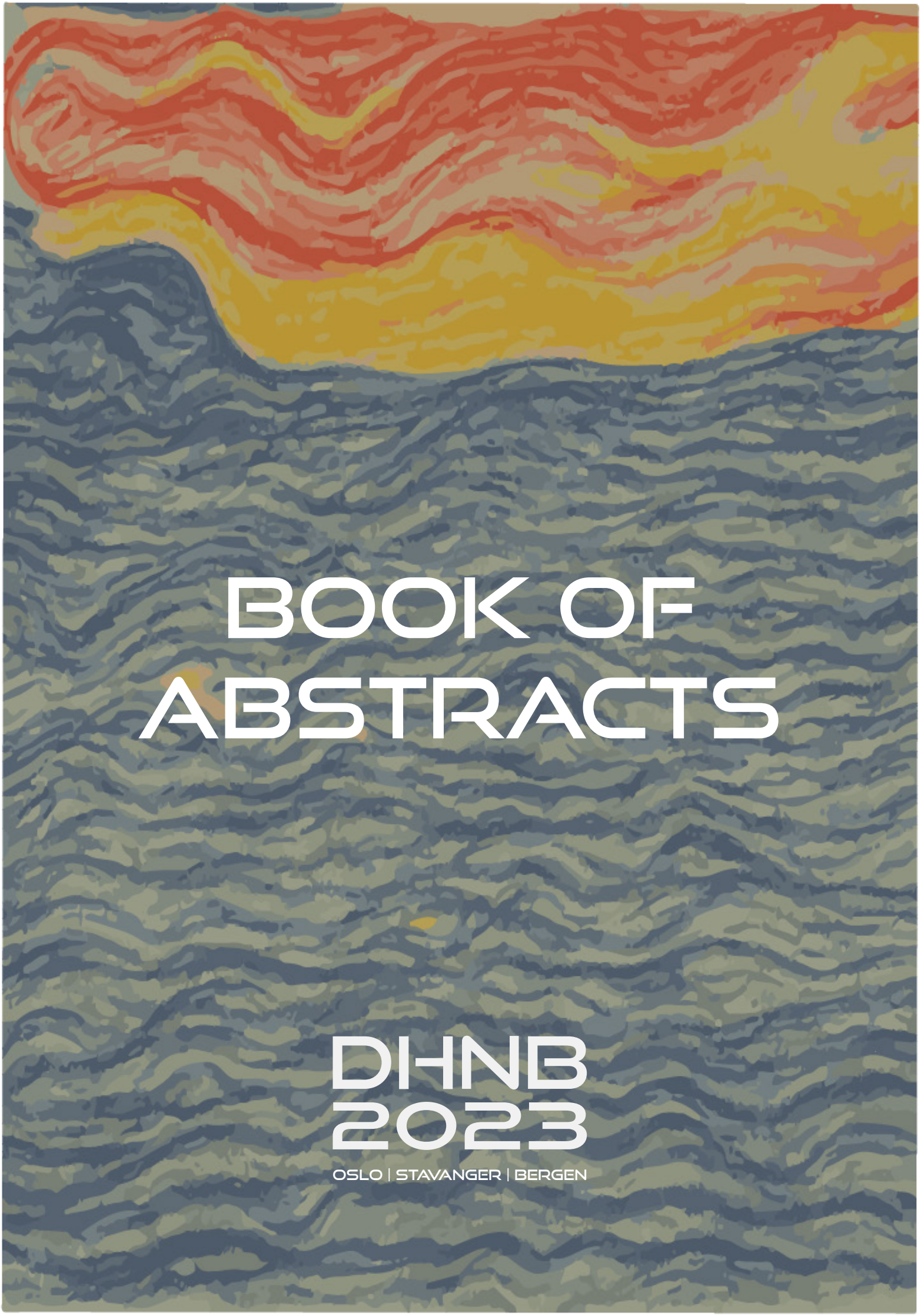
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Book of Abstracts

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Contents

Policy Issues vs. Documentation: Using BERTopic to Gain Insight in the Political Communication in Instagram Stories and Posts During the 2021 German Federal Election Campaign

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9 Mar 2023
14:30-16:00

Instagram is a growing social network [1] with a special focus on visual media. Both, internationally and in Germany politicians' and parties' political communication on Instagram has attracted researchers' interest from several fields like political science and communication science (cf.).[2]

Political communication on Instagram has been investigated differently, depending on the area of study and research interest. For the present project, we focus on content as in the campaign information and policy issues disseminated by political actors through Instagram. Our research interest was influenced by,[3] which – like most studies concerned with the political communication of election campaigns on Instagram – relies on manual analysis (e.g. through coding). In order to brace for a growing amount of visual content on social media we propose to take a computational stance: Using OCR we convert text-integrated images to computer readable text. Once the text has been digitized we are ready to apply established approaches from the computational social science (CSS),[4] like computational text analysis methods (CTAM).[5] In the scope of the present project we propose the use BERTopic[6] for topic modelling to gain insight into the policy issues covered by captions, text-integrated posts and text-integrated stories – and the share of posts or stories covering any issues at all.

We collected a sample of 2208 stories and 718 posts shared by politicians and parties in the 2021 German federal election campaign. Then we executed OCR with the help of EasyOCR and trained a Deep Learning Model to discriminate relevant from irrelevant text snippets using manually annotated data. Finally, the relevant snippets were fed into BERTopic, each post caption, text-integrated post and story as a separate document.

Once we reduced the number of topics to 15, several themes emerged. One category consisted of call-to-action content, in some cases mixed with policy issues (e.g. "Neue Wohnungen bauen [...] am 26.9. CDU wählen"), in others without (e.g. "Besser am 26.9. beide Stimmen CDU"). Another type of topic describes posts documenting the election campaign or speeches by politicians, in some cases combined with addressing the supporters and thanking them for their participation at campaign rallies. Documentation may be combined with short quotes referring to policy issues. Text-integrated images with short quotes emerged as another topic, further, we found a "change" topic, for posts and stories with parties offering to initiate abstract change when voted. Finally, in the policy-focused topics different subjects, like climate-change and economy or economy and social - blended together. We assigned a new variable to each topic classifying whether topics include mainly policy concerned content or rather policy-less documentation, call-to-actions or thanking the supporters by manually looking at a random sample for each topic.

Overall the majority of Instagram stories show, through the lens of topic modelling, a documentation of events, call-to-actions for future events and thanks to supporters.

Only a minority of stories try to disseminate policy issues. A slight majority of text-integrated posts are concerned with policy issues and captions are mostly used to promote policy issues. With triple the amount of stories to posts, the campaign appears to rather be focused on documenting events. The present analysis is only one building block towards a computational analysis of visual social media. We see future work to use speech recognition systems in order to transcribe videos posted as stories as we expect more policy issues to hide in the audio track.

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