

POLICY BRIEF #53

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DOES OUR NEWS USE PREDICT OUR VIEWS ON SOCIETY?

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News media have often been thought to function as a user's 'window to the world', that allows them to keep up to date on current affairs, and, in doing so, participate in society. But what if news users view the world through a 'narrow' window, or take only a quick peek at the world? Would their views on society be significantly different from other users?

In this policy brief we explore this question in 3 steps. First, we look at the different news repertoires (or windows) among Flemish news users. Second, we look at the users within each repertoire. Third and last, we compare news users with each repertoire according to their societal attitudes, including civic disengagement, community and fellowship, individualism, and ethnocentrism.

While algorithms have often been the subject of moral panics surrounding filter bubbles or echo chambers, we found that the downward spiral of a Limited news repertoire coupled with a lower socio-economic status might prove a bigger threat in isolating users and skewing their views on society towards the negative.

Interested in how to move forward based on these results? Take a look at the [**CONVERSATION**](#) STARTERS at the bottom of this document.

1

THROUGH WHICH REPERTOIRES DO USERS SEE THE WORLD?

Broadly speaking, we find four different 'windows' or news repertoires that Flemish news users peer through:

- (1) the **Traditional news repertoire**, which is mostly oriented towards television news and legacy media;
- (2) the **Panoramic news repertoire**, which excels at combining a wide variety of sources including quality media brands;
- (3) the **Casual news repertoire**, which affords a more passive approach to news and includes mostly online sources; and lastly
- (4) the **Limited news repertoire**, which has news users rarely consult the news media and has them mostly relies on television news.

2

NOT ALL WINDOWS ARE MADE EQUAL

Flemish news repertoires differ greatly, both with regards to their composition, as well as the users that make use of them. For example, users with a Limited news repertoire exhibit lower socio-economic status, and report a lower

subjective income. Meanwhile, the broadest Panoramic news repertoire appears to remain limited to higher-educated and affluent news users.

3

AN OPEN WINDOW FOSTERS AN OPEN MIND

Societal attitudes differ significantly among the different news repertoires. What's more, we find similarities between the structure of one's repertoire, and one's outlook on the world. For example, news users with a broad Panoramic repertoire exhibit a higher societal engagement, and lower individualism and ethnocentrism than users with a Limited news repertoire.

1. THROUGH WHICH WINDOWS DO USERS SEE THE WORLD?

The Flemish news repertoires presented below were constructed using the Flemish Participation Survey¹ (a large scale representative CAPI survey) by clustering news users ($N=3138$) based on their use of (1) news sources, (2) news participation, and their preference for (3) news genres. News sources included a wide variety of media devices and platforms commonly used to access news. News participation was measured as 'reading comments on articles' and 'writing reactions on forums'. Lastly, a wide variety of news genres were included, such as politics, sports, crime, society, and others.²



Traditional // 37.7%

Users in this news repertoire are characterized by their use of mostly traditional news sources. These users rely primarily on legacy media, including newspapers, television, and radio as news providers. Users of this news repertoire have a broad topical interest including Crime, Human Interest, and Society. However, despite being jack-of-all-trades when it comes to their topical interests, users in the traditional news repertoire exhibit little interest in entertainment news about celebrities or lifestyle topics, and only a moderate interest in Politics.



Panoramic // 31.3%

Users in this news repertoire excel at combining a diverse range of sources, and interests. In addition, this news repertoire belongs to users with a pronounced interest in news on Society, Politics, and Crime. It includes both traditional news sources (newspapers, television, radio) and new or online media (computer & smartphone). It is also striking that users of the Panoramic Repertoire participate in news more than those of other repertoires, in particular by reading other users' comments on news articles.

¹ The Flemish Participation Survey is a large scale representative survey into the media and cultural participation patterns of Flemish citizens overseen by the Knowledge Center Culture and Media Participation. For more information, see <https://www.cultuurenmedia.be>

² For a complete list of variables included in the clustering analysis, and more information on how news repertoires were constructed, see: Picone, I., & Vandenplas, R. (2021). Windows to the World: Imagining Flemish News Audiences and Their Views on Society through the Lens of News Repertoires. *Digital Journalism*, 1-22.



Casual // 17.5%

This news repertoire belongs to a noticeably more passive news user. These news users tend to meander through the news landscape. Their use of news is more infrequent than that of the Traditional or Panoramic repertoire, only consulting most news sources on a weekly or monthly basis. Moreover, for these users, social media such as Facebook and Twitter are the most important source of news, in addition to radio. In terms of their interests, these users have a clear preference for topics including human interest and entertainment.



Limited // 13.4%

While users of the other repertoires still consult news sources on an infrequent or daily basis, the news consumption of users of the Limited Repertoire is much sparser. These users avoid online news media, as they rely primarily on television journals for updates and consume hardly any news, if ever. This is also reflected in the interests of these users, as they seem to have no pronounced preference for any specific topic. When it comes to the news they are disinterested in, however, their preferences become noticeably more outspoken. More than 70% of the users of this news repertoire indicate that they are not interested in celebrities (entertainment) or politics. In addition, it is also noticeable that these users, just like the users in the Traditional Repertoire, participate less in news overall. They rarely if ever read or write comments on articles.

2. NOT ALL WINDOWS ARE MADE EQUAL

Not only do the different Flemish news repertoires differ greatly with regards to their internal composition. They also **differ significantly with regards to the sociodemographic profiles of their users**. This means that while media have been argued to have become more accessible over the years, **news use in Flanders appears to remain marked by social stratification**.

The Panoramic repertoire for example, which is characterized by exhibiting the broadest range of news sources and interests and a higher participation in news compared to other repertoires, **remains the prerogative of users with a higher socio-economic status**. These users are young to middle-aged, have attained high levels of education, and exhibit high net and subjective incomes. This is in stark contrast to **the Limited repertoire**, which is home to users with a **markedly lower socio-economic status**.

The lower socio-economic status of users with a Limited repertoire is further problematized by their lower subjective income compared to other users. This sets them apart from users of the Traditional repertoire, who at first glance appear to share a lower socio-economic status profile. In our study, subjective income was measured by asking respondents how difficult it was to make ends meet financially. As a result, users in the Limited news repertoire consist of a larger **group of users that reports a financially precarious and as a result more fragile situation**.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of sociodemographic profiles of news repertoires

		Percentage By Repertoire				
		Traditional	Panoramic	Casual	Limited	All
<i>Net income</i>	< 1899	32,1	9,3	15,6	41,0	20,8
	1900 - 2899	30,1	20,8	20,7	26,9	21,6
	2900 - 3699	21,2	28,8	37,0	19,6	21,7
	> 3700	16,6	41,0	26,7	12,5	20,2
<i>Subjective income</i>	Low	16,3	8,3	13,2	27,0	7,7
	Medium	21,5	14,0	15,1	21,9	49,8
	High	62,2	77,7	71,7	51,1	41,3
<i>Gender</i>	Female	54,3	41,6	57,7	47,0	50,4
	Male	45,7	58,4	42,3	53,0	49,6
<i>Age</i>	15-17	1,4	1,7	16,5	7,2	5,0
	18-34	5,4	29,7	51,7	18,7	23,2
	35-54	29,4	41,0	25,0	31,3	31,2
	54-65	26,3	16,5	5,1	15,2	17,9
	65+	37,5	11,0	1,7	27,6	22,8
<i>Education</i>	No or primary education	13,2	1,0	2,0	19,3	9,0
	Lower secondary education	22,2	9,1	21,1	25,9	19,2
	Higher secondary education	34,9	26,4	42,6	38,7	33,5
	Higher education	29,7	63,5	34,3	16,1	37,7

The descriptive patterns presented in Table 1 are largely confirmed through a Multinomial Regression Analysis which can be found in the full paper. This regression analysis provides an overview of the likelihood for users to adopt a news repertoire other than the reference category of the Limited repertoire. Here, we see similar patterns arise when controlling for the effect of other sociodemographic variables in the model. More specifically, these results support the finding that **higher educated users have higher likelihoods to adopt Panoramic repertoires**, while **lower educated users gravitate more strongly towards the Limited Repertoire**. Similarly, our regression analysis supports that **younger users, as well as female users, are more likely to adopt a Casual news repertoire than a Limited repertoire**.

3. AN OPEN WINDOW FOSTERS AN OPEN MIND

Moving forward with these results, **how do inequalities in news use potentially impact a user's views on society?** In the last stage of our research, we compared the different news repertoires with regards to their views on the world. This was achieved by relating the repertoires to 5 themes: (1) civic disengagement, their (2) sense of community, (3) fellowship, (4) individualism, and (5) ethnocentrism.

The distinction between users with a Panoramic and Limited repertoires is perhaps **best reflected in the descriptive analysis of Ethnocentrism**, presented in Table 2. Here, a significantly higher percentage of **users with a Limited news repertoire exhibit negative sentiments towards migration** (see Q16_5 and Q16_6), and significantly differ from users in other repertoires with regards to their views on other ethnicities (Q16_7) and cultures (Q16_8).

Table 4: descriptive analysis of Ethnocentrism

		Percentage By Repertoire			
		Traditional	Panoramic	Casual	Limited
Q16_5. Generally speaking, migrants cannot be trusted	Disagree	42,1 _a	59,8 _b	49,6 _c	38,9 _a
	Neither agree nor disagree	49,5 _a	34,4 _b	43,4 _a	45,6 _a
	Agree	8,3 _a	5,8 _a	7,0 _a	15,6 _b
Q16_6. Migrants contribute to the prosperity of society	Disagree	30,8 _a	25,0 _b	33,4 _{a,c}	41,2 _c
	Neither agree nor disagree	60,4 _a	63,7 _a	60,2 _a	49,3 _b
	Agree	8,8 _{a,b}	11,3 _b	6,4 _a	9,6 _{a,b}
Q16_7. People with a different ethnicity come to our country to benefit from social security	Disagree	22,4 _a	34,2 _b	26,9 _a	23,8 _a
	Neither agree nor disagree	57,6 _a	54,1 _{a,b}	55,7 _{a,b}	47,3 _b
	Agree	19,9 _a	11,7 _b	17,4 _a	28,9 _c
Q16_8. The presence of diverse cultures enriches our society	Disagree	16,8 _a	9,7 _b	15,9 _a	27,2 _c
	Neither agree nor disagree	63,9 _a	59,4 _a	64,9 _a	57,4 _a
	Agree	19,4 _a	30,9 _b	19,2 _a	15,4 _a

Percentages with a different subscript differ significantly from each other at the .05 level

What's more, these differences persist when controlling for possible interferences that sociodemographic variables might have on attitudes. Users of the Panoramic repertoire exhibit less civic disengagement, showed a stronger social connection, are less individualistic, and less ethnocentric than users of the Limited repertoire. These results appear to indicate that **the panoramic nature of the repertoire translates into a panoramic window upon the world, which is reflected in their connection to society and peers, as well as their openness to other cultures.**³

4. CONVERSATION STARTERS

In conclusion, how can we move forward with these results? In the following section, we present a couple of conversation starters, which are aimed at sparking the discussion on news repertoires as windows to the world, and policy interventions related to this topic.

A **NEWS REPERTOIRES ARE THE 'NEW' FILTER BUBBLES**

Problem: Our analysis showed that filter bubbles extend far beyond the online sphere, and that our own news repertoire actually act as a filter bubble, or window to the world that frames what is within and beyond our field of view. We found significant relations between a user's news repertoire and their attitude on a number of societal themes. But what if in turn the shape of our window is marked by social inequality, as also shown by our data? This might create a downward spiral where the (media) rich get richer, and those in precarious situations disengage from society.

Solution: Interventions aimed at bursting filter bubbles would then benefit from tackling the social stratification of news use, and media use by extension.

³ For a full overview of the regression analysis, see: Picone, I., & Vandenplas, R. (2021). Windows to the World: Imagining Flemish News Audiences and Their Views on Society through the Lens of News Repertoires. *Digital Journalism*, 1-22.

B

FUTURE-PROOFING BY THINKING WITH REPERTOIRES

Problem: In highly converged media landscape, it is becoming increasingly clear that the everyday media practices of users are inherently cross-media. In the case of news use, for instance, it is hard to imagine a user that relies on a single news source. Even the Limited news repertoire, while significantly less media rich than the Panoramic repertoire, picks their news from a small selection of sources. All contemporary users construct a personal news repertoire that feeds them information throughout the day.

Solution: Connecting to questions of how to aid contemporary news users in developing media literacy. Especially in a high intensity and chaotic news environment that has become polluted with misinformation and fake news, media education should be oriented towards initiatives on 'cross-media literacy'. The latter of which raises awareness of the benefits of composing, and helps citizens achieve, a diverse news (media) repertoire.

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*imec-SMIT's **Media & Society Program** hosts approx. 45 researchers that study business, user and policy aspects of mediated communication. The program has a track record in fundamental and applied national projects.*

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