

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.

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

33 Kristinn Már Ársælsón, 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

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.

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 reingegangen und hat dann festgestellt, dass die Oberfläche ihm nicht so zusagt. [...] Wir müssten durchaus gut klarkommen mit Oberflächen, ich habe allerdings auch tatsächlich 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.

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. Kristinn 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

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

44 Kristinn 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 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

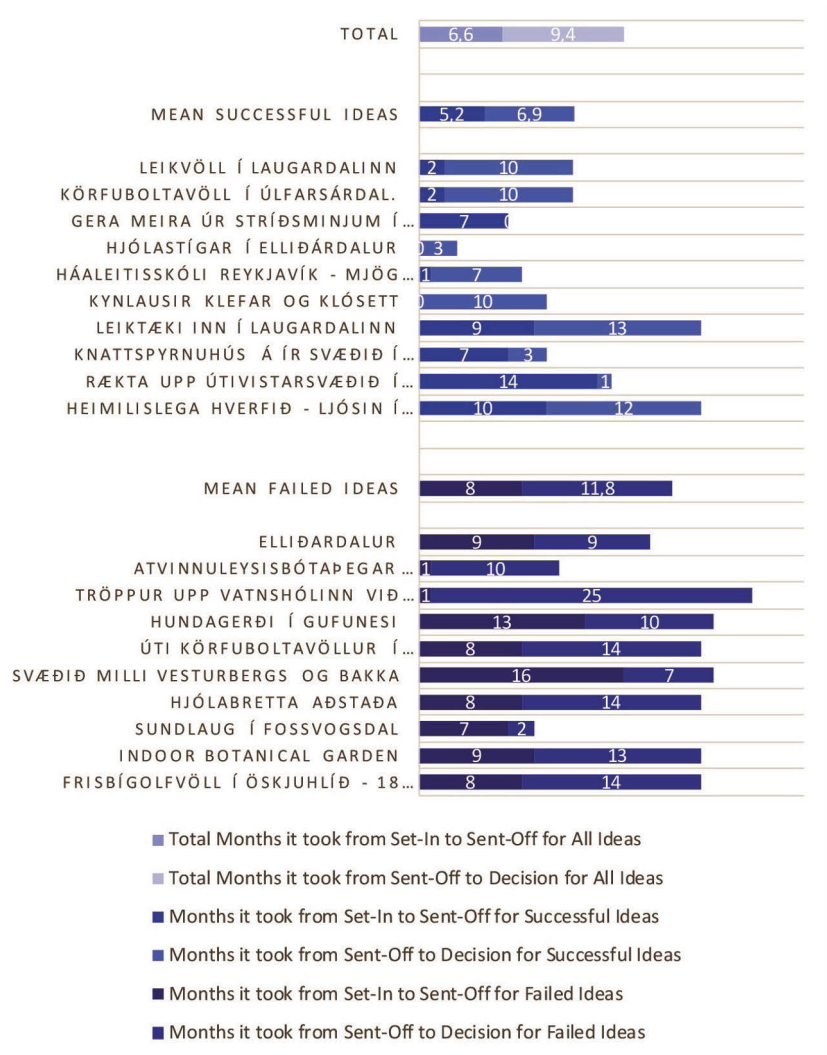
realistically implementable solution. [...] the administration should contribute to the debate early on. To let citizens vote and tell them only afterwards that the suggestion is not implementable can have a devastating effect on motivation.

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 *LiquidFriesland*'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,

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



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

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 "Hjólastígur í Elliðárdal" (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-

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.

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, responsiveness, and rationality (cf. Linden) – cannot be fulfilled

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

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 tillit 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 Elliðaárna 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.

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*, where 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 statements⁶⁰; 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

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 Reykjavik* 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 *LiquidFriesland*, 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

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 notice⁶⁴, 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 *LiquidFriesland* 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

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

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

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 Bjarnason, 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

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-

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 Grímsón 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 Gunnarsson’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 Kristinn 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.)

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

81 Kristinn 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. Kristinn Már Aðælsón’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).

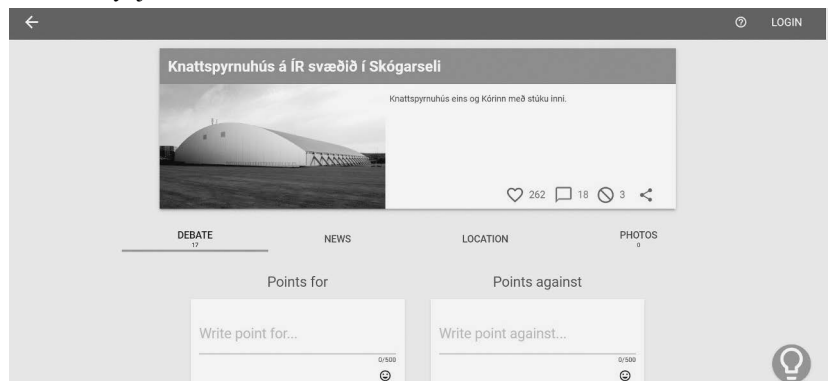
At least initially, however, users take *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* at face value, that is as “online consultation forums” (cf. ‘About Better Reykjavík’), an “online participatory social network” (Citizens Foundation, ‘Better Reykjavík’), or an “Online Plattform für Bürgerbeteiligung” (eng.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

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

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



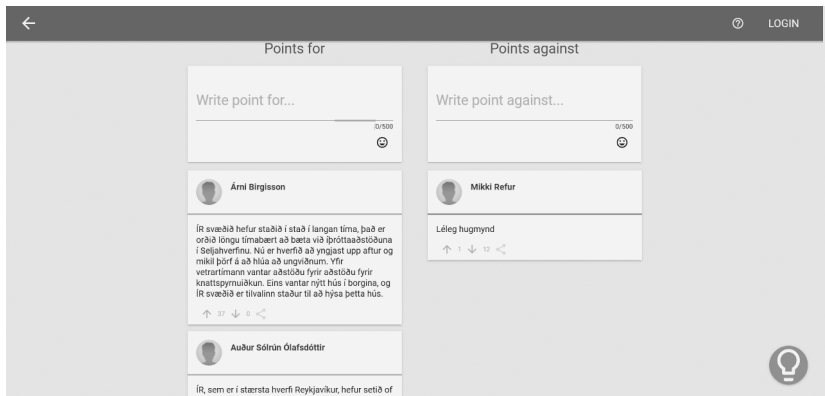
83 Per Hansen, personal interview, Reykjavík, 23 July 2012.

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>.

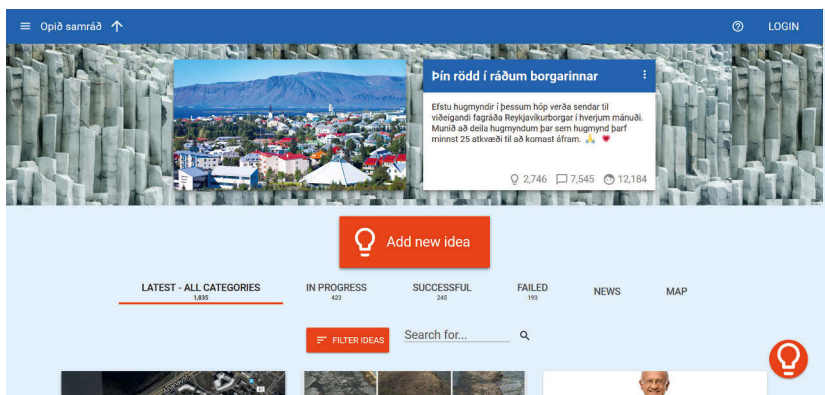
Fig. 6: First Comments to “Knattspyrnuhús á ÍR svæðið í Skógarseli”, Idea in Betri Reykjavík⁸⁷



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.

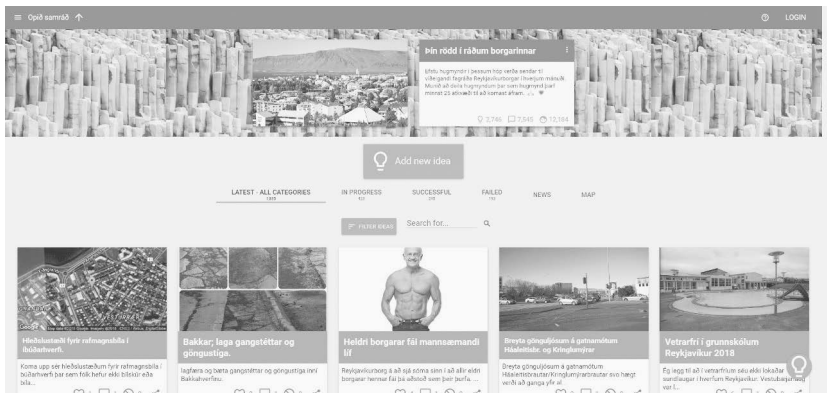
In this case, the description of the idea is particularly meagre. Barely a full sentence, it simply says “Indoor football hall with a round roof”. If the user takes the structure of the website’s design literally, she will indeed keep herself brief

Fig. 7: Starting Page of Betri Reykjavík in Default 100% Viewing Size⁸⁸

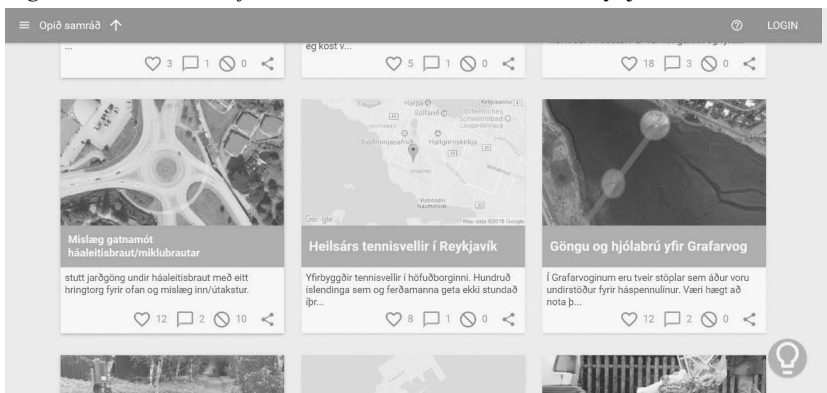


87 Idea by Anna Válsdóttir. Screenshot taken on 3 May 2018 at <https://betrireykjavik.is/post/9013>.

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

⁸⁹ Starting Page of *Betri Reykjavík Reduced* to 67% in the Mozilla Firefox Browser Quantum. Screenshot taken on 3 May 2018 at <https://betrireykjavik.is/group/47>.

⁹⁰ The grey symbols (heart, speech bubble, banned, share) are all responsive, except the speech bubble. Screenshot taken on 3 May 2018 at <https://betrireykjavik.is/group/47>.

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

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 Guðrún 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

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.

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

98 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

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

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

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 *LiquidFriesland*. 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 Guðmundur 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

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

102 In 2013, *LiquidFriesland* was awarded the dbb Innovation 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.

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-

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.

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

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

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

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 Guðrún 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 Guðrún'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.

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 Neighbourhoods* 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

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 Sohnmann 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-

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

127 The programmers fundamentally believe 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.

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,

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