

The SEO effect.

Mapping the optimized landscape around controversial policy issues in Italy

Abstract

This research investigates the use of search engine optimization (SEO) by political and non-political actors to amplify the visibility of search engine results. While there has been much theoretical speculation around the role of SEO techniques in boosting the ranking appearance of a website, few empirical studies have been undertaken to understand the extent to which SEO techniques are used to promote visibility online. This study takes Italy as a case study to map the information landscape around nine highly controversial issues during the Italian electoral campaign of 2022. Using a combination of digital methods and a tool detecting optimization in websites, our article aims at examining which actors employ SEO techniques to foster the circulation of their ideas and agendas around hot topics. Our analysis reveals that information channels, institutions, and companies are predominant, while political actors remain in the background. Contextually, data indicate that SEO techniques are employed by several recurrent editorial groups, company owners, and institutions. Ultimately, we discuss the impact of SEO techniques on the circulation and visibility of information around relevant policy issues, contributing to shaping and influencing public debate and opinion.

Research questions

Which actors appear in the first positions when searching for key policy issues of the Italian political elections?

- a. Which of them uses SEO?
- b. How relevant are political actors in this context?

Figure 1

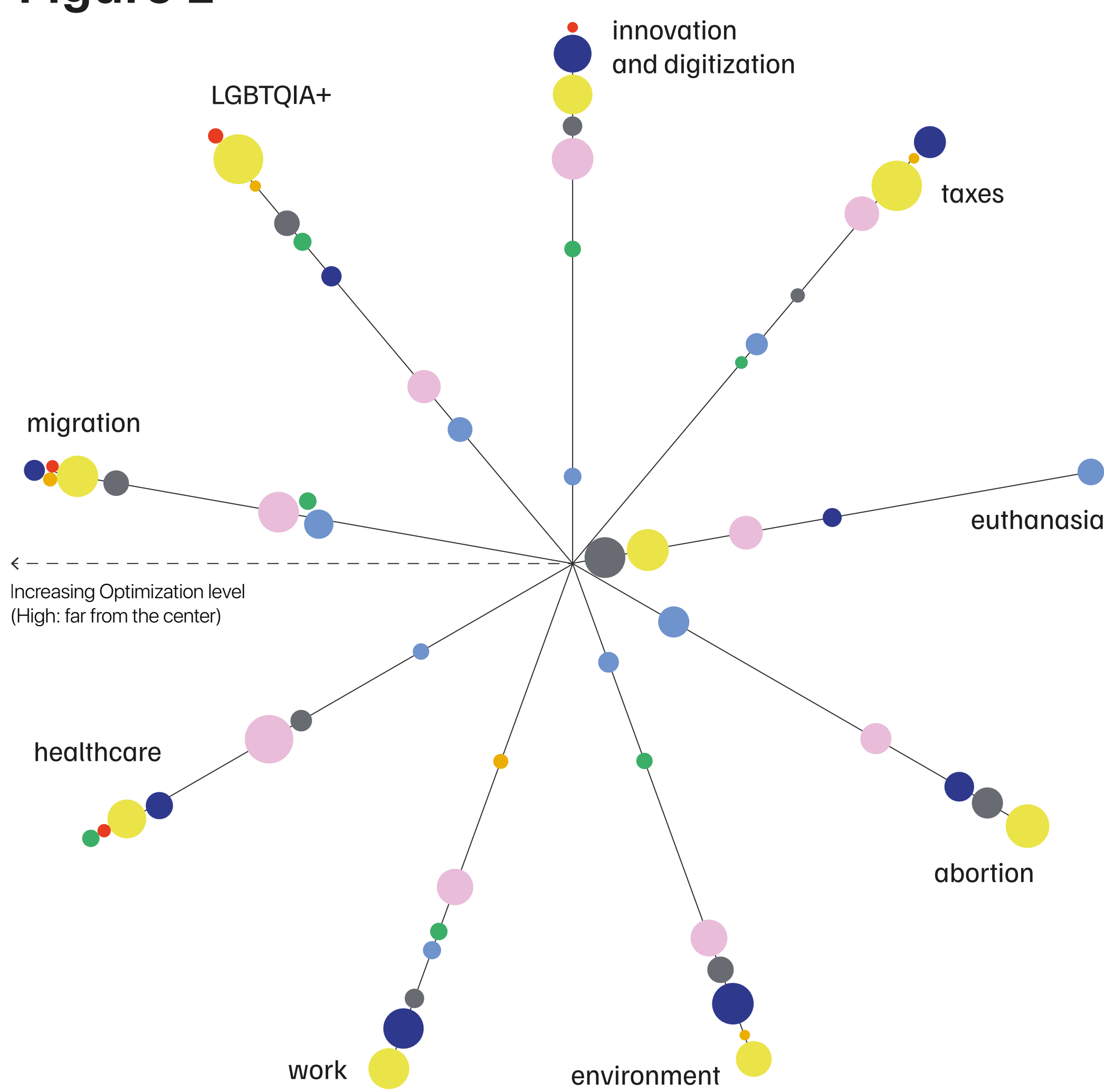
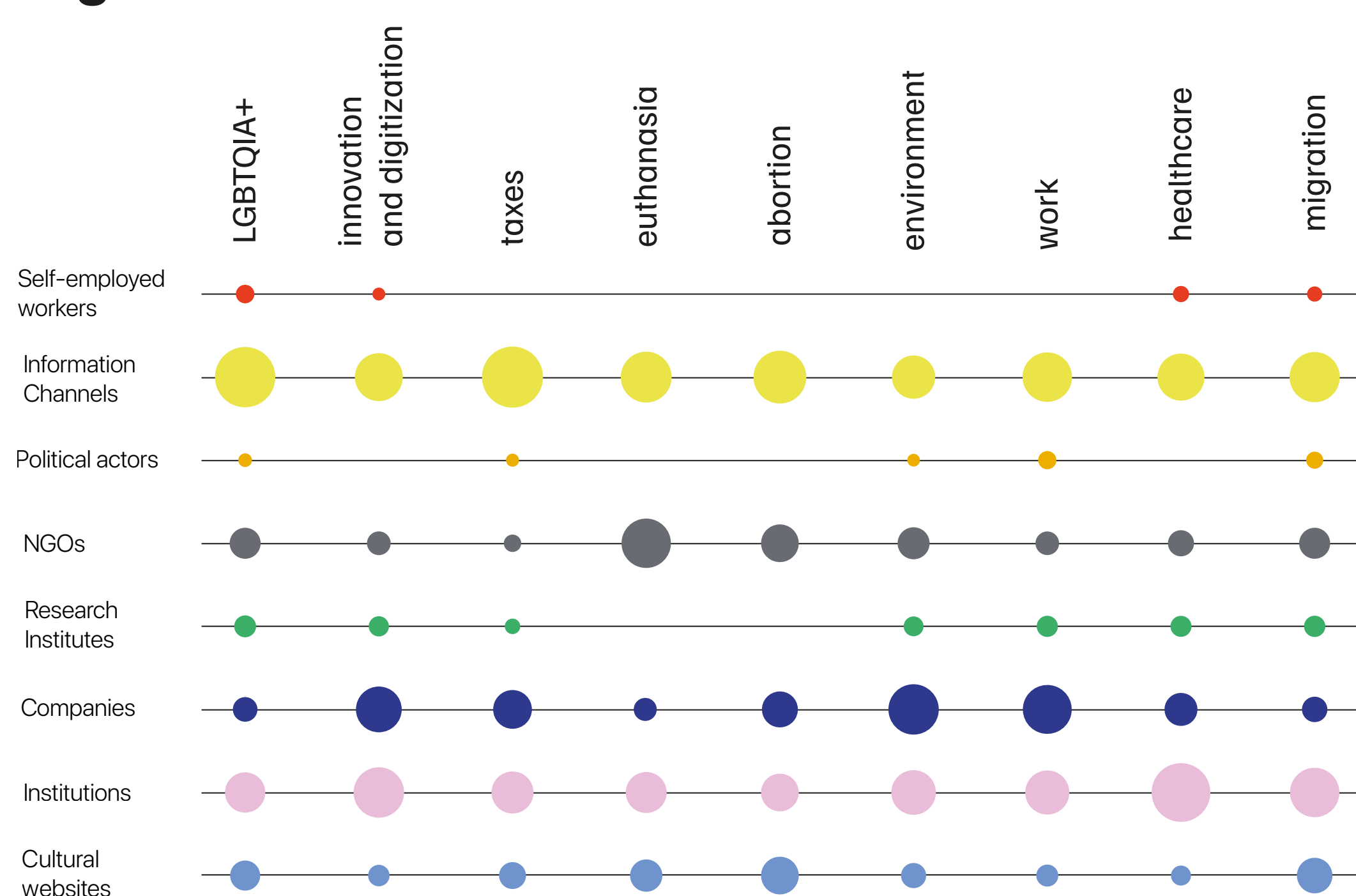


Figure 2



SOURCE (COLOR) - FIG 1, 2

- Companies
- Information Channels
- Self-employed workers
- Political actors
- Cultural websites
- Institutions
- NGOs
- Research Institutes

APPEARANCE - FIG 1, 2 (DOT DIMENSION)

- Minimum appearance in Google Results
- Maximum appearance in Google Results

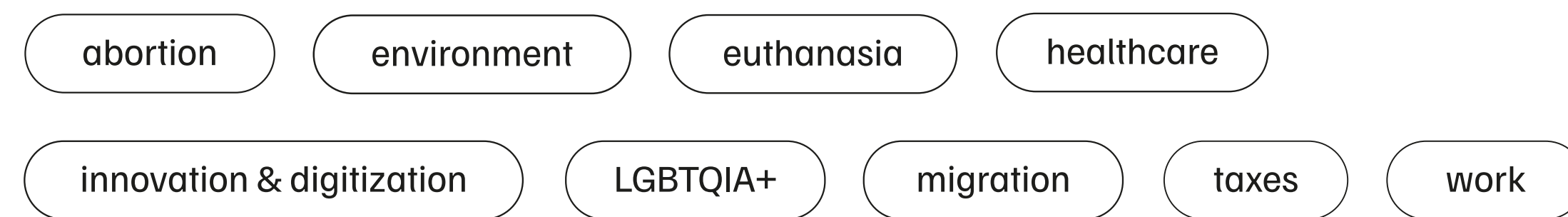
LEVEL OF SEO OPTIMIZATION - FIG. 1 (DOT DISTANCE FROM CENTER)

- Far from the center: HIGH Optimization
- Near the center: LOW Optimization
- Far from the center: HIGH Optimization

Methodology

IDENTIFICATION OF TOPICS

phase 01



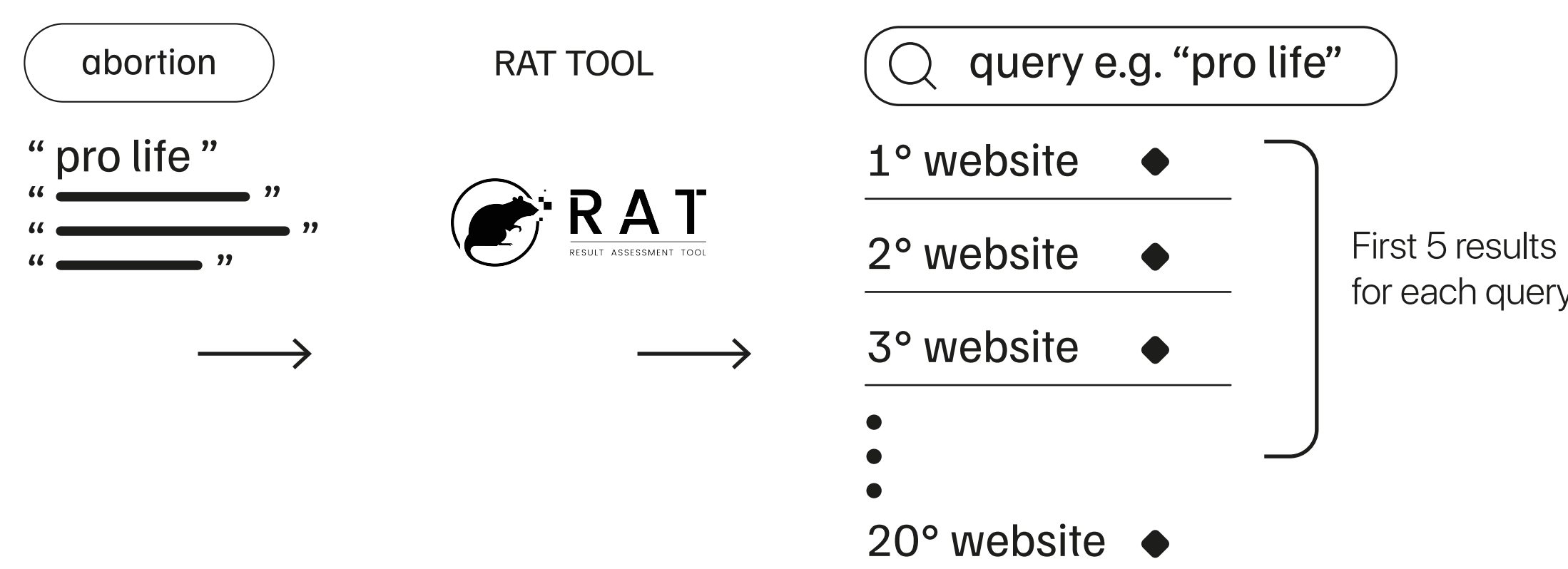
KEYWORDS EXTRACTION

phase 02



ANALYSIS: KEYWORDS AS QUERIES

phase 03



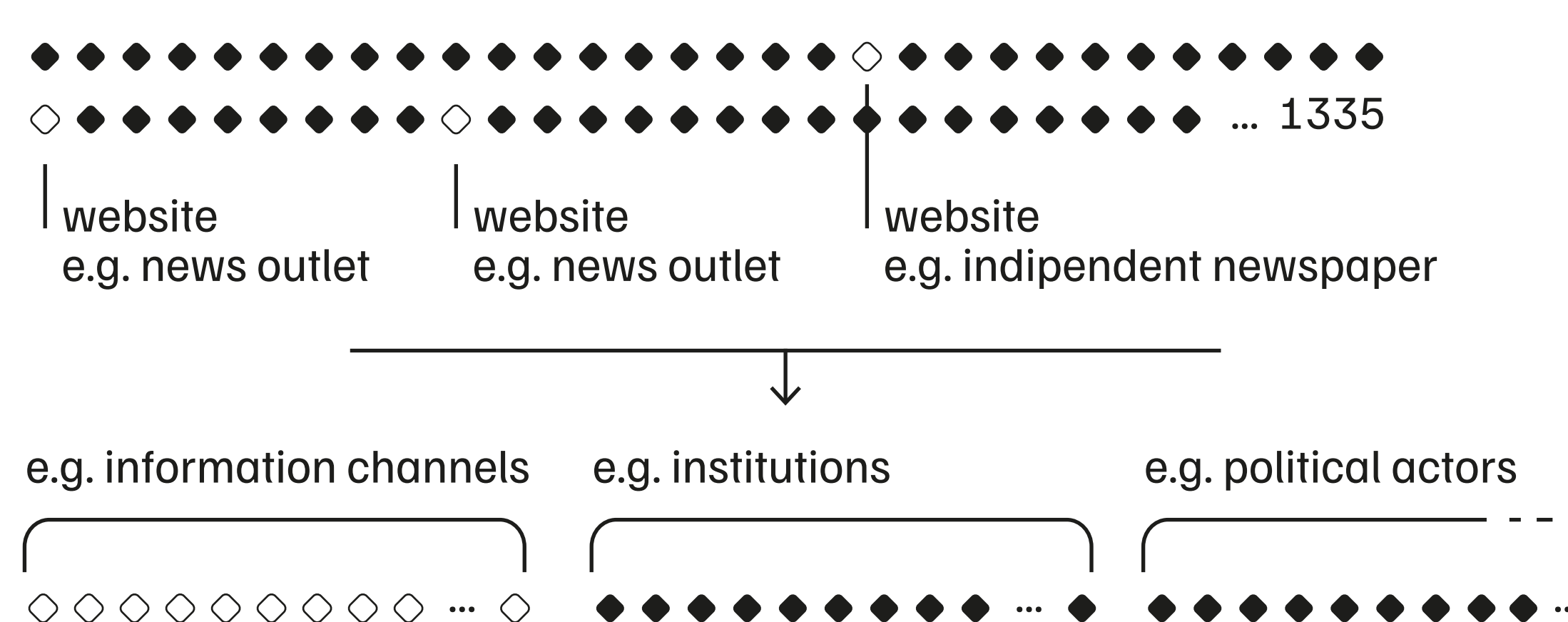
FINAL DATASET: WEBSITES

phase 04



WEBSITE CATEGORISATION

phase 05



Following the digital methods (Rogers, 2013, 2018) the empirical investigation focuses on nine social and political issues. These topics were identified through an exploration of the electoral programs of the most relevant parties (i.e., having at least the 5%) and coalitions competing in the 2022 Italian election.

For each topic: a list of relevant keywords was formulated, either one word or more than one (see Supplementary Material), which were manually extracted from said programs.

The keywords were then used as queries on software (RAT) developed by the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences (HAW Hamburg), simulating a search on Google. The output is a file including the following data: the input query, the link of the website, the position of the website in the ranking (from 1 to 20), and the probability of optimization. The analysis was limited to the first five results for each query, deeming them to be the most visually prominent on the Google result page and, thus, most likely to be seen (and visited) by users.

Final dataset: 1335 websites
55 abortion, 45 euthanasia, 230 work, 130 LGBTQIA+, 170 migration, 160 taxes, 205 healthcare, 165 innovation and digitization, and 175 environment.

The coding process involved iterative rounds of individual coding and collective discussion, the categories were not decided a priori but emerged deductively from the data, following the principles of ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987; Caliendo and Gandini, 2016).

They are information channels, cultural institutions, research institutes, companies, political actors (including both pages of parties, coalitions, or individual leaders), institutions, and NGOs.

Findings

Looking at the typologies of actors present in the first five results, we notice that the majority of the websites are information channels, a broad category that comprises a variety of news and media outlets. Immediately following this category for frequency of occurrences in the dataset, companies and institutions are equally very present in the result page, appearing most frequently in the first positions of the result page, whereas research institutes, cultural websites, and political actors were less significantly present.

It was also found that, with few exceptions (e.g., cultural websites), these categories of actors have most likely implemented search engine optimization strategies to climb to the top of the Google search result page.

Political Actors

The almost total absence of political actors is perhaps the most relevant finding of the analysis. As a matter of fact, only five out of nine of the considered issues report the presence of political actors: work, migration, environment, tax, and LGBTQIA+. Moreover, the category "political actors" always takes the last position of the players, ranked for the frequency of occurrences: In fact, political actors appear three times in work-related results, three times in the migration dataset, and one time each for the remaining searches - environment, tax, and LGBTQIA+.

Nonetheless, we can observe that political actors have a prominent role with respect to their position in the page result ranking. In addition to websites, social media pages were found in the dataset. Looking at the optimization probability level, we can observe that—with the sole exception of the website of the Democratic Party—the rest of the political actors have been classified as being probably optimized.

References

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Camilla De Amicis

Data Visualization, Poster Design, Data Analysis, Article

Laura Caroleo, Giulia Giorgi

Research, Data Analysis, Article

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The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1144669/full#supplementary-material>

Contact: camilla.deam@gmail.com