1 Introduction

It was a Thursday in late April 2016. And like most Thursdays since completing the main part of fieldwork in late 2014, I checked both websites that I've been researching for the last four years. I just did not feel comfortable about completely losing track of the fields, and their easy accessibility was just too seductive to not return to them, at least for a few moments each week. So I did as I almost always did that day: clicked on the two symbols in my browser's bookmark bar to load both websites in adjacent tabs and then opened the Excel document in which I keep track of any interesting actions and changes.

Starting with the Icelandic website Betri Reykjavík, I copied and pasted titles and links to the three new ideas that users had set in during the last few days. One user suggested installing a play area for dogs between BSÍ, the central bus station and the recreational park area of Hljómskálagarðinn (cf. Thoroddsen). Another user urged the construction of an underpass for pedestrians and cyclists under Borgarvegur street in the Grafarvogur neighbourhood (cf. Sigurðardóttir). The third idea raised awareness of the fire hazard caused by arson in mailboxes overflowing with newspapers and thus suggested terminating delivery of the free dailies (cf. Hjálmarsson). I also checked the numbers of ideas "officially in progress", "officially successful› and "officially failed" and noticed that nothing has changed in any of the three categories in the last week. I also check the categories of ideas "trending", "top read", and "top voted". The idea about moving the domestic airport out of the city centre has been heading the "trending" list for 20 months; joined there by constructing a golf course in the Fossvogsdalur neighbourhood for the last eight months. Those ideas are amongst the most contested on Betri Reykjavík, for almost exactly as many users voted for as against them.[1] So it's no surprise that the idea of moving the airport is also at the top of the most read ideas; together with a suggestion to rename one of the pubs Bravó and Húrra in the city cen-

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1   While 133 users voted for moving the airport, 132 voted against it (cf. Sigurðsson).

tre to prevent confusion between the two (cf. Andrés Ingi) and the proposal to allow free parking for small cars in the city centre (cf. Ástgeirsson). The first two ideas have been the most read for the last eight months. This week the ideas that received the most votes were a suggestion to install bicycle pumps throughout the city (cf. Aradottir Pind), fees for the use of studded tires on cars (cf. Þengilsson), and the cleaning of cycling paths to avoid accidents (cf. Ágústsdóttir).

Closing this tab and opening the LiquidFriesland tab, I am shocked. My browser tells me that there is no website available under that URL. I retry by clicking on the symbol in the bookmark bar without success. Next, I go to the website of the district of Friesland directly and try to access LiquidFriesland *that way. I have no luck, instead I stumble over a press release, stating that* LiquidFriesland *was terminated at the end of April. I cannot believe it! What I had often nervously joked about has come true: one of my two fields has gone offline. What does that mean for my research? Should I look for a new field and start all over? Should I just stop pursuing my PhD?*

These initial emotional reactions occurred naturally. However, things quickly shifted back into perspective: of course, the dissolution of a research field shapes both research and analysis. But never does it automatically lead to the end of its investigation. In other words, *LiquidFriesland* going offline was to be regarded as just another observation of the field, and was to be analysed and understood as such.

Furthermore, this incident perfectly illustrates what is perhaps the main challenge of research in, on and about the Internet: it changes quickly. Over the past two decades, Information and Communications Technologies – or ICTs – have arguably permeated most parts of people's everyday lives across the globe. Working, learning, shopping, dating, and training are just a few activities that are now also and increasingly happening online. Websites and applications remain beta versions forever and change nearly daily to better suit the demands of their users. Ever decreasing in size, digital devices have found the way from data centres over workplaces into the home, and increasingly frequently, into people's pockets and hands.

However, it is not only leisure activities likes those mentioned above which are also increasingly taking place in digital space. ICTs are also posing a tremendous challenge to traditional media, predominantly through the runaway success of Social Media and, with it, the dissolution of the information monopoly once held by professional journalists and news outlets. At the same time, civil and political activities as diverse as voting, signing petitions, and taking part in boycotts are now increasingly being done online. ICTs also hold unique opportunities for

citizens to have a more direct influence on political decision-making processes by suggesting ideas on how to improve everyday life in their area. That is the case in the research fields *Betri Reykjavík* in Iceland's capital, and *LiquidFriesland* in the district of Friesland in northern Germany.

There are several things we need to understand better about these developments. First, we need to better understand how ICTs influence citizens' information collection regarding political news. The ways in which people completely shift their information collecting to online outlets (both of traditional and Social Media), or in which they combine online and offline media, or in which they completely ignore ICTs in information collecting, has consequences for citizens' information practices. Here information is to be seen as a prerequisite to political participation. Investigating people's information practices allows us to reason about citizens' general dispositions toward political participation as well as the likelihood that they will engage in online modes of participation.

Second, we do not know enough about how ICTs influence citizens' repertoires of political participation modes. Knowing whether citizens' repertoires of political participation modes broaden because of ICTs would help to more closely assess if ICTs really only facilitate "slacktivism" (cf. Serup Christensen, 'Political Activities on the Internet') or if online participation modes make it possible to take part politically in new, meaningful and flexible ways.

Third, changes in citizens' political participation practices around ICTs have not been comprehensively researched. Do people participate more frequently because of the opportunities provided by ICTs? Do ICTs facilitate the integration of political participation into citizens' everyday lives, including for those who were previously not involved for whatever reason? Do citizens perceive changes in their own political efficacy, both internally and externally? Whatever the case, if we do not develop further understanding on how ICTs affect citizens' participatory practices, we will not only be able to project both the state of digital democracy in Germany and Iceland today, but will also be better able to utilise the potential of ICTs to mobilise citizens to participate politically over the longer term.

Fourth, by looking at how citizens use and make sense of online participation tools like *Betri Reykjavík* or *LiquidFriesland*, we can gain valuable insights about this mode of online political participation. With such knowledge, we could develop guidelines for both politicians and administration, as well as programmers on how to design and implement effective citizen/user-friendly online participation tools. This is also the reason why investigating the interfaces, that is the communication and interaction between the three prime actor groups – users/citizens, programmers, and politicians and administrators – in online participation tools like *Betri Reykjavik* and *LiquidFriesland* is worthwhile. It is only by learning more about the conflicts, irritations, and good moments in interactions between

those actors that we can further develop online participation tools that fit citizens' needs and that they therefore see as worth incorporating into their everyday lives.

Studies by political scientists or communication scholars on political participation often lack the micro-perspective on those that actually take part, those that choose to participate in one way or another, those that mix-and-match modes of participation right through the artificial boundaries of offline and online worlds, always true to their everyday lives. The micro-perspective offered by Cultural Anthropology does indeed have important and insightful contributions to make to the study of political participation. Focusing on the actual participants, listening to their stories, their descriptions and their reasonings promises to open a hitherto strongly under-researched dimension, that of participants' diverse motives for and perspectives on political participation: "[e]thnographic research on virtual worlds provides a perspective no other approach to technology and society can offer: it can demonstrate imbrications of technology, culture, and selfhood with significant and enduring social consequences" (Boellstorff et al. 195).

This book makes a further contribution by taking a comparative approach to investigate two online participation tools, the Icelandic *Betri Reykjavík* and the German *LiquidFriesland*. By adopting a mix of both face-to-face and online ethnographic methods to learn about, speak to and understand users, programmers, and politicians and administrators connected to the tool, I set out to determine the tools' relevance both to political decision-making processes and people's everyday lives. By referring back to data I collected about *Betri Reykjavík* in 2011–12, and by checking the fields and remaining in contact with interlocutors after the main fieldwork phase ended in 2014, it has been possible to observe cyclical changes and challenges the fields have had to face over a period of several years. As I broached in the vignette at the beginning of this introduction, one research field, *LiquidFriesland*, was even investigated over its complete lifecycle – from launch to deletion.

This study has its roots in two main areas of academic research: political participation, and Internet and Politics. Online participation tools like *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland* question established classifications of participation modes and definitions of political participation. In that way, I argue that online participation tools do have a strengthening effect on direct, participatory and deliberative strands of democracy, thus chipping away at the hegemonic aspirations of representative democracies established both in Iceland and Germany.

Seen from both a technological and a societal perspective, ICTs – and first and foremost the Internet –have forever altered the ways in which people communicate, interact, and generally take part in life. So-called Social Media generally "offer numerous benefits, including the abilities to carefully craft a public or semi-public self-image, broaden and maintain our social connections, enhance

our relationships, increase access to social capital, and have fun" (Baym, 'Social Networks' 400). Instead of characterising those changes in information and participation practices as either good or bad, this book suggests a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which Social Media differ from other media. Moreover, it examines the evident suitability of Social Media to accommodate political practices, as well as motivating and engaging people in political participation.

Regarding the outline of the book, a chapter on the state of research follows this introduction. It focuses on research in the areas of political participation and on the intersection of the Internet and politics. The research fields *LiquidFriesland* and *Betri Reykjavík* are then discussed in detail. Following that, the methods employed in this study – participant observation, interviews, and focus groups – are presented and contextualised. The last chapter of the book is concerned with the study's results and their discussion. Here, the focus is on political participation repertoires today, the enabling versus the simulation of (online) participation, political participation in times of crisis and times of affluence, and the role of geographical proximity in (online) political participation. The "insertions" in the book, "Doing Ethnography I-III", aim to condense the meta-commentary and my reflections regarding the respective chapters to follow: research fields, methodology, and results and discussion.