

## 4 Research Fields

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

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

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

## 4.1 *LiquidFriesland*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The workings of *LiquidFriesland*

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

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

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

Fig. 1: Starting Page of LiquidFriesland<sup>7</sup>

The screenshot shows the LiquidFriesland website interface. At the top, there is a search bar and a link for 'Anmeldung Registrierung'. Below this is a navigation bar with 'Startseite'. The main content is organized into two columns. The left column, 'Themenansicht', lists various initiatives with their titles, dates, and results, each accompanied by a pie chart. The right column, 'Organisationseinheiten', includes 'Landkreis Friesland' and a section titled 'Was kann ich hier machen?' with a list of actions such as 'anmelden um teilzunehmen', 'strukturierte Diskussion', '4 Phasen einer Entscheidung', 'Stimmdelegation', and 'Präferenzabstimmung'.

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

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

7 Screenshot taken on 16 May 2015 at [www.liquidfriesland.de/lf/index.html](http://www.liquidfriesland.de/lf/index.html).

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

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

### Sampling Process

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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- 11 Most names of individual users of *LiquidFriesland* have been pseudonymised. Real names were used when either the participant explicitly wished so or if they were public figures and also speaking in their role as such, like politicians and programmers.
  - 12 His initiative suggested the reintroduction of the old JEV-number plate, JEV meaning Jever, the administrative centre of the district of Friesland. In the first months after *LiquidFriesland*'s launch, Lamprecht quickly developed into a model-user of some kind for two reasons. First, he was not politically active prior to his engagement on *LiquidFriesland*. Second, media heavily stressed the fact that he was not disappointed after his motion had been dismissed; his quotation "Das ist halt Demokratie" (That's democracy, after all.) has become an aphorism favoured by many media outlets.