

# POLICY BRIEF #59

15 June 2022

## Trust in news remains high but flickers of polarization show cracks in news landscape

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Today, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism publishes its yearly [Digital News Report](#), for which imec-SMIT is the Belgian partner. In this latest edition, we summarize the main findings on Flemish news use in 9 key trends. What is the state of trust in news as we exit the pandemic? Which news sources do Flemish news users rely on in 2022? And do news users feel that journalists work to the benefit of society, or their own political and commercial interests? This policy brief provides you with an answer to these questions and more.

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

Want to know how these findings fit within the past evolutions in news use? Be sure to check out our updated [NEWS MONITOR](#).

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### ONLINE REGAINS POSITION AS MAIN NEWS SOURCE

During the coronavirus pandemic, television news experienced a noticeable 'covid-bump'. In 2022 however, that bump has passed, and online news regains its place as the most important news source in Flanders.

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### NEWS AVOIDANCE CONTINUES TO GROW

Around 64% of respondents indicate that they avoid the news to varying degrees in 2022. Low and middle educated as well as younger news users in particular appear to be more prone to news avoidance practices.

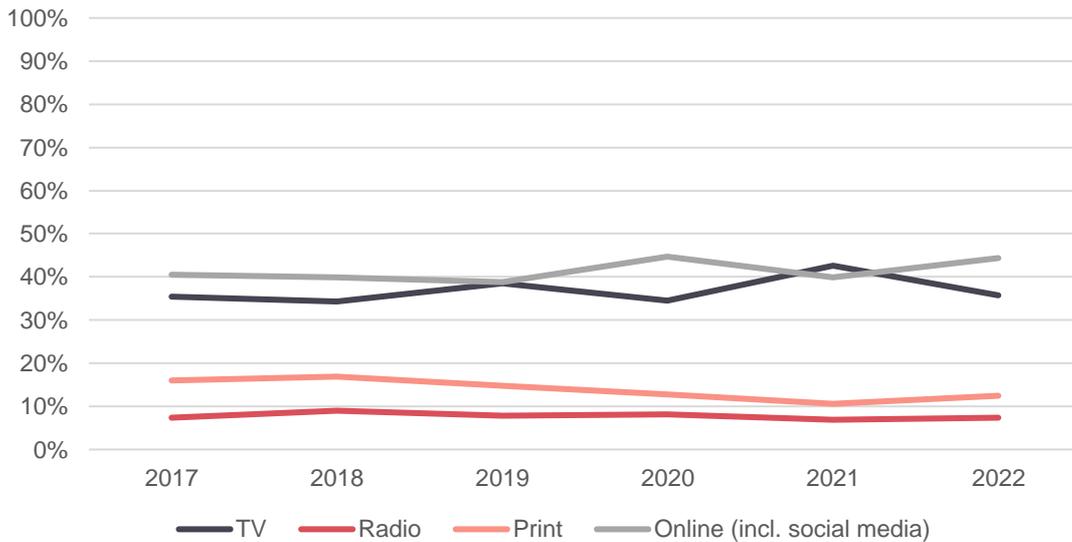
- 3 PERSONAL MOTIVES LEAD TO NEWS CONSUMPTION**  
The most important motivations for Flemish news users to keep abreast with news are centered on the self. They stay up to date for personal relevance and usefulness, to learn new things, and out of a civic duty to be informed.
- 4 TRUST IN NEWS REMAINS HIGH BUT TRUST GAPS OPEN**  
Trust levels in news remain higher than they were prior to the pandemic. But more low income (+12 points) and right-wing news users (+4 points) distrust the news, leading to old and new trust gaps opening in the Flemish news landscape.
- 5 NEWS BRANDS ARE LARGELY TRUSTED BUT POLITICALLY POLARISED**  
Flemish news brands see trust levels decrease as political trust (and distrust) gaps continue to grow. While right-wing news users are more distrusting across the board, the left-wing ones exhibit a visible distrust in commercial news brands.
- 6 NEWS USERS FOCUS MORE ON BRANDS THAN ON JOURNALISTS**  
Online, Flemish news users are most aware of the specific news brand accompanying a news item, rather than journalist or commentator that wrote or published it.
- 7 EVER MORE YOUNG ADULTS ARE PAYING FOR ONLINE NEWS**  
Paying for online news does not show a relapse like in several other countries. Young adults are the driving force behind the increasing willingness to pay for online news.
- 8 A CRITICAL STANCE TOWARDS NEWS MEDIA'S INTERESTS**  
Sizeable minorities of the Flemish respondents, notably and most worryingly younger ones, appear to believe that news organisations put commercial interests and/or their own political views ahead of what is best for society.
- 9 MOST FIND NEWS MEDIA POLITICALLY CLOSE TOGETHER**  
Most Flemish news users hold the view that the main news organisations in Flanders are quite or very close to each other in terms of political background and ideology.

## 1. ONLINE REGAINS POSITION AS MAIN NEWS SOURCE

Online and television news have been grappling with one another for the top spot as **main news source** over the past years. In 2022, **online news has regained its position** as most important news source. Radio and print in particular declined steadily since 2017, but seem to have bottomed out in recent years as both feature as the main source of news for only a small minority of Flemish respondents.

Looking at the different age groups, it is noticeable that the strongest decline of television as main source is among the **younger generations**. While television news might have functioned as an important anchor point to keep abreast of coronavirus news during lockdown, on par with older news users, younger generations have returned to online news (including social media) as their most important source. **Similar shifts** can be traced among respondents with a low income and/or education.

You said you've used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is your MAIN source of news?

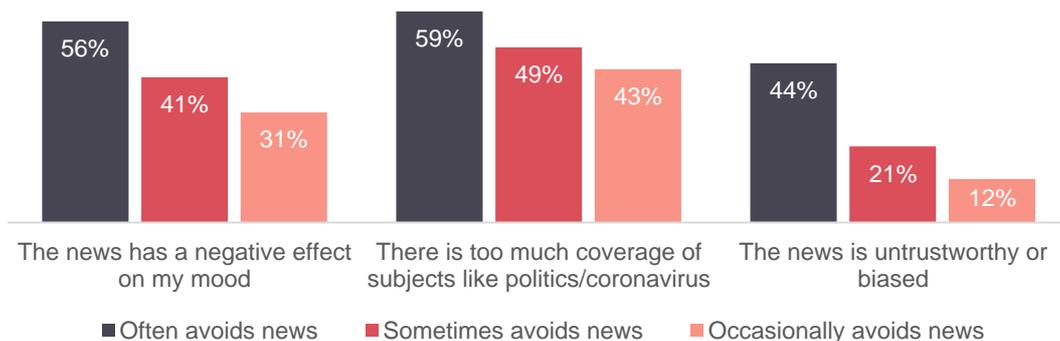


## 2. NEWS AVOIDANCE CONTINUES TO GROW

News avoidance remains a timely subject in news consumption. In 2017, 48% of Flemish news users indicated avoiding the news sometimes, occasionally or often. By 2022, **64% of Flemish news users indicate they avoid the news** to varying degrees. Low and middle educated, as well as younger age groups, appear to be more likely to avoid news than others.

Despite an increase in news avoidance, research has argued that **occasional news avoidance** might fit within a healthy news routine and functions as a **coping mechanism** when news users feel overwhelmed or strained mentally. Indeed, for occasional news avoiders, the **negativity of news** as well as an **overload of coverage** on politics and COVID-19 feature as the main motivations for their avoidance practices. However, a different story unfolds for **frequent news avoiders**. For these news users, a **lack of trust in the news** features as the third most important factor in their avoidance of news, hinting at a deeper, structural problem that causes these news users to turn away from the news.

Why do you find yourself actively trying to avoid the news?



### 3. PERSONAL MOTIVES LEAD TO NEWS CONSUMPTION

When it comes to their main motivations to consult the news, Flemish respondents are mainly looking for news that has **personal relevance and purpose** (47%). The news should therefore be relevant and/or related to the daily life of the news user. Obtaining information that makes them **learn something new** or **provides background information** on current affairs and societal issues is an important reason for approximately one third of the Flemish respondents and comes in second place.

However, **the social aspect of news** features prominently as well, as respondents that consulting the news is also aimed at having **something to talk about or share** with family, friends, and colleagues. Lastly, a fair share of Flemish respondents (29%) considers it their **civic duty to be informed**, highlighting how news consumption functions as a person's window to the world that allows them to stay informed on their immediate and broader living environment.

Which, if any, are the most important reasons for you, personally, to keep up with the news?



### 4. TRUST IN NEWS REMAINS HIGH BUT TRUST GAPS OPEN

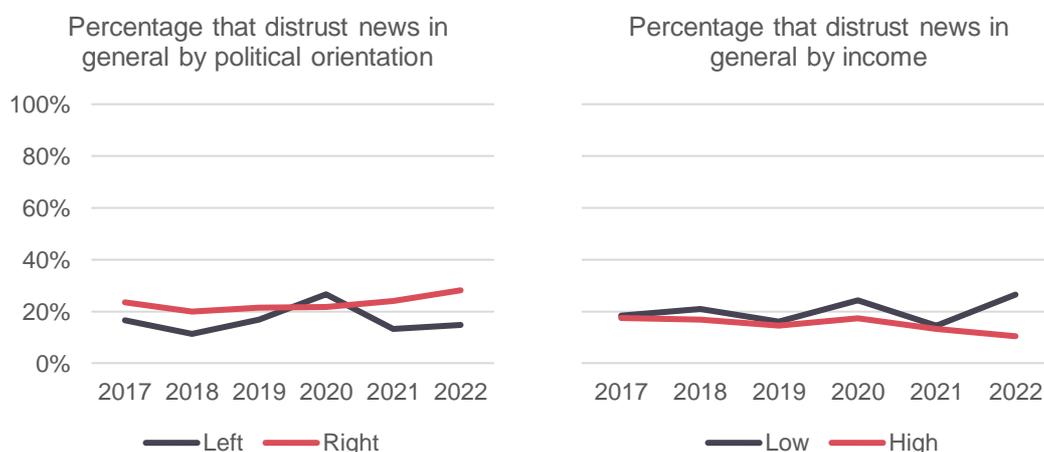
After a marked increase during the pandemic, the **number of news users that indicate they trust the news in general declines slightly** in 2022 to 57% (-4 points). Still, trust levels remain higher than they were before the pandemic. Trust levels in Flanders are on par with those in The Netherlands (56%), Norway (56%) and Denmark (58%), while those in Wallonia are closer to Poland (42%) and Austria (41%), and remarkably higher than France (29%).



Time will tell if the pandemic meant a rallying cry for trust in news, or if this year's results mark the continuation of the steady decline in trust in news that preceded the global health crisis.

Still, **trust levels in the news that respondents use themselves remain high**, creeping up to 62% of Flemish respondents (+2 points). The broad trust that the Flemish news landscape was afforded during the pandemic might be dissipating as distrusting news users are increasingly folding back onto a more limited range of news sources and news repertoires are becoming less diversified.

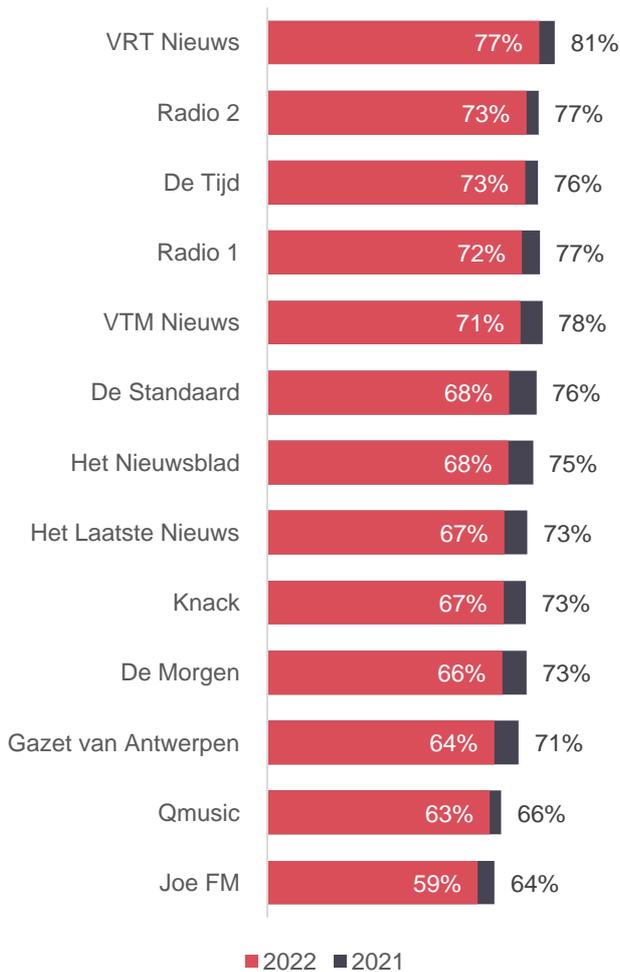
Lastly, the dip in trust levels occasionally appears to go hand in hand with an increase in distrust. Especially among lower income (+12 points) and to a lesser extent among self-identified right-wing news users (+4 points), distrust levels have risen in 2022. As a result, **the Flemish news landscape is becoming increasingly marked by several trust (and distrust) gaps**. What's more, the new income-based distrust gap might reflect a broader decline in trust in institutions among lower income groups that struggle with the rising cost of living and energy prices in Belgium since mid-2021.



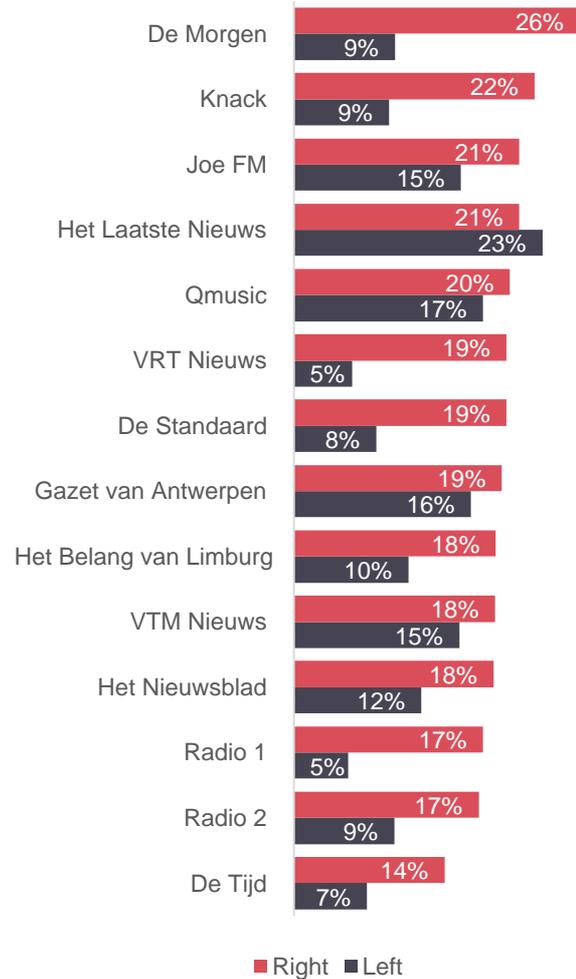
## 5. NEWS BRANDS ARE LARGELY TRUSTED BUT POLITICALLY POLARISED

Just as we noted that general trust levels have started to dip again, we note a decline in the percentage of news users that indicate their trust in Flemish news brands in 2022. As a result, **trust levels for Flemish news brands** appear to have **returned to the level they had attained before the coronavirus pandemic**. However, **trust gaps between news users with a left- and right-wing political orientation continue to grow**. While trust in news among left-wing news users returns to a pre-pandemic state, trust in news brands among right-wing users continued to decline throughout previous years.

Percentage of users that trust brand



Percentage of users that distrust brands by political orientation



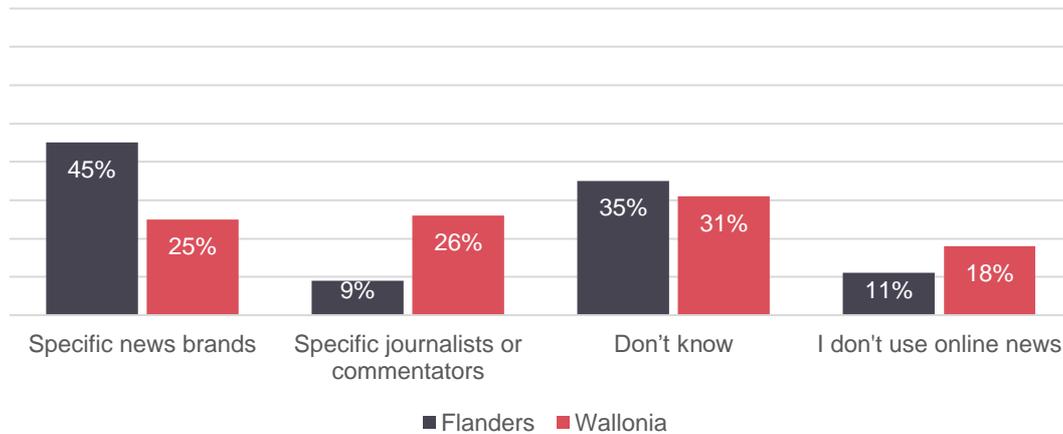
Additionally, a more pronounced distrust in Flemish news brands has taken root. [The number of news users with a distrust in Flemish news brands has increased in 2022, in particular among 'right-wing' news users.](#) Certain news brands are polarising between left-wing and right-wing oriented news users in terms of trust. This is most clear in the comparison of the two most commonly used online news brands in Flanders: Het Laatste Nieuws and VRT NWS. While we find that the level of distrust is more or less the same amongst left- and right-wing news users for Het Laatste Nieuws, we find a significant (dis-)trust gap among left- and right-wing news users for public broadcaster VRT Nieuws. As a result, while VRT NWS is the most trusted news brand in Flanders, it is also one of the most polarising in terms of distrust. More concretely: 19% of Flemish respondents that self-identify as right-wing distrust VRT, compared to only 4% of left-wing respondents.

## 6. NEWS USERS FOCUS MORE ON BRANDS THAN JOURNALISTS

When looking for news online, news users may pay less attention to the **source of a news item**. Our data show that a little over a third of the Flemish respondents **do not know what they pay most attention to** (35%). We do note, however, that when the Flemish respondents consume online news, they mainly focus on the **specific news brands** above the news items (45%). Indicating that the Flemish media landscape consists of recognizable and possibly strong news

brands. By contrast, only 9% of the Flemish respondents pays attention to the **journalist or commentator** that wrote or presents the news item.

When looking for news online, which of the following do you tend to pay most attention to?

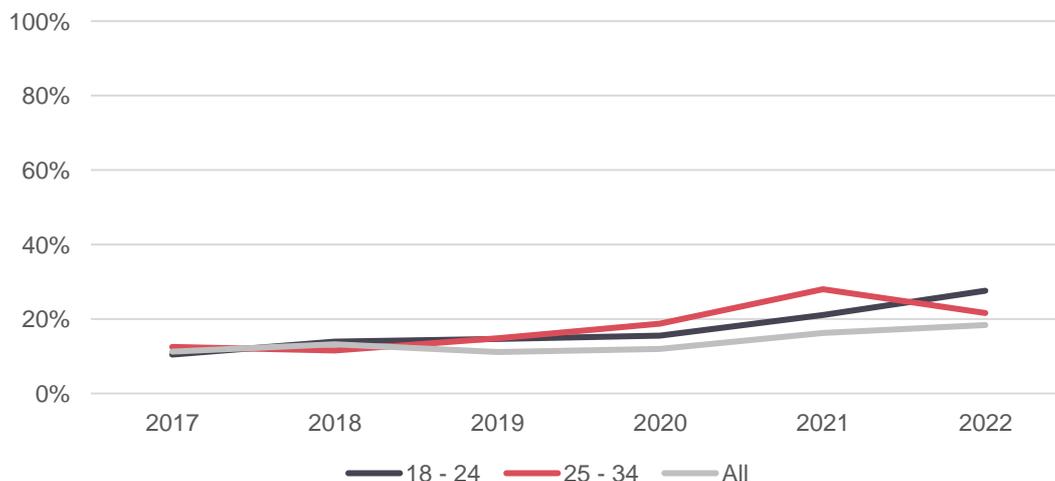


The figures of **Wallonia** show a strikingly different story. When consuming news, the French-speaking news users pay more attention to specific journalists (26%) than to specific news brands (25%). A possible explanation are the **rather large differences in media culture** between the North and South of our country, where we see more journalists attaining star status.

## 7. EVER MORE YOUNG ADULTS PAY FOR ONLINE NEWS

The COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by a peak in paying news use. What's more, the latest data cautiously suggests that the covid-bump in payment for news in Flanders might outlast the pandemic, contrary to the general trend in the worldwide survey of overall growth levelling off. **18% (+2 points) of the Flemish respondents paid for online news in the last year.** At a time where news organisations struggle to attract younger audiences, it is encouraging to see that in Flanders especially the **younger generation is the driving force behind paying for online news.**

Percentage of users that paid for online news content, or accessed a paid for online news service in the last year



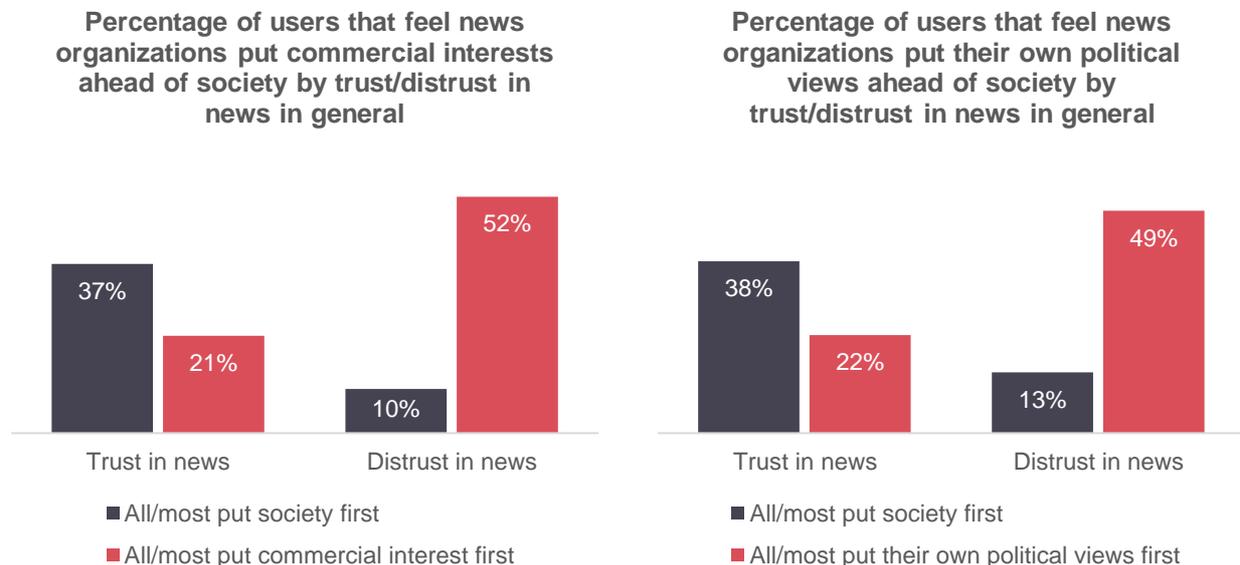
Within the **18-24 age group**, **28% (up from 21% in 2021)** of respondents indicate that they **paid for online news** in the last year, which translates to the highest percentage of paying news users of all age groups. In 2017, only 10% of them paid for online news. Yet, caution is due. We do see **a clear drop from 28% to 22% of 25-34-year-olds who say they paid for online news** in the past year. And in the older age categories, growth is stagnating, which may be because these groups make even greater use of - and appreciate - offline news sources.

## 8. A CRITICAL STANCE TOWARDS NEWS MEDIA'S INTERESTS

That a majority of Flemish news users trusts news in general does not mean that they trust all news, all of the time. In general, an equal number of Flemish respondents are more critical and are more confident of news media putting what is best for society ahead of their commercial or political interests. **Close to a third state that all or most news organizations put their own commercial or political interests ahead of what is best for society** and close to a third states the opposite.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a critical attitude towards news organisations strongly aligns with whether news users either trust or distrust the news. When we take a closer look at these attitudes, we find that among those who trust the news in general, 37% believe that journalists put society first. Meanwhile, **among news users who distrust the news in general, half of them believes that journalists serve their own commercial and political interests above all else.**

These results also show that even among those who trust news in general, opinions are hardly uniform when it comes to the question whether news organisations put society ahead of their own interests.

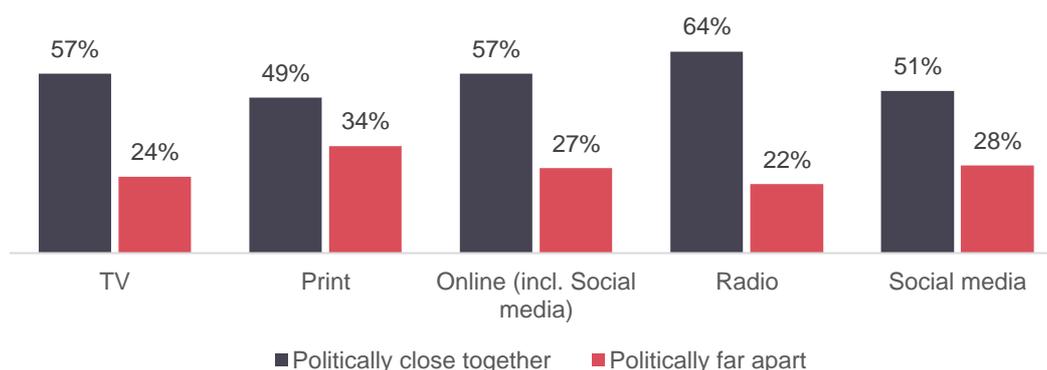


A similar pattern can be found among news users with differing political orientations. Just as right-wing news users have exhibited a steady increase in distrust in the news, these news users also hold a more cynical stance with regards to the aims of news organizations. **About 40% of right-wing news users indicate that news organizations put commercial and political interests ahead of society.** This is in stark contrast with left-wing news users, where only 25% hold a similar (cynical) position.

## 9. MOST FIND NEWS MEDIA POLITICALLY CLOSE TOGETHER

Most Flemish respondents (55%) believe that news organisations are politically close together rather than far apart (26%). However, while **a clear majority of Flemish news respondents does not consider the news landscape to be polarized** in general, certain news sectors seem more politically differentiated. News users that mainly rely on print news sources experience more polarization in the news landscape than others, potentially pointing to the legacy of a newspaper market that used to be heavily pillarised until far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Experienced polarisation of the news landscape by main source of news



Despite news users not necessarily experiencing the news landscape as polarized, **some news brands are more commonly consulted by one side of the political spectrum**. The online platform of public broadcaster VRT NWS is more commonly consulted by left-wing news users (52%) than right-wing news users (35%) whereas the website of commercial news brand HLN, as well as commercial broadcaster VTM is more commonly consulted by right wing news users (HLN.be: 55%; VTM: 50%) than left-wing news users (HLN.be: 35%; VTM: 31%). As a result, the Flemish news landscape nevertheless appears to be marked by political trust- and use-gaps. This was briefly touched upon in [Key Trend 5](#), which highlights how right-wing users are more distrusting of news brands across the board, whereas left-wing news users are more distrusting of commercial news brands.

## 10. CONVERSATION STARTERS

Now that we have updated you on the most important trends in news use of the past year, we present **3 conclusions** to spark the discussion. **Want to continue the conversation?** Be sure to visit [Nieuwsgebruik.be](https://nieuwsgebruik.be) for more data and findings on news use in Flanders.

**A POINT TAKEN FROM THE PANDEMIC: OLD MEDIA NEVER DIE**  
Having seen television's rise and fall during the pandemic illustrates an old lesson in media studies: media do not disappear if they stick to what they do best. And in certain circumstances, including a global health crisis, one medium's affordances, such as the television's ability to reach wide audiences simultaneously with editorially vetted, audiovisual news, can become relevant for a larger part of the audience once more.

Not only in certain circumstances, but also for certain (groups of) news users, some media will remain more relevant than others. Clearly, as online news reclaims its spot as main source of news for most people in Flanders, the availability of news at your fingertips – literally – at all times, is something that works well for lots of people. News media are increasingly good at convincing news users, mostly the young, that it is worth paying for a combination of this convenience and editorially curated and validated news.

At the same time, advertisers are exhibiting a renewed appreciation for live television and/or streaming audiences. So, while digital news has reclaimed its throne, Flanders still features a firmly rooted cross-media news market, with room for multimedia companies working across different outlets to build scale, as well as companies that focus on a more niche and local offering.

## B

### WHEN AMERICA SNEEZES, EUROPE CATCHES A COLD

While Flanders can still count on high trust levels in news and news brands, other countries offer a bleak outlook. The US news landscape is strongly polarized and features the lowest trust score across the countries covered in the DNR survey (at 26% of news users); France (29%) and the UK (34%) are not far off. And, despite remaining at a relatively high trust score (56%), The Netherlands has seen a dip in trust amid the turmoil of increased violence against journalists, and the emergence of two new broadcasters, one of which seeks to cater specifically to right-wing news users.

While, the Flemish news landscape is nowhere near as fractured as the US market, we do find that gaps in news use and attitudes are growing, indicating that Flanders might not be exempt from some of the same polarizing influences that cripple other markets. We see distrusting news users folding back onto a less diverse range of news sources. Trust (and distrust) gaps are opening up across income levels and political orientations. As distrust among right-wing news users continues to grow, a disproportionate number of right-wing news users finds that news media all too often serve their own political goals instead of society. Meanwhile, more young news users expect news media to take a stance, for example when it comes to measures against climate change (which we explore in a [separate analysis](#) on our website). And in this group, news avoidance is increasing, with a group of news users structurally disconnecting. All this leaves news media and journalists in Flanders with a lot to think about. The silver lining is that we can look to America's illness as a cautionary tale, and pre-emptively take the necessary vitamins. However, what those vitamins consist of is a crucial question that we should urgently explore.

## C

### THE RESPONSIBILITY OF STRONG NEWS BRANDS

The Flemish news landscape still consists of strong, recognisable and largely trusted news brands. The fact that Flemish news users pay attention to brands rather than journalists or contributors shows that strong brands still matter. On the other hand, more than a third of Flemish respondents does not know whether they pay attention to brands or journalists, which points to how difficult it can be for some to make note of an item's source when consulting news online.

The amount of time spent with news is likely to further decrease under the pressure of the many services competing for our attention. News brands can still act as a beacon guiding news users as they surf the digital news waves, but also

as a buffer for the dip in confidence. We cannot underestimate to what extent news users are, to use the term of Michael Schudson, *monitorial citizens*, and what this implies for news brands. News users generally monitor what happens in the world from a distance. But when they are personally affected by events, they actively seek relevant, more in-depth information. When this happens, as the pandemic has shown, citizens are able to look to these strong news brands. Citizens consider this a basic right, and do not always realise that there is a limit to what you can expect from news organisations at a moment of crisis if you do not also support them throughout less critical times. For now, a strong public service and financially savvy news organisations have guaranteed that service, but media scholars, policy makers and news organisations should collaborate more to demonstrate the importance of strong news brands in democratic societies.

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