

POLICY BRIEF #77

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Flemish news users consume news through ever more channels but AI journalism remains out of their comfort zone

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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. This policy brief summarises the main findings on Flemish news consumption into 9 key trends, including evolutions in news consumption and news interest among young people and knowledge about and attitudes towards AI in journalism. Concluding our policy brief, we open the discussion on this year's findings through three **CONVERSATION STARTERS**. First, how can news media deploy AI without losing the trust of their audiences? Second, what strategies can news media adopt to restore trust among certain groups of news users? Third, how can news organisations and policymakers work together to re-engage news detractors? Eager to find out how these findings fit within past evolutions in news use? Be sure to check out our updated [NEWS MONITOR](#).

Key Trends

- 1 FEW NEWS USERS FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH AI AS NEWS PRODUCER**
Only 13% of Flemish news users feel comfortable with AI as a news producer. Younger and more educated people are better informed about and more positive towards AI. Yet there remains a high level of reluctance, especially with political reporting.
- 2 TRUST IN NEWS GETS A DENT ON THE LEFT**
Trust in news stagnates worldwide and the gap between Flanders (51%) and Wallonia (35%) remains wide. Notable is the increase in distrust among left-leaning Flemish people (24%) and young people (34%). Transparency, high journalistic standards and representation are crucial for trust in news.
- 3 NOT ALL FORMS OF NEWS AVOIDANCE ARE PROBLEMATIC**
News avoidance is on the rise in Flanders, with 62% sometimes or often avoiding news in 2024 (up from 48% in 2017). Younger and less educated Flemish people are more likely to avoid news. Although 85% still consume news regularly, we need solutions to keep heavy news avoiders (now 13%) informed.

- 4 ON TIKTOK, IT IS HARDER TO DISTINGUISH UN/RELIABLE NEWS**

It is harder to distinguish reliable from unreliable news on TikTok. Although social media is a news source for 38% of Flemish news users, 47% are concerned about factuality online. TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) are seen as more problematic for recognising reliable information.
- 5 YOUNG PEOPLE ARE LEAST CONFIDENT AND INTERESTED IN NEWS**

Young people (aged 18-24) show the greatest disinterest and distrust in news. Although close to 30% of them consult news several times a day, 35% say they have no interest in news and 34% distrust news.
- 6 FLEMISH NEWS USERS EXPECT NEWS MEDIA TO PROVIDE THEM WITH CLEAR AND BALANCED INFORMATION**

Flemish news users particularly value news that keeps them informed, educates them on issues and offers different perspectives. Yet journalism does not fully meet these expectations, especially among younger and less affluent people.
- 7 MORE SATISFIED CUSTOMERS AMONG PAYING NEWS USERS**

Paying news users are more satisfied with news media, especially news that provides practical information and encourages civic engagement. Willingness to pay remains low, especially among the low-educated and low-income categories.
- 8 NEWS CONSUMPTION IS EVOLVING, BUT LESS PRONOUNCED THAN ELSEWHERE**

Flemish news consumption is shifting to digital platforms, with social media as a growing but still complementary source. Young people use social media more often, while traditional news brands are still highly trusted.
- 9 POLITICALLY OUTSPOKEN NEWS USERS SHOW MORE INTEREST IN (DIGITAL) NEWS**

Politically outspoken news users consult news more often, are more confident and participate more actively in news discussions than politically not outspoken Flemish people. They use social media less as a news source and are more likely to pay for online news.

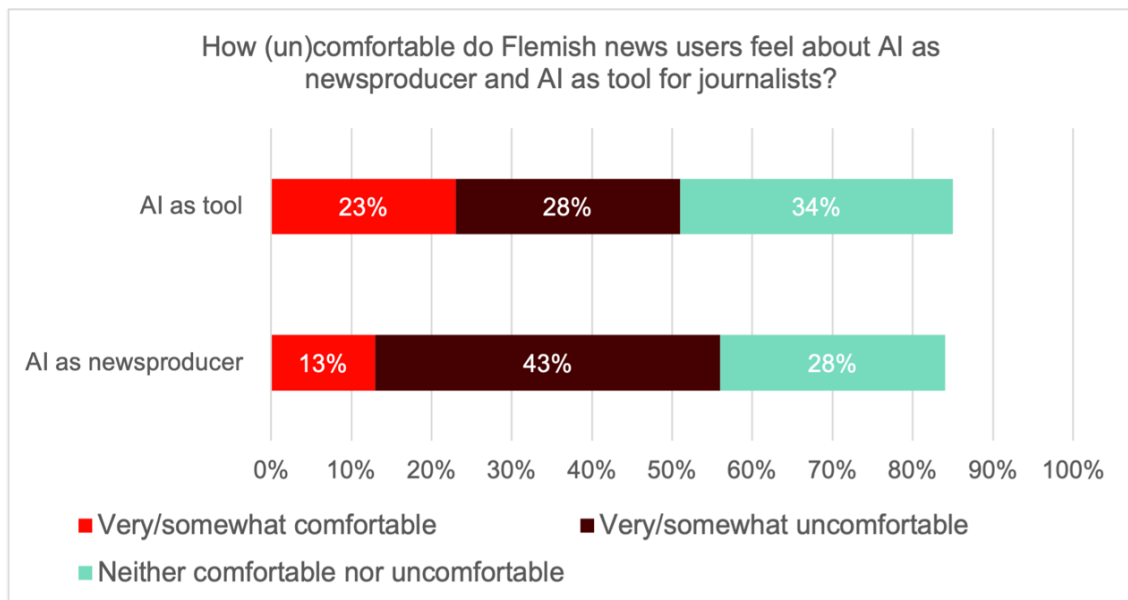
1. Few Flemish people feel comfortable with AI as news producer

Societal interest in artificial intelligence (AI) has been growing rapidly in recent years. Tools such as ChatGPT provide people with easy access to AI. Yet it is striking that a large proportion of Flemish people (57%) have little or no information about these technologies.

It is noticeable that young people (18-24-year-olds) are better informed about AI compared to older age groups. **The older the Flemish news users, the less informed they are about the technology and its applications.** Among education levels, too, we see that people are more likely to be limitedly informed about AI. The difference between informed and uninformed becomes smaller depending on the level of education: low (31pp), medium (24pp) and high (8pp). We can tentatively conclude that **people with higher education levels are more likely to contact or seek information about AI** compared to lower education levels.

There is no such thing as THE artificial intelligence, quite the contrary. There is a great diversity of AI tools, even within the journalism sector. Here, there is an important distinction between **AI as a news producer** (mainly AI driven with some control from a journalist) and **AI as a tool** for journalists (created by a journalist but with help from AI, for example, in transcribing interviews or translating information). What is striking is that for about a third of Flemish news users, AI within journalism remains difficult to assess, judging from the fact that they indicate they are neither comfortable nor uncomfortable with the idea of AI as a news producer or AI as a tool.

When it comes to artificial intelligence as a tool for journalists, only 23% of Flemish news users say they feel comfortable with it. When it comes to the idea of AI as a news producer, it is even a lot less: only 13% of Flemish news users feel comfortable with news created mainly by AI with limited control by a journalist. For local news (20%), news about art and culture (20%) or about science and technology (23%), this is admittedly slightly higher than for political news (15%).



Base: All (N=1132).

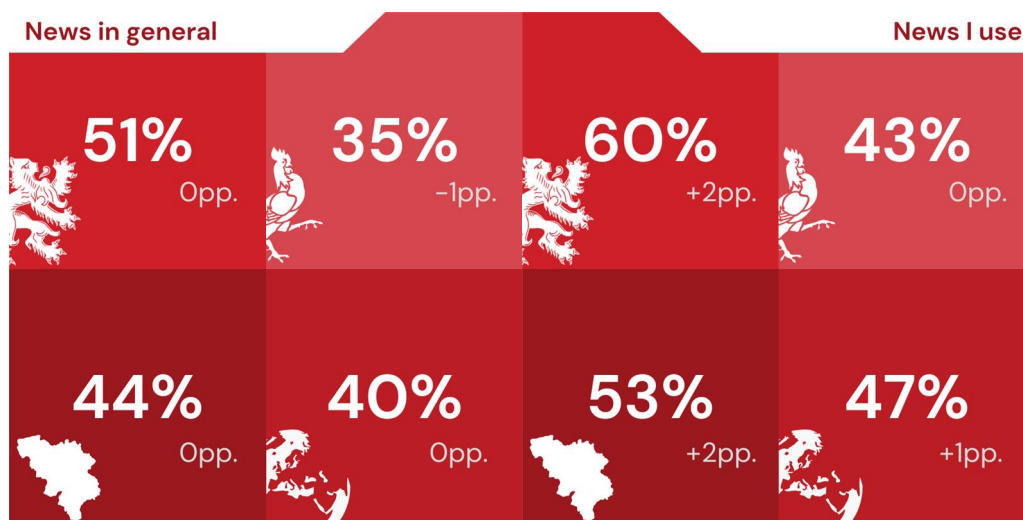
More young people (30%) are also comfortable with AI as a news producer. Just because young people tend to be more informed about AI and its applications, they may also be more aware of its possibilities and consequences. At the same time, it is also possible that, despite higher awareness about artificial intelligence, this does not mean that they necessarily also have a more critical attitude.

Furthermore, there is a clear difference between education levels when it comes to people being uncomfortable with AI in journalism. **More people with higher education levels are more distinctly uncomfortable with the idea of AI as a news producer** compared to the low and mid-high education levels, which could indicate that they are more aware of the potential dangers. This difference is also noticeable when looking at income levels.

2. Trust in news gets a dent on the left

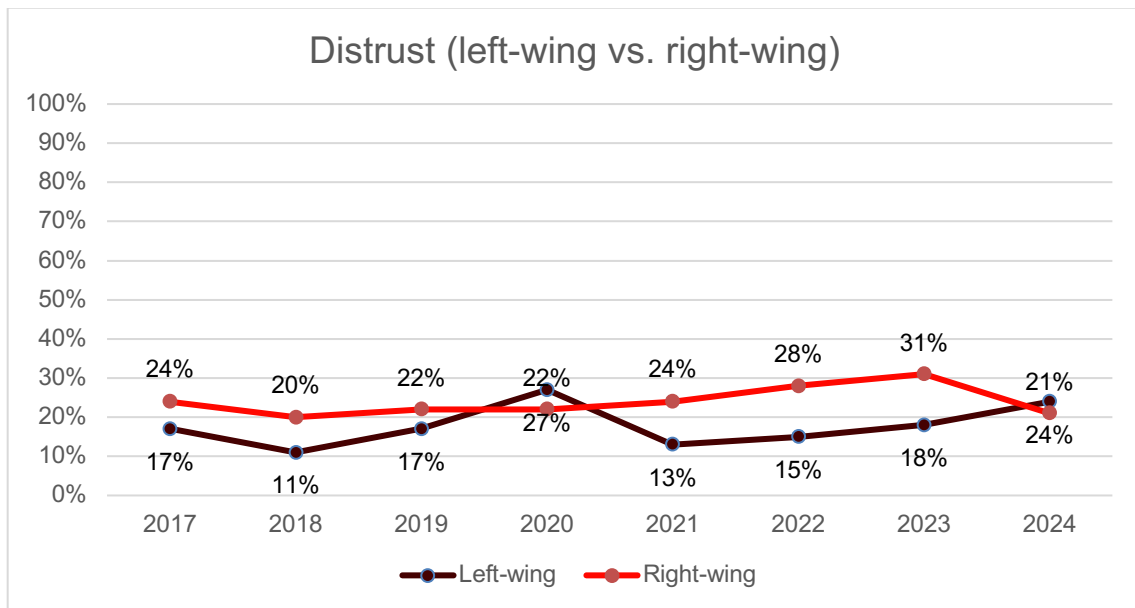
After a dent in trust since 2021, today global trust in news appears to be stagnating. The trust gap between Flanders (51%) and Wallonia (35%) remains. Flemish news users continue to score relatively well against the rest of the world in terms of trust in news. Remarkable: while in recent years we have seen Flemish distrust of news appear mainly on the right of the political spectrum, today we see an increase on the left. Among young people (18-24 years old) we also find a significant group of distrusters. **Transparency, journalistic standards and representation** are the main reasons for trusting a news organisation.

Like last year, just over half (51%) of Flemish news users say they trust the news, while the gap with Wallonia remains: only 35% (-1pp) of Walloon news users trust the news, which also remains below the global average (40%).



Base: All (N=1132); Trust in news 2024; pp. indicate the difference with 2023.

So, while trust in Flanders remains relatively high, important changes are noticeable within the group of **distrusters**. While in recent years we found more distrusters mainly among **right-wing-oriented Flemish news users**, they are now being overtaken by left-wingers: **24% (+6 pp) of left-wingers explicitly state that they do not trust the news**, compared to 21% of right-wingers, which is a striking decrease of **10 pp** within the latter group. In addition, there also appears to be a **large group of distrusters (34%) among youngsters** (18-24-year-olds) (See Key trend 5).



Base: Left-wing (N= 113); Right-wing (N=225).

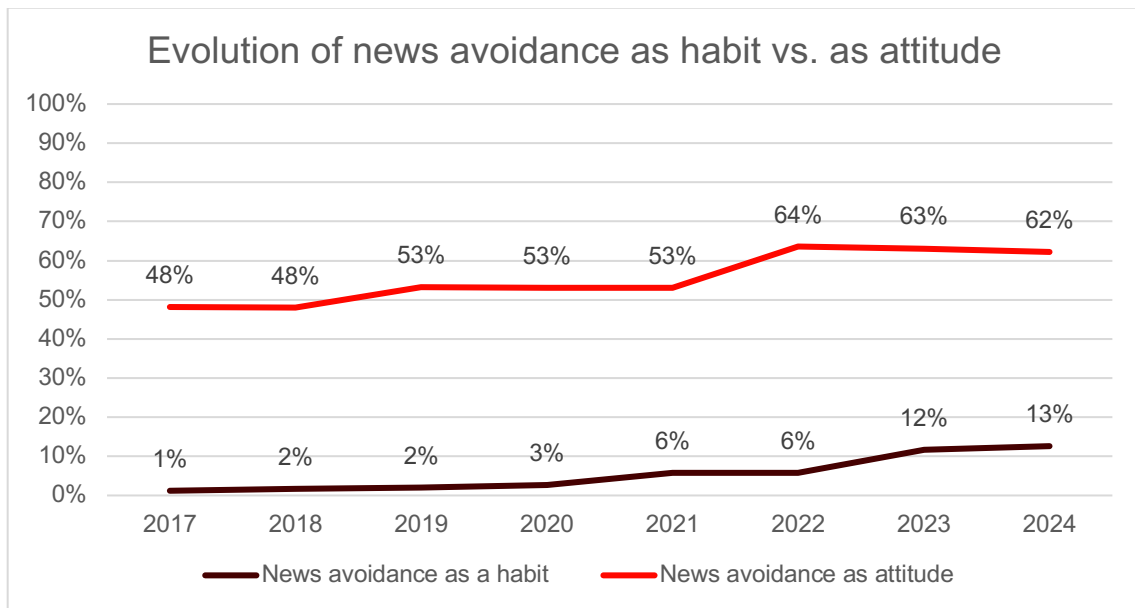
The most important reasons for Flemish news users to trust or not trust news are whether news media are **transparent** about how the news is made (76%), whether they pursue **high journalistic standards** (71%) and whether they portray and **represent people like themselves fairly** (70%). Interestingly, for 83% of people aged 55+ in particular, transparency plays a major role in trusting a news brand. **Highly educated and high-income Flemish news users** also consider transparency in journalism important. Within these same groups, more importance is also attached to **journalistic standards**. By comparison, among 55+ people, almost 80% value this, while among young people (18-24) it is less than half (48%).

3. Not all forms of news avoidance are problematic

News avoidance cannot be categorised under one heading. We can describe it as **an attitude** towards news where people mainly try to avoid too much or too negative news, but also as **an activity** where people consume less news. Both experienced a marked increase in recent years. The number of news users indicating they often or sometimes avoid news rose from 48% in 2017 to 62% in 2024. The proportion of Flemish people who consult news less than once a week went from about 1% to almost 13% over the same period.

Avoiding the news as an attitude falls under the category of normal coping with the current news and media landscape. In a previous [Key Trend](#) and [Analysis](#), we described this (critical) attitude towards news as healthy, especially if it does not occur systematically and structurally.

It would seem logical that consuming less news and trying to avoid the news go hand in hand, but the data show a **more complex picture**. Among those who consult the news less than once a month, the **heavy news avoiders**, a third do not perceive themselves as news avoiders. Conversely, among Flemish people who follow the news daily, we observe a relatively large group that does have the perception of often or sometimes avoiding the news (32%). Perhaps this says something about the current news landscape where, on the one hand, we are confronted with the news through more and more channels, but on the other, we also more often try to **shield ourselves** from it because the news can be perceived as **invasive, overloading and/or toxic**.



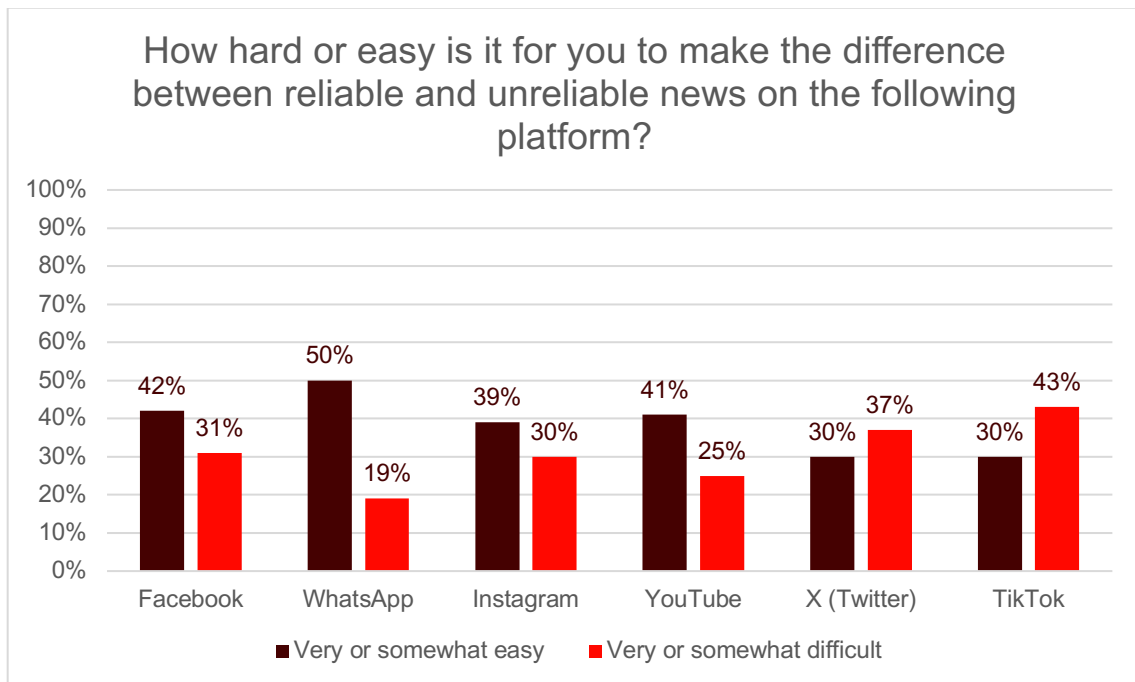
Base: All (N=1132); Habit (activity) is consuming news less than once a week, Attitude is self-perception of news avoidance.

Furthermore, it is **mainly younger, less educated Flemish people who fall into the category of heavy news avoiders**. This group of users has always had a somewhat difficult relationship with news, but seems to be increasingly dropping out in recent years. This group is, of course, relatively small. 85% of Flemish people do not fall into the category of 'heavy news avoiders' and consume some form of news on a regular basis. Yet we must be careful not to let the group of dropouts (13%) grow and even convince this group to consult a certain basis of news, if not daily then at least weekly.

4. On TikTok, it is harder to distinguish reliable from unreliable news

That people are increasingly engaging with news content via **social media platforms** no longer surprises. For instance, 38% of Flemish news users use social media as one of their news sources, with the two youngest groups leading the way with 47% for 18-24-year-olds and 54% for 25-34-year-olds.

The place that social media platforms occupy in the media repertoire of Flemish news users also raises questions about the consumption of news on these platforms. All the more so in the current climate where disinformation on social media is a major challenge and the reliability of information is thus constantly under discussion. Similarly, **47% of Flemish news users are concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet**. But to what extent do they also think they can distinguish between the two?



Base: All (N=1132).

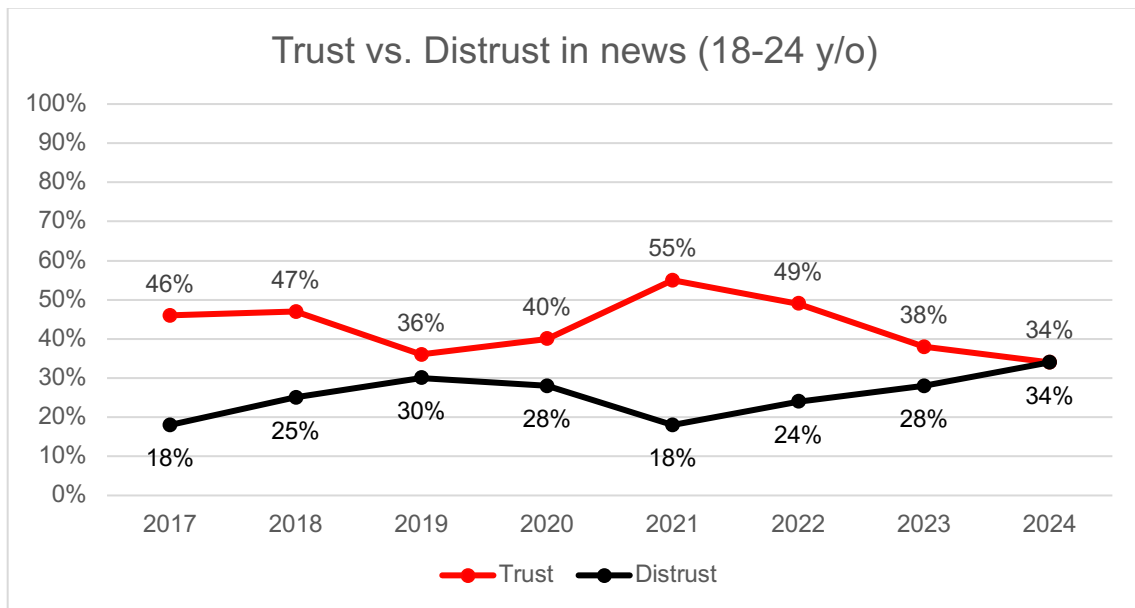
Looking at the top five social media platforms most used for news (Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Messenger), more Flemish news users find it easy than difficult to distinguish between reliable and unreliable news on those platforms. For X (the former Twitter) and TikTok, however, this is not the case. Certainly **on TikTok, more Flemish news users find it more difficult to recognise reliable information**. It certainly illustrates that there is also a role for news media as a reliable source or guide on those platforms.

5. Young people least confident and interested in news

The rising trend in disinterest in news goes hand in hand with a decline in news consumption: across almost all age groups, **Flemish news users appear to consult the news less often**. However, it is young people who behave remarkably within this trend. 18-24-year-olds today comprise the proportionally largest number of distrusters (34%) and number with pronounced disinterest in news (35%).

The overall downward trend in news consumption continues: **only 45% of Flemish people say they consult the news several times a day** compared to 60% in 2017. In parallel, interest in news also appears to be falling: with a drop of 5pp compared to last year, today **only 36% of Flemish people say they are very interested in news**. By comparison, in 2017 this was still 62% in Flanders.

However, young people (aged 18-24) stand out within this general trend: in this age group, trust and interest in news fall the most. While almost 30% of young Flemings aged 18-24 say they consult the news several times a day, within the same group there is a sharp rise in disinterest in news. Leading the way against other generations, today as many as **35% of 18-24-year-olds explicitly say they have no interest in news**. This is an increase of 12 percentage points from last year, and a whopping 29 percentage points increase from 2017.



Base: All (N=1132).

But young people also stand out in terms of distrust of news. More specifically, a **tipping point** is even noticeable where today **as equally as many young people distrust the news than young people still trust the news**, namely 34%. By comparison, within the 55+ group, only 11% distrust the news.

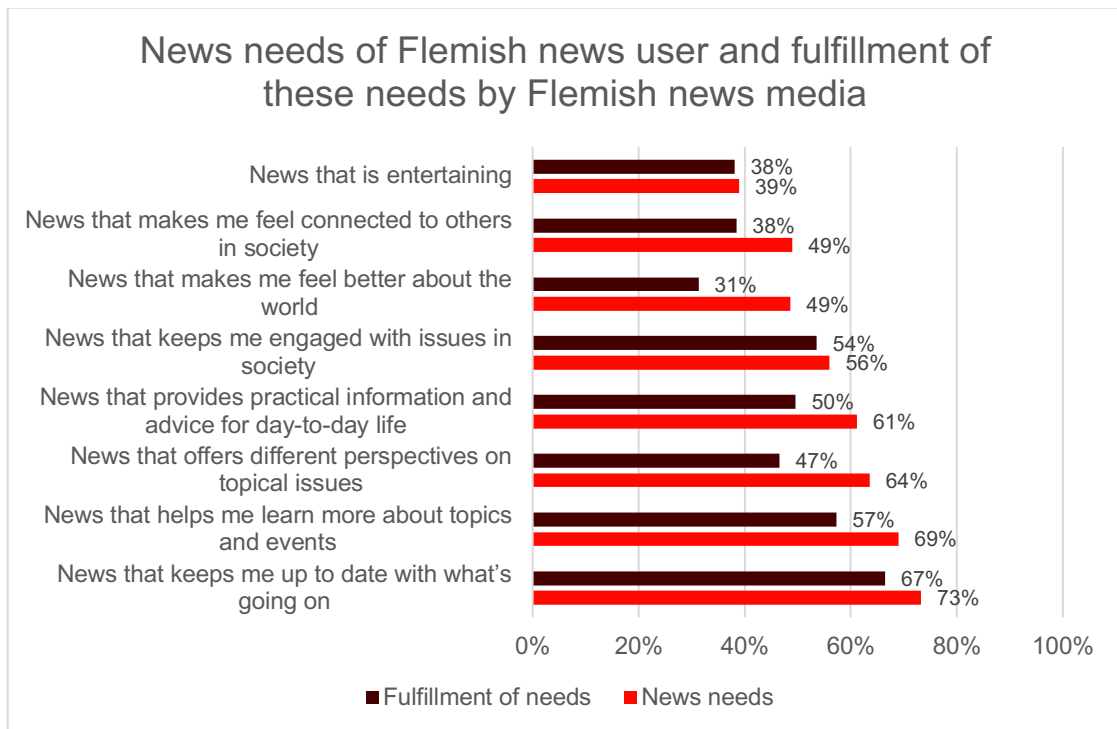
6. Flemish news users expect news media to provide them with clear and balanced information

The average Flemish news user's news needs largely coincide with the core tasks of journalism. Flemish news users primarily expect news to keep them informed, to teach them something about topics and events, and to give them different perspectives on current affairs. The journalistic role of informing in a clear, balanced way prevails.

What the Flemish news users are less in need of is news that makes them feel better about the world, that makes them feel connected to others in society or that is entertaining. News media can meet these needs, but that's where Flemish people's expectations are a lot lower.

But do the news media live up to these expectations? If we ask Flemish people **how good or bad the news media are** at taking care of these news needs, it turns out that the most important needs are also best met. This seems to indicate an **adequate prioritisation** within the remit of journalists. On the other hand, there is a noticeable difference between the news needs and the fulfilment of these needs. Almost across the board, **journalism does not sufficiently meet the news needs of the Fleming.**

Looking at the amount of news users stating that news media do a good or very good job at delivering these needs, we see the following: 'news that keeps me informed' (67%), 'news that keeps me engaged with issues in society' (57%) and 'news that educates me about topics and events' (52%). In the current strained news environment, we could of course consider these scores still sufficient.



Base: All (N=1132); Fulfillment of needs: Percentage of respondents answering 'somewhat good' or 'very good' when asked how good or bad the news media is at providing you with each of the following. News needs: Percentage of respondents answering 'somewhat important' or 'very important' when asked how important or not important each of the following are.

Still, when we calculate the average scores of importance of these needs and compare them to the average score of fulfillment, we do see journalism underperforming. Especially in terms of 'News that offers me different perspectives on current topics' (-0.39 difference), 'News that makes me feel better about the world' (-0.35), and 'News that teaches me about topics and events' (-0.31), Flemish people seem to expect more from the Flemish news media.

Zooming in on the breakdowns according to socio-demographic characteristics, a frequently recurring story emerges again. It is mainly the younger age groups, the less educated and/or Flemish people with a lower income who both indicate that the news media meet their news needs to a lesser extent and across the board consider the list of news needs to be less important.

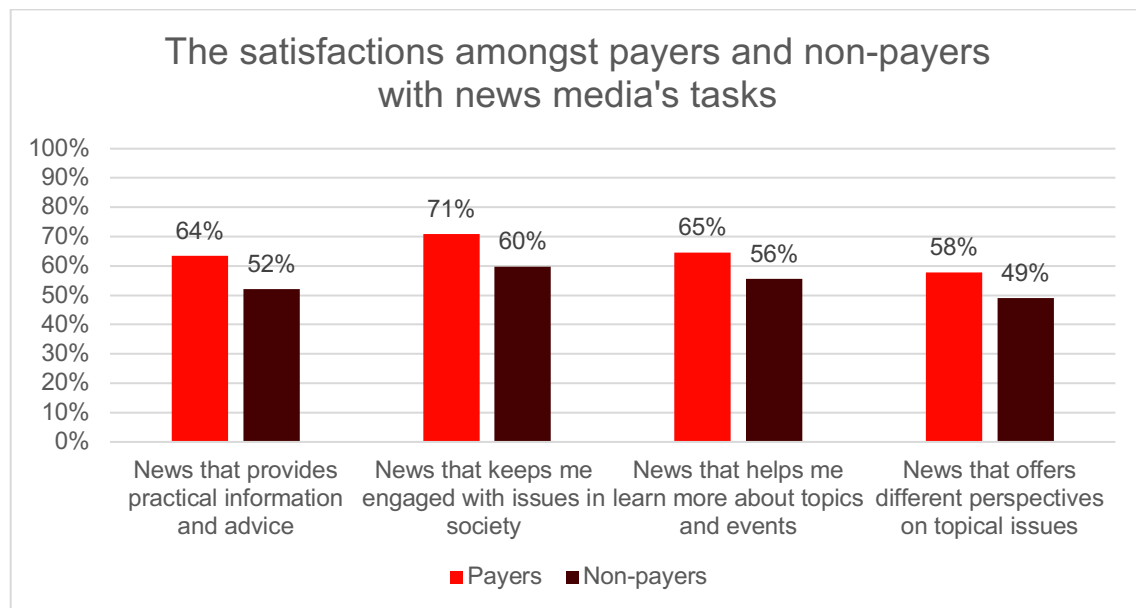
The interpretation is ambiguous. These news users consult less news and this could mean that they are less able to judge to what extent journalists are doing their job properly. Equally, these people use less news precisely because they are dissatisfied with journalism – we hope to investigate this further in the future. Furthermore, some disengagement from journalism may also be caused by not recognising or feeling represented. As the [profile of Belgium journalist study](#) points out, in terms of diversity and especially inclusiveness, there are still big steps to take in this regard on the average editorial floor.

7. More satisfied customers among paying news users

For a lot of Flemish news users, online news media are an important form of access to news. Yet last year, only 15% of Flemish news users reported paying for online news content.

Last year, too, we already noticed a **ceiling in the figures for willingness to pay for online news**. Among both low-educated Flemish news users and those with a low income, it is a **further drop** to pre-corona percentages, with only about 10% in both groups indicating to pay for online news. This should not be surprising, precisely because the **precarious economic situation** of a lot of people in society has only persisted over the past year (e.g. rising food and energy prices).

When Flemish news users still choose to pay for online news, they prefer to do so in the form of a subscription (45%). A considerable majority (77%) opts for a subscription to one (online) news brand. One figure that stands out here is the **rising number of subscriptions among higher-income Flemish news users**. We see a significant increase within this group in the number of people indicating **having two or more subscriptions**: from 21% in 2023 to 39% in 2024.



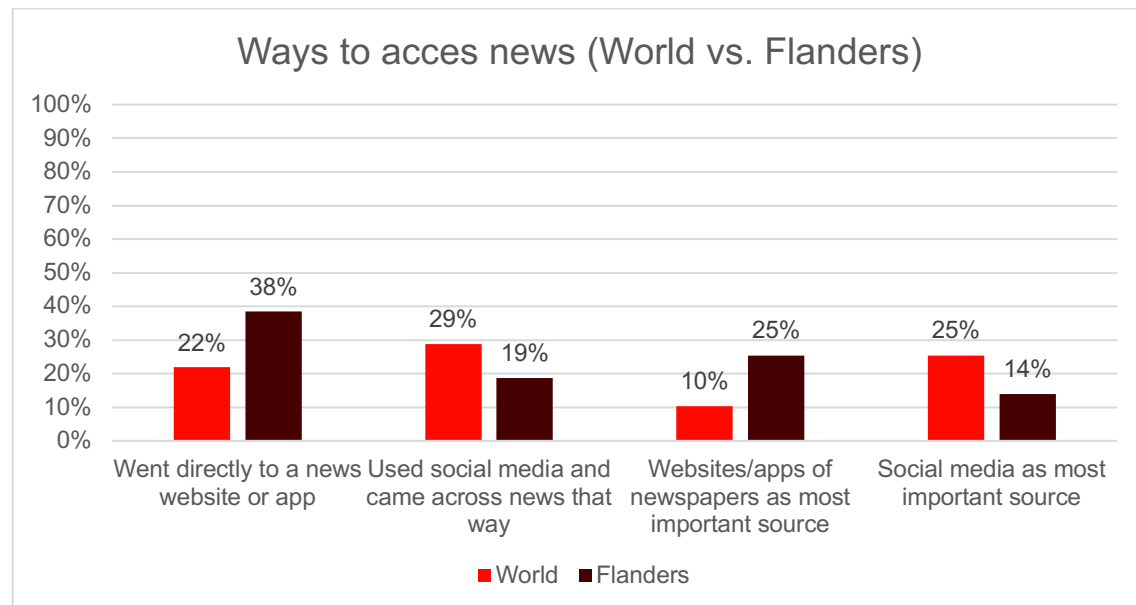
Base: Payers for news (N=170, 15%), Non-payers (N=962, 85%).

Paying or not paying for online news media also affects **satisfaction with the range of tasks provided by these news media**. Four tasks stand out where payers have higher satisfaction rates compared to non-payers. The biggest difference is found in 'news that provides practical information and advice' (63.5% and 52.1% respectively) and 'news that engages people on social issues' (70.8% and 59.7% respectively), in addition to 'news that teaches people something about a particular topic' (64.5% and 55.6%, respectively) and 'news that offers different perspectives' (57.8% and 49%, respectively). This is potentially interesting information for news media as it indicates which needs are especially important for paying users.

8. News consumption is evolving, but less pronounced than elsewhere

Flemish news user in recent years have **followed the international trend towards more digital access**. Traditional channels for news do not disappear completely from the news repertoire, but both TV, radio and print are the main route to news for fewer and fewer Flemish people. Online platforms, including news sites and apps and social media, are partly replacing these traditional channels.

On the face of it, not startling figures. Globally, we see similar trends. Yet the Flemish news landscape seems to be **robust**. Social media as the main source to news has almost doubled to 14% since 2017, but there is still a big difference with the global average (25%). Compared to other countries, **more Flemish news users prefer going directly to a news site or app as their main access to news** (world: 22%; Flanders: 38%).



Base: Flanders, All (N=1132), World, All (N=89158).

The strength of the news landscape is linked to a number of **strong and reliable news brands**. Among the **most used online news brands** on a weekly basis, Het Laatste Nieuws (44%) has been the leader for several years, followed by VRT NWS (31%) and Het Nieuwsblad (23%). Most Flemish news brands have also enjoyed high trust among Flemish people for several years (see the [country report on Belgium](#) for concrete figures). Foreign news brands have difficulty breaking through completely in Flanders. A very small minority surf to the New York Times or BBC News.

However, this does not mean that nothing is moving. That younger generations are incorporating more social media, such as TikTok and YouTube, as well as new sources like Cestmoco, into their repertoire is a sign of things to come (see Key Trend 5).

9. Politically outspoken Flemish people show more interest in (digital) news.

*Age, education and income still create important fault lines in the news consumption of Flemish people. Political preference is less decisive, unless we compare **Flemish people with and without an outspoken political preference**. Respondents who indicated 'don't know' to the question about their political preference are considered here as politically not outspoken Flemish people, those who indicated left, centre or right as politically pronounced Flemish people.*

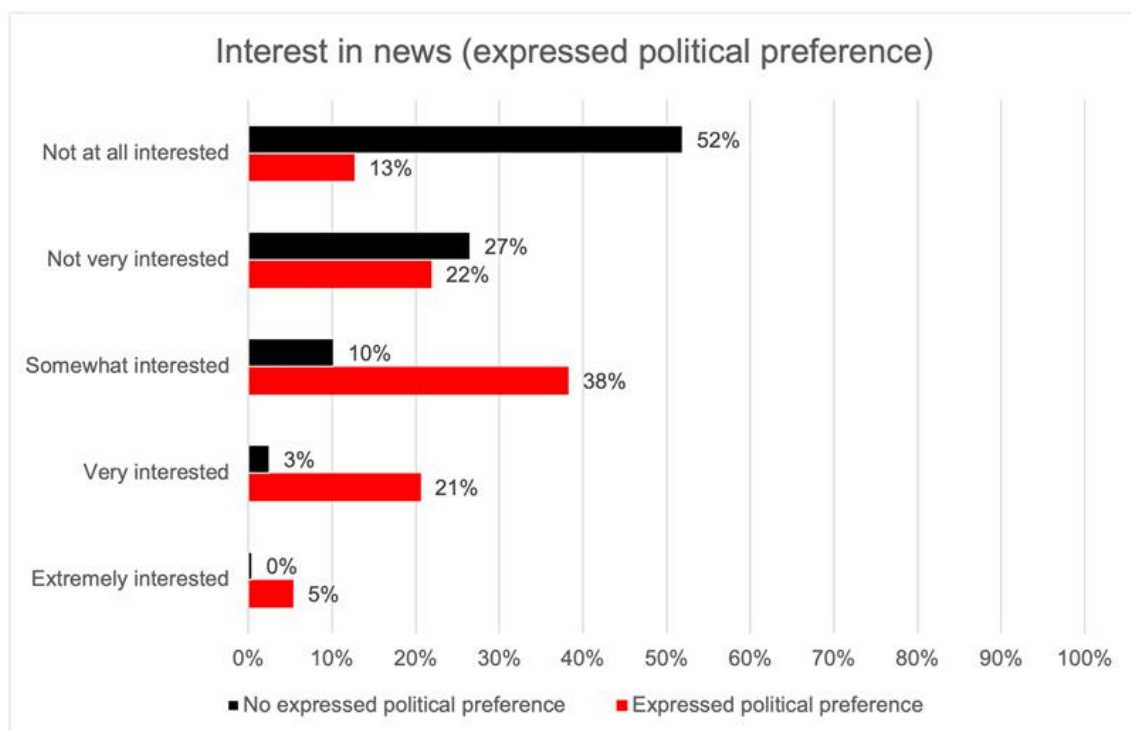
Let us first take a closer look at their news consumption. **Politically outspoken Flemish people consult (online) news more often**: as many as three in four consult news at least once a day. Among politically not outspoken Flemish people, the figure is only 50%. In terms of the use of traditional news media, we do not see a big difference. In terms of online news sources, however, they do differ greatly: 23% of the politically not outspoken Flemish people indicate social media as their main news source, compared to only 11% of the politically outspoken

Flemish people, who more often consult news mainly via news sites and/or apps (26% vs. 19%). This then clearly translates into **more willingness to pay and actually pay** for online news (18% vs. 5%).

Politically outspoken Flemish people logically show **a greater interest in politics, and also in news**: almost half (45%) are very to extremely interested in news compared to only 15% of politically not outspoken Flemish people.

In terms of trust in news, there are proportionally as many distrusters. However, there are proportionate differences between the number of trusters. **More than half of politically outspoken Flemish people (53%) trust the news** compared to about 40% of politically not outspoken Flemish people. Proportionally, almost twice as many politically not outspoken Flemish people say they often avoid the news. They do concur in leaving the news rather occasionally. A clear difference emerges among those who say they never avoid the news. Among the politically outspoken Flemish news users, this is slightly more than one in three (35%), whereas it is only 16% among the politically not outspoken Flemish.

The politically outspoken Flemish news users also participate more in news. About 9% of them sometimes share a news item on social media compared to about 5% of politically not outspoken Flemish news users. They are also remarkably more likely to comment below an online news item. Talking about news both online and offline also shows clear differences. One in three politically outspoken Flemish people regularly talk about the news face to face with friends and colleagues. Among politically not outspoken Flemish people, this is only 16%.



Base: No outspoken political preference (N=862, 76%), Outspoken political preference (N=269, 24%).

Thus, we see a trade-off between some political knowledge or engagement and news habits and attitudes. In short, politically outspoken Flemish people consult more news and have a more positive attitude towards it compared to politically not outspoken Flemish people.

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.

1 – How can news media deploy AI without losing the trust of their audience?

Only 13% of Flemish news users feel comfortable with AI as a news producer. This reluctance is particularly strong in political reporting, while young people and the more educated are generally more positive towards AI. This group has a better understanding of AI technologies, but the broad reluctance raises questions about **how AI can be implemented in journalism without losing public trust**. AI can be a valuable tool in journalism, for example through rapid data analysis and content creation, but transparency about its use and control by human journalists is crucial, especially given the importance of transparency for trust. What steps can news organisations take to be transparent about AI use and ensure control mechanisms that give the public trust? These are the questions news media can think about in light of these evolutions.

2 – What strategies can news media employ to restore trust among certain groups of news users?

Trust in news stagnates worldwide and the gap between Flanders (51%) and Wallonia (35%) remains wide. Remarkable is the increase in distrust among left-leaning Flemish people and young people. These groups value transparency, representation and high journalistic standards. What can news organisations do to reinforce these values and restore trust? The data shows that 76% of **Flemish news users value transparency**, and 71% value **high journalistic standards**. Can news organisations be more open about their sources and methods? Can they include more diverse perspectives and voices in their reporting? By actively addressing these needs, news organisations may be able to restore and strengthen trust in news among these critical groups. Of course, transparency also comes with challenges: too much openness about the internal organisation can also be used against news media by opponents of a free press, and could further lower trust. Nevertheless, we see in the figures that transparency is valued by news users, and can thus be a building block for renewed trust.

3 – How can news organisations and policymakers work together to re-engage news outlets?

News avoidance is on the rise in Flanders, with 62% of news users sometimes or often avoiding news in 2024, up from 48% in 2017. Younger and less educated Flemish people in particular are avoiding news more often. Although 85% still consume news regularly, it is important to counter the growth of news aficionados (now 13%) and re-engage them. What can news organisations and policymakers do to reverse this trend? The rise in news avoidance often stems from **a sense of overload or negative coverage**. News organisations can consider rethinking their approach, for instance by focusing on journalism that highlights not only problems but also solutions. Media policy in Flanders can continue to focus on educational programmes that promote media literacy and resilience in the face of disinformation, so that people are better able to deal with news critically and selectively.

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