

POLICY BRIEF #69

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News avoidance stagnates at high peak as consumption and interest wanes

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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 summarizes the main findings on Flemish news use in 9 key trends, including high levels of news avoidance and a continuing decline in news consumption and news interest among Flemish users. Moreover, with news consumption on algorithmically driven platforms growing, this year's data explores how users deal with algorithms.

Concluding our policy brief, we open the discussion on this year's findings through two [CONVERSATION STARTERS](#). First, considering the strong reach, trust in, and support for public broadcaster VRT, we discuss the role that VRT might play as an ally, fostering collaboration and quality within the broader news landscape. Second, delving into the waning trust in news, we explore whether changing news practices and attitudes might offer a way to rekindle the audience's confidence in the news.

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

1 NEWS AVOIDANCE STAGNATES AT HIGH LEVEL
Avoidance numbers stagnate in 2023, but at a high level. Amongst news avoiders we identify **two distinct types**: **Systematic avoiders** that disconnect from the news by turning away from specific sources of news or prioritizing non-news-related activities, and **Occasional avoiders** that control their news intake by managing the flow of news and information.

2 PAYING FOR ONLINE NEWS HITS A CEILING
The pandemic came with an increase in paying for news, but by 2023, this trend seemed to regress to pre-COVID numbers. Have we reached **a ceiling in paying for online news**? A mere **16% of Flemish news users are currently paying** and will potentially do so in the future. The **cost-of-living** might be to blame.

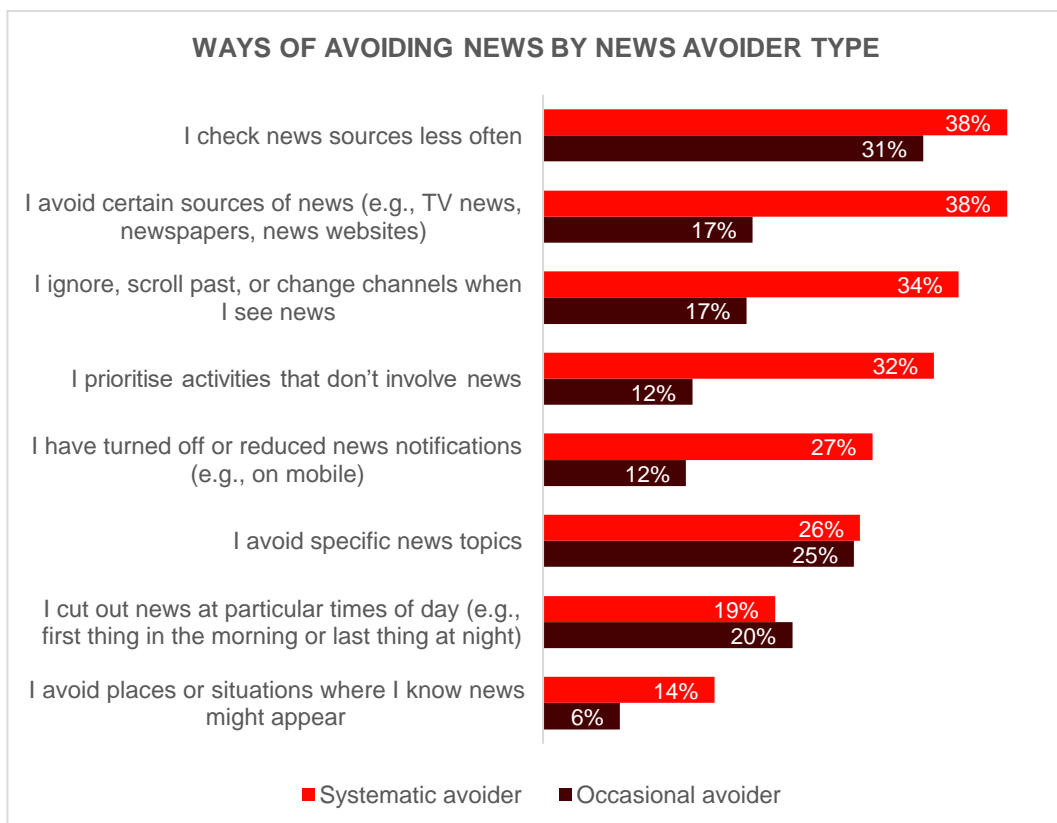
- 3** | **LOW PRICES LURE SUBSCRIBERS, QUALITY CONTENT RETAINS THEM**
Convincing Flemish news users to pay for online news remains a hard bargain. Non-payers appear to be swayed only when there is a **significant reduction in pricing**. Once they commit to paying, however, it is **high-quality and distinctive content** that tends to encourage their sustained financial support.
- 4** | **TELEVISION NEWS IS A TRUSTWORTHY STAPLE IN NEWS DIETS**
As **trust in news further declines**, a trust gap between Flanders and Wallonia persists. Additionally, users relying mainly on **television news** exhibit **higher trust** than those relying on social media. Most users primarily encounter criticism of journalism on social media, potentially hinting at **social media as a more toxic news environment**.
- 5** | **DISCUSSING NEWS REMAINS THE PREFERRED WAY TO PARTICIPATE**
Most users are hesitant to get involved in public debates on social media, with a **minority sharing news via social media platforms or commenting on news stories**. Youngsters in particular prefer participating in **closed online settings** (e.g., discussing the news with friends and family in messaging apps), although talking about the news in real life remains the preferred way of participating.
- 6** | **DECLINE IN NEWS USE COINCIDES WITH WANING INTEREST**
News use in Flanders is in **decline**: people consuming the news **once a day or more** (71%) decreased **10pp** since last year. Parallel, a declining trend is noticeable in general **interest** in news. Remarkably, youngsters (18 to 25-year-old) are ahead of both trends: their general interest in news decreased 13pp since last year and **almost 1 out of 4 youngsters explicitly expresses a disinterest in news**.
- 7** | **A CALL FOR MORE CONSTRUCTIVE, SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED NEWS**
In general, Flemish news users demonstrate a preference for news that provides a (quick) **update on current affairs** (47%). An equally large group expresses interest in **information that suggests solutions** (47%) and in more **positive news stories** (50%). The (further) implementation of this constructive and solutions-oriented journalistic approach could potentially improve news interest and **better the relationship between news media and its audience**.
- 8** | **HIGH SUPPORT FOR THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER**
A large number of Flemish news users consult news brands from public broadcaster VRT. Coupled with the **high levels of trust** that the public service broadcaster enjoys, VRT holds a strong and important position within the Flemish news landscape, further consolidated by **high levels of support for the public broadcaster** and its importance to society and users personally.
- 9** | **USERS TRAIN THEIR ALGORITHMS TO GET RELIABLE AND DIVERSE CONTENT**
Almost half of the Flemish news users **try to control their personalized newsfeed** by for example (un)following, muting, blocking, or changing other settings. Mainly doing so to receive **more reliable content** and to **see more diverse perspectives**.

1. NEWS AVOIDANCE STAGNATES AT HIGH LEVEL

After increasing consistently over the past years, avoidance numbers remain high in 2023, as **63% of Flemish news users avoid the news** to some extent (either often, occasionally, or sometimes). While a minority of users (9%) indicate that they often disconnect from the news, a large majority of news avoiders only does so on an occasional basis. As a result, most instances of news avoidance (in line with our [insights](#) on news avoidance during the pandemic) concern momentary interventions by news users to control the flow of news and information, for instance by **reducing the frequency of news use** (52%) rather than avoiding the news altogether.

Among users that avoid the news, we identify **two distinct types of news avoiders: (1) systematic avoiders** avoid news on a frequent basis and more systematically decouple from the news; and **(2) occasional avoiders** avoid news here and there but in general can be thought to remain tethered to the news to some degree.

While **occasional avoiders** tend to avoid news through interventions that control the flow of information (checking news less often, avoiding specific topics, or tuning out the news at specific times during the day), **frequent avoiders** exhibit a more structural disconnection from the news flow. These users **avoid certain sources of news** (37%), **ignore, scroll past, or change channels when they see news** (34%), or **prioritize activities that don't involve news** (32%).



Base: respondents that avoid news (N = 736).

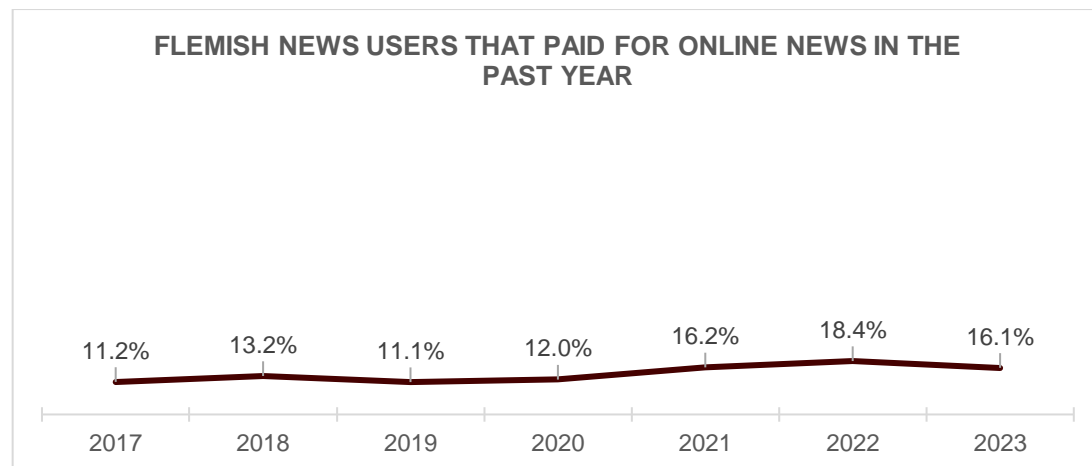
Unsurprisingly perhaps, **Systematic avoiders have significantly lower trust levels than other news users**, as only 22% indicate that they trust most news most of the time (compared to 48% of Occasional avoiders and 65% of non-avoiders). While it is unclear from the data which came first: a distrust in the news, or a disconnection from it, these findings are both hopeful and concerning. On the one hand, **occasional news avoidance can be seen as an organic part**

of **everyday news consumption**, which flows through peaks of higher frequency in news consumption (e.g. during the onset of the pandemic) and valleys of intermittent news avoidance or fasting. For a large majority of users, this is the case. However, a small minority of Systematic avoiders disconnects to a far bigger extent from the news, seeking solace in non-news related activities and distrusting the news landscape to a much larger degree.

2. PAYING FOR ONLINE NEWS HITS A CEILING

For years, the proportion of Flemish news users that pay for online news remained steady at around 12%. In 2021 and 2022 however, we saw a significant uptick, as almost 1 in 6 Flemish news users paid for online news. This surge, dubbed a COVID-bump, mirrored a worldwide trend. Throughout the pandemic, news users sought out and showed a willingness to pay for trustworthy, high-quality news on COVID-19 and related topics.

In 2023, the **percentage of Flemish news users paying for (online) news recedes to 16%**. The challenging economic circumstances we encounter today could partly explain this. Unsurprisingly then, 75% of the Flemish respondents report being affected by an increase in living costs in the past year.



Base: total sample (N = 1167).

When Flemish news users do decide to pay for online news, subscriptions remain their preferred method to do so. As was the case in previous years, most Flemish news users **subscribe to one (online) news brand**. However, it's worth noting that there has been **a sharp decline in news users with multiple news subscriptions**, as the percentage of Flemish respondents with two or more subscriptions fell from 23% in 2022 to 15% in 2023. Given the tough economic environment, many questioned the need to maintain ongoing subscriptions. Indeed, 28% of Flemish news subscribers either cancelled or renegotiated their online news subscription(s) in the past year. **Although there has been a slight overall decrease in paying for online news, the churn is especially prevalent in the number of subscriptions.**

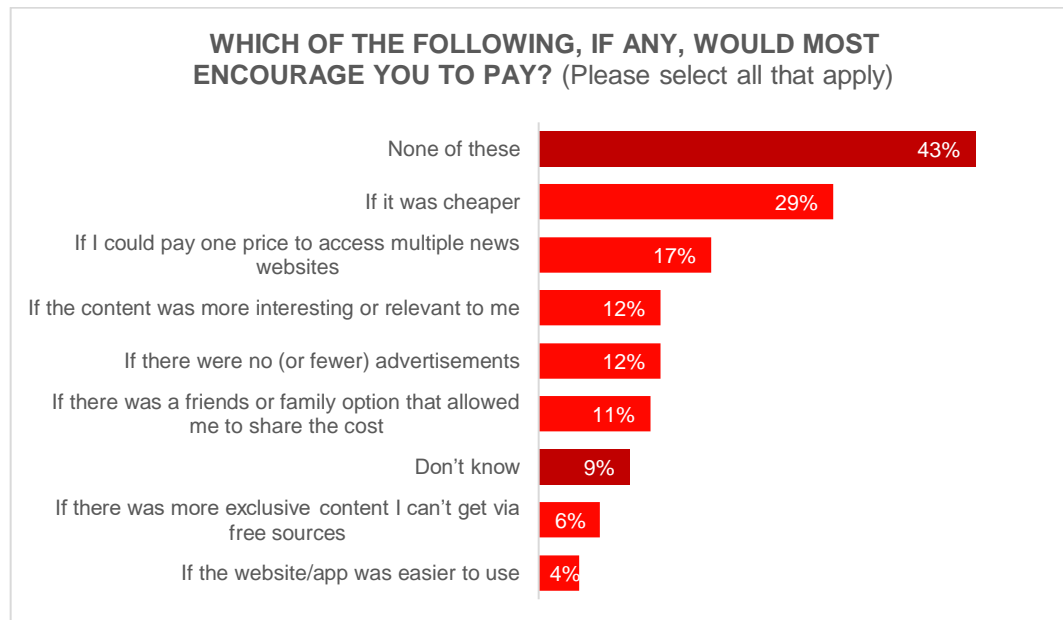
The trend of decreasing payment for online news was not uniformly experienced across all age groups though. The **youngest respondents (aged 18-24 years)** demonstrated the most pronounced tendency to reassess and even cancel their subscription(s). On the other hand, Millennials (aged 25-35 years) continue to lead the way, with 1 in 5 paying for online news.

About 16% of Flemish news users currently pay for online news, slightly below the 17% average found in Western countries. While Flanders' average lags behind that of Norway (39%) and Sweden (33%), Flanders stays ahead of neighboring Germany and France, both at 11%. The

pressing question then becomes whether **the minor decline in paying for news in Flanders is a temporary blip caused by economic turmoil or a ceiling in paying for online news is reached.**

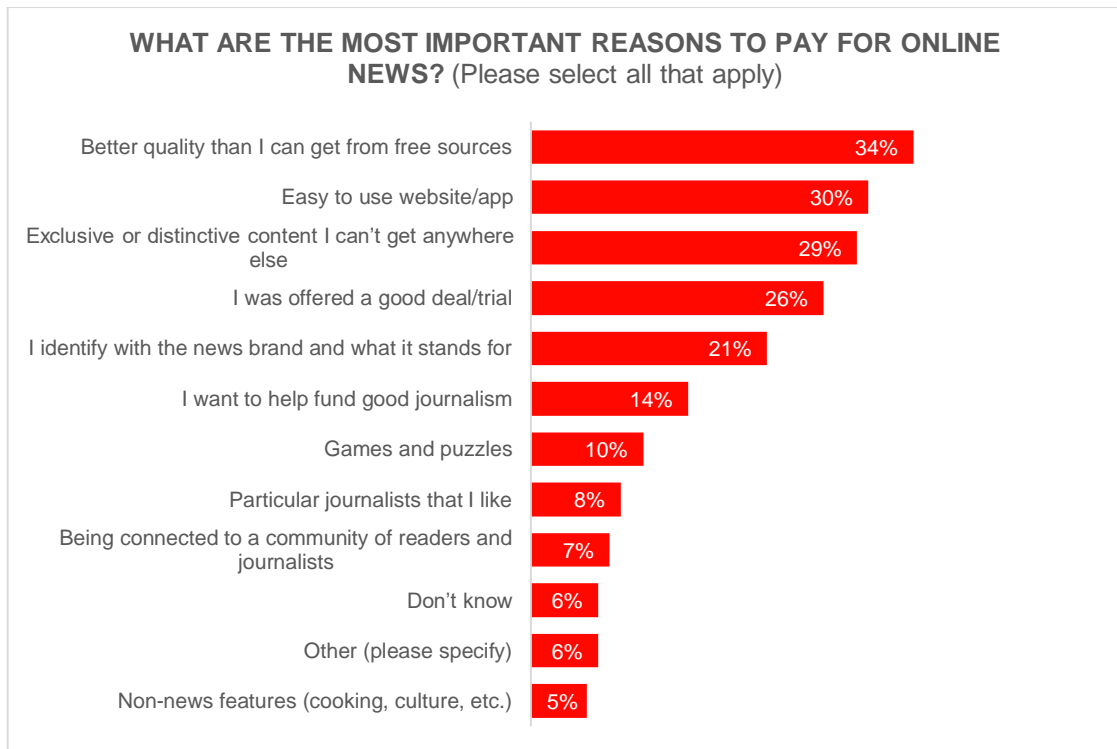
3. LOW PRICES LURE NEW SUBSCRIBERS, QUALITY CONTENT RETAINS THEM

The million-dollar question for commercial news organizations remains: how can they convince people to pay for their content? **Setting the right price** – or from the perspective of the user a low price – seems to be the only way to encourage a willingness to pay. Other potential incentives include a single fee to access multiple news websites (17%) and a reduction or absence of advertisements (12%). Consequently, these incentives exert additional pressure on commercial news organizations to reduce their prices, often already operating in a financially precarious environment. Catering to the demands of non-payers might generate short-term gains, but it could jeopardize long-term sustainability. Furthermore, a disconcerting **43% of respondents indicate that none of the proposed encouragements would convince them to pay for online news** – right on the average of the 20 countries in the survey where paying for online news is most established.



Base: respondents currently not paying for online news (N = 919).

There are no significant differences between the younger (under 35 years) and older (over 35 years) Flemish news users. However, younger generations **consider pricing even more crucial** and show greater interest in subscriptions covering multiple brands and users. This offers them more value for their money. Younger generations also expressed that they might be more willing to pay for online news if the content was more **interesting or relevant** to them, a topic we revisit in Key Trend 7.



Base: respondents currently paying for online news (N = 115).

The Flemish news users who do pay for online news do so because of the **better quality they get compared to free sources (34%), the easy-to-use website or app (30%), and exclusive or distinctive content they can't get anywhere else (29%)**. Thus, a news organization can foster loyalty among subscribers by delivering high-quality, distinctive content on a user-friendly platform. The fourth most common reason for paying for online news is being offered a good deal or trial (26%). Both paying and non-paying news users agree that (low) pricing is a significant factor in their decision to initiate and/or maintain a subscription.

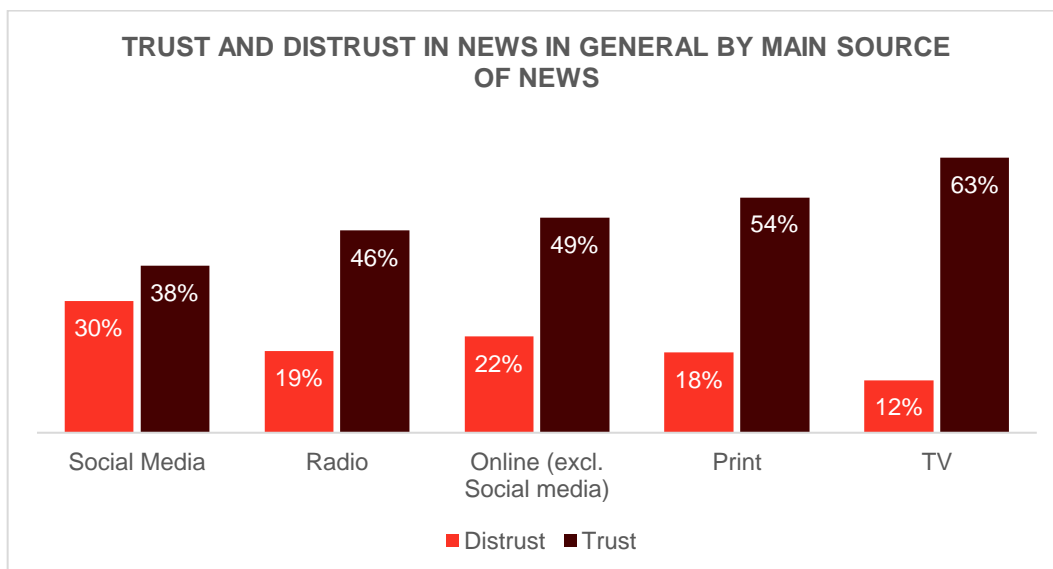
In short, **quality content retains subscribers, while lower prices seem to be the primary (and possibly only) way to entice non-paying users to start paying.**

4. TELEVISION NEWS IS A TRUSTWORTHY STAPLE IN NEWS DIETS

As **trust in news further declines**, the trust gap between Flanders and Wallonia persists. A significantly higher number of users indicate that they trust news in general in Flanders (51%) compared to Wallonia (36%). Trust levels in Flanders compare more strongly with Dutch (57%) and Nordic trust levels, whereas Wallonia's trust levels compare more strongly with French (30%) and Southern European trust levels. Rather than cultural differences, we could be witnessing [economic insecurity](#) here as a factor closely linked to a decline in institutional trust.



When it comes to trust (and distrust) in news, **political orientation** remains the most divisive factor by far. This is highlighted by the (dis)trust gap between news users with a left-wing and a right-wing orientation, where we consistently find more trust in news brands among left-wing users than we do among right-wing users. Conversely, right-wing users are more numerous in expressing a distrust in certain Flemish news brands. These trust gaps are most prominent when it comes to quality news brands, or brands associated with the Flemish public broadcaster, while commercial news brands such as broadcaster VTM exhibit no noticeable trust gaps between left- and right-wing users.



Base: total sample (N = 1167).

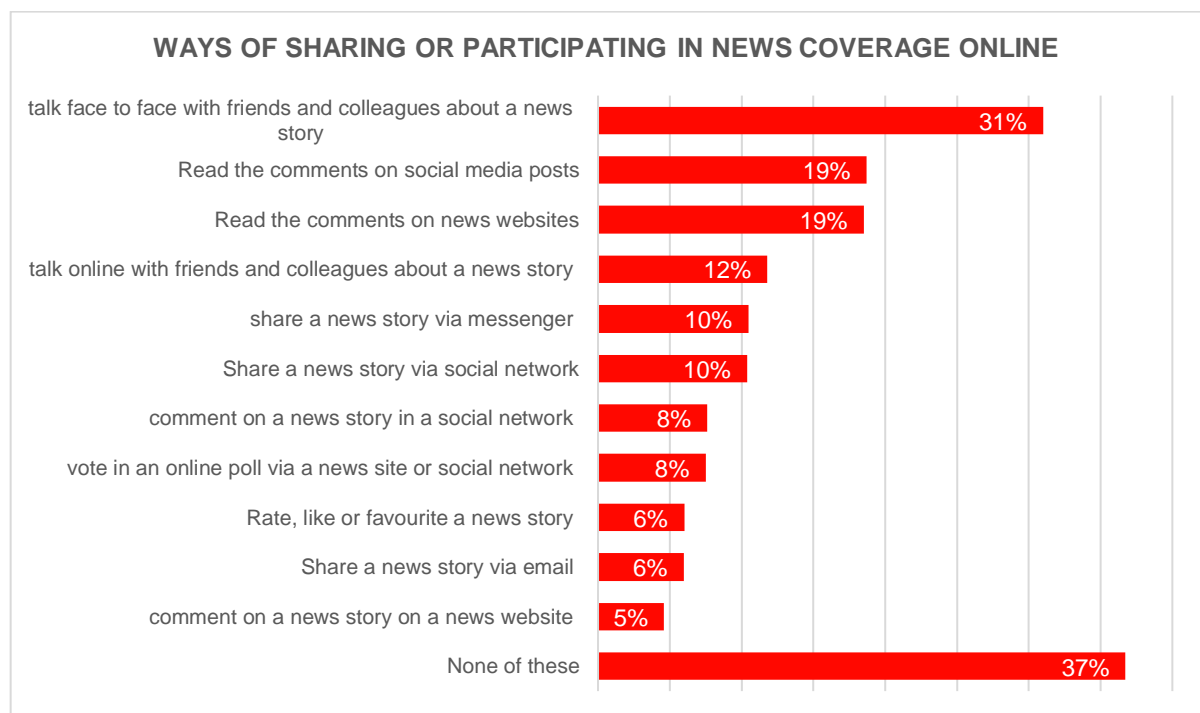
Interestingly, some further differences in trust can be found depending on a user's main source of news. For instance, **trust in news is lowest among users that rely on social media as their main source of news** and information (38%). This resonates with social media as a **potentially more toxic news environment**, and a breeding ground for fake news and criticism of journalistic practice – as 50% of Flemish users that have encountered voices criticizing journalism encountered those on social media.

In contrast, **users that rely primarily on television news are by far the most numerous to trust the news (63%)**. Looking back on the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, we found that users who cut down on news often turned to the television journal as an anchor point in their news diet. As a result, we might find some indications of **television news as a nutritious staple**

in a healthy and balanced news diet. One that provides a valuable counterpoint to the gradual decline in weekly use of television for news, and can further explain how despite this decline, television broadcasts remain the main source of news for 34% of Flemish news users.

5. DISCUSSING THE NEWS REMAINS THE PREFERRED WAY TO PARTICIPATE

In general, **online participation** in news remains restricted to **a minority** of Flemish news users, as **just 1 in 10 Flemish news users shares news via social media** platforms, and 11% **comment** on a news story. In fact, just 1 in 4 Flemish news users considers online participation in news a positive experience, with a majority (38%) remaining on the fence on whether it is positive or negative. Instead, Flemish audiences invest themselves in more passive forms of participation in **closed online settings**, such as reading comments (28%) or discussing news in private chats (12%).



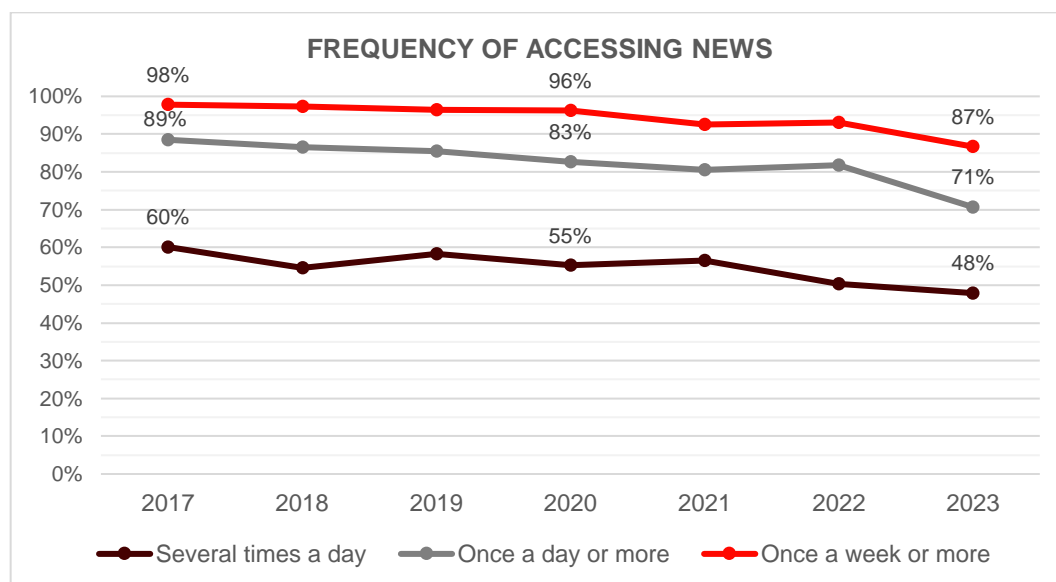
Base: total sample (N = 1167).

Talking about news is still the most popular way of participating, especially offline, as 31% of Flemish news users discuss news with friends and colleagues in real life, while 12% of respondents discuss news stories online. However, seeing as **41% of users employs caution when discussing politics online**, we might find some indication as to why users might be hesitant to discuss and participate in news online, or why 37% refrains from participating in news altogether. Right-wing news users (56%) in particular appear to feel the need to be slightly more careful than others in expressing their views online.

As a result, with nearly half of the Flemish respondents indicating they feel the need to be careful with what they say (about politics) online, the question remains as to how open the online sphere actually is to discuss news and ideas.

6. DECLINE IN NEWS USE COINCIDES WITH WANING INTEREST

News use in Flanders is in **decline**, as the number of users consuming the news **once a day or more** has decreased **by 10 percentage points** since last year. Specifically, we note a sharp drop in frequent news use (once a day or more) among older news users aged 55, going from 90% last year to 75% in 2023. This trend is most noticeable among the youngest age group (18- to 25-year-olds), where the drop in news use coincides with a **declining interest in news**. What's more, **about 1 in 4 youngsters explicitly express a disinterest in news** (23%).



Base: total sample (N = 1167).

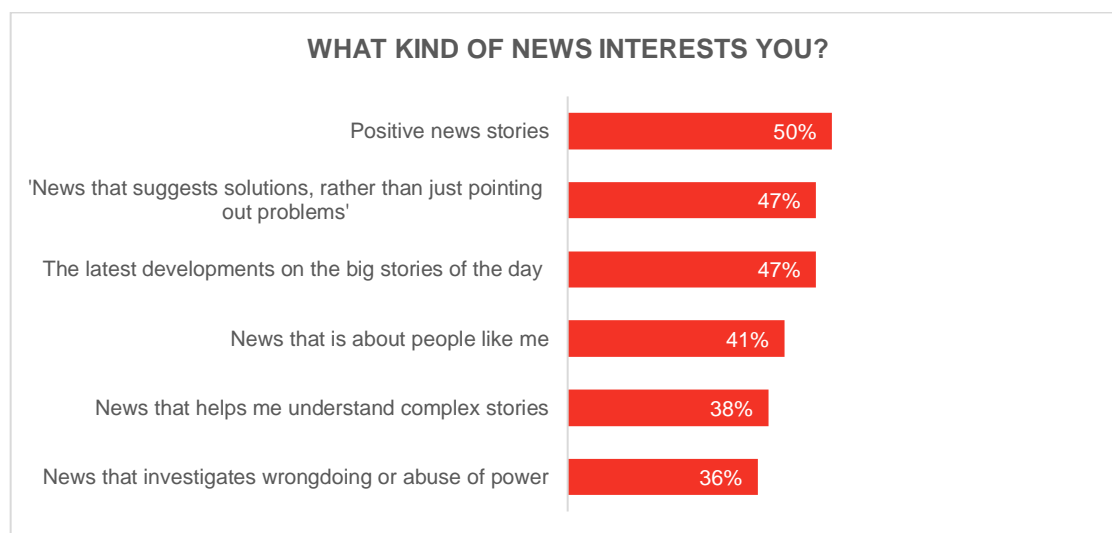
In terms of news sources, almost half of the Flemish users (49%) rely on **online media as their main source of news**. Despite experiencing a COVID-bump in popularity during the pandemic, television is again losing ground to online news as main source of news for Flemish users. Despite this trend, television remains the main source of news for nearly half (48%) of the users aged 55 and above. For the youngest group of news users (18- to 25-year-olds), social media has gained huge strides in 2023, as **42% (+8 pp.) of youngsters use social media as their main source of news**.

While the weekly usage of television and radio as news sources remain in a steady but slowly declining trend in Flanders, **the printed press in particular sees a drop in weekly use** of almost 10 pp (from 36% to 27%) since last year. This drop is most noticeable among the youngest generation of news users (age 18-24), where the shift towards online forms of news consumption is most pronounced: while 30% of 18- to 25-year-olds used print media as a source of news in 2022, only 16% still does in 2023.

7. A CALL FOR MORE CONSTRUCTIVE, SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED NEWS

Nearly half of Flemish news users (47%) primarily turn to the news to stay informed about **the latest developments on the big stories of the day**. This traditional interest in news is expected. However, it may be more surprising to note that an equal proportion of Flemish news users show clear interest in **news that suggests solutions rather than just pointing out problems** (47%). Moreover, half are attracted to **positive news stories** (50%). These elements are hallmarks of constructive or solutions-oriented journalism. For many years, even decades,

scholars and industry professionals have concluded that these genres of journalism could increase interest in news and improve the relationship between journalism and its audience. Now, Flemish news users also express a strong interest in constructive, solutions-oriented news (resonating with findings from the COVID-19 pandemic).



Base: total sample (N = 1167).

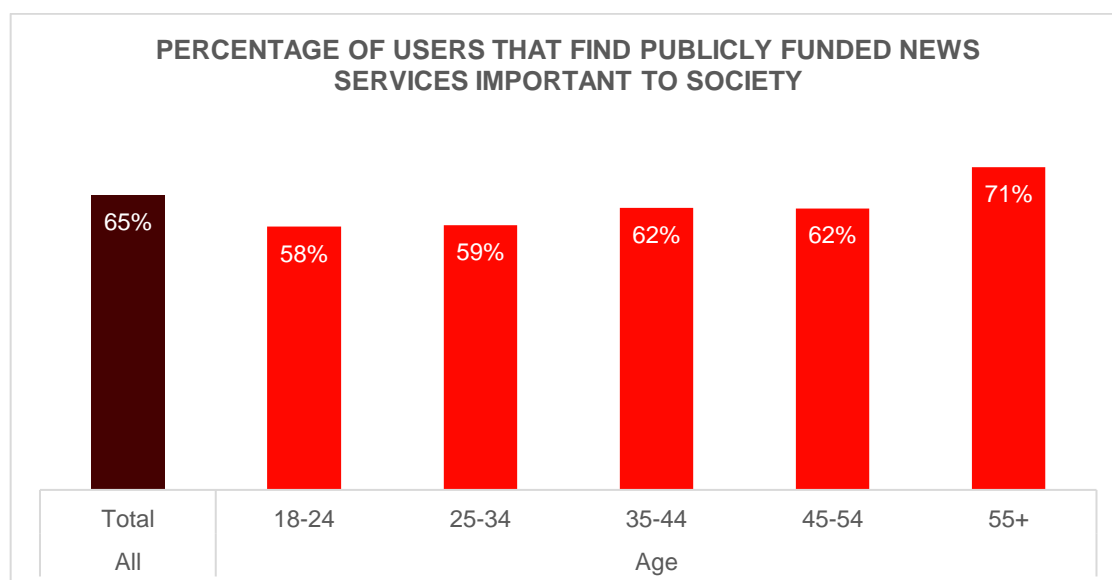
Not all socio-demographic groups are equally interested. Age does seem to matter less, but significant differences emerge when considering Social Economic Status. Flemish respondents with **lower incomes and/or education levels indicate being less interested in the proposed kinds of news**, especially when compared with affluent, highly educated respondents. The cause of this disparity is not straightforward. Perhaps these less educated, less affluent respondents are more interested in other kinds of news not listed in the survey options. Alternatively, they may find the news less engaging or valuable because it doesn't resonate with their experiences or interests.

Political preference also significantly influences the kinds of news that garners interest. **Left-wing news users show more interest in solutions-oriented and positive news stories compared to their right-wing counterparts.** They are also more interested in news that aids in understanding complex news stories. It seems left-wing news users are more receptive to journalists' input to learn something new, provide solutions to societal problems, and frame news stories in a different, more positive light. We will explore these interpretations in more depth in **Conversation Starter** below.

8. HIGH SUPPORT FOR THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER

In both current and previous data from the Digital News Report, we've seen public broadcaster VRT emerge as a strong news brand that features a large reach and high trust levels. When it comes to **offline** news use, for example, **60% of Flemish news users consult VRT brands at least weekly** – owing to VRT's strong television and radio presence. When it comes to **online** news, the public service broadcaster's **online brands reach 37%** of Flemish news users. Especially among the youngest age group (18-24 years), **the public broadcaster's @nws.nws.nws channel has taken huge strides in the last 3 years**, growing from 8% in 2021 to 29% in 2023 among users aged between 18 and 24. Making @nws.nws.nws the third largest news brand among the youngest age group in our survey.

Aside from taking a prominent position in the Flemish news landscape, the Flemish public broadcaster retains a high level of trust, with **76% of respondents finding VRT trustworthy**. While this ranks the public broadcaster among the most trusted Flemish news brands that were questioned in the DNR, VRT excels when it comes to high levels of trust (a score of 8 or higher out of 10) for 57% of respondents. This makes VRT an important **beacon of trust**, that can perform a **lighthouse function in societal debates**: informing citizens on important societal issues, taking an objective stance in heated discussions, and playing an important part in the effort to counteract fake news.



Base: total sample (N = 1167).

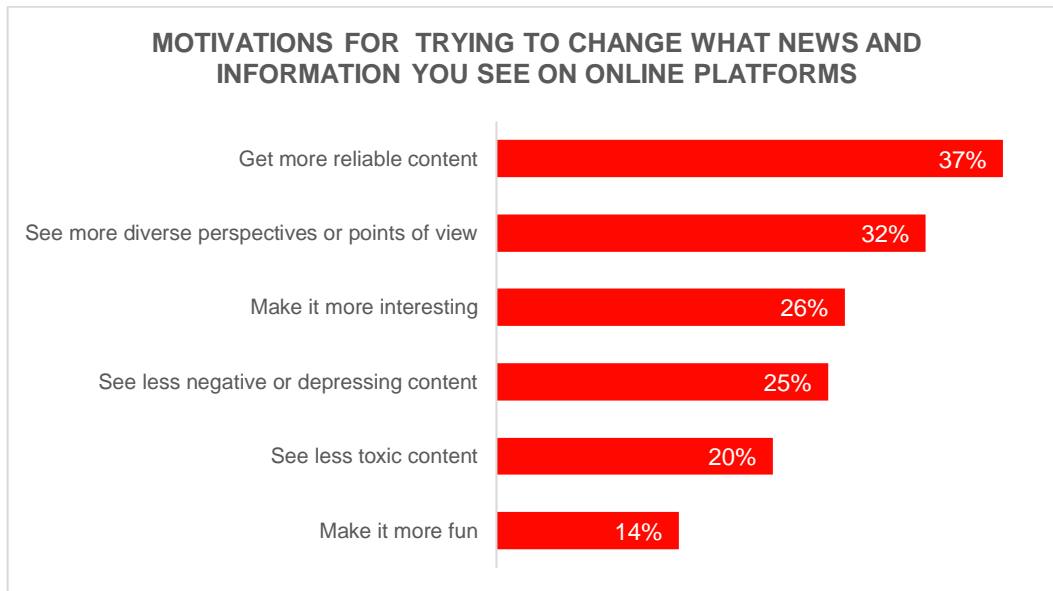
Put together, it is perhaps unsurprising that the high reach and trust of public broadcaster VRT also translates to a **high sense of importance of the public broadcaster to society** (65%), as well as to news users personally (59%). This is especially the case among socio-demographic groups that are most reached by VRT, such as those aged 55 and above, and higher educated and income users.

9. USERS TRAIN THEIR ALGORITHMS TO GET RELIABLE AND DIVERSE CONTENT

With a large chunk of news practices taking place through social media, the latest Digital News Report delved into how users stand on algorithmically driven news selection. Interestingly, most users remain neutral when it comes to algorithmic news selection, although **higher educated respondents show a noticeably more pronounced dislike for algorithmically selected news**. Looking further into these results, we can see why, as most respondents voice a concern that algorithmically selected news might cause them to miss out on important information (49%), or challenging viewpoints (46%).

Despite the prominence of algorithmically driven platforms, users are not entirely powerless to act upon their concern: roughly half of Flemish news users (48%) indicate that they actively **try to control their personalized newsfeed** by (un)following, muting, blocking, or changing other settings. This trend is especially noticeable among the more tech savvy younger generations (as well as higher educated and more affluent respondents).

On the other hand, we find that older news users (55 and above) are less likely to apply curation techniques to control their algorithmic news feed. While this can partly be explained by older users (55 and above) less frequently accessing news through algorithmically driven platforms than younger age groups, when they do train their algorithms, older users do so in a highly critical manner.



Base: Users who try to change what they see via their algorithm (N = 565)

Indeed, when looking at their **motivations to strategically train their algorithms**, we find that users mostly do so **to receive more reliable content** (37%), to see **more diverse perspectives** or points of view (32%), to **make their news diet more interesting** (26%) or to **see less negative or depressing content** (25%). However, we find that when older users (55+) alter their algorithm they primarily do so to mostly get diverse perspectives (40%) and reliable information (47%), whereas younger age groups (under 35) equally do so to make their news practices more fun (21%).

10. CONVERSATION STARTERS

Now that we have updated you on the most important trends in news use of the past year, we present **2 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 **IS THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER A DISRUPTOR, OR A POTENTIAL ALLY?** Reflecting on the findings from **Key Trend 3**, the number of users that pay for news has stagnated, pointing to the possibility that **the ceiling for the number of users that pay for news has been reached**. How then can we further increase the user's willingness to pay for news, if at all?

The Flemish data in this year's Digital News Report indicate that most users are would be more inclined to pay for news if it were cheaper. When users do pay, however, they do so mostly to gain access to **high-quality, distinctive, and exclusive content**.

But what then, do users consider to be quality content? Taking the different kinds of news that interests users most as a proxy, we find that **users are not only looking for the latest updates, but are also looking for positive, constructive, and solutions-oriented journalism** (which resonates with findings from the COVID-19 pandemic).

With its free news offering, the public broadcaster is often cast as a **disruptor or competitor** for commercial news brands. However, existing studies – [although few](#) – provide little evidence for a negative market impact of public service media upon private sector media. Moreover, as we've consistently found in our data, Flemish public broadcaster VRT is strongly positioned within the news landscape, with a consistently high level of trust and wide reach. What's more, **Flemish news users exhibit high levels of support for the public broadcaster**, both through its importance to society and themselves personally (see **Key Trend 8**). Following close behind support levels for public broadcasters in the Nordic countries, which also have strongly positioned public broadcasters.

In that sense, the latest DNR data taps into a long-running discussion surrounding the public broadcaster's position within the news landscape. Rather than casting VRT as a disrupting market force, public service media could be considered as allies in producing high-quality and valuable local information and in countering the generic, often free offerings of the tech giants. Just as [VRT CEO Frederik Delaplace argued](#), **a strong public broadcaster can help the broader news landscape flourish**. Not only does it raise the bar for news content, but the public broadcaster can also provide news users with a gateway to quality news and play a connective and cooperative role within the news landscape.

B

CAN A MORE OPEN ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE NEWS INCREASE OUR TRUST IN MEDIA?

Trust in news plays a significant role on various levels. In times of crisis and upheaval, media (and journalism in particular) are called upon to provide the general public with crucial and qualitative information. Trust in the news is essential for journalism to adequately perform that function. [Other research](#) has associated (dis)trust in news with (dis)trust in politics and society as a whole, underlining the **importance of trust as a foundation** to build support for societal changes.

However, **distrust in news is not an attitude shared equally across all socio-demographic groups**. Over the past five years, the Digital News Report revealed a growing trust-gap between left-wing and right-wing news users, with the latter exhibiting a higher distrust in news.

These opposing groups also exhibit slight differences in news use. Left-wing oriented news users tend to have a broader (or more panoramic) news repertoire, encompassing a wider range of sources. In contrast, right-wing oriented news users often maintain a more limited news repertoire, drawing from fewer, less diverse, predominantly online sources. Yet, no significant differences are observed in their interest in news or frequency of news use. **The disparity in news use thus primarily manifests in the diversity of sources**.

Furthermore, left-wing oriented news users exhibit a greater openness to considering different perspectives and viewpoints. In **Key Trend 7**, we already briefly discussed this disparity. This openness is reflected in the left-wing oriented users' greater interest in news that aids their understanding of complex stories, is solutions-oriented, and presents news in a more positive light. **Right-wing oriented users often consume news with a more utilitarian motive** (e.g., getting a quick update), while **left-wing oriented news users are more receptive to journalistic input**.

Besides these attitudes, left-wing oriented news users also demonstrate a certain **openness in their news practices**. For instance, they strategically adjust the inflow of news and information streams to include more diverse perspectives, to make their news repertoire more interesting, and also filter out toxic and negative news (see **Key Trend 9**).

The question pertains whether these news attitudes and news practices of left-wing oriented news users can instruct other users to **adopt a broader news repertoire and a more open attitude towards news**. This could potentially lead to higher trust levels, a result beneficial not only for news media but also for society as a whole.

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[Nieuwsgebruik.be](#) is the point of reference for research on news consumption practices. Guiding you through the latest data on news use to bring you all of the insights, with none of the fuss.



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