4.2 *Betri Reykjavík*

In contrast, gaining initial access to *Betri Reykjavík* was smooth. However, the sampling process did hold some surprises in store. *Betri Reykjavík* is an online participation tool programmed by Gunnar Grímsson and Róbert Bjarnason, Icelandic IT specialists and Internet pioneers working together under the registered name of *Citizens' Foundation*. The website is based on the open source software *Your Priorities*, which they developed.[13]
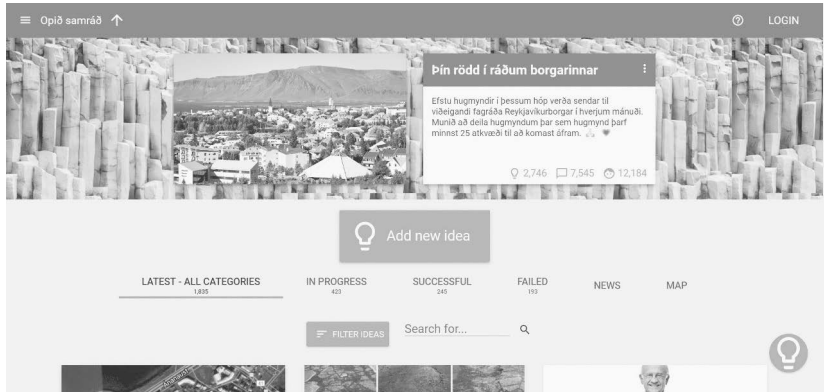
Betri Reykjavík went online in 2010, about half a year before municipal elections in Iceland's capital Reykjavík. Then in its early version and still called *Skuggaborg* (eng. *Shadow City)*, it offered a space to every political party running in the elections to promote their ideas and enter into discussions with potential voters. While not every party made use of this possibility, the *Best Party* participated eagerly, asking citizens for their ideas on how to improve life in Reykjavík. In the end, this public generated content became the *Best Party*'s programme, helping it achieve election victory with their head, actor and comedian Jón Gnarr, becoming major. Because of the *Best Party*'s heavy usage of the participation tool in its early days, *Betri Reykjavík* is still strongly associated with the party and their creative take on Icelandic politics – even though by 2014, Gnarr's tenure had ended, the *Best Party* had disbanded, and some of its former members had regrouped to form a new party, *Bright Future*. Today, the website *Betri Reykjavík* does not bear much resemblance with its predecessor from 2010. Areas designated to political parties have disappeared. Instead, every citizen can submit an idea, vote for or against ideas of other users, and comment on those (see Figure 2). The ideas are organised into eleven different thematic categories, for example urban planning, sports, or education.

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

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

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

Fig. 2: Starting Page of Betri Reykjavík[14]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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