9 Conclusion

In this book, I set out to study political participation in the digital age. More precisely, I investigated the influence of ICTs, and particularly the Internet, on citizens' political participation repertoires. It concluded that the Internet enriches participants' political participation repertoires by opening up new and flexible participation modes that are predominantly participatory or directly democratic in nature. Examples for these new political participation modes are online participation tools integrated in decision-making processes, such as *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*, as well as the online participatory budgeting tool *Betri Hverfi*.

I then investigated the influence of these ICTs on citizens' political participation practices. My findings suggest that ICTs have been largely responsible for a shift in citizens' participation practices from being general, linear, high-threshold, temporally constricted, and dependent on physical presence to topic-centred, anachronistic, low-threshold, temporally discontinuous, and independent from physical presence. With this multi-dimensional flexibility, it appears that citizens can now participate politically more often. The assumption that political participation becomes a more mundane part of people's lives through the opportunities ICTs bring appears to be justified, at least to a certain degree.

Moreover, seeing their submissions online, seeing politicians and administration dealing with them and implementing them appears to increase citizens sense of internal political efficacy, which again motivates them to engage further. The data does not in any way support the normative view that online participation is mere clicktivism or slacktivism (cf. Eisel). Instead, modes of online participation actually appear to trigger other forms of political participation, such as party political engagement or even candidacy for a political office.

Moreover, political participation practices in times of crisis and in times of affluence develop rather differently. The 2008–09 financial crisis, which the majority of Icelanders appeared to experience as "a disruption of the quotidian" (Snow et al.), mobilised many to take up various modes of political participation which even went beyond both the thematic and temporal scope of the crisis. In times

of affluence, when "participants are not motivated by immediate life-threatening situations of political or economic crisis, but rather, have their basic needs of life met, or even in abundance" (Kerbo 654), greater incentives are needed to mobilise citizens. This is also illustrated by the different participation levels in *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*, and the eventual shut-down of the latter in 2016 due to a complete lack of participation.

Regarding the specific online participation tools *Betri Reykjavík* or *LiquidFriesland*, the actual uses of those tools and sense-making processes on behalf of their users were investigated. In the second analysis chapter, this is combined with the study of the interfaces, that is the communication and interaction between the three primary groups of actors: users/citizens, programmers, and politicians and administration. My research revealed conflicts and irritations at play here, such as the opacity of communication in online participation tools, or the different groups' diverging understandings of the scope and function of online participation tools. While citizens expect these online tools to offer a place and way to discuss and deliberate, my and other research suggests that politicians and administrations "tended to commission sites that maintain existing institutional and cultural practices" (Wright and Street 858). This becomes visible, for example, in the software design of both tools favouring individual clicktivist actions, while simultaneously inhibiting discussion and deliberation.

The research also found a substantial transformation in participants' information practices through ICTs. This is line with Strömbäck et al.'s findings that today, individuals' information gathering practices have developed into "personal news repertoires" (1) which are multi-method, combining different media formats and media outlets for each of the formats. In this process, filtering, sorting, and contextualising information become a regular part of citizens' new skill-sets in information practice. This (in)competent mixing and matching has a significant role in participation practices as well, suggesting that through the use of ICTs, people may become better informed and thus more likely to engage politically.

This research has a number of implications which have a wide-ranging impact. First, the competent application of a mix-and-match approach to information seeking and consumption in "contemporary, high choice, hybrid and fragmented media environments" (cf. Chadwick in Strömbäck et al. 3) emphasises the Internet, and especially Social Media, as information sources that need to be taken seriously. Political and civic educators, as well as municipal administrations, should make wise use of Social Media, not only to reach out to young citizens but indeed to citizens across all age groups.

The research findings should also be of special importance to programmers of online participation tools. As "Software is Politics", software programming and design play a vital role in the extent to which the promises of digital democracy

(cf. Linden) are actually fulfilled. At the same time, an online participation tool is only as participatory as its political and administrative commissioners want it to be. As such, my findings also speak directly to politicians and administrations who would like to implement an online participation tool. They need to be clear about the scope of citizen participation they wish to enable and with it, the degree to which they are prepared to restructure both the political culture and political communication (cf. Rosenzweig and Eith 12).

The fact that the multiplication and diversification of political participation modes over the last 25 years has been fundamentally powered by the development of ICTs should make those who proclaim widespread political apathy wonder. My research supports Jan van Deth's view that election turnout is not the only way to measure political participation in a democracy (cf. 'Map'). Rather, diverse online modes of political participation are here to stay, and these need to be considered in assessing the state of democracy today, whether it be by opinion-making scholars and journalists, or politicians and administrators. Adopting a more operational, open interpretation of political participation, as van Deth and others suggest, is fundamental because "[…] those with the most restrictive and conventional conceptions of political participation identify a strong and consistent pattern of declining political participation and engagement over time, whilst those with a more inclusive conception discern instead a change in the *mode* of political participation" (Hay 23).

For future research in this area, I would recommend expanding and diversifying the sample and sampling process. It would be worthwhile to examine these research questions with interlocutors who have less experience using online participation tools, so as to rule out over-exuberance about the potential of ICTs for political participation. It would also be worthwhile incorporating more citizens under 40 in the study, as they were the noticeable exception within this study's sample, where most participants were in their 50s or 60s. Finally, I have no doubt that more research on young citizens' political participation in the digital age is needed.