> 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

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]

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:

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 selecting 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 plausibility 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]

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. However, 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 provides, 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 participant 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 Frühstücks, 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 techniques, 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 working full-time, caring for a family, and pursuing other recreational hobbies. Thomas Fischer vividly describes how he reads news, and how he restricts himself:

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

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:

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 Nachdenkseiten, 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]

---

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 Neustadtgödens 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

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.

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

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,

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).

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