

8 Results and Discussion

Simply looking at individuals acts of political participation, such as marching in a demonstration or signing an e-petition, is not enough to understand how people's participation repertoires are influenced by ICT. Indeed, as information, communication and participation are all mutually dependent and interactive, one also has to research people's information and communication practices.

Consequently, one focus of my research is on participants' information practices, and their practice in terms of navigation and sense-making where a seemingly infinite amount of data is available and accessible online, and in which agency in producing information has shifted dramatically. Thus I attempt to simultaneously look at participants' use of traditional offline, online, and social media – something which has rarely been done before (cf. Strömbäck et al. 2).

After outlining the most common modes of political participation, I also look at (online) political participation from three different perspectives: the continuum of online participation (between empowerment of the citizens and the simulation of participation), differentiating between participation in times of crisis and in times of affluence, and participants' preference for participation at the local rather than national or international level.

8.1 Political Participation – A Definition?

Interviewer: When did you start to be interested in politics?

Guðrún: I'm not interested in politics.

Interviewer: What are you interested in then?

Guðrún: Surroundings, solutions – things that have always been done THAT way, but is it possible to do it THIS way? Like that. Politics are way down at the bottom.¹

1 Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

In only my second interview in 2012, Guðrún’s statement that she was not interested in politics put me off my stride for a moment. What I had imagined to be a clever opening question that would surely initiate a lengthy narration about her political activity resulted in a declamatory one-liner. Despite being one of the most active users of *Betri Reykjavík* – with many initiatives and comments on diverse topics put into the system –, Guðrún was apparently “not interested in politics”.

For many years now, Guðrún’s statement has had me thinking about how the (scientific) vocabulary of scholars does not necessarily conform with or to participants own interpretations. The academic sets out to investigate a theoretical set of practices or a theoretical concept within a field, and yet has only a sketchy understanding of how actors in the field itself understand the topic. As is clear from the example above, my understanding as the researcher, and Guðrún’s understanding as the researched about her practices, did not exactly coincide.

As Miller et al. illustrate through the term “Social Media”, researchers may decide to accept the “vagaries of public semantics” in defining one’s research topic, pointing out that this “definition is not absolute, nor does it contain firm boundaries; rather it is a heuristic device which helps to clarify the parameters of our study” (9). Keeping this in mind, I took pains to avoid constructing the research objective at my writing desk. As such, in the course of fieldwork, the research objective *political participation* was transformed into numerous phrases that came from participants themselves, such as *taking part in politics and society*, *engaging politically*, *engaging civically*, *being interested in what is happening in the municipality*, *being an activist*, and *being a politician*. Indeed, all those attributions and activities, apart from *being a professional politician*, fit well into van Deth’s map of political participation modes (see chapter 2.1.2 New Modes – New Definition?), thereby assuring me that my research was still firmly grounded within research areas and fields.

In other words, “political participation” appeared to be an abstract term which participants seldom identified with – even though they talked extensively about their activities, activities that I would have immediately categorized as modes of political participation. This becomes especially visible in Þórgnýr’s case. In 2014, I asked him about his new positions as a deputy city councillor, chair of the sports and leisure council, and vice chair of the culture and travel council in Reykjavík:

This is what happens when you start poking your nose at things you shouldn’t be poking your nose at [...]. I suppose it takes me being opinionated, but self-diagnosed apolitical. So *Betri Reykjavík* was a fine venue for me to actually take part in discussion I was interested in. But it turns out, that I was involved in some activism with some friends and I didn’t really connect it to politics at the time. It is kind of a naive, very tight perspective I had on things [...] and before I knew it, I was running for parliament last year. And I

was just filling in on the list, to be honest. [...] And done, here I am. That's a little bit of a change and I was a LITTLE BIT surprised about that.²

As a result of these insights, I was able to create a multi-faceted work on how people are taking part in shaping the conditions of their, as well as their families' and friends', day-to-day world. Van Deth notes more than 70 modes of political participation, including such diverse activities as voting in elections, *buy-cotts*, and guerrilla gardening (cf. 'Partizipationsforschung' 11). As such, I see no sense in drawing strict arbitrary lines between what "political participation" is or is not. Indeed, I would always argue for a more inclusive measurement system. For me, the key factors in defining "political participation" are interest, engagement and commitment to the democratic community and to society, in whichever modes that they may appear – rather than a restrictive, scholarly label.

8.2 Information Practices through the Ages

With the spread of the Internet, the sheer mass of information available has grown exponentially. Not only has the technological capacity to store seemingly infinite amounts of data been created (cf. Reichert), but agency in producing information has also shifted immensely, with vocational journalists losing their interpretational sovereignty and countless semi-private bloggers (cf. Al-Ani) and citizen-journalists (cf. Meikle) entering the stage. This development has been widely featured both in academic and societal discourses. Often neglected in these discourses is, however, the changing role and position of the reader/user. Consequently, this chapter investigates the information practices of readers/users and their navigational and sense-making practices while simultaneously using traditional offline, online, as well as social media. Ultimately, thinking about information practices is important for the overall investigation of political participation in the digital age to "examine how people combine the use of offline and online media and how their "political information repertoires" or "news diets" influence political participation (cf. Strömbäck et al. 2).

8.2.1 Defining Information Practices

The term "information practices" first came to me during analysis as a working title to group the various practices of participants revolving around information. It was only later that I found out that there was indeed a whole theoretical complex

2 Þórgnýr Thoroddsen, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 19 June 2014.