

POLICY BRIEF #49

23 June 2021

9 major ways in which the pandemic has marked Flemish news consumption

Ruben Vandenplas, Pauljan Truyens, Sarah Vis & Ike Picone



Kenniscentrum
Cultuur- en
MediaParticipatie



Today, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism publishes its yearly [Digital News Report](#), in which imec-SMIT is the Belgian partner. This year, our analysis shines a spotlight on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on news use in Flanders. In this policy brief, we will guide you through **9 MAJOR WAYS** in which the pandemic has marked Flemish news consumption in 2021.

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

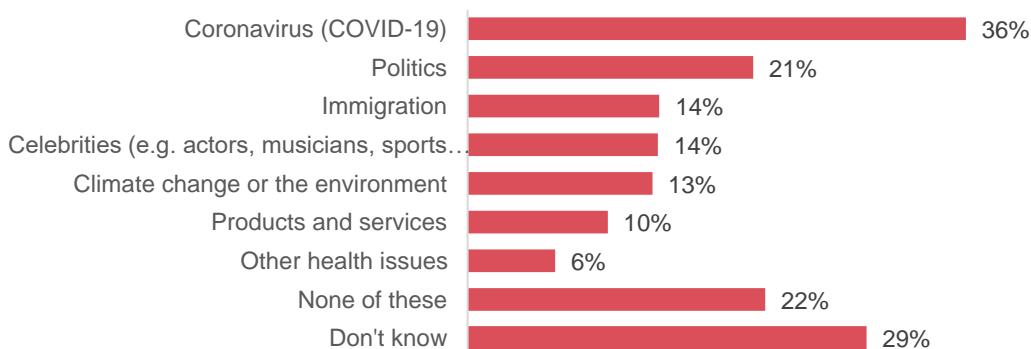
- 1 COVID-19: FLANDERS' FIRST DIGITAL DISINFORMATION WAVE**
Flemish news users are confronted more with fake or misleading news on COVID-19 than with disinformation on any other topic. Politicians appear to be the subject of most concern as a source for fake news on COVID-19.
- 2 NEWS INTEREST GROWS, BUT SO DOES NEWS AVOIDANCE**
The uncertainty of a global health crisis sparked an increased news hunger among Flemish news users. Despite the interest in news, a growing number of users are tuning out of news altogether, as news avoidance rises.
- 3 TELEVISION TAKES THE CROWN**
The pandemic caused tremors in the news routines of Flemish users. With users spending most of their time indoors, television has reinstated its place as the most important provider of news.
- 4 SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS IN DECLINE**
Social media see less use as a source for news. This coincides with a growing concern over fake news on social media and messaging apps. Flemish users increasingly choose to access news directly on their own terms.
- 5 TRUST IN NEWS IS SOARING**
After a steady decline over the past two years, trust in news increased by roughly 10 pp in 2021, as a majority of Flemish users (61%) now indicate they trust the news. Despite a general increase, political differences in trust are growing.

- 6 | LEGACY NEWS BRANDS GAIN TRUST DURING PANDEMIC**
Audience trust in Flemish news brands has increased in 2021, but 'quality news brands' excel as trustworthy sources. VRT in particular appears to solidify its place as a beacon of trust, with 63% of users rating it 8 or higher.
- 7 | THE MAJORITY STILL DOESN'T PAY FOR NEWS**
Despite the higher interest in news during the pandemic, the willingness to pay for news didn't increase all that much. With an uptick of slightly more than 4 pp, approximately 16% of Flemish news users now pay for online news.
- 8 | MILLENIALS PUSH ALTERNATIVE PAYMENT METHODS**
The majority of those paying for news prefer taking a monthly or yearly subscription for a single online news provider. Although a growing group of young, highly educated Flemings expands their news diet to include multiple news providers which they support financially.
- 9 | WE DON'T TALK (ABOUT NEWS) LIKE WE USED TO**
With users forced to isolate in their homes, fewer occasions presented itself to talk about news face to face with friends and colleagues. This has led to a significant dip in participation in news. Half of the Flemish users reported not participating in news, including sharing, liking, or discussing news content.

1. COVID-19: FLANDERS' FIRST DIGITAL DISINFORMATION WAVE

Due to the spread of disinformation related to the coronavirus and the vaccines that are supposed to protect us against it, **the past year has presented Belgium with its first major wave of digital disinformation**. The numbers speak for themselves: Flemish news users were substantially more confronted with false or misleading information about the coronavirus (36%) than on any other topic.

Have you seen false or misleading information about any of the following topics, in the last week?



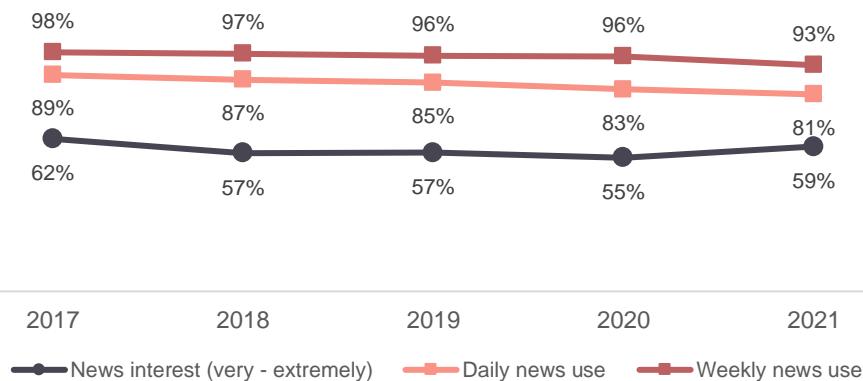
This **was even higher amongst the younger groups**: around 45% of news users under 35 years old indicate that they have been confronted with disinformation about the coronavirus in the past week, compared to only 30% of those aged 45+. This may be due to the higher use of social media for news [among the younger generations](#).

Politicians appear to be the subject of most concern as a source for fake news on COVID-19. More than 1 in 4 Flemish users reported being concerned about politicians as a source of fake news related to the coronavirus, which is substantially higher than those concerned about disinformation coming from ordinary people, journalists and celebrities. Remarkably, amongst the 18 to 24 year olds not politicians but ordinary citizens are regarded as the most mistrusted source of coronavirus news.

2. INTEREST IN NEWS GROWS, BUT SO DOES NEWS AVOIDANCE

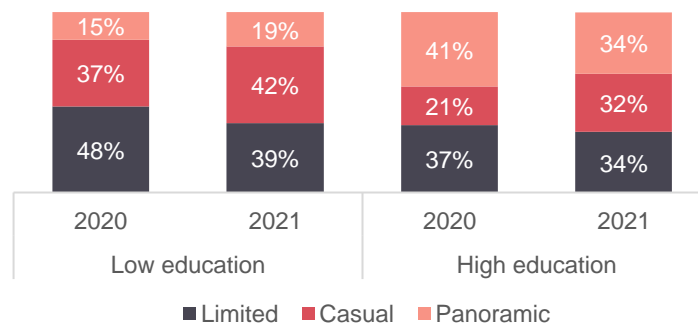
The pandemic appears to have sparked a higher interest in news. But despite what one might expect based on the early [boost in reach](#) that most Flemish news media benefitted from during the pandemic, the overall number of users that consumed news on a weekly basis has declined by roughly 3,5% in 2021. This coincides with what appears to be a slight increase in news avoidance, as the number of users that use news less often than once a month has grown by 4%.

Regular news use and news interest during the past 5 years



Looking at the entirety of media that Flemish users consume on a regular basis, we find that **users have begun to significantly change their news routines** in the wake of the pandemic. This is noticeable in the shifting proportions of people that make use of a specific news repertoire. Broadly speaking, the amount of Flemish news users that consume news sparsely and casually from different sources (casual news repertoire) has increased in 2021. Specifically, the number of higher-educated news users who used a broad range of news sources intensively (panoramic repertoire) appears to have shrunk in 2021. This might be an indication that **users have trimmed down their news use in favor of more tempered news habits during the pandemic**. In contrast, lower-educated news users predominantly consumed news sparsely from a limited number of sources (limited repertoire) in 2020, but now feature more casual (+5 pp) and even panoramic repertoires (+4 pp).

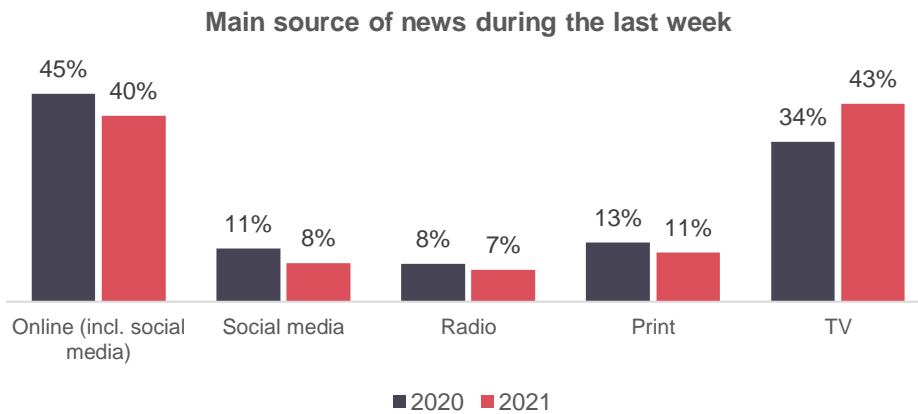
Percentage of users of a repertoire within level of education



3. TELEVISION TAKES THE CROWN

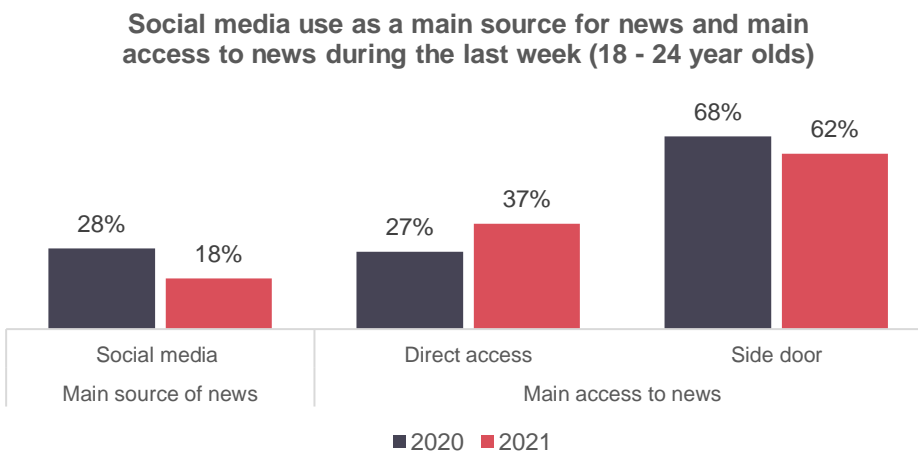
The interest in the televised press conferences of the National Security Council appears to have shifted the primary sources that Flemish news users consulted during the past year. **Television news use grew by roughly 8% since 2020**, solidifying its place as the most important source for news during the pandemic. Despite the possibility for online news media to provide users

with a constant stream of news and information, **online news use shrunk** during the pandemic, connecting to a broader shift towards more selective news use patterns during the pandemic (described **Error! Reference source not found.**). **Lower and middle education and income users in particular** exhibit the most noticeable turn towards television as their main news provider.



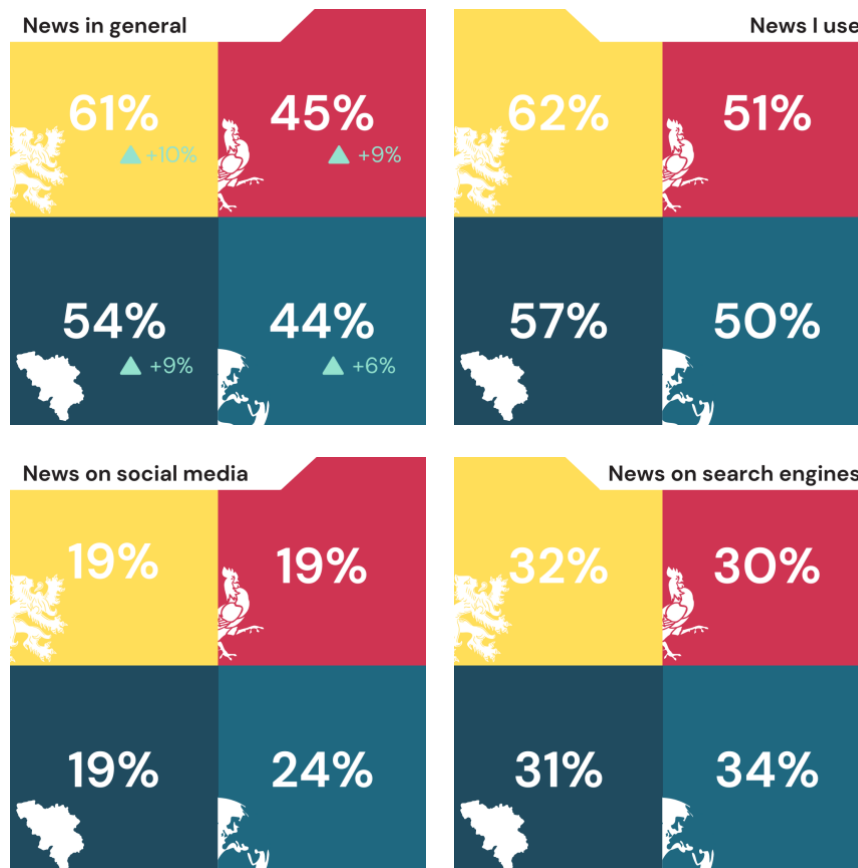
4. SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS IN DECLINE

Flemish news users have **turned away from social media as news providers** in 2021. This trend is particularly noticeable for young news users (18 to 24 years old), which relied most on social media for news consumption in 2020. The decline in social media news use coincides with a **general move towards direct, branded access** rather than side-door access as their main way to access news. **Information overload** is often considered an important factor in news avoidance. In the tumultuous news environment of the pandemic, operating at a high velocity and rife with fake news (especially online), this might explain why a higher number of Flemish news users **engage with the news on their own terms**.

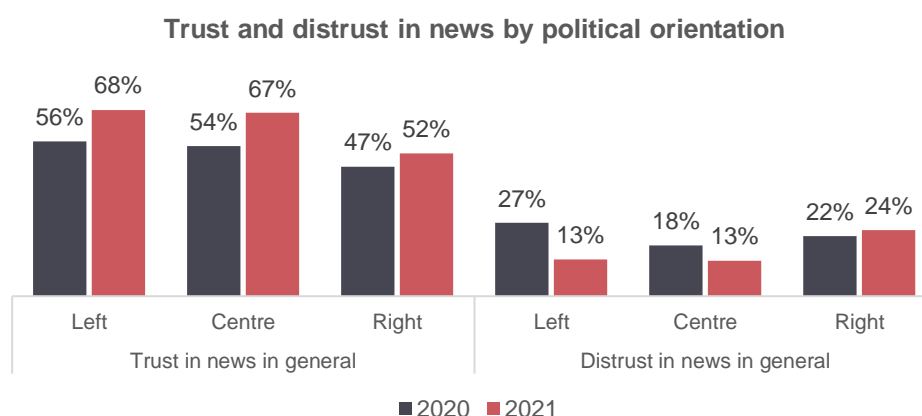


5. TRUST IN NEWS IS SOARING

The coronavirus pandemic appears to have reignited trust in news with Flemish users. Roughly 61% of Flemish news users indicate they trust news in general, **up roughly 10%** from 2020. Trust in news on social media, however, stagnates at 19%. Despite the general rise in trust, **significant differences in trust remain between Dutch- and French-speaking Belgians**.



Differences in trust levels across political orientation have increased since the coronavirus pandemic. The trust gap has grown significantly between those news users of a left-wing and centre political orientation on the one hand, and those of a right-wing political orientation on the other. While distrust in news has generally decreased in Flanders, the **amount of news users of a right-wing political orientation who distrust news is growing.**

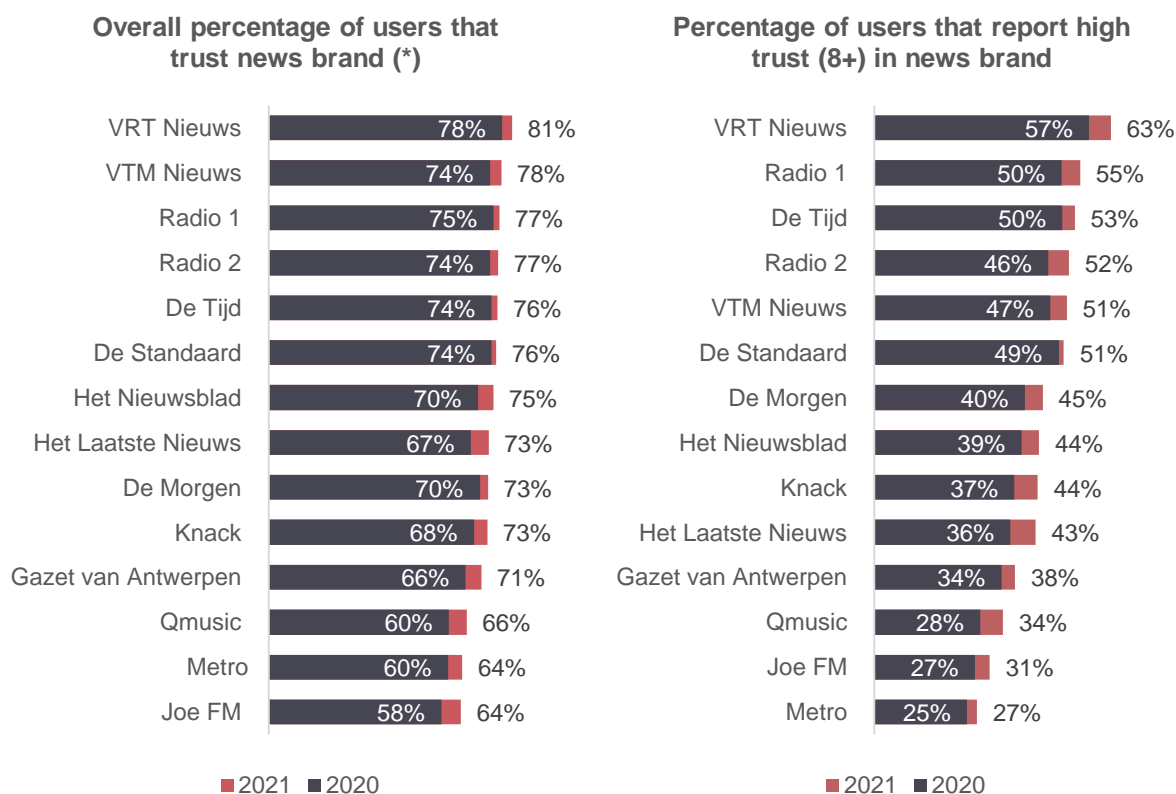


Trust scores are measured via a 5-point Likert scale where a score of 1-2 is recoded as distrust and 4-5 as trust

6. LEGACY NEWS BRANDS GAIN TRUST DURING PANDEMIC

Legacy news brands are increasingly perceived as reliable news sources by Flemish news users during the coronavirus pandemic. In line with the more general growth in trust described **Error! Reference source not found.**, Flemish news brands have marked a growth in trust across the board. Popular news brands in particular saw the biggest uptick in trust, including JoeFM (+6,5%), Het Laatste Nieuws (+6%), and Qmusic (6%). Connecting to the renewed

importance of television as a source of news in Flemish media repertoires during the pandemic, public broadcaster VRT and commercial broadcaster VTM spearhead the lineup of most trusted news brands in 2021.



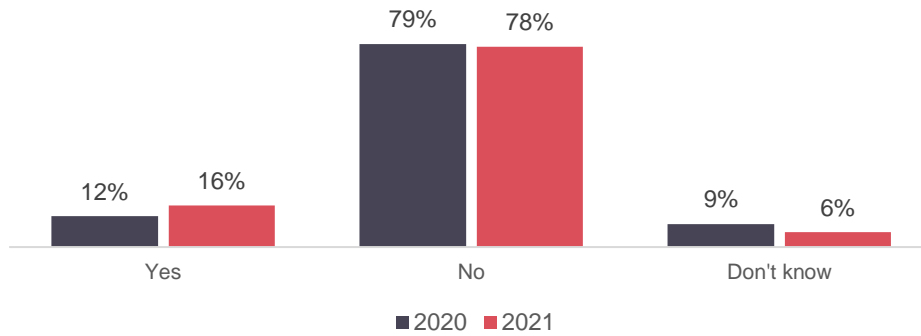
(*) Trust scores are measured using a 10-point Likert scale (0 = not at all trustworthy – 10 = completely trustworthy), where the percentage of users that find a brand trustworthy equals the sum of users that rate 6-10 on the Likert-scale

Although quality news brands such as VRT, De Tijd, De Standaard, and De Morgen see less growth in the overall percentage of users that indicate trust in their brands, **quality news brands excel as trustworthy news sources** during the pandemic. **VRT News in particular solidifies its place as a beacon of trust** in the past year, as 63% of Flemish news users afford VRT Nieuws a trust score of 8 or more. In comparison, popular news brands such as JoeFM or Het Laatste Nieuws are afforded a score of 8 or more by respectively 31% and 43% of Flemish news users.

7. THE MAJORITY STILL DOESN'T PAY FOR (ONLINE) NEWS

In the past year, the majority of the Flemish audience went looking for reliable news to stay up to date on the evolution of the coronavirus pandemic. However, the considerable shift towards national and local news did not result in a significant **change of mind towards paying for (online) news. 16% of Flemish news users** indicate they have made some sort of payment for (online) news during the past year, an increase of 5% since 2020. In comparison, approximately 80% of Flemish news users has refrained from paying for (online) news entirely.

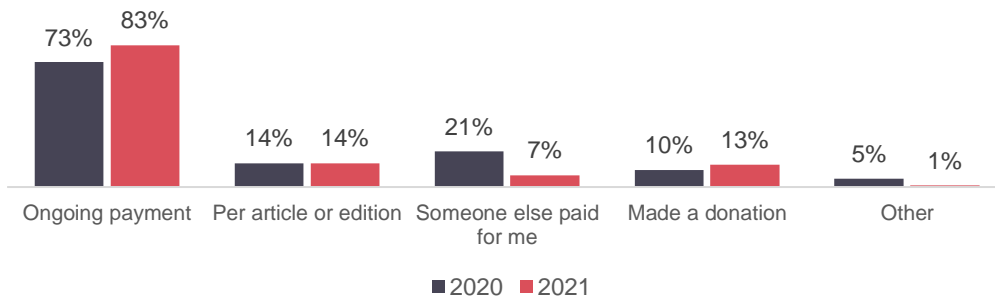
Have you paid for online news in the last 12 months?



8. MILLENIALS PUSH ALTERNATIVE PAYMENT METHODS

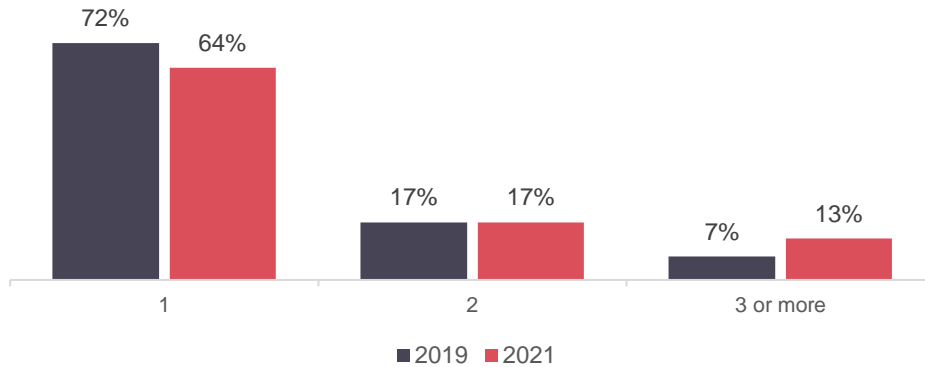
The minority of those who paid for news in the last year does this in a **slightly different way** in comparison to 2020. **Ongoing payments** (monthly or yearly) still is the preferred way of more than 80% of the Flemish users. Less traditional payment methods, such as paying per article or making a donation, are gaining popularity among the younger generations. Especially highly-educated millennials are casting themselves as early adopters of **these alternative payment methods**. Remarkably, getting access to news via someone else's subscription dropped 14%.

Which of the following ways have you used to pay for online news in the last year? (Base = Paid for (online) news in the last year)



Flemish users who pay for 3 or more news providers has nearly doubled during the pandemic. This can also be ascribed to the younger news users. A small group of highly interested news consumers decided to **broaden their newsdiet** in the past year, looking for qualitative, reliable news from a set of diverse sources.

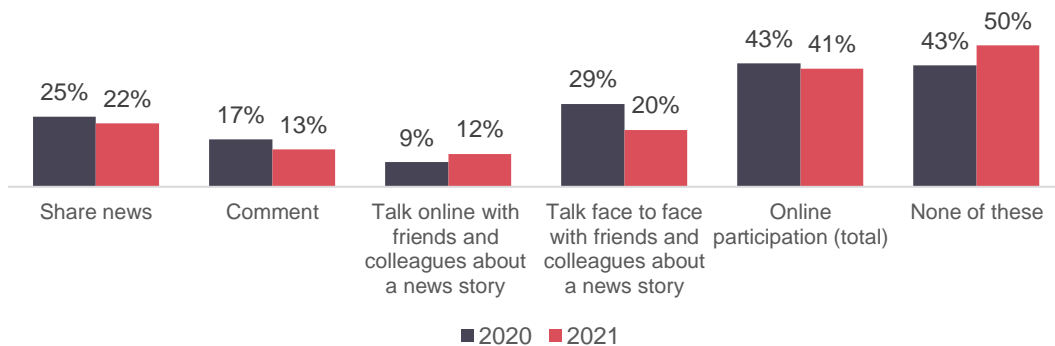
How many different news providers do you regularly pay money to? (Base = Paid for (online) news in the last year)



9. WE DON'T TALK (ABOUT NEWS) LIKE WE USED TO

Despite a general decline in news participation, **young news users** (18 to 24 and 25 to 34 years old) **remain the most active news participants**. Unsurprisingly, as most of the year was spent in lockdown, talking about news with friends and colleagues during face-to-face conversations has dropped significantly in 2021. However, this doesn't mean that this activity has been moved online. **Online participation has declined** in 2021, perhaps further highlighting how Flemish news users adopted more selective patterns of news consumption.

Which, if any, of the following ways do you share or participate in news coverage during an average week?



This shift in participation in news is **especially noticeable with users of a right political orientation**. In 2020, 'right-wing' users appeared to be the most active participants in news by far, with 53% indicating they **participated in news online** during the last week. During the pandemic, a significant number of right-wing users has stopped participating in news, as **50% now indicates they did not participate in news at all** (up from 36% in 2020).

10. CONVERSATION STARTERS

Now that we have updated you on the highlights in news use in the past year, we leave you with 4 conclusions that are meant to spark the discussion on how to move forward with these results. **Want to continue the conversation?** Be sure to visit [Nieuwsgebruik.be](https://nieuwsgebruik.be) for more data and analysis on news use in Flanders.

A

SHOULD NEWS MEDIA LEAD THE FIGHT AGAINST FAKE NEWS?

With fake news on the coronavirus and vaccines, Flanders is no longer exempt from the spread of disinformation. Flemish news users are most wary of fake news coming from politicians, while news organisation still benefit from a trust bump and (re)claim a central position in people's news diets.

This puts news organisations in an ideal position to curb the spread of fake and misleading information. **But how can news organisations capitalise on this position, from both a journalistic and commercial perspective? And can they take up the fight without help?**

B

CAN WE STILL REACH THOSE WHO TURN AWAY FROM NEWS?

It is remarkable that the spikes in audience reach reported by many mainstream media in Flanders were not reflected in a higher amount of people consuming news. On the contrary, **our data show that slightly more people sparsely consume news or avoid it entirely.**

Reaching those who disconnect from the public sphere is becoming a key challenge for governments across Europe. Thinking of our news habits as our 'window to the world', an important question for media policy makers then becomes **who are the citizens that turn away from the news and why?** In our analysis on the impact of [COVID-19 on news avoidance](#), we begin to explore an answer to this question.

C

ARE NEWS ORGANISATIONS WINNING THEIR BET ON PAYWALLS?

It might be too early to say, but for the first time since 2017 we see **a slight increase in paying for online news.** A small but growing portion of Flemish news users are concerned about the financial difficulties that plague news media. And a small group of highly educated millennials is even willing to pay for multiple subscriptions.

These users have specific consumption patterns, look for quality and unique content, and are open to support journalism financially in various ways. **How to cater to these highly demanding groups of news users** might be key to win the bet on paywalls.

D

CAN NEWS ORGANISATIONS CONSOLIDATE THEIR POSITION?

The tremors of the coronavirus pandemic have redrawn news consumption patterns. Users exhibit a move towards more tempered and structured news habits, highlighted by a shift in news repertoires, a move away from social media and online news, and an increase in direct, branded access. Put together, users increasingly sought to inform themselves **on their own terms.**

This leads to a strong momentum for news media as trusted sources, but not without challenges, as we already see signs of audience reach returning to [pre-COVID-19 levels](#). Hence, an important question emerges: **how can news organisations consolidate their central, trusted position in people's news diets once we leave the pandemic behind and new challenges emerge?**

Ruben Vandenplas is a PhD Researcher at imec-SMIT-VUB's Journalism, Trust, and Participation unit. His research is focused on everyday media use and participation in a cross-media landscape. Ruben.vandenplas@vub.be

Pauljan Truyens is a PhD Researcher at imec-SMIT-VUB's Journalism, Trust, and Participation unit. His research focuses on the relationships between users and media, with a focus on news. Pauljan.truyens@vub.be

Sarah Vis is a PhD Researcher at imec-SMIT-VUB's Journalism, Trust, and Participation unit. Her research focuses on the changing role of cultural journalism and critics in a digital media landscape. Sarah.vis@vub.be

Ike Picone is associate professor of Media and Journalism at the Department of Communication Sciences and heads the unit on Journalism, Trust & Participation within the Media & Society program of the imec-SMIT research group. Ike.picone@vub.be

***Nieuwsgebruik.be** is the foremost gateway to cutting-edge research on news consumption patterns. Guiding you through the latest data on news use to bring you all of the insights, with none of the fuss.*



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

Prof. Dr Ike.Picone@vub.be heads the program's Journalism, Trust & Participation Unit.