

# POLICY BRIEF #27

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## In news we trust. High trust in news hides regional, educational and age-related differences

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Today, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism publishes its yearly [Digital News Report](#), in which imec-SMIT is the Belgian partner. In our dedicated [Facts and Figures](#) report, we delve deeper into the data and results on digital news use in Flanders and Wallonia. In this policy brief, we focus on trust in the news and the role of journalism in the light of various policy initiatives taken to tackle disinformation.

### Highlights

- Trust in news in general remains relatively high in Belgium compared to other countries (7th/38), but trust is much higher in Flanders than in Wallonia;
- While 61% of Flemish news users above 35 years old trust the news in general, this drops to only 38% of news users under 35 years old;
- This is mirrored in younger news users taking more measures to deal with distrust, like discounting the use of inaccurate news sources or discuss news with others;
- Trust in news via social media is remarkably lower, also amongst young news users, even if about 1 in 5 of under 35s says social media are their main news source;
- Overall, trust in key legacy news brands, including the public broadcaster, is high in Flanders, with little right/left polarisation in terms of trust amongst their audiences in comparison with other countries or in contrast with some perceptions;
- Flemish news users appreciate news media for keeping them up-to-date and helping them understand the news, rather than for monitoring the powerful. Especially in affluent Northern European countries like Finland and Norway the latter function of journalism is considered more important.

Tackling disinformation has been [high on the European agenda](#) in the past year. In its 2018 Communication on the matter, the European Commission put forward investing in high quality journalism as one of its key overarching principles. In Flanders, support for investigative reporting has been in place for years through Journalismfund.eu. Last year, the Flemish Government installed the [Flemish Journalism Fund](#) to support innovative journalism, with fact-checking initiatives being among the first to get funded.

## 1. Trust in news. A regional matter.

To be successful, news media not only need to publish the outcome of such initiatives - and quality news stories in general - and audiences need not only to consume them. Audiences also need to trust news media in order for factual information to be valued as such, and not be dismissed as merely *another opinion*.

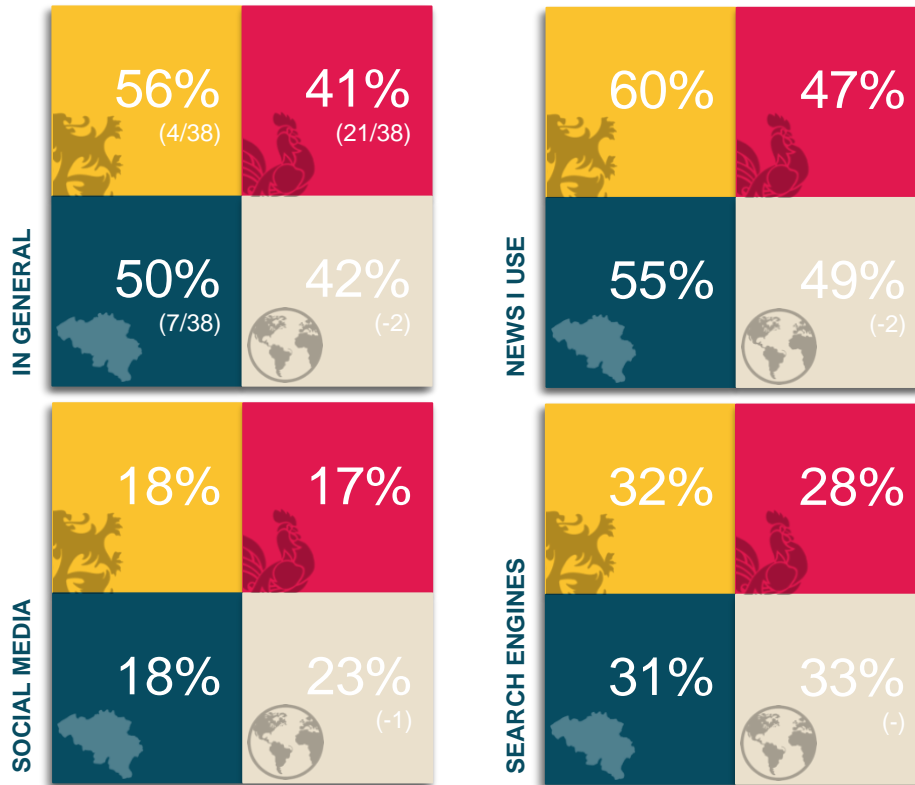


Figure 1: Different types of trust in media - Flanders, Wallonia, Belgium, Worldwide

In Belgium, as in general across the 38 countries, **trust in the news is stable** over the last four years, with only 50% trusting most of the news most of the time. Belgium is still ranked 7th. Remarkable however is the **difference between Flanders and Wallonia**. 56% of Flemish news users trust the news in general, putting Flanders on the 4th place, whereas only 41% of Walloons do so. Both regions are much more aligned - mutually and internationally - in terms of trust when it comes to social media and search engines, where we see a very slim decline compared to last year, which might be a reflection of how Facebook and Google have been linked to disinformation in the previous year.

## 2. In Flanders, especially the young distrust the news

But in Flanders too, we notice large **fluctuations in trust levels between subgroups of the population**. This is the case between people with a left versus right political orientation and to a small extent with higher versus lower education, but most notably between younger and older news users. Whereas 61% of respondents above 35 years old trust the news in general, only 38% of those under 35 do so. In light of the recent elections in Belgium, and the success of the extreme right amongst young voters attributed by various commentators to a certain extent to a relentless campaign on social media, these numbers are telling.

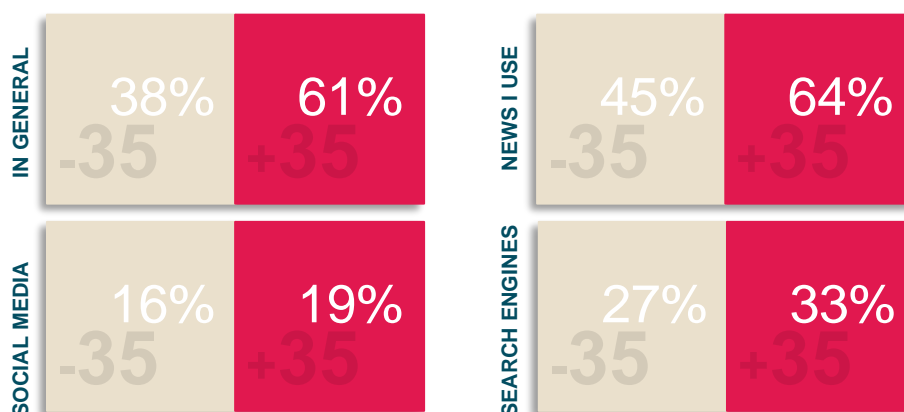


Figure 2: Different types of trust in media – under 35s/above 35s

More than 60 percent of Flemish news users under 35 years old turned to online media for news in the past week. **Online media, including social media, are clearly a more important news source than television amongst the younger age groups.** Amongst those aged 18 to 25 even social media alone are consulted more for news than television.

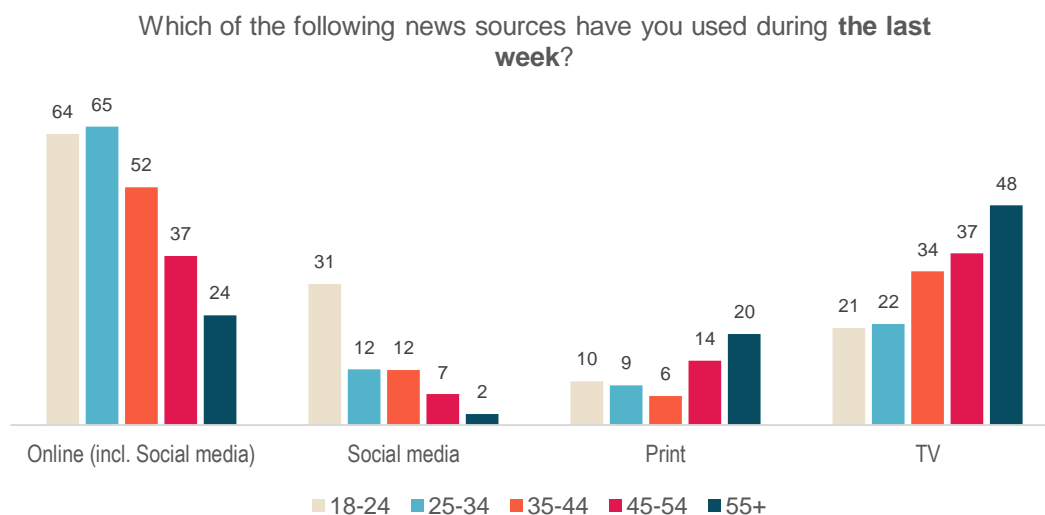


Figure 3: News sources used during the last week by the respondents.

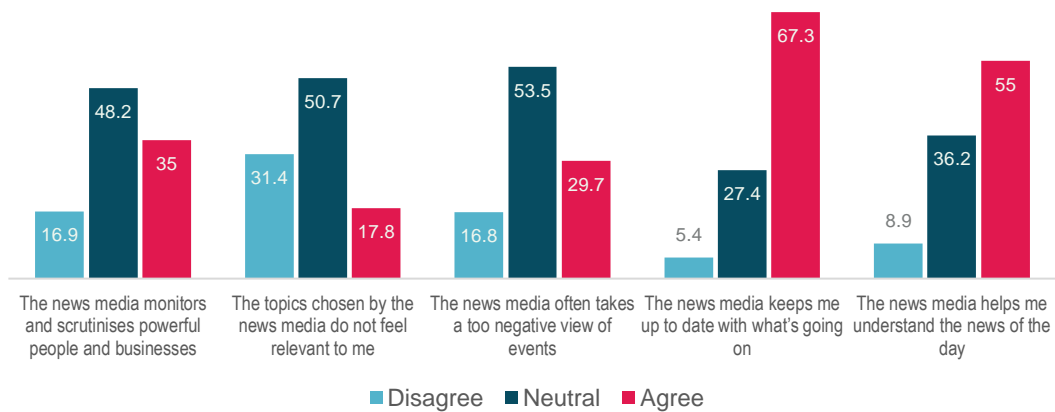
One may then suspect that younger news users who turn to social media might also trust them more. This is however not the case: whereas trust in social media is very low amongst all age groups, the oldest news users do not really turn to social media for news compared to other sources, while the youngest ones do. When asked about their main source for news, **20% of under 35s answer social media; only 5% of above 35s do so.** The youngest groups hence get a significant portion of their news through a source that a large majority of them do not trust. This discrepancy between use and trust might point towards youngsters adopting a more cautious way of navigating online news sources.

### 3. News media bark rather than bite

With this general high level of trust in the news in mind, we wonder whether Flemish news users trust the news media to get the job done. 68% of Flemish news users agree that news media keeps them up to date with what is going on and 55% agree that news media helps them understand the news of the day. Still, about 9% explicitly disagree with the news media doing well at explaining what is happening, and slightly over one-third neither agrees nor disagrees. Interestingly, only 35% agrees that the news media monitors and scrutinizes powerful people and businesses.

**Satisfaction with news media’s watchdog role is thus much lower than satisfaction with their informational and explanatory role.** On top of that, almost half of news users do not have a strong view about the watchdog role of news media.

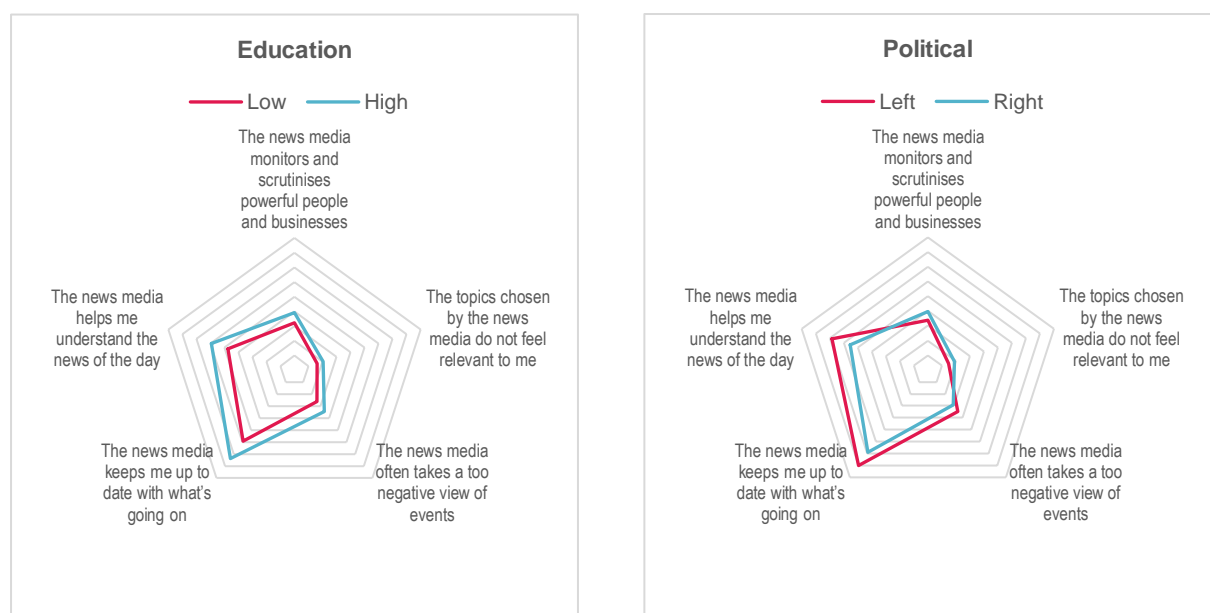
**How Flemish news users evaluate news media's performance**



*Figure 4: Flemish news users evaluation of news media's performance.*

This seems to correspond to a certain degree with the goals journalists set themselves. A recently published report on the [profile of Belgian journalists](#) showed that 80% of Flemish journalists find providing reliable information the most important goal journalism should aspire to. ‘Present the news in an understandable way’, ‘provide objective information’, and ‘explain complex issues’ are also perceived as important goals by almost all journalists. Being the watchdog of democracy completes the top 5 of journalistic goals, but with only 70% of journalists deeming it important. In comparison to the informational role of journalism, both Flemish journalists and Flemish news users attribute less importance to its watchdog role.

Do we notice a difference in appreciation amongst certain groups? **People on the left give a significantly higher score to news media’s informational role** than people on the right. People with a lower education show generally a more negative attitude towards the news. Under 35s on the other hand do not show big differences from their older counterparts.



## 4. Trusted brands? Education is key.

The relatively high overall levels of trust in the news in Flanders also translate into **high trust scores in news brands**. Even though trust in brands varies, in general, the scores of the main news brands revolve around somewhere between 6 and 7 out of 10 (see the DNR [Belgian country report](#) for more information). Both in Flanders and Wallonia, the public broadcasters, VRT news (7.37/10) and RTBF news (7.07/10) respectively, are the most trusted brands.

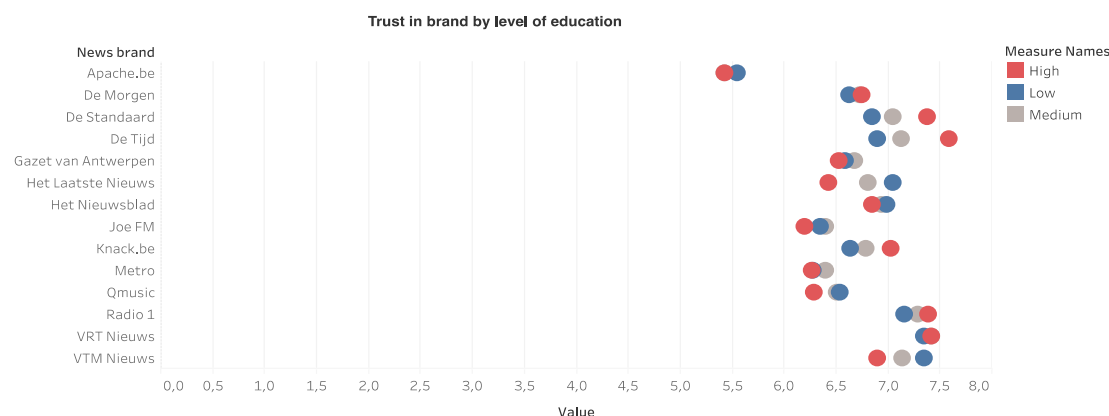


Figure 5: Trust in brands by level of education.

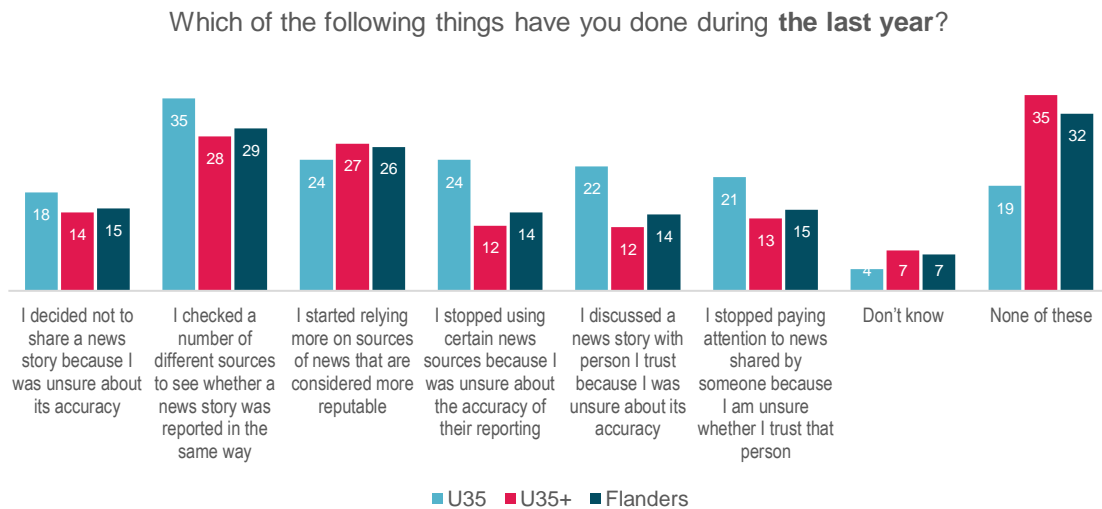
In general, news users under 35 score news brands lower than those above 35. But rather than concluding that youngsters do not trust legacy brands like VRT News or VTM News (both score around 8/10 amongst under 35s), we can explain this by noting that older news users trust them even more. A similar pattern can be seen between people on the right showing slightly lower trust scores across all media. We do see a remarkable difference when we consider education levels. Here, we clearly see that **higher educated news users trust quality brands like De Tijd and De Standaard more** than lower educated news users do, while lower educated news users trust commercial brands like Het Laatste Nieuws and VTM Nieuws more than higher educated ones do.

## 5. Changed online habits to #tackledisinformation

**About 1 in 3 Flemish news users is concerned about what is real and what is fake online**, the lowest number of all surveyed countries except The Netherlands. According to the DNR, behavior seems to have changed most in countries where concern about misinformation is highest. We indeed see that compared to the whole sample, less Flemish news users have stopped using sources with 'less accurate' reputations (14% vs. 24%, 34% in USA) or decided not to share a 'dubious' news article (15% vs. 29%, 35% in USA). The interpretation of 'less accurate' 'dubious' and other subjective terms was left to respondents.

Still, also in Flanders, **62% of news users have somehow changed their online habits** in the last year in response to disinformation. A positive finding for news media is that 1 in 4 Flemish news users say they are relying on 'more reputable' news sources. The most reported measure taken by news users is one strongly associated with news literacy: 30% (vs. 41% globally) say they checked accuracy by comparing multiple sources. These findings illustrate some of the dynamics at play that were discussed until now: with the concern about false information online relatively low and trust in news and news brands relatively high in Flanders, a large part of news users hardly seem to be changing their behavior. Those that do indicate that they have started relying more on reputable sources like legacy news media or on double-checking the information they get.

While our research suggests a clear link between education and these changing habits, in this policy brief, we will zoom in on some age-related differences. **The number of news users changing their online habits increases to 77 percent amongst under 35s**. Significant differences can be noted: more under-35s doublechecked information, stopped using certain 'less accurate' news sources, stopped paying attention to news shared by someone possibly untrustworthy and discussed a news story with a trusted person. This could point to a more 'investigative' mindset amongst younger news users.



*Figure 6: Respondents habits during the past year.*

It would be interesting to further scrutinize whether this is related to a life-phase where youngsters are still exploring ways of gathering news or rather to a digital-born generation that has become intrinsically more critical about the information they consume.

## 6. With great trust comes... great responsibility

The data from the 2019 Digital News Report suggest that trust in news brands in Flanders is still high compared to most other countries surveyed in key news markets across the world. How to explain this? Often heard explanations include a small-language market shielding news brands from international competition, a relatively conservative news user keen on following legacy brands and a strong public broadcaster serving as a benchmark for quality information. The data seem to support these explanations to a certain extent. **Legacy news brands are amongst the most used and trusted news sources**, and, even if to a lesser extent, also online. The public broadcaster, VRT, is the most trusted brand overall, even though the commercial broadcaster VTM is trusted slightly more amongst the under 35s.

Certainly, this makes for a strong case for both public and private news organizations to demand the best possible circumstances to fulfill their role as trusted news providers, be it through direct support mechanisms such as subsidies for the public broadcaster, investigative reporting or journalistic innovation, or indirect support through VAT-exemptions or journalistic education. But **trust is a two-edged sword**. You can easily take advantage of those who trust you. Hence, the more people trust you, the larger your responsibility to live up to that trust.

The trusted relationship between news media and Flemish citizens is good news in times of online disinformation. This does however not mean that news media are in an ideal position to continue earning that trust. Declining revenues and increased competition put pressure on the relationship (see our Facts & Figures for data on willingness to pay). In this context, it remains worthwhile in Flanders to **further explore policy mechanisms** that can at the same time support news media in increasing or maintaining the quality of their coverage and remind both public and private media of their responsibility in this trusted relationship.

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