

POLICY BRIEF #37

16 June 2020

Declining trust, concerns over misinformation & low willingness-to-pay.

News media in troubled waters in Flanders and Wallonia.

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Today, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism publishes its yearly [Digital News Report](#), in which imec-SMIT is the Belgian partner. In our [Facts & Figures](#) report, we explore the data and results on digital news use in Flanders and Wallonia. This policy brief focuses on changes in news use, trust and paying for news over the last five years and key attitudes regarding misinformation and journalism. We will discuss the data as part of our webinar on media concentration on June 25 (Free registration [here](#)).

Highlights

- Digital access to news is consolidating in Belgium. Use of **print** is further declining, but **television**, too, is now more than 10 percentage points down since 2016.
- For 45% of Flemish news users, **online media** (incl. social media) are their main news source. When accessing online news use, only around 30% do so mainly **directly** via a news site or app, 70% via a '**side door**' like newsletters or social media.
- 37% of Flemish news users **aged 18 to 24** say social media are their main access to online news compared to only 10% directly via site or app. Despite other social media growing, **Facebook** is still king in terms of access to news, also amongst youngsters.
- Last years' **drop in trust** in the news in general is further confirmed. The **large gap** between trusting Flemish (51%) and Walloon (36%) news users remains striking.
- Citizens are most concerned about **misleading information by domestic politicians**. Concerns over **journalists** spreading false news are remarkably higher in Wallonia.
- Over half of Flemish news users would prefer that **political advertisements** be banned from television, social media and search engines and that social media would block political adverts with inaccurate claims.
- Trust in **VRT brands** remains high over the past years, also amongst **right-leaning** news users, and particularly high amongst left-leaning news users.
- Over the past five years, the number of people **paying for online news** in Flanders has not grown and remains at 12% and 11% in Wallonia.
- In Flanders, of those paying for online news, a significant part is doing so via **another subscription** or via **another person** paying for it.

This is the fifth year that Belgium, split into Flanders and Wallonia, is part of the Digital News Report. In this policy brief, we grasp the opportunity to look at some striking trends in **news use**,

trust and willingness to pay over the past five years, while zooming in on some **current issues** that are likely to affect how news media will continue to work post-Covid-19.

1. Online, mobile and indirect news access are now mainstream

In the last five years, the trends that have been shaking up the news industry in the last decade have further solidified also in Belgium. In 2020, **mobile (55%) has surpassed computer (50%)** as the most used device to access online news – Flanders and Wallonia showing identical numbers. **TV news is no longer immune** from the shift to digital. The downward trend is gaining traction. Online media (website, apps & social media) are the most used news source in both regions. Social media have now slightly surpassed print in Flanders and leave print way behind in Wallonia.

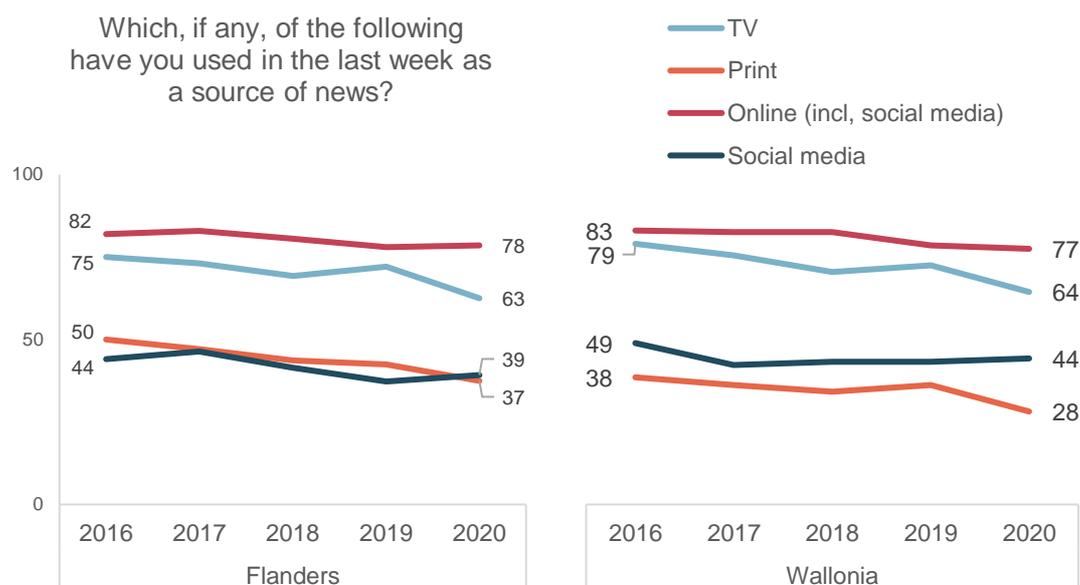


Figure 1: Online news is now mainstream (percentage of respondents shown)

Zooming in on Flanders, we see that **print** has been steadily decreasing over the last five years to finally giving way to social media in 2020. 45% of Flemish news users now say online media (incl. social media) are their *most important* news source, for 34% its television, for 13% its print, for 11% its social media. When we take a closer look at how online news is accessed (see figure 2), the dominance of tech intermediaries becomes immediately clear: only 27% of Flemish news users considers accessing one or more news websites or apps directly as their main news source. **70% use any 'side-door' access as their main news sources**, oftentimes provided by Google, Apple, Facebook and the likes. Some interesting things to note here.

First, while this side-door access to news is dominant, the ratio direct/indirect access as people's *main* news source remained broadly the same over the last five. Also, 34% of Flemish news users said they went **directly to a news site or app** in the last week, up from 30% in 2016. Knowing that most of the popular news brands have installed some form of paywall, this could suggest that their bet on paid-for digital first did not drive more people to the platforms.

Second, to counter the move to various platforms, publishers have been looking to build direct connections with consumers via email and mobile alerts. In Flanders, the use of **newsletters** has been remarkably high. In 2020, 21% note that this is their main way to access online news. Behind that number lies a **significant drop** though: the number of people having used an email newsletter or email alert in the last week dropped from 49% in 2016 to 33% in 2020. **News alerts** through app or SMS on the other hand rose from 9 to 17%. **Podcast** use was only asked on a monthly basis. 23% of Flemish news users have listened to a podcast in the last month; 8% to a news podcast.

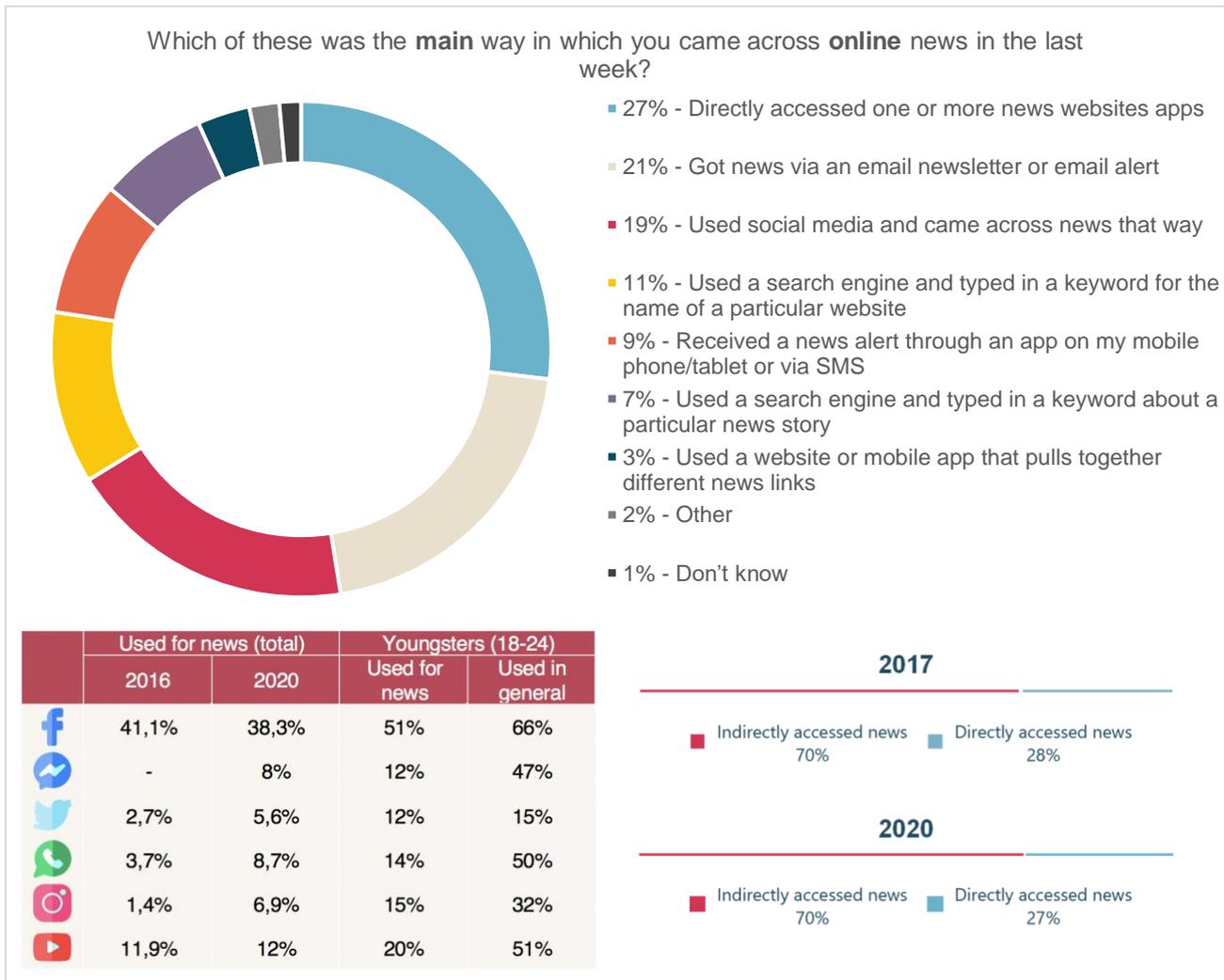


Figure 2: Main sources for online news in Flanders

Third, **social media** are still used to access news by a significant number of Flemish news users (28%) on a weekly basis, albeit growth seems to have stabilised since 2016. Just short of 20% of Flemish news users note that social media are the *main* way they came across news in the last week. We do see some developments regarding which social media are used for news. **Facebook** loses a few points but is still by far the most used platform to use news. Use of **Twitter**, journalists' and politicians' favourite, has doubled but remains small, and has been surpassed by **Instagram** and **WhatsApp**. **Youtube** on the other hand is stagnating.

Interesting to note is that **social media use for news is significantly higher amongst those aged 18 to 24**. For 37% of them, social media is their *main* access to online news, way above all other forms surveyed, including directly via site or app (10%). In terms of general use in this age group, Facebook (66%) is definitely feeling the competition of (its own) platform WhatsApp and Google's Youtube, but not when it comes to news. While 50% of youngsters are using WhatsApp and Youtube, only 14% and 20% respectively use them to access news. **51% use Facebook for news**.

2. Trust in news. The downward turn confirmed

Across all markets, the survey indicates that less than four in ten (38%) said they trust 'most news most of the time' – a fall of four percentage points from 2019. Less than half (46%) said they trust the news they use themselves. In Belgium, like in recent years, **trust in the news in general** remains significantly higher, but the **downward trend** we saw last years is now further confirmed.

This trend is perceived in both regions. This is especially remarkable in Wallonia, where trust in the news in general was already significantly lower than in Flanders. 51% of Flemish news users trust the news in general, putting **Flanders** in **6th place** among the 40 surveyed countries. As we noted last year, the **discrepancy** between **younger** and **older** people remains remarkable in Flanders, with 57% of those above 35 trusting the news in general compared to only 37% of those below 35. Flanders does no longer seem immune to the general decrease in trust in public institutions that is perceived [in many parts of the Western world](#). **Wallonia** comes in at number **25** (36%).



Figure 3: Different types of trust in media (Flanders, Wallonia, Belgium, worldwide – and compared to 2016 and rank out of 40 surveyed countries where provided)

Interestingly, in terms of trust in the news in general, both regions seem to align more with their respective cultural cousins: 52% in **The Netherlands** and 23% in **France**. This might however have more to do with The Netherlands and Flanders being more affluent regions as wealthier, more educated and frequent consumers of news remain [far more trusting](#) in their institutions. Both regions are more aligned – mutually and internationally – when it comes to news obtained through the intermediary of **powerful technology companies**, which is clearly **less trusted**.

3. Rising concerns about misinformation

Global concerns about misinformation remain high. Even before the coronavirus crisis hit, more than half of the global sample said they were concerned about what is true or false on the internet when it comes to news. Here, too, both regions diverge. In Flanders this is rising: **about 4 in 10 Flemish news users is concerned about what is real and what is fake online**, up from 3 in 10 in 2018. Flanders is still amongst the less concerned countries in the sample, together with Austria (40%), Denmark (37%), Germany (37%), and The Netherlands (32%). In Wallonia, 6 out of 10 are concerned (63%) down from 66% in 2018¹.

¹ In Flanders, we notice large **fluctuations in trust levels between subgroups of the population**, between people with a left versus right political orientation and to a small extent with higher versus lower education, but most notably between younger and older news users. See our previous [brief](#).

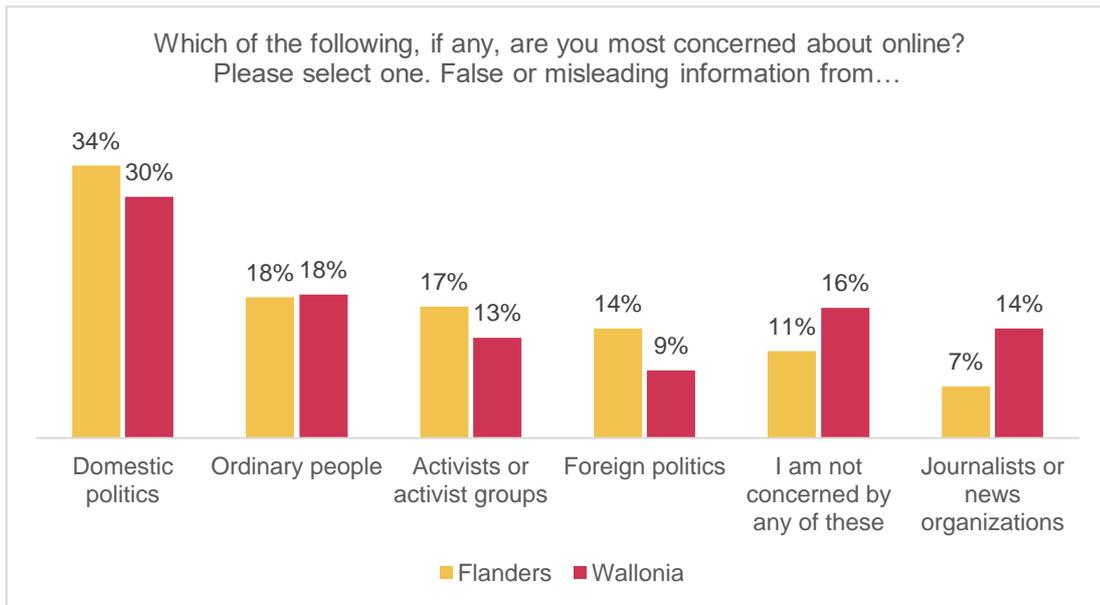


Figure 4: Actors people are most concerned about when it comes to misinformation

Which potential sources of misinformation are people most concerned about? Globally, **domestic politicians are the single most frequently named source of concern for misinformation**, and there is no between the two Belgian regions. A striking difference, however: in Wallonia, twice as many news users are most concerned about false or misleading information from **journalists or news organizations** than in Flanders, which might hint at the fact that the lower general trust in news in Wallonia is more explicitly directed at news media. The recent corruption scandal around public company Publifin, which also shined on its news subsidiary L’Avenir, might play a role here.

4. Safeguarding democracy from political persuasion

Knowing that Flemish news users are mostly concerned about politicians as source of online misinformation, it is interesting to further probe how they feel regarding political advertisements, the role of tech companies and the role of news media in relation to political misinformation.

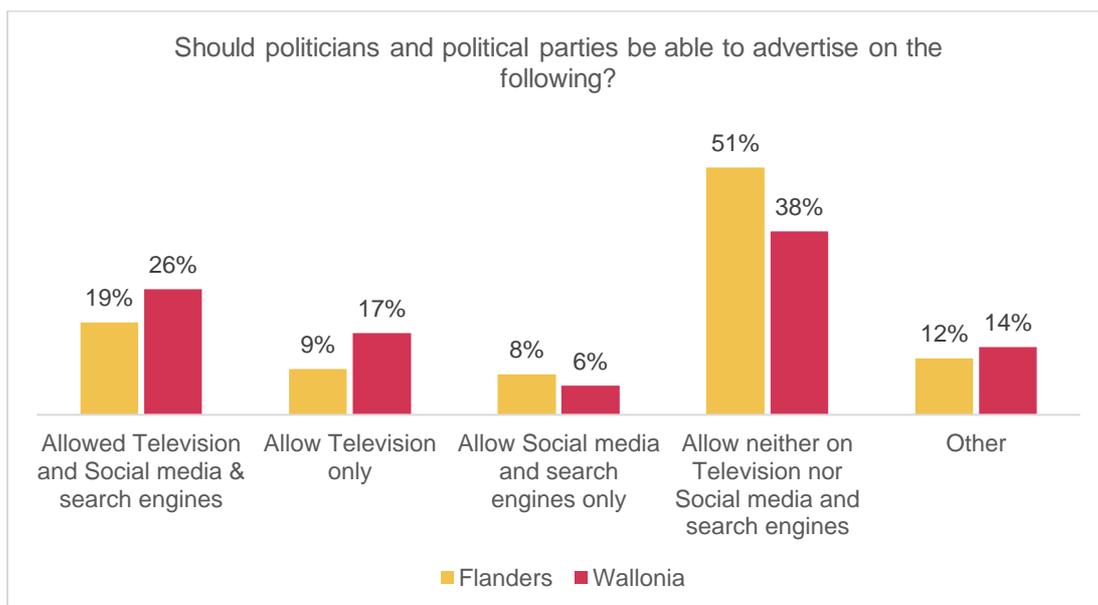


Figure 5: Attitudes towards political advertisement

Regarding political advertisements, half of the Flemish news users would prefer to **ban political advertisement** from television, social media and search. Only 20% would allow them on all three channels. Flanders does not allow political advertisements on radio and television anyways, and most of its citizens do not really seem to expect it either.

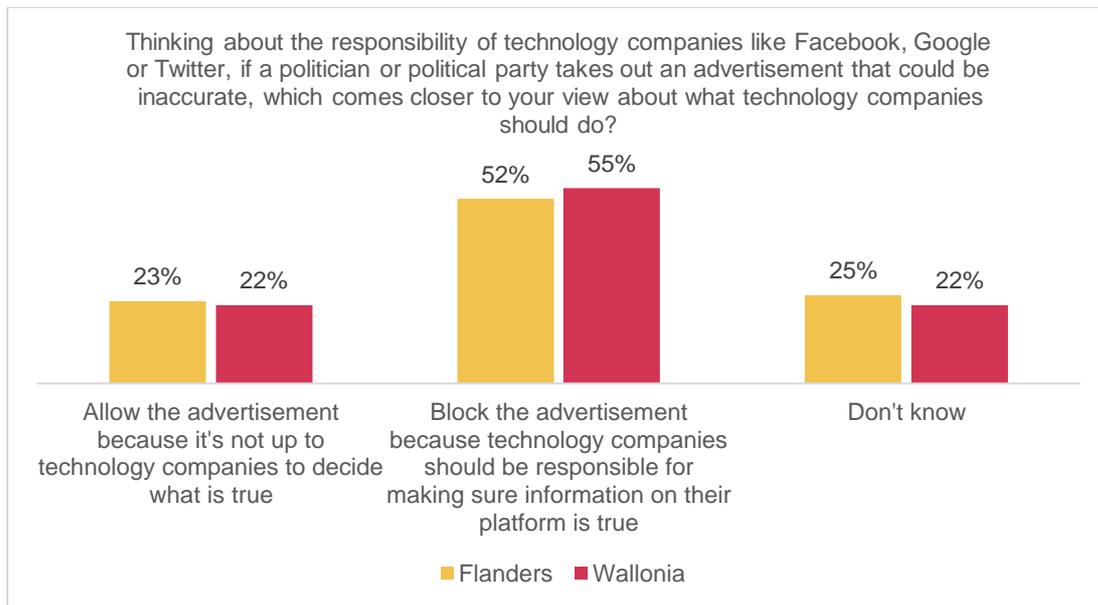


Figure 6: Attitudes towards technology companies and political advertisements

When it comes to the **responsibility of technology companies**, a small majority of Flemish news users would prefer platforms to **block political adverts** that could contain inaccurate claims – even if it means they ultimately get to decide what is true. This is interesting in light of the recent actions taken by [Twitter](#) to fact-check president Trump and Facebook’s ongoing decision not to fact-check political advertisements. As Mark Zuckerberg [argued](#): “*Political speech is one of the most sensitive parts in a democracy, and people should be able to see what politicians say.*” While Facebook does not want to be the **arbiter of truth**, news users might think differently here.

News media in turn often claim to be the **watchdog of democracy**. What should they do when a politician makes a statement that could be false? Here, Flemish news users seem **more divided**, with public opinion nicely split between those who would expect news media to report the statement to know what the politician said and those who believe news media better give nor the statement nor the politician unwarranted attention.

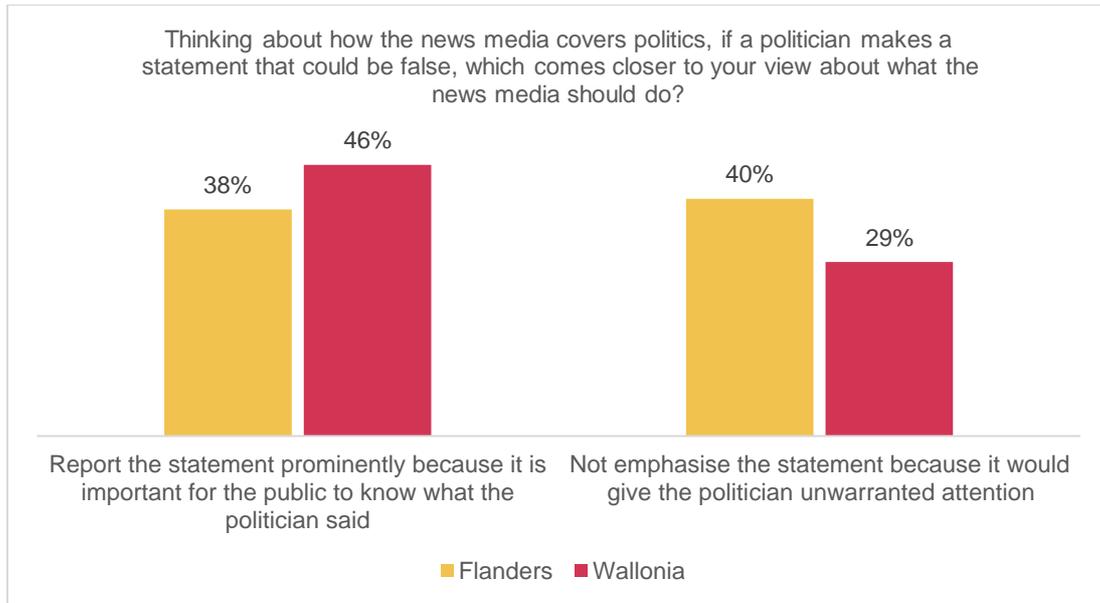


Figure 7: Attitudes towards the role of news media and politicians

5. VRT... Friend or foe?

Globally, political polarisation linked to rising uncertainty seems to have **undermined trust in public broadcasters** in particular, which are losing support from political partisans from both the right and the left. In Flanders, the **VRT** is preparing to renew its management contract with the Flemish government. That process is taking place on the background of a political struggle where VRT is often accused of holding a leftist bias and making editorial decisions accordingly.

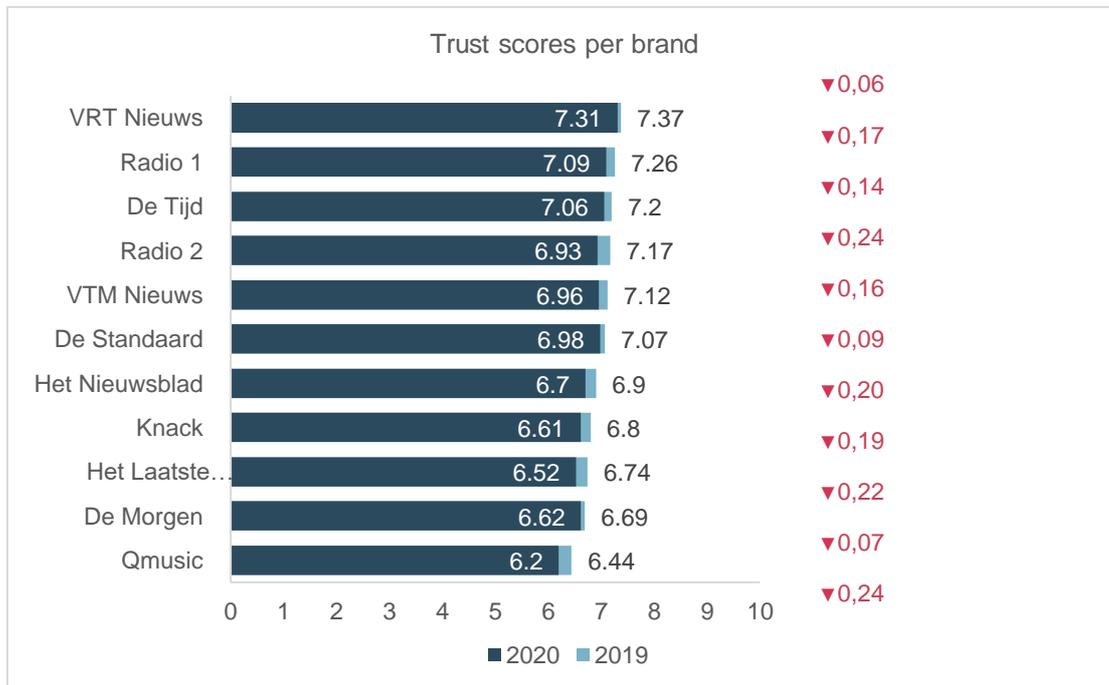


Figure 8: Brand trust scores 2020

In that context, it is interesting to see that **VRT Nieuws** is still the brand with the **highest trust score** in our survey, even though its score and that of its main competitors are not that far apart. VRT suffers from a slight decline in trust over the last year, but so do all other brands, in line with the lower general trust in the news discussed above. Still, looking at brand trust scores, **all news**

brands seem to show a remarkable resilience, which might suggest that declining trust in the news in general is driven more by difficulties to navigate the online information environment than by a lowering degree of trust in the news media.

Focusing on VRT, there are **differences** amongst youngsters, education and political orientation though. Amongst all age groups, VRT Nieuws remains the most trusted brand, except amongst those **aged 18 to 24**. **VTM** is not only attracting more youngsters than **VRT**. It also translates this higher reach into a (slightly) **higher trust score** for the brand. And while use of **De Standaard** and **De Morgen** is much lower amongst this age group, the quality news brands resonate in terms of trust. Except for its Radio 1, trust in VRT is quite **similar across education levels**.

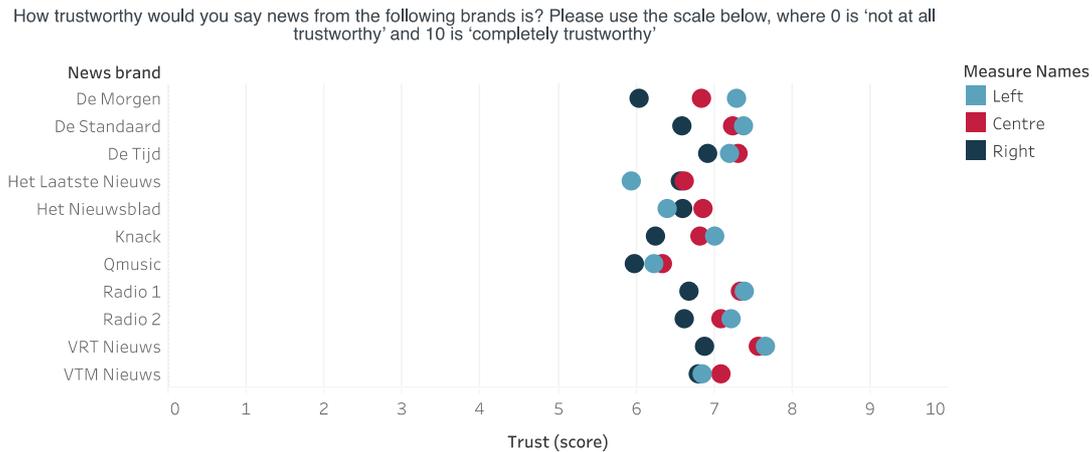


Figure 9: Brand trust scores by political orientation

While still high, trust in the public broadcaster is clearly lower amongst people at the right than at the left and centre. VTM seems to be the least 'polarising' brand. Still, contrary to what the loudest voices on Twitter may suggest, even amongst **citizens with a right-leaning political orientation, VRT remains the most trusted source** amongst the brands covered. What is clear is that general trust in VRT Nieuws is high and remains stable over the past years, also amongst right-leaning news users, and particularly high amongst left-leaning news users².

² Political orientation was probed by asking people 'Some people talk about 'left', 'right' and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself?'

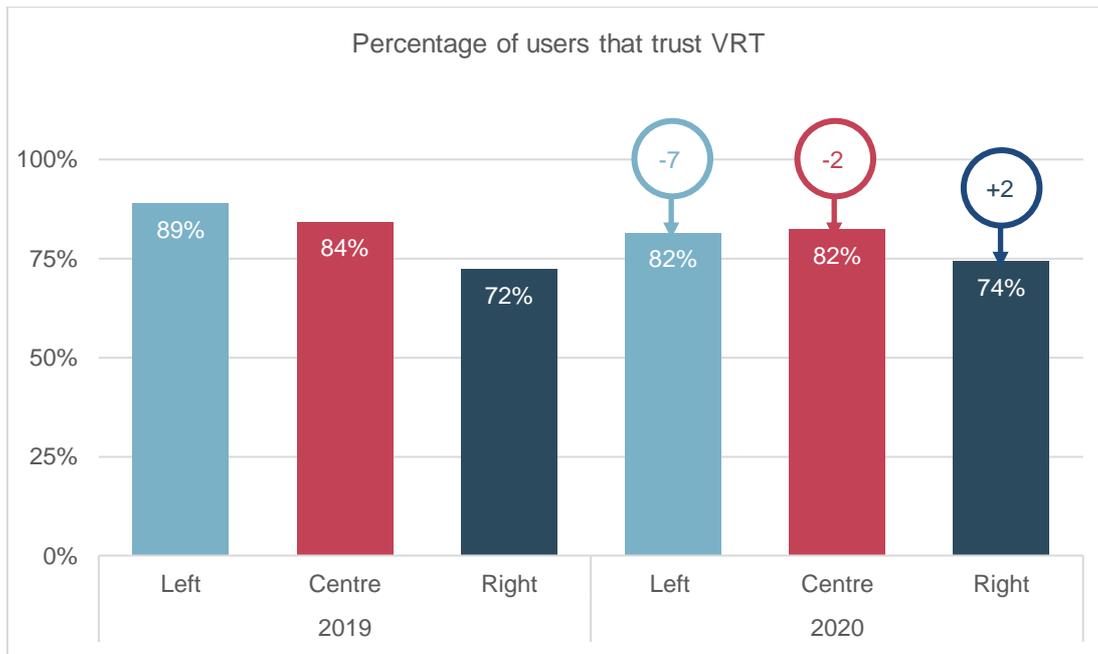


Figure 10: Percentage of Flemish news users trusting the VRT by political orientation

Zooming in even more closely, we can divide our sample along political orientation and then look at how many respondents within each group deem VRT Nieuws trustworthy – giving them a score of 6 or higher. Are there any differences compared to last year? First thing we notice here, too, is the **high levels of trust for the public broadcaster’s news brand**. Remarkably, we perceive a larger drop in trust for VRT News amongst left-leaning voters, while trust amongst right-leaning users is even very slightly increasing.

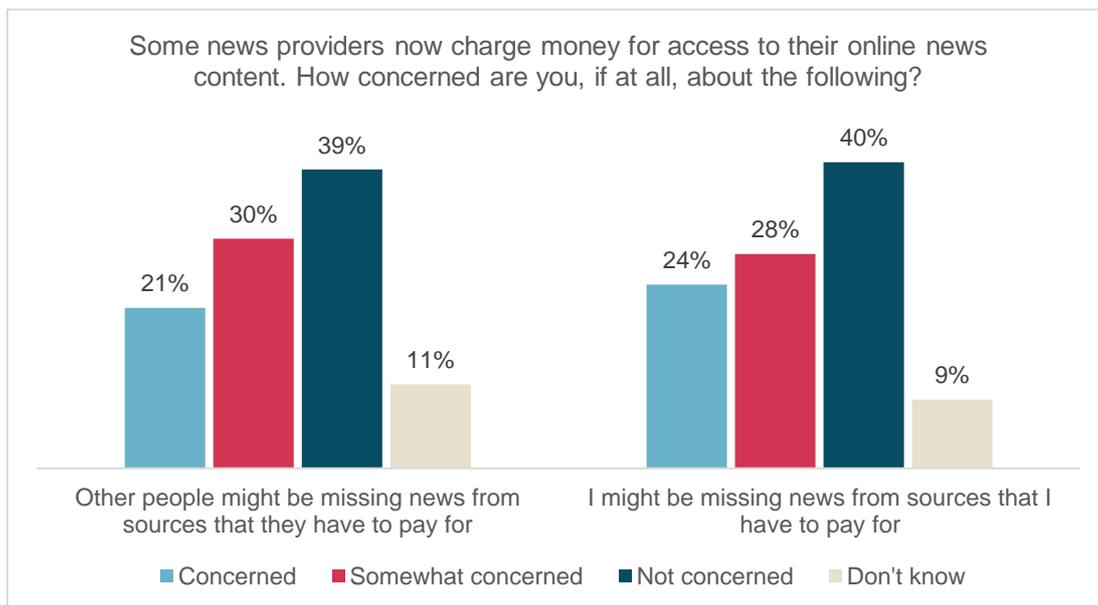


Figure 11: Amount of Flemish news users concerned about access to news

Finally, another point of discussion regarding the public broadcaster is whether VRT should focus foremost on audiovisual news or should also expand its online news offering? Rooting for the former are news publishers arguing that a strong online VRT would disrupt the market, defending the latter are public institutions fearing that paywalls would **exclude citizens from access to**

news. Are Flemish news users concerned about the issue of missing news from sources they have to pay for? Here too, Flemish citizens seems to be **divided**.

6. Paying for online news remains low in Flanders

In 2019, a series of questions were asked about people's willingness to pay for news – discussed in last year's [Facts & Figure](#) report. Amongst others, they revealed that 90% of Flemish news users are unlikely to pay for online news they appreciate in the next 12 months.

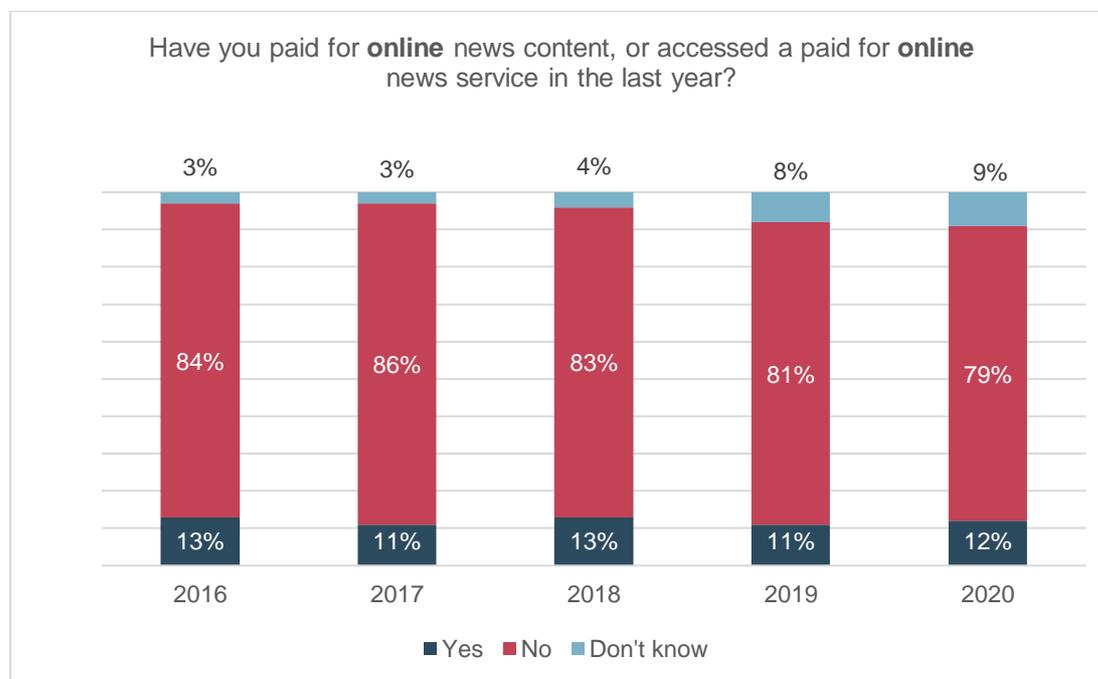


Figure 12: Amount of Flemish news users paying for online news

This year's survey confirms that the amount of Flemish news users **paying for online news** has **hardly increased** last year. If we consider this over the last five years, we see a consistently low percentage of people paying for online news (12% – in Wallonia 11%). This resonates with trends across the globe discussed in the DNR. Distinctiveness and quality of news content are the most important reasons to pay for online news. Still, a large number of people are perfectly content with the news they can access for free and a very high proportion of non-subscribers (especially in the USA and the UK) say that nothing could persuade them to pay.

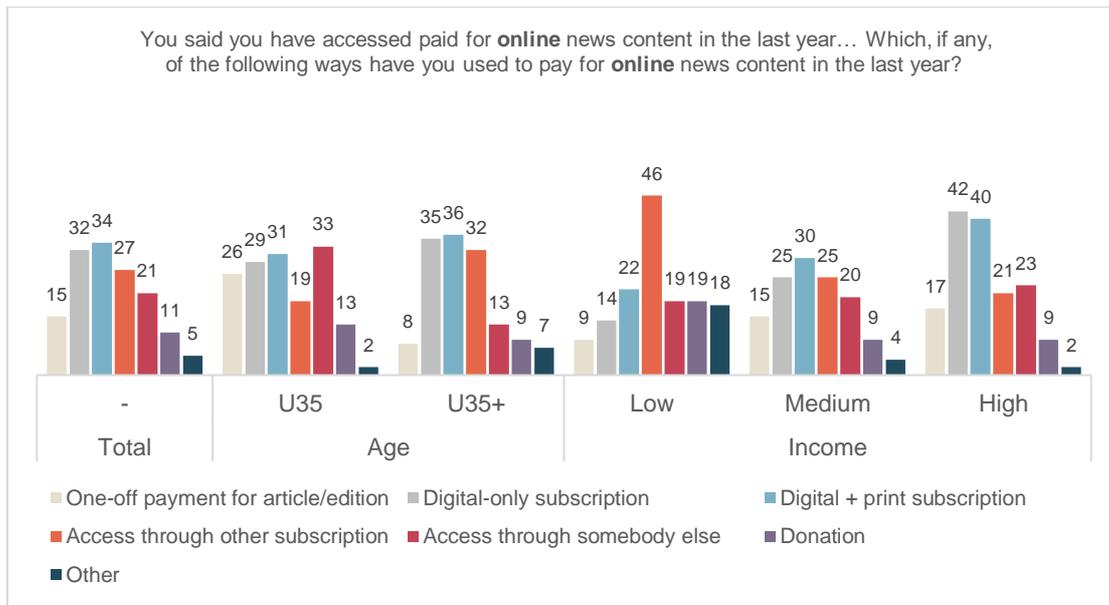


Figure 13: Different ways of paying for online news by age and income

Those who do pay for online news in Flanders seem to do so mainly through digital-only and digital+print subscription. Next to that, a significant part of paying news users are not seeing the bill, as they access paid news **through another subscription** – think access to Het Laatste Nieuws through Proximus – or **through somebody else paying** for it. Accessing paid news through somebody else paying for it spikes amongst those **below 35 years**. Accessing paid news through another subscription is remarkably higher amongst those with a **lower income**. So, even amongst those paying for news, we see that especially older and more affluent news users are the ones ‘putting their money where their mouth is’.

7. Conclusion. Navigating troubled waters.

News media are caught in the middle of a pressing public debate. Their choices are increasingly scrutinized by politicians, civil society and citizens alike. Judging by the loudest voices on Twitter they never seem to get it right. If they report the lies told by politicians, they are considered accomplices in amplifying misleading messages. If they don’t, they are accused of censoring one side of the story. If journalists take a stance, they are biased. If they do not, they are spineless.

In navigating these troubled waters, journalists have some tough calls to make. They can fall back on their editorial expertise. But in order to make informed decisions, having an idea of how their main stakeholder, the citizens, are looking at some of these issues is key. The Digital News Report seeks to offer exactly that by providing comparative, recurrent, evidence -based insights into news use that are complimentary to editorial analytics.

In the coming months in Flanders, news media will be covering the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly going as far as new elections. **Trust in the news in general is declining, concerns about disinformation are rising and politicians are seen as the most worrying source of misleading information.** In such a context, news media can rely on the fact that across the board they enjoy **high levels of trust amongst the public**, even though only a minority is also willing to pay for the information they offer. This should give them the necessary confidence to take difficult decisions. In some cases, however, such as the decision to run or not misleading information of politicians, public opinions is strongly divided. We will just need to trust them to take the right decision.

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*The **Media Programme** of SMIT, a research group at imec and VUB, consists of 45 junior and senior researchers. The researchers are specialist in various policy, market, and user research methods. Their work spans the fields of national and European media and competition policy, cultural diversity, public broadcasting, the sustainability of creative industries, immersive media, data and valorisation, privacy, media literacy, and digital inclusion. The programme is headed by Prof. Dr. Karen Donders (karen.donders@vub.be). The programme is also in charge of **Mediahub Brussel**, that is investing in education, innovation and collaboration in the Flemish and Brussels media sectors. The Mediahub Brussel is supported by the Flemish Government.*