshot taken on 23 August 2018 at https://www.liquidfriesland.de/tipps/tipps/ tippdetails.html?tid=900000103.

Fig. 14: Starting Page of Borgarlandið[183]

The regression and simplification of online participation is also visible in *Borgarlandið*, another report-mapping software tool (see Figure 14) that some *Betri Reykjavík* users had switched to between my research stays in Iceland in 2012 and 2014. In *Borgarlandið*, citizens can briefly explain what they would like to see improved in Reykjavík, mark it on a map, and receive a hands-on reply within a few days. For instance, Guðrún Sigurðardóttir preferred *Borgarlandið* over *Betri Reykjavík* in 2014 because it went straight to the point: "There are all kind of things you can put in there. That tree needs trimming, wash the windows, just about everything. That is a really good thing. […] It is just: pavement needs fixing – it's exactly there. You can put it on a map or just write a description. And it goes straight to the department. Easiest way to get small things done".[184]

Of course, suggestions that can be submitted over such a website are located on another level than the ideas that originally came in through *Betri Reykjavík*.

Suggestions differ heavily both in the complexity of expression and in the complexity of their implementation: too few park benches, broken streetlights, or overgrown grass is easier to fix than protecting an inner-city lot from development (cf. Allen) or reforming unemployment benefits (cf. magnús). In short, it is evident that the former suggestions require significantly less deliberation and debate than the latter do.

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183 Screenshot taken on 25 August 2018 at https://reykjavik.is/abendingar.

184 Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 30 May 2014.

These examples illustrate several obstacles to online participation, both regarding the facilitation of online participation tools and their impact. While most participants – at least that I spoke to – want online tools that enable them to discuss and deliberate on political matters, and which facilitate involvement in decision-making processes, the current software does not offer that. It is likely that innovations in software design that would enable such debate and participation are not promoted by administration and politicians, who may be more interested in consolidating the status quo of power relations. Report-mapping software tools like the second version of *LiquidFriesland* and *Borgarlandið*, which cannot, even with the best will in the world, be described as political participation tools, are the consequence of this tension between citizens' and politicians' demands and motivations.

8.4.3 Political Participation in Times of Crisis and in Times of Affluence

Another perspective on (online) political participation is the differentiation between times of crisis and times of affluence, as adapted from Harold R. Kerbo's work on social movements. Kerbo stresses that there are "differing socioeconomic conditions from which social movements are spawned. Depending on these conditions, the mix of conceptual tools needed in order to understand a social movement adequately may differ" (653). To Kerbo, times of crisis are characterised by "life-disrupting situations, including (but not limited to) widespread unemployment, food shortages, and major social dislocation" (653). In times of affluence, people "have their basic needs of life met, or even in abundance" (654). These "differing socioeconomic conditions" – the moment of crisis in Iceland and its absence in Germany – help explain the differences in general participatory behaviour in Iceland and Germany, as well as the different development trajectories of *LiquidFriesland* and *Betri Reykjavík*.

8.4.3.1 Political Participation in Times of Crisis
Today, few scholars would argue that political participation can be investigated without looking at the context of social, political and economic conditions in a society (cf. Almond and Verba; cf. Brady et al.; cf. Verba, Schlozman, et al.). Whether a society is in a state of crisis or in a state of affluence has a significant influence on the actual forms that political participation takes. In times of crisis, people appear more easily motivated to participate politically, and do so in additional modes than they might make use of in times of affluence. In this chapter, I argue that the primary reason for this increased participation is that people see themselves as more affected by the outcome of political decision-making processes on the daily-life level of their existence in times of crisis than in affluence; or, in

other words, there is more at stake in times of crisis. Before going into detail about these claims, and in order to provide context about the conditions in which participants were acting, this sub-chapter will provide a brief summary of the events that led to the crisis in Iceland and its consequences for society.

To be able to comprehend and contextualise the events that led to the crisis in 2008–09, it is crucial to take a brief look at the modern history of the Republic of Iceland,[185] which can be roughly divided into two periods: before 1940, and after 1940. The Icelandic historian Guðmundur Gylfi Magnússon points out that "[u] p to 1940 Iceland is best viewed as an essentially agrarian and to some extent an insular society." Illustrating his point, Magnússon marks pre-1940 society as "[...] grounded on the traditional peasant values of thrift and financial restraint" (238). This is accompanied by a conservative attitude towards society and culture. The situation started to change in 1940, when Iceland was occupied first by British, then by US-American forces seeking to secure allied control over the North Atlantic during the Second World War. Until their withdrawal in 2006, the presence of US–American troops had a lasting influence on Icelandic culture. Simultaneously to the presence of US-American troops, "the traditional values of agricultural society [...] continued to play an important part in people's lives and perceptions" (ibid.). After the Second World War, a combination of three factors triggered a period of extended growth: first, Iceland received money through the Marshall-Plan for the establishment of the US/NATO military basis; second, demand for Iceland's most important export product, fish, was high, and third, Icelandic society remained small, but became increasingly well-educated with a deep-seated sense of national identity (cf. Wade and Sigurgeirsdóttir, 'Reykjavík-Gang').

With growing prosperity, Iceland established a welfare state oriented along the lines of the Scandinavian tax-financed model. During the 1980s, both the average income and income distribution in Iceland were on a par with the Scandinavian countries. However, state regulation and clientelism were much more pronounced, with the political and economic sector both controlled and tied up by a local oligopoly. This elite consisted of about a dozen families. This power bloc, known in the vernacular as "the Octopus", effectively controlled everything: banks and insurances, transportation and fisheries, the delivery of the NATO-bases and the import sector, and the political class, with most leading politicians also directly connected with "the Octopus". The oligarchs and their nepotistic web essentially had the same power as the clan chiefs of the earlier Iceland (cf. Wade and Sigur-

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185 In substance, the summary of the modern history of Iceland and the happenings of the financial crisis is adopted from my unpublished master's thesis "Decision-Making in Digital Democracy. Assessing the Online Participation Tool *Betri Reykjavík*", accepted by the Faculty of Humanities of the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen in 2012.

geirsdóttir, 'Reykjavík-Gang'). They controlled the (centre)-right *Sjálfstæðisflok-kur* (*Independence Party*), which held power over the media and were responsible for making high-level appointments within the bureaucracy, the police force and the judicial system. The political scientists Robert Wade and Silla Sigurgeirsdóttir report that when a normal citizen wanted a loan for a new car or foreign currency for a trip abroad, they had to approach party officials first. The authors argue that this situation led to a wild entanglement of mistrust, cajolery and blackmail, apparently characterised by a culture of brute masculinity.[186]

From the late 1970s onwards, a group of business and law students calling themselves "the Locomotive" wanted to develop their careers by propagating radical market ideas without being dependent on the patronage of "the octopus". Probably the most prominent member of "the locomotive" is Davið Oddsson, who has had an astonishing career – he has been mayor of Reykjavík, Iceland's longest serving prime minister, and chair of the board of governors of the *Central Bank of Iceland* (see also chapter 1.3 *Filtering, Sorting, Contextualising*). In the boom years at the start of the 21st century, Icelandic businessmen started to expand into international financial markets. These businessmen would later go down in history as *Útrásavíkingar* or *Outvasion Vikings*, as businessmen setting out to conquer the world with Viking-like ambition. A new atmosphere started to pervade Iceland and a time of apparent greed, consumerism and recklessness began. The Icelandic population became enslaved by a collective frenzy of consumerism on credit (cf. Puhl 114). According to an international study in 2006, Icelanders were the happiest people in the world (cf. Wade and Sigurgeirsdóttir, 'Lessons from Iceland'). In his book *Boomerang. Travels in the New Third World*, the financial journalist Michael Lewis describes how, almost overnight, the majority of a generation of men did not go fishing any more, but invested in apartments in Beverly Hills, in English football clubs, Danish airlines, Norwegian banks, Indian power stations. Lewis argues that they proceeded in a way that reminded him of deep-sea fishing: fishing in every weather until the boat sinks (cf. as cited in Hüetlin 125).

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186 Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this book to take a detailed look at gender relations during the Icelandic crisis. Cynthia Enloe's volume Seriously! Investigating Crashes and Crises as if Women Mattered provides excellent food for thought on the matter, especially the chapter 'DSK, Vikings and the Smartest Guys. Masculinities in the Banking Crash of 2008' (cf. 49–85). Moreover, Kristín Loftsdóttir's and Helga Björnsdóttir's 2015 article 'Risk taking business Vikings: Gendered dynamics in Icelandic banks and financial companies' offers more in-depth information on the Icelandic case, although the entire paper (except the abstract) is written in Icelandic (cf. 231f.).

Earlier statements from Iceland's president, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, illustrate this point well. The speech he delivered to British businessmen in 2005, the hey-day of the Icelandic boom, can be seen as the epitome for this kind of self-regard and arrogance. In it, Grímsson lists the reasons for "Iceland's success story" (3) which include "a strong work ethic […] a heritage from the old society of farmers and fishermen," "personal trust" and "old-fashioned entrepreneurship" (4). For Grímsson, these characteristics, together with "the heritage of discovery and exploration fostered by the medieval Viking sagas", had led Icelanders to interpret "modern business ventures as an extension of the Viking spirit" (5).

Several participants that I interviewed had their own interpretations about how this consumerist mentality had developed. For Norwegian immigrant Per Hansen, Icelanders

> are newly rich. There's still [...] euphoria, because they now have the money which they didn't have when their grandparents or great-grandparents were growing up. They might have been living in houses made from turf and then came a lot of money from the Americans during the war and fisheries. And I guess there has been a general increasing in Western Europe as well. I think this is part of the reason for this mentality.[187]

Guðmundur Gylfi Magnússon compares the developments described above to "[...] something out of a fairy-tale" (256). And like a fairy-tale, it turned out to be too good to be true. Iceland, once one of the poorest countries in Europe, had embarked "on what has been described as 'one of the purest experiments in financial deregulation ever conducted'" (Addley). The British journalist Esther Addley continues: "Successive politicians privatised Iceland's natural resources and dismantled its regulatory mechanisms, sparking an economic bonanza for its bankers and mixing for its citizens the now-familiar toxic cocktail of bountiful credit, flaccid financial oversight and an unspoken collective agreement not to ask too many questions but just keep on spending". In the end, Iceland's "three main banks, controlled by a tiny elite cabal, had a paper value of more than 10 times the country's GDP" (Addley).[188]

Following the bankruptcy of the US-American bank Lehman Brothers in September 2008, foreign investors in Icelandic banks withdrew their money overnight. The value of Iceland's currency, the Icelandic Króna, crashed. Suddenly

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187 Per Hansen, personal interview, Reykjavík, 23 July 2012.

188 With a focus on macroeconomy and financial markets, Benediktsdóttir et al. provide a detailed account of how the crash came about (cf. 183ff.).

everything was far more expensive.[189] A huge chunk of the Icelandic population lost their savings, jobs, and homes, either because they were unable to pay high rents or because they had to sell their property. Even at the end of 2009, it was still impossible to obtain Euros or US Dollars in Iceland except at the international airport, where an outbound flight ticket was needed to prove one was leaving the country.[190]

In the blink of an eye, Icelanders had to realise they were "not necessarily the best in the world", as the title of an article by Kristín Loftsdóttir suggested (1). Aside from the measurable economic effects of the crash such as debt per capita, the crisis had a massive impact on the collective national identity. During the boom years prior the crisis, the economic adventure Icelandic businesspeople had embarked on "was seen as a joint project of Icelanders, reflecting the national Icelandic character as such, rather than the success of a few individuals" (Loftsdóttir 7). And as a consequence, many felt the crisis as the failure of the collective Icelandic nation, and not merely that of a few bankers and politicians.

Crisis as Disruption of the Quotidian

Having provided the historical background, I now turn to look at the crisis period itself. For the majority of the Icelandic population, the crash was experienced as a crisis because it was a disruption of the quotidian, that is, of "all the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life; more specifically, […] daily practices and routines that comprise habitual social action, alongside the natural attitude of routinized expectations and the suspension of doubt about the organization of the social world and one's role within it" (Buechler 59).

The fallout from the crisis was not limited to those gambling with Iceland's national economy, it was so severe that it affected the entire population. As Bernburg and Víkingsdóttir point out, such an event can open up radical new possibilities:

Stable routines of everyday life render most people unreflective in their perception of reality, which are, thus, based largely on taken-for-granted assumptions (for example, 'banks are trustworthy'; 'government acts in the public's interest'). But, events that disrupt or threaten routine life, 'the taken-for-granted substrate of everyday life', can undermine the habitual acceptance by individuals of their situations. When such disrup-

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189 This was the case for Icelanders at least. As an exchange student coming from the Eurozone, I 'benefited' from the weak króna in Reykjavík in 2009. In the end, life in Iceland was much more affordable than I had envisioned it to be when applying for the semester abroad. These exchange rates may have already triggered the tourist boom that was about to come (cf. 'Währungsverfall').

190 As I experienced on 22 December 2009.

tion is experienced collectively, as can occur in a crisis, an opening emerges for re-interpretation of shared meanings, beliefs, and identities, thus facilitating the emergence of radical or activist frames. (85)

So personally affected by the crisis – their standard of living decreased, their everyday sense-making practices disrupted –, large parts of society were also motivated to become active and to demand change. In social movement literature, this effect is often explained through relative deprivation theory, which "implies that when crises end long periods of rising prosperity, feelings of shattered expectations and blocked goals (relative deprivation) may lead individuals to experience injustice and frustration, mobilizing them to participate in rebellious action" (Davies as cited in Bernburg 232). In several other countries hit hard by the crisis, a new wave of politicised protesters and social movements emerged, particularly in Spain (cf. Calvo; cf. Romanos) and in Greece (cf. Rüdig and Karyotis). In some countries, "the level of public participation in some of these protests has threatened public order and political stabilities" (Bernburg 231); and in Iceland, daily protests on Austurvöllur (the square in front of parliament) during the winter of 2008–09 culminated in the overthrow of the national government.

Many Icelanders were shocked and felt disbelief once the extent of the negligence of bankers, the inertia of political decision-makers, and the immense cronyism underlying society became public. As prominent Icelandic chronical and journalist Alda Sigmundsdóttir notes: "[i]t was a collapse of the people's trust in its country's politicians, institutions and financial system. It revealed to the vast majority of us that we'd had no idea of the extent of the political corruption and neglect that had lurked beneath the surface of our society for decades". Bernburg and Víkingsdóttir point out that "framing the crisis as a 'moral shock', made it possible to appeal to values of justice, and associate protest participation with moral duty" (94). In that way, the crisis motivated many previously disengaged citizens to participate politically, such as by demonstrating in the Pots-and-Pans Revolution. Dominique Plédel Jónsson succinctly summed up the lack of political participation prior to the crisis: "activism is not an Icelandic trait".[191] Guðmundur Kristjánsson was also surprised by the high turnout at weekly demonstrations in front of Alþingi, the parliament building, but he also felt that the Icelandic protests were somewhat innocent in comparison to those elsewhere:

it was a little strange when everybody went to protest when the banks fell and see all the people protesting. But it […] wasn't no/like you sort of see it from abroad, that they are burning cars and just do a lot of damage, but it wasn't much done here. It was only one

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191 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

bench or one tree or something that burnt or something and they had to clean the Alþingi house because it was covered in eggs, that was all the damage, you know, all the force from the protest.[192]

Crisis as Liminal Phase

In the following, I draw on French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep's and British ethnologist Victor Turner's work regarding liminal phases to further analyse this state of crisis. As cited above, in times of crisis "an opening emerges for re-interpretation of shared meanings, beliefs, and identities, thus facilitating the emergence of radical or activist frames" (Bernburg and Víkingsdóttir 85). In a way then, a crisis can be understood as a liminal phase in the life of an individual, but also in the condition of a nation state.

The concept of the liminal phase goes back to Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (1909). According to van Gennep, there are three phases "which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age": "separation, margin (or limen, signifying 'threshold' in Latin), and aggregation" (Turner 94). In Iceland, the first phase corresponds to the boom-years in the lead up to the crash, which can well be described as a "detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both" (Turner 94). [193] The second or liminal phase was the crash itself, as well as its immediate aftermath. The third phase describes the reintegration and 'normalisation' in a newly negotiated state of societal being, which arguably has been the case in Iceland since around 2010.

Snow et al. conclude that people become active once their everyday lives have been shaken. However, there is another dimension to social mobilization other than (the fear of) loss. Turner thinks that in times of liminality, in threshold situations, a more open society exists, and in it, a wider range of socially acceptable behaviours may appear: "the characteristics of the ritual subject […] are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state […] signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both" (94). In liminal times of crisis, when "an opening emerges for re-interpretation of shared meanings, beliefs, and identities" (Bernburg and Víkingsdóttir 85), people find it more probable that their engagement does make a

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192 Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 22 June 2014.

193 The idea of interpreting the financial crisis through Arnold van Gennep's Rites de Passage and Victor Turner's thoughts on the liminal phase was initially articulated in my unpublished master's thesis (2012). This section here is both a refined and extended version of my earlier work.

significant difference, that they can change something. In this way, their sense of internal efficacy increases, as Guðrún illustrates:

> See, the Icelandic soul, I think that is the word for it, from the eighties was 'Do this, do that, that's it'. And I think we are, like all these demonstrations are proving, we are discovering we HAVE a voice. And we CAN say, we can let them know, when they cross the line. So I think that's/it's going into the right direction. It will gonna take a period, a few more years, but I think they are gonna pay more attention to the people than they have.[194]

It appears as if a process of emancipation has begun in the wake of the crisis, with people finding their voice and speaking back to politicians and other elites who, for example, had seen "modern business ventures as an extension of the Viking spirit" (Grímsson 5). The fact that this statement about normal Icelandic life in 2005 – about the quotidian – comes from the former president exemplifies the intimidating confusion created and the interpretational sovereignty that prevailed. Guðrún's quote, however, illustrates how the crisis led many citizens to question the joint failure of political and economic elites, made people ill-content to remain obedient to those elites, and empowered them to claim their own right to speak up and to political power.

Intensified Sense of Community Created by Crisis

In the liminal phase, this emancipation can be interpreted as one element in the process of finding society's new position; as one new common denominator in the state of 'Communitas', signifying the society which will come into being within the search for new horizons (cf. Kaschuba 191). Citizens' new found willingness to not only fundamentally question what political and banking elites were doing and saying, but also to listen to other theories and advice empowered them with knowledge and helped them envisage a more active role in society. If before the crash, the majority just tended to mind their own business and pursue their own (materialistic) goals, then after the crash, when these goals had become out-of-reach in any case, there was a wave of people opening up to others and recalling community; and this community was consolidated by the shared experience of the crisis and its effects, including unemployment, lost savings, and lost homes. This consolidation of community not only helped console those in it, but also helped them summon strength and motivated them to improve their lives and the life of the community, which they had come to see as inextricably intertwined with.

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194 Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 30 May 2014.

In the aftermath of the crisis, Dominique says that this sense of community could be seen in the residential neighbourhood meetings, which more people attended, and in the streets and parks: "all these people, they walk around the lake or on Sundays on bikes [...] and they were talking together. If you stop, sit down on a bench, someone sits at your side and discusses and so. It has been really opening speech, at least."[195] But she did not "know how it is in other areas of Reykjavík, because this is quite limited, you really belong to Arbær, you have this feeling towards it. But five years ago, everybody was just in his own corner, you would just say *Hi* and no discussion on a Sunday."

The idea for *Betri Reykjavík* itself was also born out of this time of "intense comradeship and egalitarianism" between people in transition (Turner 95), being part of a new vision for the state of communitas. Engaging online at *Betri Reykjavík* was envisioned as strengthening the renewed feeling of community and social cohesion, strengthened by the "need for many individuals to make sense of the crisis" (Bernburg and Víkingsdóttir 86). In other words, the Internet, and especially Social Media, facilitated this process of community building and maintenance.

First and foremost, the communities that come into being through *Betri Reykjavík* seem more stable than Howard Rheingold's canonical definition of "virtual communities". To him, a virtual community is a group of people that knows and communicates with each other, shares knowledge and information, and is one in which members, who meet and communicate primarily via computer networks, also care for each other as human beings, at least to a certain degree. However, the communities that come into being through *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi* are not solely virtual or confined to online space since, in most cases, they refer to geographically located spaces within the greater city of Reykjavík, the immediate mundane environments of the users. In that way, participation in *Betri Reykjavík* is not possible without encouraging offline engagement and producing an offline community, and it is not based on shared interests alone but also on local closeness (cf. Döring 369).

Several users illustrate this point. For Dominique in particular, participation through *Betri Reykjavík* means "a start to get out of your own little shell, or little house or little flat or little car and going to participate in the meetings in the suburbs or in your area".[196] She continues "you know, that's the thing that *Betri Reykjavík* did. It got the people closer". In 2011, online political participation was indeed able to strengthen solidarity between citizens. As Wellman and Haythornthwaite argue, "the Internet is not destroying community but it is responding to, resonating with, and extending the types of community that have already be-

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195 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.
196 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

come prevalent in the developed Western world: for local and distant ties, strong and weak ties, kin and friends" (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 4). In other words, online communities do not repress local social networks of families, colleagues, neighbours or friends, but rather, those groups make use of online communities and integrate them into their everyday life, since these online communities make everyday life easier in the conditions of mobile globality which they also promote at the same time (cf. Deterding et al. 129).

Aside from Dominique, Guðmundur, Freyja, and Þórgnýr also found that the communal exchange of ideas and discussion in their everyday offline lives increased after the crisis; and they attributed this to citizens' activity on *Betri Reykjavík*. In their research, Italian sociologists Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani support this conclusion, that "virtual networks operate at their best when they are backed by real social linkages in specifically localized communities" (133).

Many interviewees affirmed this argument, saying that the close-knit community within Reykjavík, and indeed in the whole of Iceland, was one of the main reasons that a digital participation tool like *Betri Reykjavík* worked so well there. Icelandic society has a tradition of being relatively open, almost everybody seems to know everybody, and is often related to them within a few degrees of separation. I believe it says a lot about a society when everyone is called by their first names, even the prime minister, president, and the head of the church.[197] In his environment, it seems reasonable that it is easier to convince others and to make things move if other users are acquaintances, and not merely cyber-personalities with fake usernames (cf. Döring 369). For Þórgnýr, the smaller the society and the country is, the "freer you are, the easier is it for you to influence."[198]

Crisis and Innovation

This small and friendly structure of Icelandic society, and more so in its enhanced and empowered version after the crash, also allowed for increased creativity and innovation. In referring to innovation here, I understand it as "the invention and implementation of new things, knowledges [sic] and practices; innovations come about when unprecedented solutions to either known or new problems are devised and then put to work" (Welz, 'Cultural Swirl' 256). Gisela Welz argues that the conditions under which crisis lead to productivity and the generation of something

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197 The practice of calling everyone by their first names obviously has a lot to do with Icelandic naming conventions. Surnames are a rare occurrence, as "Icelanders use the patronymic system, where son, 'son' or dóttir, 'daughter' is attached to the genitive form of the father's or, less commonly, the mother's, first name" (Parnell and O'Carroll 338). Telephone books are subsequently also structured by first names.

198 Þórgnýr Thoroddsen, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 20 July 2012.

new, rather than to a collapse of meaning and sense making, are especially interesting for cultural anthropologists (cf. 'Wandel der Kulturen' 133).

Welz refers to the German sociologist Hans Joas who argues that people develop increased inventive capabilities and creativity when mundane routines fail on the resistance of the (social and material) environment (cf. 'Wandel der Kulturen' 132). Indeed, the ongoing popularity and relevance of *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi* are prime examples of the increased inventive capabilities and creativity induced by crisis in Iceland. But there are countless more, including a myriad of newly established working groups, the national forum in 2010,[199] the *crowdsourcing* of a new constitution[200], and the intensification of the tourist industry as Iceland's prime source of revenue.[201]

In this sub-chapter, I focus on the establishment of working groups and on *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi* as examples of innovations coming out of a time of

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199 In 2010, around 950 Icelanders came together to deliberate on the future of country and reflect on what they wanted to see form the basis of Iceland's new constitution. For more information, see www.thjodfundur2010.is (last accessed 17 August 2018).

200 As Iceland-based journalist Paul Fontaine points out, "Iceland's original constitution is more or less borrowed from the Danes. In the wake of the 2008 economic collapse, a public outcry to change the very structure of Iceland's socio-political system led to an initiative to write a new constitution. This led to the formation of a Constitutional Council. The council – comprised of 25 men and women from around Iceland, and appointed by then Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir for the task – got to work on writing a new constitution for Iceland" ('Constitution'). The American legal scholar Lawrence Lessig emphasizes that the crowdsourced "process for drafting this constitution is the most democratic process we've seen in the history of constitutions anywhere. We've never seen something like this. This process involved an incredibly intelligent mix between grassroots, citizen-driven input, expert-crafting direction, and an actual deliberative process for drafting the constitution that wasn't controlled by insiders" (para.2). For more in-depth information on the Icelandic experiment of crowdsourcing a new constitution, see Jón Ólafsson's 2016 article 'The Constituent Assembly. A Study in Failure' (cf. 252ff.).

201 Tourism has increased steadily since the crash and in 2016 amounted to 8.1 percent of the GDP (cf. Statistics Iceland, GDP). The number of employees in activities related to tourism (such as accommodation, travel agencies or tour operators) more than doubled from 14,600 in June 2008 to 30,700 in 2018 (cf. Statistics Iceland, Employees). To encourage year-round tourism, image building relied on Iceland's natural attractions, Viking history, and quirky culture (cf. A. Árnason et al.; cf. Grétarsdóttir et al.; cf. Kjartansdóttir and Schram; cf. Lund, Loftsdóttir, et al.; cf. Lund, Kjartansdóttir, et al.; cf. Schram, 'Borealism'; cf. Schram, 'Wild Wild North').

crisis. As I have shown, the crisis not only increased participation amongst people already interested in politics, but also prompted many who had previously been disengaged to participate. In short, in times of crisis, more people become more politically active in more different modes. In Iceland, numerous working groups and initiatives were formed to discuss and deliberate on the country's economic, social, and cultural future. As Reykjavík mayor Dagur B. Eggertsson pointed out, "everywhere in society people were creating their own think-tanks and deliberating on what to do now, how to move forward and what needed to be done and how new Iceland should look like, it was basically everywhere. All the universities, all the, ya, just everyone".[202]

As already touched upon, Guðmundur initially became active in a financial reform group, which sparked further participation in *Betri Reykjavík* and *Dögun*, a political party.[203] Another participant, Kristínn Már Ársælsson founded *alda – the association for sustainability and democracy*,

> a think and do tank, a hope and think and do tank […] in 2009 after the financial crisis. The government fell and right after the national elections, it was clear that it would be a leftwing coalition. I myself and a bunch of other people were immediately aware that they were not gonna make any structural changes to either our economic system or our democratic system, even so they were the first leftwing government and it was just after the crash, their main emphasis was on rebuilding the economy, not restructuring or changing it in any way. SO we thought, I thought there was a real need for some sort of organisation to put out ideas, emancipatory ideas about changing both the democratic system and the economic one. […] So I just got contacted a lot of people who I knew were dissatisfied and were interested in finding usable solutions. The main concept behind that was to create an organisation that would find models, institutional models that had been tried and tested somewhere that could deepen democracy or increase equality which would change our economic system in a way that would be more sustainable and more equitable and more democratic.[204]

Betri Reykjavík and *Betri Hverfi* were also founded in reaction to the crisis. In order to counteract the corruption and nepotism revealed in Icelandic economy and politics, Gunnar and Róbert originally wanted to facilitate an open contact and discussion forum for political parties and their potential voters in the run-up to the 2010 municipal elections. Today, the freeware *Your Priorities* that is behind *Betri Reykjavík* is used in over 20 countries to help "citizens get their voices heard and

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202 Dagur B. Eggertsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 27 June 2014.

203 Cf. Guðmundur Kristjánsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

204 Kristínn Már Ársælsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 20 June 2014.

to encourage citizens participation in governance" (Citizens Foundation, 'Home'). The software has been awarded multiple awards in the e-Democracy and social innovations sectors (cf. Citizens Foundation, 'About').

Another element that seems to contribute towards Reykjavík's readiness to innovate is locality. For Welz, "cities are most prone to be culturally productive in periods of social transformations – transformations that bring together within one place social actors and groups from a variety of origins, some far-flung and widely separated" ('Cultural Swirl' 262). That place was Austurvöllur, the square in front of the parliament building Altþingi, where protesters, journalists, artists, politicians, scholars and scientists met, discussed and deliberated for several months.

However, a space does not have to exist geographically to bring innovation. The Internet, and especially Social Media, work together with geographically located spaces to create such condensed places which "enable cultures to mix and people of various backgrounds to mingle and freely communicate with each other", and therefore belong to "the privileged locations and epochs of cultural innovations" (Welz, 'Cultural Swirl' 262f.). The Internet does not only enable communication between people, it also brings people with similar interests together to form a community who had previously been isolated for various reasons (cf. Passig and Lobo 125). As Hannerz points out, "the concentration of people in a limited space is important to cultural process not only because it provides critical masses for varied developments, but also because it offers forever new occasions for serendipity" (203). The response to the crisis that centred in Austurvöllur did so in collaboration with Social Media, and became the innovative cultural swirl that lead to new general elections, to an attempt to crowdsource a new constitution, to the formation of the *Citizens' Foundation* and the consequent development of *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi*. Furthermore, Lemi Baruh and Hayley Watson point out that

> [i]n the midst of a political crisis, new media technologies enhance individuals' abilities to network and offer new opportunities for citizens to organise, engage, and coordinate action as social activists. With the help of online networks, activists can locally and globally push grassroots ideas, organise and coordinate action (such as during the Occupy movements), and, crucially, through acts of citizen journalism, get their voices heard by the wider public. (250)

These catalysing effects Social Media has had for change and innovation are not unique to Iceland. In various countries hit hard by the 2008–09 financial crisis, Social Media played a fundamental role in mobilisation, information, and communication. As Yannis Theocharis points out for Greece,

[m]any of the people who later became organisers of solidarity initiatives and leaders of civic innovations visited the protests and met like-minded people with whom they kept in touch via social media. These communication channels gave them the opportunity to discuss their ideas publicly, find an audience using networks of friends or unknown others with whom they created loose online ties during the Aganaktismenoi mobilisations, and build new solidarity networks. (244)

It appears reasonable to argue that this condition of people meeting in condensed spaces, either out in the streets or online, is met much more by Reykjavík and *Betri Reykjavík*, than by the district of Friesland and *LiquidFriesland*. This is reinforced by statistics: Reykjavík has 462 inhabitants per square kilometre (cf. Vísindavefurinn; cf. Statistics Iceland, *Population*), while the district of Friesland has 162 inhabitants per square kilometre (cf. Landkreis Friesland, 'Zahlen'). Moreover, the number of registered and especially of active users speak for Reykjavík as enabling an innovative cultural swirl: more than 14,000 users were registered with *Betri Reykjavík* at the time it was still possible to check on this number (2013) and several new ideas were set in on a weekly basis. In contrast, no new ideas were posted on *LiquidFriesland* in the months leading up to its shutdown; and in the months before that, there were only around ten regular, active users.

All in all, the crisis seems to have enhanced certain dispositions in Reykjavík society which favoured participation and innovation. If both come together, as in the case of the online participation tool *Betri Reykjavík* or the online participatory budgeting tool *Betri Hverfi*, the prospects for sustained implementation appear good. As I have shown, the crisis disrupted the quotidian lives of Icelanders with thousands losing their jobs, savings, and homes. Thus, it sparked increased political interest and participation as suddenly, something substantial was at stake. In the liminal phase of crash and aftermath, a wider range of behaviour became socially acceptable, such as protesting in the Pots-and-Pans Revolution. The success that this wave of political participation brought – including the resignation of a government which Icelanders held primarily responsible for the crisis – empowered and emancipated large parts of society. With new confidence, efficacy, and social cohesion, many citizens began looking for and offering solutions to help the society out of crisis.

8.4.3.2 Political Participation in Times of Affluence

In Friesland, the innovative online participation tool *LiquidFriesland* failed because it did not become established in the Frisian's participation repertoire. One of the reasons for this failure were the "times of affluence". Kerbo describes social movements in such times as "collective action in which the major participants are not motivated by immediate life-threatening situations of political or economic

crisis, but rather, have their basic needs of life met, or even in abundance" (654). While the crisis was the defining moment for the establishment of *Betri Reykjavík* and for participation in Iceland, such crisis was absent in Friesland. The financial crisis 2008–09 did not hit the German state and population nearly as hard as it did the Icelandic state and people. Of course, several "crises" have since skittered about the discourse regarding democracy: from the crisis of the political party system, the crisis of the welfare state, the Euro crisis, the refugee crisis, and the ever-present crisis of democracy. In short, the term "crisis" is overused in the political and social sciences , as well as in the media and politics itself (cf. Merkel 7).

Despite the occurrence of certain "crises" in Germany, none of those had such fundamental and palpable effects on the population as the 2008–09 financial crisis had on the Icelandic citizens, which could be classified as a "moral shock". For James M. Jasper, these shocks "generate a visceral unease strong enough to generate mobilization even in the absence of pre-existing networks. Individuals are moved emotionally by an act that violates conceptions of morality and those emotions explain social movement participation" (cf. as cited in Simmons 521). In other words, mobilisation depends on the "depth of participants' political grievances" (Portos and Masullo 202).

The political grievances of citizens of the district of Friesland were relatively shallow. In times of affluence, it is because citizens' basic needs "have been met that they have surplus resources such as time, money, and even energy to devote to social movement activity" (Kerbo 654). However, the issues at stake in these times "may be less personal and less severe, thus requiring more movement resources and encouragement to motivate their social movement activity" (661).

Strain theory, a prominent mobilization theory from social movement research, also appears adaptable to explain mobilization not only in exceptional times, but also in calmer, affluent times.[205] Although other researchers have not suggested adapting strain theory to explain social movement activity in times of affluence, it is possible to do so by conceptually expanding the term *strain* to

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205 One of the oldest and most prominent ideas in research on social movements, strain theory argues "that movements have their origins in troublesome, unsettling social conditions, traditionally conceptualized as 'strains'" (Snow et al. 1). This remained the prime view on mobilisation for collective action for decades, but had fallen out of fashion by the late 1970s. Snow et al. however argue that the abandonment of strain theory was empirically premature. With a focus on the quotidian, the authors offer a fresh and fruitful look at the link between strain and the emergence of social movements. The authors argue that "the kind of breakdown most likely to be associated with movement emergence is that which penetrates and disrupts, or threatens to disrupt, taken-for-granted, everyday routines and expectancies" (2).

include unpleasant and improvable social or political situations. Although these social situations do not threaten people's existence, they still substantially affect their "taken-for-granted, everyday routines and expectancies" (Snow et al. 2).

This can be seen in the cases of Icelandic research participants Per and Einar, who both see cycling primarily as a mode of transportation rather than a leisure activity: "I use mine [his bike] for commuting, I go ten kilometres back and forth, twenty kilometres a day. And it is just my way of travel".[206] Political engagement for the construction of new bike paths, the instalment of traffic signal systems favouring cyclists, and the ban of cars from the inner city, potentially leads to a substantial improvement in their everyday lives and those of their peers in the cycling community. Therefore, the strain of having to share a path with pedestrians, having to cycle on the streets without marked cycling lanes or on badly maintained paths on their daily commute, sparks both their interest in researching possibilities for improvement and becoming active and setting ideas into *Betri Reykjavík*, commenting on similar suggestions, and/or voting on these. Per has also been on the board of the Icelandic Cyclists' association for many years.

When defined this broadly, strain theory also works well at explaining peoples' motives for participating on *LiquidFriesland*. Citizens that start initiatives as diverse as suggesting that bike paths signposts be cleaned[207], lacking road markings be retouched[208], or that a school be expanded to a sixth form college[209] do so because they experience the absence of these structures as disadvantages, as strains in their everyday life which threaten "to disrupt, taken-for-granted, everyday routines and expectancies" (Snow et al. 2). For example, small retailers Karin Schmidt and Wolfgang Müller, fearing losses in sales, protested the planned construction of a shopping centre in their town, both in on-site demonstrations and on *LiquidFriesland*.[210]

However, for most Frisian citizens, the extent to which their lives could be improved through engagement on *LiquidFriesland* appeared insufficient to put up with the inconveniences and crudities of the tool (as explained in chapter 2, Communication within Online Participation Tools). Rather, a number of the citizens who used *LiquidFriesland* did so for reasons that cannot be identified as political

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206 Einar Magnússon, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 6 June 2014.

207 "Beschilderung der Radwege reinigen", Initiative i111, Bürgerverfahren '85 in the first version of *LiquidFriesland*, last accessed 16 June 2015.

208 "Nachbesserung fehlender Straßenmarkierungen", Initiative i96, in the first version of *LiquidFriesland*, last accessed 6 August 2014.

209 "Erweiterung der IGS Friesland um einen Sekundarbereich II", Initiative i31 in the first version of *LiquidFriesland*, last accessed 6 August 2014.

210 Karin Schmidt and Wolfgang Müller, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

per se. According to my participants, many registered simply out of curiosity,[211] because they had a strong affinity for all things technological and Internet-concerned,[212] or had time on their hands[213]. Clearly, any correlation with political interest or engagement is lacking here. For many of my interlocutors, the feeling of solidarity with and sense of obligation to acquainted leaders in local politics and administration,[214] often seen as characteristic of small communities, seems to have been sufficient motivation to register with *LiquidFriesland*.

As I have outlined above, *Betri Reykjavík* came into being because of a moral shock in times of crisis within a fragmented society in a threshold state. The initial aim of *Betri Reykjavík* was to provide a space for every political party running in the 2010 municipal elections to hold discussions with potential voters, to promote their ideas, and to develop their agendas out in the open instead of behind closed doors.

The thirst for transparency and fundamental change that was central to the creation of *Betri Reykjavík*, was absent in that of *LiquidFriesland* (cf. Killian et al.). *LiquidFriesland* was implanted top-down into a stable society "with established, unquestioned structures, norms, and values" (ibid.), because the Landrat Sven Ambrosy thought it would be nice to offer an additional way for citizens to communicate with the administration; and at that, drawing great media attention to the district of Friesland.

Political Disinterest as Sign of Affluence?

Aside from the relatively shallow political grievances of Friesland's citizens and the insufficient mobilisation and resources on the part of the administration, it appears likely that political disinterest played a role in *LiquidFriesland*'s failure. In the literature, political disinterest is often associated with dissatisfaction, voter apathy, and cynicism (cf. Kersting, 'Online Participation' 271). The main line of reasoning in these articles is that citizens lose interest in politics and stop participating politically because they feel that their interests and realities are insufficiently represented by elected politicians and governments (cf. van Deth, 'Politisches Interesse'). My research participants however suggested a different reading of political disinterest in times of affluence. This becomes especially understandable in Krístinn's line of reasoning, as he makes clear that political disinterest is not necessarily to be seen as something negative:

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211 For example Helmut Weber, focus group, Jever, 9 October 2014.

212 For example Peter Lamprecht, personal interview, Jever, 16 September 2013.

213 Pensioners and people on parental leave stated that they had time on their hands, for example Heinz Schulz and Anna Wagner-Becker from the focus group in Varel, 9 September 2014.

214 For example Susanne Engstler, personal interview, 8 October 2013.

one measurement of a healthy society could be political disinterest. Disinterest in poli-
tics does not necessarily mean that there is something wrong with the political system,
it could simply mean that people are already satisfied. So they don't see the need to be
interested in the political sphere or decision-making, they just go *'Life is great, I don't
have to spend my life on politics, that's great.'*

We need to find a way to incorporate that into our system in the future. Because one of
the reasons there is a declining interest in political parties and declining vote, is simply
because of the level of affluence in the western world. Our life, our quality of life is
at a level where what the politicians are doing doesn't really affect our quality of life
that much anymore. They're tweaking something here and they are tweaking some-
thing there, doesn't really matter what they are doing. My quality of life is not going to
change whether this one is in power or that one.[215]

Interestingly, Friesland's Landrat Sven Ambrosy takes the same line:

wann beteiligt man sich und wann beteiligt man sich nicht? Wenn ich unheimlich en-
gagiert bin in einer Sache, dann beteilige ich mich. […] Wenn eine Unzufriedenheit
mit Politik da ist, dann ist eine hohe politische Aktivität zu verzeichnen. Das ist ja auch
richtig so in der Demokratie. Wenn aber eine hohe Zufriedenheit da ist, dann beteiligen
sich weniger. Wenn die Bevölkerung schweigt, sich nicht beteiligt, ist das dann ein
ganz schlimmes Zeichen für den Zustand der Demokratie oder sogar vielleicht ein sehr
gutes? Weil die die sich nicht öffentlich äußern sagen: ‚Läuft doch'. Ich würde mal
sagen hier in Friesland, es läuft, es gibt eine hohe Grundzufriedenheit. Und wenn nicht,
dann hat man Beteiligungsmöglichkeiten.[216]

when does one get active and when does one not? When I'm very committed to an
issue, then I get active. […] When there is political discontent, there are reports of high
political activity. And that is what democracy is about. But when there is high level of
content, less people are politically active. When the population keeps quiet – is that a
terrible sign for the state of democracy or perhaps a very good sign? Because those
citizens that aren't active publicly say: 'Everything is going well'. Here in Friesland,
I'd say everything is going well, generally, people are very content. And if not, there are
opportunities for participation.

As both quotations from the fields show, the weakening of representative democ-
racy does not necessarily indicate that the idea of democracy as such is in danger.
It could also mean that citizens orient towards strengthening participatory and

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215 Kristínn Már Ársælsson, personal interview, Reykjavík, 20 June 2014.

216 Sven Ambrosy, phone interview, 22 September 2015.

deliberative aspects of democracy, as is the case for Iceland and what Kristínn was hinting at. Or political disinterest could simply mean that citizens are relatively satisfied with the status quo. For Friesland's press secretary Klug, this is a legitimate position to say 'I only participate in the elections because I feel that is my civil duty, but right now I would rather like to mow the lawn or lay on the couch and watch sport on TV instead of participating through *LiquidFriesland*'.[217]

8.4.3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I illustrated how the concept of times of crisis and times of affluence are one way of interpreting different levels of participation in my research fields. While this interpretation has been heavily influenced by my research (fields and questions), the concept of times of crisis and of affluence is nevertheless transferable to other political participation frameworks. The key point here seems to be that the the more significantly their everyday life has been disrupted, more profound a citizen's personal (political) grievances, the easier it is for them to become engaged in or to deepen their engagement in politics. Or, from a top-down perspective: in order to mobilise affluent citizens with secure livelihoods, significantly more resources are required, and participation levels are more difficult to maintain.

8.5 The Role of Geographical Proximity in (Online) Political Participation

In this chapter, it will become clear that some modes of political participation appear better suited for influencing national or state levels and other modes appear better suited for influencing on the local municipal level. This connects well with the initial analysis of people's political participation repertoires as processes of negotiation, of mixing and matching (see chapter 8.4.1 Political Participation Repertoires Today).

At the national political level, people seem to prefer established modes of participation such as electoral voting, whereas at the local level, they appear to prefer other modes. A clear example of this is Hörður Torfason, the founder and main organiser of the Pots-and-Pans Revolution and of *Samtökin'78*, Iceland's national queer organisation. Aside from being a singer and songwriter, Hörður is also a political activist by profession. In chapter 8.4.1, Political Participation Repertoires Today, I cited Hörður's demand for compulsory voting. Somewhat surprisingly, he still admitted that

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217 Cf. Sönke Klug, personal interview, 25 August 2015.

honestly, when the elections were coming up, I just went away. […] I didn't wanna be here. Because people have this tendency of filling papers and everything with filth about people and I don't like that. I don't like to read bad things about other people, I really don't. […] SO when elections are coming up, all these debates, I avoid it. I don't wanna fill myself with this rubbish. So, I stepped away.[218]

Fig. 15: Starting Page of Betra Ísland[219]

However, at the local level of politics, people seem to prefer more direct, participatory, and deliberative modes of political participation. As pointed out in chapter 2.3, another example for this preference are *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi*, the online participatory budgeting tool which enables participation only in the district in which one lives – so, at the micro level. Through it, participants can actively take part in shaping their immediate neighbourhood and surroundings, and thus contribute to improving the lives of family, friends and neighbours.

218 Hörður Torfason, personal interview, Reykjavík, 24 June 2014.

219 The small black frame on the right side indicates the original Betra Ísland, while the other tiles lead to participatory budgeting sites of municipalities such as Stykkishólmur. Screenshot taken on 24 August 2018 at https://www.betraisland.is.

The national version of *Betri Reykjavík*, *Betra Ísland*, is significantly less popular than the local platforms. In 2012, Dominique said she had not "gone into that [*Betra Ísland*]. I stayed to Reykjavík. It's something, it has to be something so close that the people really get involved with it/to touch you personally. And when you think of *Betra Ísland*, […] nothing has been really happening, it's been in between. So, I'm not sure it can work at a country's scale, I'm not sure."[220] The last idea was added in March 2019, so nothing new was added for over six months. However, several municipalities other than Reykjavík have used *Betra Ísland* as a platform to host their annual online participatory budgets, as Figure 15, 187, illustrates.

In Iceland, the preference for more direct, participatory, and deliberative modes of political participation on the local level can at least partially be attributed to the effects of the national crisis. The citizens' increased reversion to local communities and their immediate surroundings, as both spaces of action and reference areas in their daily lives, may also serve as an explanation for increased interest in participating in municipal decision-making processes. Generally, most of the interviewees felt that there had been a general increase in interest in their local area. Long-term political activist Jón Þór remarked that "people are more interested in their smaller neighbourhood than in the bigger Reykjavík area".[221] Moreover, Þórgnýr contemplates "that people that live in the same street or the same cluster of houses should be more active. I've been thinking a lot about this, but have never been active, to get the neighbours together and just take charge of our street a little bit and maybe send suggestions [to *Betri Reykjavík*, JTK] or stuff like that."[222] Einar thinks that this is exactly the way to get people motivated over the long term: they have to be involved with decision-making related to their immediate surroundings, their neighbourhood. By conducting the *Betri Hverfi* project, the municipality seems to be meeting exactly this need: "it [*Betri Hverfi*] was really to your close environments, to what in your, let's say, 500m or 200m radius, what is there the things you would like to see." [223]

According to the British economic geographer Peter Dicken, the size of a political unit is indeed relevant for citizens' levels of political engagement. Generally, "the key localizing force derives from the essential 'socialness' of human activities and the fact that such socialness is facilitated and enhanced by geographical proximity. Such untraded interdependencies are essentially socio-cultural" (as cited in van Deth, 'Politisches Interesse' 273).

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220 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

221 Jón Þór Ólafsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 20 July 2012.

222 Þórgnýr Thoroddsen, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 20 July 2012.

223 Einar Magnússon, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 6 June 2014.

Auch ohne übertriebene Romantisierung des Lebens in kleinen Kommunen ist klar, dass die räumliche Nähe („geographical proximity") vielerlei direkte soziale Kontakte ermöglicht: Man trifft sich beim Bäcker, kennt sich von der Schule, sieht sich im Verein und erfährt direkt von Familienglück und Trauerfällen. Wer so zusammenlebt, wird auch die kommunalpolitischen Probleme eher als gemeinsame nachbarschaftliche Aufgaben und Herausforderungen betrachten als dies in größeren Kommunen der Fall ist. (ibid.)

Even without exaggeratedly romanticising life in small municipalities it is clear that geographical proximity enables all kinds of direct social contacts: you run into each other at the bakery, know each other from school, see each other in associations, as well as directly hear about domestic bliss and bereavement. Those who live together like this are also more likely to see problems relating to municipal politics as joint communal tasks and challenges than people living in bigger municipalities.

Indeed, the proximity factor also seems to be at play in online participation. The high degree of importance interviewees attribute to the local level becomes visible in their voting behaviour within *Betri Reykjavík*, as Guðrún's statement illustrates: "I see a topic...and I don't like it, but I don't not like it enough to oppose on it. Maybe that's something not in my neighbourhood and I don't care about it and I don't want it, and maybe if it would be close to my home, I would oppose to it. But I don't like to be against something."[224] In order to engage with an idea and to be willing to spend time and energy on it, "it has to be something so close that the people really get involved with it, it has to touch YOU personally."[225] Again, this stresses the local character of *Betri Reykjavík*, which is much more rooted in and intertwined with the everyday lives of citizens than *LiquidFriesland* is.

While the kind of geographical proximity described by van Deth clearly exists for users of *Betri Reykjavík*, it does so only superfluously for the users of *LiquidFriesland*, as the district is not the local frame of reference for citizens, the municipality is. *LiquidFriesland*'s catchment area is mostly rural, with 98.000 people living scattered about an area of about 608 square kilometres, including the East Friesian Island of Wangerooge. The district is at the politically intermediate level, a level which seems almost harder to grasp than the national level, at least concerning its jurisdiction and responsibilities. Indeed, interlocutor Peter Lamprecht makes clear that the local level is that at which one can most easily understand the politics: people in Varel know about what is going on in Varel, and the people in Jever are hopefully informed about what is happening in Jever. But beyond that,

224 Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.
225 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

it becomes relatively unclear for many citizens whether the district, municipal, or state government is responsible for a certain issue.[226]

As discussed in detail in chapter 2.1, a common reason for the council rejecting suggestions and ideas put through *LiquidFriesland* was that they were outside the district's jurisdiction. As such, it comes as little surprise that users like Christa Hoffmann demanded local versions of *LiquidFriesland*. For Hoffmann, the topics that the district is responsible for are not those which are directly relevant to the population, and she is convinced that many more citizens would participate if a tool like *LiquidFriesland* was made available at the municipal level.[227]

It is not only their "expertise" in their neighbourhoods which encourages citizens to participate, but also the ease they have imagining how and what could be changed there. The impression that their engagement could also benefit others in their neighbourhood – family, friends, neighbours, the community – appears to help mobilise and motivate them. My research has shown that people are especially interested and more likely to participate when an issue or topic directly affects the daily lives of themselves, or those close to them. For example, parents like Guðmundur Kristjánsson or Anna Wagner-Becker are often interested in issues related to day-care and schooling; people that bike to work daily, like Per and Einar, support the improvement of bike path networks; and fearing losses in sales, small retailers like Karin Schmidt and Wolfgang Müller protest the planned construction of a shopping centre in their town. On a national level, many Icelanders became active in protesting against the government and the financial system after the financial crash of 2008–09, because they were facing large debts, unemployment, and the loss of their savings and even their homes. In every single interview about their interest in certain civic or political issues, participants pointed out directly or indirectly how those issues were relevant in their daily lives.

Conversely, users found it hard to engage in discussion (on the online platforms) about topics that did not personally affect them (anymore). For instance, Ursula Thoms's children have left school and are now at university, so she found it difficult to take part in a debate about school restructuring.[228] In online participation, people are able to contribute to discussions on topics directly related to their daily lives in their immediate surroundings. This is in stark contrast to traditional electoral participation, where citizens only role is to vote on general policy directions every four or five years.

In the end, the preference for the local level as the frame for online participation tools featured heavily in participants' accounts. On the basis of this observa-

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226 Cf. Peter Lamprecht, personal interview, Jever, 16 September 2013.

227 Christa Hoffmann, focus group, Varel, 9 September 2014.

228 Cf. Ursula Thoms, personal interview, Varel, 9 October 2013.

tion, three things in particular become clear. First, the preference for the local level stresses geographical proximity as the base of general sociality. For participants, their immediate surroundings, their neighbourhood, their quarter is their frame of reference and of action. Second, the preference for the local level shows how inseparably interwoven the online and offline layers of everyday life are. Users are active in and for their immediate living surroundings by online and offline means: they are not either online or offline, nor are they either active in virtual life or real life – they are both. This evidence yet again refutes claims that political participation by online means is somehow, per definition, inferior to political participation in the *real world*, as terms like clicktivism or slacktivism have come to suggest. Third, the preference for the local level as the frame of direct, participatory, online modes of political participation is one explanation for the *varying* success of *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*; that is, the registration of as many citizens as possible and the vivid usage of the tools, as well as the establishment of the tools both in political participation repertoires of citizens and in decision-making processes.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter started out by providing an overview of the most common modes of political participation amongst participants, contextualising these modes both within participants' participation repertories and within their everyday lives. It became apparent that participants mix-and-match modes, based on a modes perceived political efficacy and their own political objectives.

I then outlined three perspectives that emerged from the data to explain (online) political participation. First, I looked at (online) participation tools as a continuum, ranging from enabling participation to simulating it. Whether (potential) users see an online tool as enabling them to have a real voice and influence in decision-making processes, or whether they see it as only simulating participation and the ideas they put forward have little relevance in the political process and the quality of life for citizens in a municipality has far-reaching consequences. For many (potential) users, *LiquidFriesland* appears to have simply been added onto the political process without any principal and permanent changes being made. Moreover, from my interviews and impressions, it seems as if it was primarily introduced in order to prove the innovativeness, modernity, and readiness for the future of the current administration, and particularly Landrat Sven Ambrosy, as the agent of change.

Second, the concept of times of crisis and affluence proves helpful in explaining multi-layered differences in political participation in Iceland and Germany. The financial crisis in Iceland appeared to be a fundamental disruption of the quo-

tidian, to "all the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life; more specifically, […] daily practices and routines that comprise habitual social action, alongside the natural attitude of routinized expectations and the suspension of doubt about the organization of the social world and one's role within it" (Buechler 59). In contrast, Frisian participants were not in "immediate life-threatening situations of political or economic crisis, but rather, have their basic needs of life met, or even in abundance" (654). In the end, the extent of personal grievances appears to be a central to mobilising – or not mobilising – people for political action and participation. The crisis also appears to have led to increased and lasting participation in Iceland, through *Betri Reykjavík* and other modes. Indeed, *Betri Reykjavík* itself is one outcome of the innovative potential of crisis.

Third, this chapter looked at the relevance of geographical proximity to the modes of political participation. Participants prefer different modes depending on the political and geographical level they are participating at. Whereas representative modes like voting at the ballot have strong support on the nation state level, participants prefer more direct and participatory modes of engagement on a more local level. In this sense, it comes as no surprise that *LiquidFriesland*, which is directed at the district level, failed to become a lasting part of decision-making processes. This is especially the case since the use of the tool becomes unclear because of the uncertainty regarding the jurisdiction of the district: many ideas suggested by users fell to the jurisdiction of either the municipality or the federal state.

In summary, this chapter adopted three perspectives to make sense of participants' repertoires and patterns of political participation, showing the complexity of political participation today. In regard to the main research question of this thesis, namely "how are people's repertoires and patterns of political participation influenced by the opportunities the Internet generally and digital democracy in particular entail?", it becomes clear that citizens typically adopted a mix-and-match strategy. In a bricolage fashion, they combined modes of political participation across physical and virtual spheres according to their respective political objectives as well as different modes perceived internal efficacy. However, my findings suggest that in these fields, both the efficacy of ICTs and their potential to facilitate change toward more direct and participatory democratic structures are limited as was shown in the last sub-chapters.

9 Conclusion

In this book, I set out to study political participation in the digital age. More precisely, I investigated the influence of ICTs, and particularly the Internet, on citizens' political participation repertoires. It concluded that the Internet enriches participants' political participation repertoires by opening up new and flexible participation modes that are predominantly participatory or directly democratic in nature. Examples for these new political participation modes are online participation tools integrated in decision-making processes, such as *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*, as well as the online participatory budgeting tool *Betri Hverfi*.

I then investigated the influence of these ICTs on citizens' political participation practices. My findings suggest that ICTs have been largely responsible for a shift in citizens' participation practices from being general, linear, high-threshold, temporally constricted, and dependent on physical presence to topic-centred, anachronistic, low-threshold, temporally discontinuous, and independent from physical presence. With this multi-dimensional flexibility, it appears that citizens can now participate politically more often. The assumption that political participation becomes a more mundane part of people's lives through the opportunities ICTs bring appears to be justified, at least to a certain degree.

Moreover, seeing their submissions online, seeing politicians and administration dealing with them and implementing them appears to increase citizens sense of internal political efficacy, which again motivates them to engage further. The data does not in any way support the normative view that online participation is mere clicktivism or slacktivism (cf. Eisel). Instead, modes of online participation actually appear to trigger other forms of political participation, such as party political engagement or even candidacy for a political office.

Moreover, political participation practices in times of crisis and in times of affluence develop rather differently. The 2008–09 financial crisis, which the majority of Icelanders appeared to experience as "a disruption of the quotidian" (Snow et al.), mobilised many to take up various modes of political participation which even went beyond both the thematic and temporal scope of the crisis. In times

of affluence, when "participants are not motivated by immediate life-threatening situations of political or economic crisis, but rather, have their basic needs of life met, or even in abundance" (Kerbo 654), greater incentives are needed to mobilise citizens. This is also illustrated by the different participation levels in *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*, and the eventual shut-down of the latter in 2016 due to a complete lack of participation.

Regarding the specific online participation tools *Betri Reykjavík* or *LiquidFriesland*, the actual uses of those tools and sense-making processes on behalf of their users were investigated. In the second analysis chapter, this is combined with the study of the interfaces, that is the communication and interaction between the three primary groups of actors: users/citizens, programmers, and politicians and administration. My research revealed conflicts and irritations at play here, such as the opacity of communication in online participation tools, or the different groups' diverging understandings of the scope and function of online participation tools. While citizens expect these online tools to offer a place and way to discuss and deliberate, my and other research suggests that politicians and administrations "tended to commission sites that maintain existing institutional and cultural practices" (Wright and Street 858). This becomes visible, for example, in the software design of both tools favouring individual clicktivist actions, while simultaneously inhibiting discussion and deliberation.

The research also found a substantial transformation in participants' information practices through ICTs. This is line with Strömbäck et al.'s findings that today, individuals' information gathering practices have developed into "personal news repertoires" (1) which are multi-method, combining different media formats and media outlets for each of the formats. In this process, filtering, sorting, and contextualising information become a regular part of citizens' new skill-sets in information practice. This (in)competent mixing and matching has a significant role in participation practices as well, suggesting that through the use of ICTs, people may become better informed and thus more likely to engage politically.

This research has a number of implications which have a wide-ranging impact. First, the competent application of a mix-and-match approach to information seeking and consumption in "contemporary, high choice, hybrid and fragmented media environments" (cf. Chadwick in Strömbäck et al. 3) emphasises the Internet, and especially Social Media, as information sources that need to be taken seriously. Political and civic educators, as well as municipal administrations, should make wise use of Social Media, not only to reach out to young citizens but indeed to citizens across all age groups.

The research findings should also be of special importance to programmers of online participation tools. As "Software is Politics", software programming and design play a vital role in the extent to which the promises of digital democracy

(cf. Linden) are actually fulfilled. At the same time, an online participation tool is only as participatory as its political and administrative commissioners want it to be. As such, my findings also speak directly to politicians and administrations who would like to implement an online participation tool. They need to be clear about the scope of citizen participation they wish to enable and with it, the degree to which they are prepared to restructure both the political culture and political communication (cf. Rosenzweig and Eith 12).

The fact that the multiplication and diversification of political participation modes over the last 25 years has been fundamentally powered by the development of ICTs should make those who proclaim widespread political apathy wonder. My research supports Jan van Deth's view that election turnout is not the only way to measure political participation in a democracy (cf. 'Map'). Rather, diverse online modes of political participation are here to stay, and these need to be considered in assessing the state of democracy today, whether it be by opinion-making scholars and journalists, or politicians and administrators. Adopting a more operational, open interpretation of political participation, as van Deth and others suggest, is fundamental because "[…] those with the most restrictive and conventional conceptions of political participation identify a strong and consistent pattern of declining political participation and engagement over time, whilst those with a more inclusive conception discern instead a change in the *mode* of political participation" (Hay 23).

For future research in this area, I would recommend expanding and diversifying the sample and sampling process. It would be worthwhile to examine these research questions with interlocutors who have less experience using online participation tools, so as to rule out over-exuberance about the potential of ICTs for political participation. It would also be worthwhile incorporating more citizens under 40 in the study, as they were the noticeable exception within this study's sample, where most participants were in their 50s or 60s. Finally, I have no doubt that more research on young citizens' political participation in the digital age is needed.

10 Appendix

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10.2 Figures

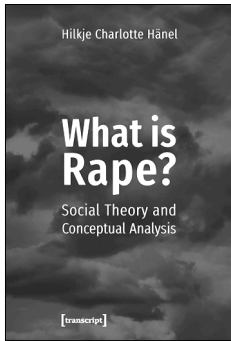# Social and Cultural Studies

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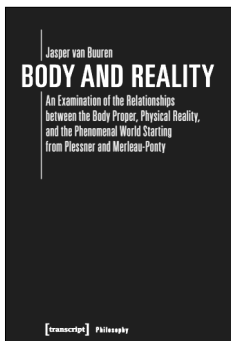E-Book: 26,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-4160-2

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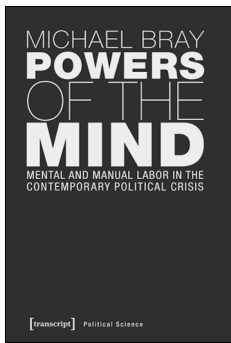E-Book: 39,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-4163-3

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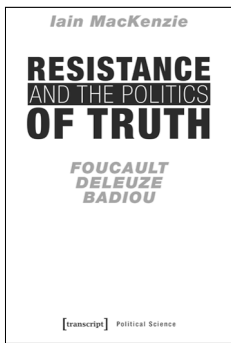
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