

# **‘Fake news’ and online disinformation Case study – Belgium<sup>1</sup>**

**Author: Eugénie Coche, LL.B.**

**Supervisor: Dr. Tarlach McGonagle**

Institute for Information Law (IViR)

Amsterdam Law School

University of Amsterdam

(24 June 2018)

---

<sup>1</sup> This case study has been written as part of the research project, ‘Law and policy's turn from ‘fake news’ to online disinformation: European and national perspectives’, coordinated by Dr. Tarlach McGonagle.

## Table of contents

Abstract.....	4
1. Introduction .....	5
2. Prominence of fake news in the Belgian media.....	5
2.1 News consumption in Belgium: facts and figures .....	5
2.1.1 Belgian concerns about ‘fake news’ .....	6
2.1.2 Belgians’ trust in news .....	6
2.1.3 Belgians’ news consumption patterns.....	7
2.1.4 Belgians and media literacy .....	8
2.2 The emergence of ‘fake news’ in Belgium.....	9
2.2.1 Foreign political events .....	9
2.2.2 Media actors discussing the phenomenon .....	10
2.3 The presence of ‘fake news’ in Belgium .....	11
2.3.1 Belgian hoaxes.....	12
2.3.2 Belgian misleading or inaccurate news articles .....	14
2.4 ‘Fake news’ as an umbrella term.....	15
2.5 Belgian politicians and ‘fake news’ .....	16
2.5.1 Examples of Belgian politicians pointing out ‘fake news’.....	17
2.5.2 The increasing use of social media as a political tool .....	19
2.5.3 Trust in politics and the media.....	21
2.6 The culprits – according to the Belgian media .....	22
3. Parliamentary and wider political discussion.....	23
3.1 View of the Belgian government on legislative measures to counter ‘fake news’ .....	24
4. European responses to ‘fake news’ .....	25
4.1 The EU’s responses to ‘fake news’ .....	26
4.1.1 The High-Level Expert Group to counter ‘fake news’ .....	26
4.1.2 The European Commission’s Communication on ‘tackling online disinformation’ ....	26
4.2 The Council of Europe’s responses to ‘fake news’ .....	27
4.2.1 The Council of Europe’s report: ‘Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making’ .....	27
5. Belgian responses to ‘fake news’ .....	28
5.1 Governmental responses to ‘fake news’ .....	28
5.1.1 Media education .....	29
5.2 The news media’s responses .....	30
5.2.1 Raising awareness.....	30
5.2.2 Quality labels .....	31

**5.2.3 Fact-checking of videos ..... 32**  
**5.2 Civil society’s responses to ‘fake news’ ..... 32**  
**5.3 Collaboration with internet companies ..... 34**  
**6. Conclusion..... 34**

## Abstract

This case study provides an overview of the ‘fake news’ phenomenon in Belgium. In light of the 2018 Reuters Report, it starts by sketching the present media landscape in Belgium. It then enquires whether Belgians are concerned about ‘fake news’; what their level of trust is in the media; which media sources are favoured by them, and what their level of media literacy is. After analysing these facts and figures, the emergence of ‘fake news’, through foreign political events, is discussed. Different examples of Belgian ‘fake news’ are then presented, which range from ‘hoaxes’ to misleading and inaccurate news articles stemming from qualified journalists. By means of these examples, the ambiguities of the term ‘fake news’, as an umbrella term to cover a wide variety of content, are explained. Given the vagueness of the term, it is submitted that ‘disinformation’ is a more appropriate term to use.

Having regard to the possible impact of this type of ‘news’ on democracy, this case study strives to shed light on Belgian politicians and their relation with ‘fake news’. By means of examples, the author argues that they increasingly use the term ‘fake news’ to discredit news media. Moreover, they tend to by-pass traditional media, through their social media accounts, thereby contributing to the emergence of ‘fake news’. The lack of editorial oversight on social media allows for false messages to be spread. In order to propose measures to counter ‘fake news’ in Belgium, the case study provides an overview of different responses that have already been put in place. Besides responses at the EU level (including the Council of Europe), the overview includes governmental responses, news media responses, civil society responses and responses stemming from collaborations with IT companies. Taking account of these measures, various recommendations are proposed in the Conclusion. It is argued that both short and long-term actions should be developed. Having regard to the forthcoming Belgian elections, the former would be necessary and should, *inter alia*, aim to enhance the transparency of social media platforms. Regarding the latter, it is argued that media literacy measures should be further built upon.

# 1. Introduction

While in 2016, the readers of ‘Le Soir’, a French-language daily Belgian newspaper, voted ‘Brexit’ as the new word of the year, ‘fake news’ has taken over that place in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Out of the 3,028 votes and the ten selected words, which included ‘blockchain’ and ‘democrature’, 28% were expressed in support of ‘fake news’.<sup>3</sup> Although this term is frequently associated with US President Donald Trump, Michel Francard (a linguist at the Université Catholique de Louvain) has stated that ‘if Trump has popularized this idiom, a lot of politicians have taken it over, including Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel in the recent debate over pensions. Fake news is no longer confined to the American political sphere’.<sup>4</sup> ‘Fake news’ is thus clearly present in the Belgian public discourse. This case study will shed light on the existence of ‘fake news’; the discussions and implications it has raised; which measures have already been taken to counter it, and whether those measures are sufficient. In order to reach a conclusion and to make recommendations concerning the actions that should (still) be taken and by whom, a normative approach will be adopted. This case study is especially relevant, given that Alexander de Croo, Federal Minister of the Digital Agenda, recently set up an expert group in order to propose measures for countering ‘fake news’ in Belgium and Europe.<sup>5</sup> The experts, who are either stakeholders or academics,<sup>6</sup> are expected to present their findings by the summer of 2018. By mapping the emergence of the term ‘fake news’ in different types of public discourses in Belgium, this case study aims to provide useful context for any future law- and policy-making measures.

## 2. Prominence of fake news in the Belgian media

### 2.1 News consumption in Belgium: facts and figures

Every year since 2012, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism issues a Digital News Report in which a comparative study, based on surveys, is presented about the news consumption in the world.<sup>7</sup> Since 2013, particular importance has been given to the level of ‘trust’ accorded by news consumers to different media actors.<sup>8</sup> In its most recent report, from June 2018, Belgium was for the third time included in the list of analysed countries.

---

<sup>2</sup> Corentin Di Parma, ‘« Fake news », Sacré nouveau mot de l’année par les lecteurs du Soir’ Le Soir ( 28 December 2017) < <http://www.lesoir.be/131431/article/2017-12-28/fake-news-sacre-nouveau-mot-de-lannee-par-les-lecteurs-du-soir> >

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Decroo.be, ‘Expertengroep en burgerbevraging buigen zich over « Fake news »’, 2 May 2018, <<http://www.decroo.belgium.be/nl/stopfakenews>>

<sup>6</sup> See for the list of appointed experts: <[https://gallery.mailchimp.com/19785924ad8de499128883985/files/ee05b952-5e25-407c-b76f-86e68148edb3/20180502\\_expertengroep\\_NL.pdf](https://gallery.mailchimp.com/19785924ad8de499128883985/files/ee05b952-5e25-407c-b76f-86e68148edb3/20180502_expertengroep_NL.pdf)>

<sup>7</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News report 2012, < <http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Reuters-Institute-Digital-News-Report-2012.pdf> >

<sup>8</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2013, p. 59-61, <<http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Reuters-Institute-Digital-News-Report-2013.pdf>>

Interestingly, for the first time, the report also specifically investigates the public concern about ‘fake news’.<sup>9</sup>

### **2.1.1 Belgian concerns about ‘fake news’**

The results of the Reuters Report concerning ‘fake news’, which were based on surveys from 2,078 Belgian news consumers, are summarized in a policy brief by Prof. Dr. Picone, one of the Minister’s appointed experts, and Ruben Vandenplas, PhD candidate at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB).<sup>10</sup> The policy brief focuses mostly on Flanders, without sketching the overall Belgian landscape in terms of ‘fake news’ or exposing the disparities between the country’s different Communities. It does, however, shed light on important aspects that deserve attention in the present ‘fake news’ debate. For example, it outlines important existing discrepancies between news consumers’ *concerns* regarding ‘fake news’ and their actual *exposure* to it. By way of illustration, 48% of Flemish news consumers expressed concern regarding ‘stories that are totally invented in order to serve political or commercial ends’, but only 13% of them claimed to have been exposed to it.<sup>11</sup> Most consumers stated that they had been confronted with ‘stories in which facts are distorted in order to achieve certain goals’ as well as ‘poor journalism’, consisting of factual errors, simplified stories or misleading titles (26% and 25%). As will be explained throughout this case study, it is important to understand the term ‘fake news’ in order to use it in a consistent manner and thereby not in relation to professional journalism.<sup>12</sup>

### **2.1.2 Belgians’ trust in news**

Belgian news consumers expressed, in comparison with other countries, a high level of trust in news: 53% of them trust news overall and 59% trust the news they use. Importantly, the Reuters report makes a distinction between the French-speaking and Flemish-speaking part of Belgium. News consumers in Flanders showed more trust in news than their French-speaking compatriots (62% as opposed to 44% trust news overall and 66% as opposed to 41% trust the news they use). Whereas these numbers mirror the results of the preceding 2017 report, a slight increase in trust has appeared. Compared to previous reports, the latest report contains new elements: only 34% of news consumers trust the news they find via search engines and 21% trust news in social media. Here, again, Flemish news consumers expressed more trust than their French-speaking counterparts.

The report does not state reasons for the discrepancies in trust between Wallonia and Flanders. However, the previous 2017 report explained this divergence as mirroring the protective nature of Flemish publishers’ editorial independence ‘in reaction to the partisan

---

<sup>9</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2018, p. 38-39, <<http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf?x89475> >

<sup>10</sup> I. Picone and R. Vandenplas, ‘Policy Brief #16 Ook Vlaming maakt zich zorgen over Fake News’, 14 June 2018, <<http://smit.vub.ac.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/POLICY-BRIEF16-1.pdf> > (only available in Dutch).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> As will be shown below, quality journalism has already suffered from the use of the term ‘fake news’ when used in relation to its activities.

image they had after the Second World War'.<sup>13</sup> According to 'Mediawijs', a media literacy centre for Flanders and Brussels, the small percentage difference between the level of trust in news overall and in news which is consulted by someone (in 2017: 3% difference; now: 4% difference), is the indication of a news landscape with little polarization.<sup>14</sup> Having regard to the 2018 survey results, this conclusion is applicable to both Flanders and Wallonia (4% difference and 7% difference).

Overall, and compared to other countries, trust is experienced positively in Belgium. As was made clear in the 2017 Reuters report, 'news brands enjoy high levels of trust in Belgium, which might be due to a general lack of explicitly partisan media, no recent press scandals, and well-functioning self-regulation through the Council of Journalism'.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, as was shown in the above-mentioned policy brief, 'age' and 'political convictions' are factors influencing consumers' level of trust. Individuals who are older than 35 years or those with left-wing political convictions are more likely to trust the media.<sup>16</sup>

Another important point made by 'Mediawijs' in light of the 2017 Reuters report is the 'complexity of trust relations'.<sup>17</sup> Whereas trust in the media was, already in 2017, said to be high in Belgium, only a minority of news consumers evaluated the media as being free from political (34%) and business (34%) influences.<sup>18</sup> The continued fear of external influences was mirrored in the latest annual report: Flemish news consumers stated that they are most concerned about 'stories that have been completely invented for political or commercial reasons' (48%).<sup>19</sup>

### **2.1.3 Belgians' news consumption patterns**

Regarding news consumption patterns, online news sources enjoy a higher rate of success than offline sources (81% as opposed to 70%). In both situations, public service broadcasters are still favoured by the public. Concerning offline news sources (i.e., TV, radio and print), VRT has a predominant position as a Flemish news channel (74%) and RTBF news as a French-speaking one (71%). Concerning online news, 'Het Laatste Nieuws online', scored best on the Flemish side (52%) and 'RTL News Online' on the French-speaking side (37%).

---

<sup>13</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News report 2017, p. 58, < [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf) >

<sup>14</sup> Ike Picone, 'Hoe is het in België gesteld met het vertrouwen in de pers?', <<https://mediawijs.be/dossiers/dossier-nieuws-en-informatiegeletterdheid/hoe-belgi%C3%AB-gesteld-vertrouwen-pers> >

<sup>15</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News report 2017, p. 58, < [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf) >

<sup>16</sup> I. Picone and R. Vandenplas, 'Policy Brief #16 Ook Vlaming maakt zich zorgen over Fake News', 14 June 2018, p. 6-7, < <http://smit.vub.ac.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/POLICY-BRIEF16-1.pdf> > (only available in Dutch).

<sup>17</sup> Ike Picone, 'Hoe is het in België gesteld met het vertrouwen in de pers?', <<https://mediawijs.be/dossiers/dossier-nieuws-en-informatiegeletterdheid/hoe-belgi%C3%AB-gesteld-vertrouwen-pers> >

<sup>18</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News report 2017, p. 58, < [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf) >

<sup>19</sup> I. Picone and R. Vandenplas, 'Policy Brief #16 Ook Vlaming maakt zich zorgen over Fake News', 14 June 2018, p. 3, < <http://smit.vub.ac.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/POLICY-BRIEF16-1.pdf> > (only available in Dutch).

Interestingly, the previous report, of which the results were very similar to the latest one, highlighted the public's preference for public service broadcasters, which accordingly 'are strongly valued by their users for accuracy and understanding complex issues'.<sup>20</sup> Paradoxically, that report also indicated that these leading news sources were mostly seen as source of amusement and entertainment instead of accuracy and reliability.<sup>21</sup>

Since 2016, all sources of news have experienced a decrease in consumers. Whereas online news (including social media) only experienced a decrease of 1%, for print news it was 6%. News on social media has experienced a decrease of 5%. When correlating the latter decrease in percentage with the 1% decrease in online news consumption, it indicates that internet users are increasingly looking for news on other sites than social media. This is supported by the following fact: in 2016, more than half of online news consumers used social media as source of news (46% out of 81%), whereas in 2018 only half of them are still doing so (41% out of 80%). This could be explained by news consumers' low trust towards social media content (21%).

This brings us to social media as a source of news. Facebook, followed by YouTube, occupies the top position with 39% considering their news feeds as source of news.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the latest Reuters report, which is silent on that distinction, the 2017 report indicates that Walloons are more inclined than Flemish people to look for news on Facebook (in 2017: 43% in Wallonia, compared to 37% in Flanders).<sup>23</sup> Last but not least, the 2018 report points out that 27% of news consumers in Belgium share news via social media or email and that 16% of them comment on news they read online.<sup>24</sup>

#### **2.1.4 Belgians and media literacy**

As previously stated and as will be explained further below, it is important to understand the term 'fake news' in order to counter it. Media literacy plays a crucial role therein. Despite the lack of presented survey results regarding media literacy in Belgium in the Reuters report, the aforementioned Policy brief indicates important elements in that connection.

According to the survey results presented in the policy brief, Flemish news users scored below average with regard to their media literacy skills. Indeed, in response to the question of how Facebook selects its news articles, the majority replied that they did not know the answer (46%). Only 22% of the surveyed news consumers ticked the correct answer, namely that

---

<sup>20</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News report 2017, p. 57, <  
[https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf) >

<sup>21</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News report 2017, p. 58, <  
[https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf) >

<sup>22</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2018, p. 66, <  
[http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DNR\\_2018-FINAL\\_WEB.pdf?x89475](http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DNR_2018-FINAL_WEB.pdf?x89475) >

<sup>23</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News report 2017, p. 58, <  
[https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf) >

<sup>24</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2018, p. 66, <  
[http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DNR\\_2018-FINAL\\_WEB.pdf?x89475](http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DNR_2018-FINAL_WEB.pdf?x89475) >



news selection takes place through automated algorithms.<sup>25</sup> This practice is often also referred to as ‘targeted advertising’ or ‘behavioral targeting’.<sup>26</sup> Taking into account that the average ‘correct answer rate’ (to that question) amounts to 29% throughout all countries, a call for action is clearly needed in Belgium.<sup>27</sup>

In light of the above facts and figures, the extent to which such a media environment is favourable to the emergence and subsistence of fake news will now be analysed.

## 2.2 The emergence of ‘fake news’ in Belgium

### 2.2.1 Foreign political events

In Belgium, the use of the term ‘fake news’ has initially been used and associated, in manifold ways, with the latest US Presidential elections in 2016.<sup>28</sup> Subjects which caught considerable attention (and headlines) included the diffusion of ‘fake news’ by social media actors, such as Facebook or Twitter, and their influential role in those elections.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the possible Russian involvement, manipulating US electoral votes through the proliferation of fake news, did not escape the media radar.<sup>30</sup> ‘Fake news’ has often been used in relation to the often-made ‘Trumpist’ statement, ‘It’s fake news’.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore not surprising that a lot of news articles covered the 2018 ‘fake news awards’ organised by the US Head of State.<sup>32</sup> The

---

<sup>25</sup> I. Picone and R. Vandenplas, ‘Policy Brief #16 Ook Vlaming maakt zich zorgen over Fake News’, 14 June 2018, p. 5, < <http://smit.vub.ac.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/POLICY-BRIEF16-1.pdf> > (only available in Dutch).

<sup>26</sup> See further: F. Z. Borgesius, ‘Behavioral Targeting, a European Legal perspective’, *IEEE Security & Privacy*, vol. 11, no. 1, p. 82-85, Jan.-Feb. 2013.

<sup>27</sup> I. Picone and R. Vandenplas, ‘Policy Brief #16 Ook Vlaming maakt zich zorgen over Fake News’, 14 June 2018, p. 5, < <http://smit.vub.ac.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/POLICY-BRIEF16-1.pdf> > (only available in Dutch).

<sup>28</sup> Corentin Di Parma, ‘« Fake news », Sacré nouveau mot de l’année par les lecteurs du Soir’ *Le Soir* ( 28 December 2017) < <http://www.lesoir.be/131431/article/2017-12-28/fake-news-sacre-nouveau-mot-de-lannee-par-les-lecteurs-du-soir> >; Alain Lorfèvre, ‘Comment Donald Trump a fait élire le mot de l’année’ *La Libre.be* (17 November 2016) <<http://www.lalibre.be/actu/international/comment-donald-trump-a-fait-elire-le-mot-de-l-annee-582db3f3cd70d913edcdb9fa> >

<sup>29</sup> Alain Lorfèvre, ‘Le rôle déterminant des réseaux sociaux dans les élections récentes’ *La Libre.be* (18 November 2016) < <http://www.lalibre.be/economie/digital/le-role-determinant-des-reseaux-sociaux-dans-les-elections-recentes-582dd870cd70d913edcdc720> >; Jean-Claude Verset, ‘Fake news: L’art de donner au mensonge le même poids que la vérité’ *RTBF.be* (29 May 2017) < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail\\_fake-news-l-art-de-donner-au-mensonge-le-meme-poids-que-la-verite?id=9619501](https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail_fake-news-l-art-de-donner-au-mensonge-le-meme-poids-que-la-verite?id=9619501) >

<sup>30</sup> Frédéric Petitjean, ‘Techreuzen gehoord over Fake-nieuws in VS-Verkiezingen’ *Computable* (28 September 2017) <<https://www.computable.be/artikel/nieuws/overheid/6211774/5440850/techreuzen-gehoord-over-fake-nieuws-in-vs-verkiezingen.html> >; Pieter Haeck, ‘Fake News bereikte 126 miljoen Facebookers’ *De Tijd* (30 October 2017) < <https://www.tijd.be/tech-media/algemeen/Fake-news-bereikte-126-miljoen-Facebookers/9948481?ckc=1&ts=1516811093> >

<sup>31</sup> Maria Udrescu, ‘Trump dénonce « le scandaleux et faux » dossier Russe’ *La Libre.be* (12 January 2017) < <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/international/trump-denonce-le-scandaleux-et-faux-dossier-russe-5877964ecd70717f88f23337> >; Joyce Stroobant, ‘Fake News is geen journalistiek probleem, al levert het journalistiek problemen op’ *Knack* (14 June 2017) < <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/fake-news-is-geen-journalistiek-probleem-al-levert-het-journalisten-wel-problemen-op/article-opinion-865833.html> >

<sup>32</sup> RTBF.be, ‘Donald Trump remet ses prix « Fake News » très controversés’ (18 January 2018) <[https://www.rtbf.be/info/monde/detail\\_donald-trump-remet-ses-prix-fake-news-tres-controverses?id=9814851](https://www.rtbf.be/info/monde/detail_donald-trump-remet-ses-prix-fake-news-tres-controverses?id=9814851) >; Sandra Cardoen, ‘Donald Trump heeft de Fake News Awards uitgereikt: Dit zijn de “Winnaars”’ *VRT NWS* (18 January 2018) <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/01/18/donald-trump-heeft-de-fake-news-awards-uitgereikt--dit-zijn-de-w/> >

repeated use of this slogan by the US President, however, caused great concern. It was said to ‘discredit journalists’ and to serve as a silencing tool.<sup>33</sup> ‘Mediawijs’ condemned this practice by declaring that Trump used the term ‘fake news’ as a swear word against the media.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, ‘he uses it [the term] as a weapon which serves to distrust the news media’.<sup>35, 36</sup>

Although ‘fake news’ emerged in the Belgian media landscape through above-mentioned events, it rapidly made its way to the 2017 French presidential elections. Multiple Belgian news articles focused on the role of fake news in this election period<sup>37</sup> and on the so-called ‘Macronleaks’.<sup>38</sup> The latter term refers to leaked documents, from Macron’s internal political campaign, which freely circulated on the web and were later categorized as ‘fake news’. RTBF declared: ‘those circulating these documents have added to the authentic documents a number of fake documents in order to cast doubt and disinformation’.<sup>39</sup> Nicolas Vanderbiest, a Belgian Ph.D. candidate at the Université Catholique de Louvain, played a crucial role in this event as he was the person who identified which source had hacked the documents, manipulated and further divulged them.<sup>40</sup>

The above-mentioned foreign political events, including the ‘anti- ‘fake news’’ measures taken by the Spanish government during the Catalanian Elections, which consisted in putting in place a system that tracks the emergence of ‘fake news’ online to preclude voters from being influenced, have thus clearly framed the path for Belgian media coverage of ‘fake news’.<sup>41</sup>

### **2.2.2 Media actors discussing the phenomenon**

Notwithstanding the news articles covering ‘fake news’ incidents abroad, multiple Belgian media actors have also simply discussed the ‘phenomenon’ and warned about its dangers. As Liesbeth van Impe, editor-in-chief of ‘The Nieuwsblad’ stated: ‘the danger is not that people

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ike Picone, ‘Het echte probleem met fake nieuws’ Mediawijs, <<https://mediawijs.be/dossiers/dossier-nieuws-en-informatiegeletterdheid/echte-probleem-fake-nieuws> >

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> See further, T. McGonagle, ‘« Fake News »: False fears or real concerns?’, *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, Vol 35(4), 2017, p. 209.

<sup>37</sup> Corentin Di Prima, ‘Pourquoi les « Fake News » n’ont pas influencé l’élection’ Le Soir.be (8 May 2017) <<http://plus.lesoir.be/93084/article/2017-05-08/pourquoi-les-fake-news-nont-pas-influence-lelection> >

<sup>38</sup> RTBF.be, ‘Macronleaks : un piratage signé par l’extrême-droite Américaine selon un expert’ (6 May 2017) <[https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail\\_macronleaks-le-piratage-d-en-marche-un-coup-de-l-extreme-droite-americaaine-selon-nicolas-vanderbiest?id=9599137](https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail_macronleaks-le-piratage-d-en-marche-un-coup-de-l-extreme-droite-americaaine-selon-nicolas-vanderbiest?id=9599137) >; A. Verstraete et Al., ‘Franse media mogen gelekte campagnedocumenten van Macron niet publiceren’ VRT NWS (6 May 2017) <<http://deredactie.be/cm/vrtnieuws/buitenland/1.2970514> >

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Julien Balboni, ‘Nicolas Vanderbiest, le «petit Belge» qui a secoué la présidentielle’ La Libre.be (10 May 2017) <<http://www.lalibre.be/actu/international/nicolas-vanderbiest-le-petit-belge-qui-a-secoue-la-presidentielle-591292b8cd70022542bbc498> >; Marie-Alix Autet, ‘Nicolas Vanderbiest : « sur les réseaux sociaux, 2017 a été la campagne du faux » RSLN (12 May 2017) <<https://rslnmag.fr/cite/nicolas-vanderbiest-election-presidentielle-2017-reseaux-sociaux-campagne-fake-news-rumeurs/> >

<sup>41</sup> Le Soir.be, ‘Décompte manuel, dispositif anti-« fake news » : des précautions prises pour les élections catalanes’ (20 December 2017) <<http://www.lesoir.be/130360/article/2017-12-20/decompte-manuel-dispositif-anti-fake-news-des-precautions-prises-pour-les> >

will believe everything, but instead that they will believe nothing'.<sup>42</sup> She pointed out that a clear distinction shall be made between the different categories of 'news' within the broad and ambiguous term 'fake news'.<sup>43</sup> According to her, people should not put 'fake news', which consists in intentionally inventing and spreading false information by reason of propaganda or in order to serve a business model, on equal footing with exaggerated headlines.<sup>44</sup> Joyce Stroobant, a researcher at the Centre for Journalism of Ghent University, warned about 'overhyping' the term 'fake news' and feared a decline in public trust of well-founded journalism.<sup>45</sup> She also pointed out that there is a lack of research on 'fake news' in Flanders, which could serve to raise awareness on the issue.<sup>46</sup> Having regard to the financial purpose that is often behind 'fake news', it would, according to her, be more lucrative to diffuse such 'news' in languages having a wide audience and reach (and therefore not in Dutch). She therefore assumed that the scope of the problem in Flanders is relatively narrow.<sup>47</sup> Numerous events have, however, taken place since these statements, such as the latest Reuters report which indicates that Belgian news consumers are aware of, and concerned about, the presence of 'fake news'. Consequently, the next section will focus on the presence of 'fake news' in Belgium.

### 2.3 The presence of 'fake news' in Belgium

On 4 May 2017, *Apache* and *Médor*, which are both news media actors with the primary objective of conducting 'deep journalism',<sup>48</sup> discovered that the Belgian public opinion concerning the adoption of the Belgian 'extended settlement law' (in Dutch: 'afkoopwet') had been influenced by 'fake news' diffused by the site *Open Source Investigations*.<sup>49, 50</sup> According to Apache and Médor, the *Open Source Investigations* website had spread information which lacked evidence.<sup>51</sup> Unlike what the *Open Source Investigations* website claimed, indications exist that the fast-track adoption of the extended settlement law, which allows for the clearing of criminal charges in return for payment, had been influenced by the wealthy Belgo-Kazakh Patokh Chodiev. Patokh Chodiev was one of the first to profit from this new law.<sup>52</sup> This journalistic insight led to a wave of news articles with headlines such as 'fake news gains for

---

<sup>42</sup> Radio 1, 'Fake news' (13 April 2017) < <https://radio1.be/liesbeth-van-impe-gevaar-niet-dat-mensen-alles-gaan-geloven-maar-dat-ze-niets-meer-geloven> >

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Joyce Stroobant, 'Fake News is geen journalistiek probleem, al levert het journalisten wel problemen op' Knack (14 June 2017) < <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/fake-news-is-geen-journalistiek-probleem-al-levert-het-journalisten-wel-problemen-op/article-opinion-865833.html> >

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> The former is Flemish and the latter is Walloon.

<sup>49</sup> See the site: <https://www.opensourceinvestigations.com/about/>. The site describes its role as providing 'in-depth research behind political stories' and 'it supplies non-partisan and precise analyses and investigations'.

<sup>50</sup> E. Walravens and T. Cochez, 'Fake news vergiftigt publieke opinie rond Kazachgate' Apache (4 May 2017) < <https://www.apache.be/2017/05/04/fake-news-vergiftigt-publieke-opinie-rond-kazachgate/> >; Eric Walravens, 'Comment les Fake News Kazakhes empoisonnent le Débat Public Belge' Médor (5 May 2017) < <https://medor.coop/fr/article/comment-les-fake-news-kazakhes-empoisonnent-le-debat-public-belge/> >

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> E. Walravens and T. Cochez, 'Fake News poisons Belgian public opinion about Kazachgate' Apache (5 May 2017) < <https://www.apache.be/2017/05/05/fake-news-poisons-belgian-public-opinion-about-kazachgate/> >

the first time foothold in Belgium<sup>53</sup> or ‘Kazaghgate: campaign of fake news in support of Patokh Chodiev’.<sup>54</sup>

Whilst this seems to mark the beginning of fake news in Belgium, the next section will demonstrate the contrary. Indeed, because of its many facets, ‘fake news’ was already present in the Belgian media much earlier.<sup>55</sup> This event, however, served to underline the manipulative purposes behind ‘fake news’ and its possible influence on public opinion. It also marked the Belgian distrust in *Open Source Investigations*, which has been described by the media as nothing more than a ‘fake news platform which strives to bring about confusion in the public opinion’.<sup>56, 57</sup> This event resulted in calls for actions to counter ‘fake news’. Indeed, when discussing the issue, Tom Cochez, Journalist and co-founder of the news site *Apache.be*, concluded in ‘the Knack’, a Belgian (Flemish) news magazine: ‘the answer on how to counter fake news is less evident. But one thing is sure: it is time to gradually wake up.’<sup>58</sup>

### **2.3.1 Belgian hoaxes**

According to the site Hoax-net, which is a Belgian site aimed at countering hoaxes by denouncing them,<sup>59</sup> eight Belgian hoax sites exist.<sup>60</sup> This includes the famous *Nord Presse* site.<sup>61</sup> Importantly, Hoax-net only lists French-speaking websites. However, Hoax-Wijzer, which fulfils the same role as the Hoax-net website, mentions five Belgian websites in its list, ‘Dutch-speaking hoax-sites’.<sup>62</sup> It can thus be concluded that there are approximately fourteen Belgian hoax sites. According to Hoax-wijzer, hoax sites are sites which profile themselves as alternative news websites but which do not spread ‘real’ news (in the sense of ‘true’ news).<sup>63</sup> An example would be a ‘satirical website’, which makes ‘fun’ of current events and is not aimed at being taken seriously. Hoax-net defines a hoax as a ‘fabricated lie’, which has been

---

<sup>53</sup> Kamiel Vermeylen, ‘Fake news krijgt voor het eerst voet aan de grond in België’ Knack (5 May 2017) < <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/politiek/fake-news-krijgt-voor-het-eerst-voet-aan-de-grond-in-belgie/article-normal-849067.html> >

<sup>54</sup> Alain Lallemand, ‘Kazaghgate : campagne de fake news en soutien de Patokh Chodiev’ Le Soir.be (5 May 2017) < <http://plus.lesoir.be/92637/article/2017-05-05/kazaghgate-campagne-de-fake-news-en-soutien-de-patokh-chodiev> >

<sup>55</sup> See for example the hoax ‘Bye Bye Belgium’ from 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Tom Cochez, ‘Fake News in Kazaghgate-Affaire raakt aan essentie van onze democratie’ Knack (5 May 2017) < <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/fake-news-in-kazachgate-affaire-raakt-aan-essentie-van-onze-democratie/article-opinion-849073.html> >

<sup>57</sup> Robin Broos, ‘Nepnieuws minimaliseert rol van miljardair Chodiev in Kazakhgate’ De Morgen.be (5 May 2017) < <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/-nepnieuws-minimaliseert-rol-van-miljardair-chodiev-in-kazakhgate-bce276e1/> >; T. Denoël and N; Kochan, ‘Kazaghgate: Chodiev attaque Gilkinet’ Le Vif (11 May 2017) < <http://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/kazakhgate-chodiev-attaque-gilkinet/article-normal-659491.html> >

<sup>58</sup> Tom Cochez, ‘Fake News in Kazaghgate-Affaire raakt aan essentie van onze democratie’ Knack (5 May 2017) < <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/fake-news-in-kazachgate-affaire-raakt-aan-essentie-van-onze-democratie/article-opinion-849073.html> >

<sup>59</sup> See <https://hoax-net.be/a-propos/>

<sup>60</sup> For an overview of French-speaking Belgian hoax sites See Hoax-net, ‘sites parodiques et satiriques’, <https://hoax-net.be/sites-satiriques/>

<sup>61</sup> See <http://nordpresse.be/>

<sup>62</sup> For an overview of Dutch-speaking Belgian hoax sites see De Hoax-Wijzer, ‘Nederlandstalige valse nieuwssites’, <http://www.hoax-wijzer.nl/valse-nieuwssites>

<sup>63</sup> De Hoax-Wijzer, ‘Valse nieuwssites’, <http://www.hoax-wijzer.nl/valse-nieuwssites>

created to look credible and true in order to serve malicious purposes.<sup>64</sup> Such purposes include the following: making revenue through generated clicks (by means of attractive headlines); influencing the public opinion in favour of extremist political ideas; selling misleading medical means; and making people believe in conspiracy theories.<sup>65</sup>

### **2.3.1.1 Examples of Belgian hoaxes**

In February 2017, the French-Speaking news site *Le Soir* diffused an article about Emmanuel Macron, under the headline: ‘Emmanuel Macron, Saudi Arabia’s favourite candidate of presidential elections’.<sup>66</sup> The article discussed how more than 30% of Macron’s presidential campaign was financed by Saudi Arabia. It was widely shared on social media, including by Marion le Pen, a member of the French political party ‘National Front’ (FN).<sup>67</sup> It turned out that the article was ‘fake’ and that it did not emanate from the official *Le Soir* site, which later clarified that it had been the victim of plagiarism.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the article originated from ‘lesoir.info’, while the real site of *Le Soir* is ‘lesoir.be’.<sup>69</sup> According to Ben Nimmo, an expert on the spread of fake information, indications exist that articles like these are pro-Russian propaganda made by Russians themselves.<sup>70</sup>

Another type of ‘hoax’ concerns those stemming from credible news media actors, aimed at stirring up emotions. For example, in October 2017, *Le Vif*, a French-language daily news magazine, published an intentionally ‘fake news’ article. The article announced that a start-up, called ‘Refugreenery’, was launching a new concept: making illegal migrants produce green energy (through biking) in return for 24 hours legal stay in Belgium and salaries of 1,60 Euros.<sup>71</sup> Two days later, *Le Vif* revealed that the announcement was a hoax, the purpose of which was to ‘make people think about what society is ready to do when faced with problems of green energy and illegal migrants’.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Hoax-net, ‘A propos’, <https://hoax-net.be/a-propos/>

<sup>65</sup> De Hoax-Wijzer, ‘Valse nieuwssites’, <http://www.hoax-wijzer.nl/valse-nieuwssites>

<sup>66</sup> Eduard Clappaert, ‘opgepast voor nepnieuws vermomd als artikels van “Le Soir” en “The Guardian”’ VRT NWS (21 August 2017) <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2017/08/21/opgepast-voor-nepnieuws-vermomd-als-artikels-van--le-soir--en--t/>>; Hoax-net, ‘Non, Emmanuel Macron n’a pas été financé par l’Arabie Saoudite’ (29 April 2017) <<https://hoax-net.be/non-emmanuel-macron-na-pas-ete-finance-par-larabie-saoudite/>>

<sup>67</sup> Adrien Sénécat, ‘Macron « Financé par l’Arabie Saoudite » : Une intox massivement relayée par l’extrême droite’ *Lemonde.fr* (2 March 2017) <[www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/03/02/macron-finance-par-l-arabie-saoudite-une-intox-massivement-relayee-par-l-extreme-droite\\_5088356\\_4355770.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/03/02/macron-finance-par-l-arabie-saoudite-une-intox-massivement-relayee-par-l-extreme-droite_5088356_4355770.html)>

<sup>68</sup> *Le Soir*, ‘Fausse information sur Macron : « Le Soir » victime de plagiat’ (2 March 2017) <<http://plus.lesoir.be/84312/article/2017-03-02/fausse-information-sur-macron-le-soir-victime-de-plagiat>>

<sup>69</sup> Adrien Sénécat, ‘Macron « Financé par l’Arabie Saoudite » : Une intox massivement relayée par l’extrême droite’ *Lemonde.fr* (2 March 2017) <[www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/03/02/macron-finance-par-l-arabie-saoudite-une-intox-massivement-relayee-par-l-extreme-droite\\_5088356\\_4355770.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/03/02/macron-finance-par-l-arabie-saoudite-une-intox-massivement-relayee-par-l-extreme-droite_5088356_4355770.html)>

<sup>70</sup> Eduard Clappaert, ‘opgepast voor nepnieuws vermomd als artikels van “Le Soir” en “The Guardian”’ VRT NWS (21 August 2017) <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2017/08/21/opgepast-voor-nepnieuws-vermomd-als-artikels-van--le-soir--en--t/>>

<sup>71</sup> Baudouin van Humbeeck, ‘Migrants : produire de l’électricité verte pour gagner 24 heures de légalité’ *Le Vif* (2 October 2017) <<http://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/migrants-produire-de-l-electricite-verte-pour-gagner-24-heures-de-legalite-article-normal-732157.html>>

<sup>72</sup> Baudouin van Humbeeck, ‘Refugreenery : ‘La fake news qui voulait sauver le monde’ *Le Vif* (4 October 2017) <<http://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/refugreenery-la-fake-news-qui-voulait-sauver-le-monde/article-normal-733211.html>>

This type of hoax brings us to an older hoax, known as ‘Bye Bye Belgium’, which caused great controversy in the then politically unstable Belgium (in 2006). During the regular news programming of the public television *La Une*, a news bulletin appeared which announced the secession of Belgium. According to the bulletin, the Flemish Parliament had announced the secession.<sup>73</sup> Only half an hour later, the message ‘this is fiction’ appeared on the public’s television screen. The purpose of this hoax was to sensitize French-speaking Belgium to the implications of the existing Community crisis. This hoax led to a whirlwind of emotions, but Philippe Dutilleul, the designer of this fictitious show, clarified that it ‘was not created to stir up emotions, but to create reflection’.<sup>74</sup> While this might have been the purpose, it did not prevent a wave of criticism. This event (partially) contributed, in 2009,<sup>75</sup> to the adoption of a Council for Journalistic Ethics, which is a self-regulatory body that deals with ethical rules governing professional journalists in French and German-speaking media in Belgium.<sup>76</sup> The Higher Audio-visual Council established that RTBF had breached its deontological obligations by insufficiently warning, or at least warning too late, that the show was fictitious, which stirred public confusion.<sup>77</sup>

### **2.3.2 Belgian misleading or inaccurate news articles**

Besides these intentional hoaxes, the term ‘fake news’ is often also used in relation to other types of news, identified by Hoax-Wijzer as ‘misleading or wrong’ news, which stem from mainstream news media actors. It explicitly refers to *Het Laatste Nieuws* (HLN)<sup>78</sup> and *Het Nieuwsblad*<sup>79</sup> as examples of Flemish news media sites which regularly publish such types of news articles.<sup>80</sup> Other news media sites have, however, also been blamed for doing so.

#### **2.3.2.1 Belgian examples of misleading or inaccurate news articles**

In September 2017, the VRT mainstream media was accused of having made a fake news report about the opening ceremony of KU Leuven University.<sup>81</sup> According to Lieven De Cauter, a philosopher and activist, different important elements had been cut out of the report.<sup>82</sup> He therefore called on everyone to share images of that event on social media and

---

<sup>73</sup> RTBF.be, ‘Bye Bye Belgium: en 2006, le docu-fiction de la RTBF créait un électrochoc’ (12 December 2016) <[https://www.rtbef.be/info/medias/detail\\_bye-bye-belgium-en-2006-le-docu-fiction-de-la-rtbf-creait-un-electrochoc?id=9479103](https://www.rtbef.be/info/medias/detail_bye-bye-belgium-en-2006-le-docu-fiction-de-la-rtbf-creait-un-electrochoc?id=9479103)>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Décret réglant les conditions de reconnaissance et de subventionnement d’une instance d’autorégulation de la déontologie journalistique, 10 September 2009, <<http://www.lecdj.be/telechargements/decretCDJ20090430.pdf>>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.; Conseil de Déontologie Journalistique, ‘FAQ’, <<http://lecdj.be/contact/le-cdj-questions-frequeemment-posees-faq/>>

<sup>77</sup> Conseil Supérieur de l’audiovisuel, ‘Décision du 4 Juillet 2007’, 4 July 2007, <[http://www.csa.be/system/documents\\_files/653/original/CAC\\_20070704\\_decision\\_Bye\\_Bye\\_Belgium.pdf?1299596370](http://www.csa.be/system/documents_files/653/original/CAC_20070704_decision_Bye_Bye_Belgium.pdf?1299596370)>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.hln.be/>

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.nieuwsblad.be/>

<sup>80</sup> De Hoax-Wijzer, ‘Nederlandstalige valse nieuwssites’, <http://www.hoax-wijzer.nl/valse-nieuwssites>

<sup>81</sup> Lieven De Cauter, ‘VRT brengt Fake News’ *De Wereld Morgen*.be (25 September 2017) <<http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2017/09/25/vrt-brengt-fake-news>>

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

claimed to find this ‘worse than scandalous: obscene’.<sup>83</sup> The criminal investigation concerning the ‘Brabant Killers’ has also led to different media actors spreading ‘fake news’.<sup>84</sup> In November 2017, *De Morgen* claimed that its journalist, Douglas de Coninck, had found an address book in the caravan of the ‘Giant of that Gang’,<sup>85</sup> which turned out to be an unfounded claim.<sup>86</sup> It was therefore criticized for divulging ‘fake news’.<sup>87</sup> Leo Neels, a former professor of Communications Law at KU Leuven and UAntwerpen, criticized the role of journalists when spreading information relating to this criminal investigation [the Brabant Killers]. He stated: ‘there is a journalistic vacuum. A non-fact leads to big editorial investments in long minutes and pages... non-facts. Excellent speculation, little attention for relevance and taking for granted what has been put forward’.<sup>88</sup>

Having regard to the previous sections, it can be said that ‘fake news’ is often used as an umbrella term to cover a broad range of content, from ‘hoaxes’, which have divergent purposes, depending on their provenance, to misleading articles.

## 2.4 ‘Fake news’ as an umbrella term

Multiple scholars have warned for the dangers of the term ‘fake news’, which serves as an umbrella term to cover a wide variety of content.<sup>89</sup> The diversity of meanings masked by the term was very well illustrated by a Flemish documentary, which reported on ‘fake news’ and was broadcast by the weekly TV programme, ‘Pano’.<sup>90</sup> This documentary strived, on the one hand, to shed light on the roots of ‘fake news’ and, on the other hand, to investigate to what extent ‘fake news’ is present in the Flemish news media.<sup>91</sup> When focusing on the former, the investigative team met up with people in Macedonia whose job consist(ed) in creating ‘fake news’ and spreading it massively on social media such as Facebook.<sup>92</sup> These people referred to their practice as ‘clickbait’,<sup>93</sup> which primarily serves profit-making purposes.<sup>94</sup> This type of

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> In Belgium known as ‘De Bende van Nijvel’.

<sup>85</sup> Douglas De Coninck, ‘Onze man vond een adresboekje in caravan van de Reus’ *De Morgen*.be (6 November 2017) <<https://www.demorgen.be/binnenland/onze-man-vond-een-adresboekje-in-caravan-van-de-reus-b2d3c8dd/>>

<sup>86</sup> VTM, ‘adresboekje in stacaravan niet van ‘de Reus’ (6 November 2017) <<https://nieuws.vtm.be/binnenland/adresboekje-stacaravan-niet-van-de-reus>>

<sup>87</sup> Re-Act, ‘De Morgen en Blunder-Douglas : Fake news voor gevorderden’ (9 November 2017) <<https://re-act.be/2017/11/09/de-morgen-en-blunder-douglas-fake-news-voor-gevorderden/>>

<sup>88</sup> Leo Neels, ‘Wat een bende, dat nieuws’ *VRT NWS* (27 October 2017) <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2017/10/27/wat-een-bende--dat-nieuws/>>

<sup>89</sup> See further, T. McGonagle, ‘« Fake News »: False fears or real concerns?’, *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, Vol 35(4), 2017; B. McNair, ‘Fake News, Falschhood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism’, 7 November 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Watch the report here: Eén, ‘Fake news: welke nieuws mogen we nog geloven?’ (12 April 2017) <<https://www.een.be/pano/fake-news>>

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., watch at 14’12’’.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., watch at 19’45’’.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., watch at 18’02’’.

‘fake news’ can therefore be compared with the fake ‘*Le Soir*’ article,<sup>95</sup> described above, and be placed within the category, ‘hoax having a financial purpose’.

When investigating the presence of ‘fake news’ in the Flemish news media, *Pano*’s team did two things. It first investigated the accuracy of news articles stemming from one particular day and from different sources: print media, radio, TV and internet. Four news experts and a team of journalistic students, which served as ‘fact-checkers’, helped them with this. This resulted in the investigation of seven different topics. All these topics presented controversial facts and had been discussed by different media actors. The team reached the following conclusion: nearly half of the articles were true; the other half was either too one-sided, confusing or simply wrong.<sup>96</sup> The term ‘fake news’ here was thus used as reference to ‘misleading or inaccurate news articles’, stemming from qualified journalists.

Secondly, students also created a ‘fake video’. The video showed a baby stroller falling from a stairway, which, at the very last moment, was caught by a man. This video was sent to news journalists in order to see whether they would use it and present it as ‘news’, without first finding out it was ‘fake’. This resulted in different Flemish news media, including *Het Nieuwsblad* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*,<sup>97</sup> presenting the video in a news article.<sup>98</sup> *Pano* showed the whole process in its documentary.<sup>99</sup> The ‘created video’ can, on the one hand, be seen as a hoax, which was created by students with the purpose of stirring up emotions (making people reflect about how easy it is to spread ‘fake news’ and have journalists using it without carrying out adequate fact-checking). On the other hand, this video can also be seen as a ‘misleading news article’, which was negligently used by different news media actors and presented to their readers as ‘true’ news.

## 2.5 Belgian politicians and ‘fake news’

The next Belgian elections will take place in October 2018. These will be municipal and provincial Council elections.<sup>100</sup> In May 2019, the next Federal elections will take place.<sup>101</sup> The non-immediacy of these events might explain why the topic ‘fake news’ is not yet at the heart of political debates surrounding the future elections. As was mentioned earlier, this did not prevent Belgian news media from dedicating numerous articles to the role played by ‘fake

---

<sup>95</sup> Eduard Clappaert, ‘opgepast voor nepnieuws vermomd als artikels van “Le Soir” en “The Guardian”’ VRT NWS (21 August 2017) <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2017/08/21/opgepast-voor-nepnieuws-vermomd-als-artikels-van--le-soir--en--t/>>

<sup>96</sup> Watch the report here: Eén, ‘Fake news: welke nieuws mogen we nog geloven?’ (12 April 2017) <<https://www.een.be/pano/fake-news>>, watch at 36’30.

<sup>97</sup> Yannick Verberckmoes, ‘Studenten geven toe: wij maakten fake news’ De Morgen.be (13 April 2017) <<https://www.demorgen.be/tvmedia/studenten-geven-toe-wij-maakten-fake-news-b69c65a6/>>

<sup>98</sup> See for example: VTM, ‘Held redt tweeling in Buggy van Trap in Gent’ (27 December 2016) <<https://nieuws.vtm.be/binnenland/219806-held-redt-tweeling-buggy-van-trap-gent>>;

<sup>99</sup> Watch the report here: Eén, ‘Fake news: welke nieuws mogen we nog geloven?’ (12 April 2017), <<https://www.een.be/pano/fake-news>>, watch at 12’24;

<sup>100</sup> Belgium.be, ‘Verkiezingen’, <[https://www.belgium.be/nl/over\\_belgie/overheid/democratie/verkiezingen](https://www.belgium.be/nl/over_belgie/overheid/democratie/verkiezingen)>

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



news' in foreign elections. This included the US elections<sup>102</sup> as well as elections from neighbouring countries, namely the Netherlands<sup>103</sup> and France.<sup>104</sup> However, two trends are slowly occurring in the Belgian political sphere. Firstly, politicians repeatedly use the term 'fake news' in relation to press articles. Secondly, politicians increasingly use social media as a direct communication channel between them and their audience. Unlike traditional news media, where editorial control exists, no such oversight is present on social media, which makes it an environment prone to the occurrence and spread of false statements.

### **2.5.1 Examples of Belgian politicians pointing out 'fake news'**

In April 2017, Prime Minister Charles Michel warned about 'fake news' concerning the restriction of mortgage loans.<sup>105</sup> A rumour had previously emerged, according to which banks would cease to give loans amounting to more than 80% of the purchased property value.<sup>106</sup> This led to a petition, which was launched by Lotfi Mostefa, a municipal councillor (from Anderlecht) of the Socialist Party (PS), addressed to the Prime Minister. It ended up being signed by more than 13,000 persons.<sup>107</sup> Contrary to what had been said in the media, the Prime Minister stressed that the government had not taken any decision or proposed to limit the grant of house loans.<sup>108</sup> To put this in his own words: 'I want to wring the neck of this fake news'.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> RTBF.be, 'Les fausses infos des médias Russes ont-elles coûté la présidence à Hilary Clinton ?' (25 November 2016) < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/dossier/election-presidentielle-americaine-la-course-est-lancee/detail\\_les-fausses-infos-des-medias-russes-ont-elles-coute-la-presidence-a-hillary-clinton?id=9464285](https://www.rtbf.be/info/dossier/election-presidentielle-americaine-la-course-est-lancee/detail_les-fausses-infos-des-medias-russes-ont-elles-coute-la-presidence-a-hillary-clinton?id=9464285) >

<sup>103</sup> HLN, 'Russen beïnvloedden Nederlandse verkiezingen met fake news' (4 April 2017) < <https://www.hln.be/nieuws/buitenland/-russen-beinvloedden-nederlandse-verkiezingen-met-fake-news~afb4a17c/> >; Newsmonkey, 'Russen hebben met 'Fake news' geprobeerd om Nederlandse verkiezingen te beïnvloeden, zegt Nederlandse Staatsveiligheid' (5 April 2017) < <http://newsmonkey.be/article/77556> >; Jurek Kuczkiewicz, 'La Russie se cache derrière de nombreuses "fake news" Le Soir.be (16 November 2017) < <http://plus.lesoir.be/124602/article/2017-11-16/la-russie-se-cache-derriere-de-nombreuses-fake-news> >

<sup>104</sup> Nicolas Vanderbiest, 'Présidentielle française : après les fake news, voici les faux sondages' RTBF.be (3 April 2017) < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/monde/detail\\_presidentielle-francaise-apres-les-fake-news-voici-les-faux-sondages?id=9571658](https://www.rtbf.be/info/monde/detail_presidentielle-francaise-apres-les-fake-news-voici-les-faux-sondages?id=9571658) >; Knack, 'Rusland verspreidt nepnieuws in Nederland' (14 November 2017) < <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/rusland-verspreidt-nepnieuws-in-nederland/article-belga-925553.html> >

<sup>105</sup> HLN, 'Michel waarschuwt voor « fake news » rond woningkredieten' (28 April 2017) < <https://www.hln.be/geld/consument/michel-waarschuwt-voor-fake-news-rond-woningkredieten~a65869f8/> >; Ariane van Caloen, 'Prêts hypothécaires: Charles Michel s'en prend aux « Fake news »' LaLibre.be (29 April 2017) < <http://www.lalibre.be/economie/placements/prets-hypothecaires-charles-michel-s-en-prend-aux-fake-news-59037f83cd70e805132256cc> >; RTL Info, 'Charles Michel s'insurge contre des « fake news »' (28 April 2017) < <https://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/politique/charles-michel-s-insurge-contre-des-fake-news--913425.aspx> >; RTBF, 'Limitation des prêts hypothécaires : « Aucune décision n'a été prise par le gouvernement fédéral », 28 April 2017, < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail\\_limitation-des-prets-hypothecaires-aucune-decision-n-a-ete-prise-par-le-gouvernement-federal?id=9592645](https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail_limitation-des-prets-hypothecaires-aucune-decision-n-a-ete-prise-par-le-gouvernement-federal?id=9592645) >

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> RTBF.be, 'Limitation des prêts hypothécaires : « le gouvernement est en train de briser le rêve de nombreux Belges »' (28 April 2017) < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/economie/detail\\_limitation-des-prets-hypothecaires-le-gouvernement-est-en-train-de-briser-le-reve-de-nombreux-belges?id=9592391](https://www.rtbf.be/info/economie/detail_limitation-des-prets-hypothecaires-le-gouvernement-est-en-train-de-briser-le-reve-de-nombreux-belges?id=9592391) >

<sup>108</sup> Lotfi Mostefa, 'Après la chasse aux chômeurs la chasse aux propriétaires' (April 2017) < <https://www.change.org/p/apres-la-chasse-aux-chomeurs-la-chasse-aux-proprietaires> >

<sup>109</sup> Frederic Cauderlier, '@FredCauderlier' Twitter (28 April 2017) < [https://twitter.com/FredCauderlier/status/857897569061662720/photo/1?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rtbf.be%2Finfo%2Fbelgique%2Fdetail\\_limitation-des-prets-hypothecaires-aucune-decision-n-a-ete-prise-par-le-gouvernement-federal%3Fid%3D9592645](https://twitter.com/FredCauderlier/status/857897569061662720/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rtbf.be%2Finfo%2Fbelgique%2Fdetail_limitation-des-prets-hypothecaires-aucune-decision-n-a-ete-prise-par-le-gouvernement-federal%3Fid%3D9592645) >

In October 2017, Rudi Vervoort, Minister-President of the Government of the Brussels-Capital Region, denounced a number of ‘fake news’ regarding Brussels, which he called ‘Brussels Bashing’.<sup>110</sup> According to him, Brussels is too often misrepresented as a place where unemployment rises, where there is a cutback in research funding, where people pay most taxes and where fewer businesses want to establish themselves.<sup>111</sup> Concerning unemployment, he declared that ‘since the government is in place, the amount of unemployed people has decreased by more than 15% in Brussels. Since 2014, unemployment of young people has decreased by 25% and, since 2006, the employment rate of inhabitants has increased from 46.7% to 51.5%’.<sup>112</sup> Rudi Vervoort was however criticized for ‘leaving out important information’, which might have negatively influenced his mentioned statistics.<sup>113</sup>

Another example concerns a controversial event, covered by different media actors, about whether or not Theo Francken, Secretary of State for Asylum, Migration and Administrative Simplification, had prevented journalists from attending a lecture he gave at Ghent University (U-Gent) on 23 March 2017.<sup>114</sup> Journalists at *De Wereld Morgen*, who wanted to attend the lecture, claimed that Theo Francken would not let journalists stay in the room.<sup>115</sup> This led to a whirlwind of arguments and, ultimately, to a fact-check carried out by *De Morgen*, which concluded that the journalists’ statements were ‘fake news’.<sup>116</sup> Following the release of this fact-check, Theo Francken published a Twitter post saying ‘asking for an apology would probably be too much, especially coming from these left-wing fake news journalists. However, thanks @demorgen for the courage’.<sup>117</sup> Despite all the counter-claims, an opinion by Dominique Willaert, published by *De Wereld Morgen*, reaffirmed the earlier statement by

---

<sup>110</sup>Parlement Bruxellois, ‘Déclaration de Politique Générale Intervention du Ministre-Président de la région de Bruxelles-Capitale Monsieur Rudi Vervoort’, 26 October 2017, < <http://www.parlement.brussels/declaration-de-politique-generale/> >, La Libre.be, ‘Rudi Vervoort démonte un certain nombre de « fake news » sur Bruxelles’ (26 October 2017) < <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/politique-belge/rudi-vervoort-demonte-un-certain-nombre-de-fake-news-sur-bruxelles-59f1b94ecd703cdd7516665b> >; Nathalie Bamps, ‘Vervoort : les Fake News sur le chômage à Bruxelles, ça m’agace, c’est stigmatisant’ L’Echo (26 Octobre 2017) < <https://www.lecho.be/economie-politique/belgique-bruxelles/Vervoort-les-fake-news-sur-le-chomage-a-Bruxelles-ca-m-agace-c-est-stigmatisant/9947079?ckc=1&ts=1517420624>>

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Lucas Vander Taelen, ‘column: fake news’ De Tijd, 7 November 2017, < <https://www.tijd.be/ opinie/column/Fake-news/9950353> >

<sup>114</sup> De Morgen.be, ‘Francken weerde geen pers uit lezing Ugent’ (5 May 2017) <<https://www.demorgen.be/politiek/francken-weerde-geen-pers-uit-lezing-ugent-b06a7ba1/>>; Dominique Willaert, ‘Lezing Francken: Journalisten werden wel degelijk gevraagd om aula te verlaten’ De Wereld Morgen (5 May 2017) <<http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2017/05/05/lezing-francken-journalisten-werden-wel-degelijk-gevraagd-om-aula-te-verlaten>>; Dries Van Langenhove, ‘Bewering dat Francken journalisten weigerde op lezing blijkt fake news’ SCEPTR (5 May 2017) < <https://scepter.net/2017/05/bewering-francken-journalisten-weigerde-op-lezing-blijkt-fake-news/> >

<sup>115</sup> Thomas Decreus, ‘Het is perfect Democratisch om een lezing van Theo Francken te verstoren’ De Wereld Morgen (3 May 2017) < <http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2017/05/03/het-is-perfect-democratisch-om- een-lezing-van-theo-francken-te-verstoren>>

<sup>116</sup> De Morgen.be, ‘Francken weerde geen pers uit lezing Ugent’ (5 May 2017) <<https://www.demorgen.be/politiek/francken-weerde-geen-pers-uit-lezing-ugent-b06a7ba1/>>

<sup>117</sup> Theo Francken, ‘@Francken Theo’ Twitter (5 May 2017) <[https://twitter.com/FranckenTheo/status/860441421567971328?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fscepter.net%2F2017%2F05%2Fbewering-francken-journalisten-weigerde-op-lezing-blijkt-fake-news%2F](https://twitter.com/FranckenTheo/status/860441421567971328?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fscepter.net%2F2017%2F05%2Fbewering-francken-journalisten-weigerde-op-lezing-blijkt-fake-news%2F)>

Thomas Decreus, namely that Theo Francken had required journalists to leave the room in which he gave a lecture.<sup>118</sup> It therefore remains unclear which version of events is accurate.

Finally, as was stated in the introduction, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel accused, in December 2017, trade unions of spreading ‘fake news’ about the pension reforms undertaken by his government.<sup>119</sup> This resulted in Charles Michel being criticized for using the term ‘fake news’ without giving the grounds on which he based his claims.<sup>120</sup> Raoul Hedebouw, national spokesman of the far-left Belgian Labour Party, claimed that: ‘if Charles Michel alleges ‘fake news’ coming from the opposition, it is simply because he is out of arguments’.<sup>121</sup> Such criticism also emerged in light of the so-called Sudan affair, which concerned the illegal stay of Sudanese immigrants in Belgium who were repatriated to Sudan. In that affair, Charles Michel accused his opponents (who were against the repatriation of the Sudanese immigrants) of spreading lies, without providing any evidence in support of his accusation.<sup>122</sup> In light of the above, it appears that Belgian politicians have started to use the term ‘fake news’ as a tool to silence opposing voices and criticism.

### **2.5.2 The increasing use of social media as a political tool**

The role of social media as political tool was very well illustrated in an article by *Het Laatste Nieuws*, titled ‘First the likes, the votes will follow’.<sup>123</sup> The article points out the increasing use of social media by Belgian politicians, such as Bart De Wever, president of the Flemish right-wing party ‘New Flemish Alliance’ (N-VA), Theo Francken (N-VA) and Open Vld’s chairwoman Gwendolyn Rutten (Flemish liberal party). An example of this new trend is the use of Facebook by Premier Charles Michel in light of the Sudan affair. On 2 January 2018, the Premier deliberately chose to speak out and, for the first time, to defend his governmental actions through the use of social media (his Facebook account).<sup>124</sup> In his post, titled ‘The sense of nuance and responsibilities’, he stated the following: ‘the regular misinformation campaigns bring me to dot the i’s. I’ve deliberately chosen to do so with the benefit of hindsight. The return policy in particular to Sudan is a sensitive topic which calls for nuances.

---

<sup>118</sup> Dominique Willaert, ‘Lezing Francken: Journalisten werden wel degelijk gevraagd om aula te verlaten’ *De Wereld Morgen* ( 5 May 2017) <<http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2017/05/05/lezing-francken-journalisten-werden-wel-degelijk-gevraagd-om-aula-te-verlaten>>

<sup>119</sup> Bart Haeck, ‘Charles Michel verwijt vakbonden leugens’ *De Tijd* (19 December 2017) <<https://www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie-federaal/Charles-Michel-verwijt-vakbonden-leugens/9964464>>

<sup>120</sup> *7sur7.be*, ‘« Fake news », « mensonges » : les syndicats, PTB et Ecolo répondent à Charles Michel’ (19 December 2017) <<http://www.7sur7.be/7s7/fr/1537/Consommation/article/detail/3328513/2017/12/19/Fake-news-mensonges-les-syndicats-PTB-et-Ecolo-repondent-a-Charles-Michel.dhtml>>

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Maxime Vancauwenberge, ‘Premier Michel zet Francken uit de wind om macht te behouden en bezuinigingen voort te zetten’ *PVDA* (4 January 2018) <<http://pvda.be/artikels/premier-michel-zet-francken-uit-de-wind-om-macht-te-behouden-en-bezuinigingen-voort-te>> ;

<sup>123</sup> *HLN*, ‘Eerst de likes, de stemmen volgen wel’ (6 January 2018) <<https://www.hln.be/de-krant/eerst-de-likes-de-stemmen-volgen-wel~a1292339/>>

<sup>124</sup> Charles Michel, ‘Charles Michel: le sens de la nuance et des responsabilités’ Facebook ( 2 January 2018) <<https://www.facebook.com/notes/charles-michel/le-sens-de-la-nuance-et-des-responsabilites/1705489479507443/>> ; Romuald La Morté, ‘La guérilla contre les « Fake News » est en marche’ *Le Vif* (15 January 2018) <<http://www.levif.be/actualite/international/la-guerilla-contre-les-fake-news-est-en-marche/article-opinion-783929.html>> ;

And it deserves more than simplifications or caricatures in one way or another. I want to re-establish certain truths very far from certain perceptions that no one attempted to create'.<sup>125</sup>

His post was shared 355 times, including by Theo Francken on Twitter,<sup>126</sup> received more than 459 comments and was 'liked or disliked' more than 1,400 times.<sup>127</sup> The Premier's spokesman declared: 'we wanted to reach as many people as possible, which we achieved. We received a lot of reactions, both positive and negative ones'.<sup>128</sup> Two weeks later, the Premier again used his Facebook account, this time to post a 'new year's' letter, in which he outlined the progress made by Belgium in different areas such as in the increase of job opportunities.<sup>129</sup> According to *De Tijd*, this new practice for Charles Michel, which consists in by-passing traditional media, does not yet render him comparable to Donald Trump.<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, Tim Verheyden, a journalist for *VRT NWS*,<sup>131</sup> warned of the dangers of this practice in the context of 'fake news'. Indeed, he stressed that: 'statements are taking the form of posts on Facebook or messages on Twitter. The media then makes news out of that. You read and find again something new about it and these opinions are in turn expressed on social media, reinforcing previously made statements, provoking reactions and the whole dynamic starts again'.<sup>132</sup>

Similarly, Eric Van Rompuy, Member of Parliament (centre right-wing Flemish Christian-Democratic party (CD&V)), expressed his fears towards the increased use of social media by politicians. According to him, this practice might ultimately lead to a decline in the role and power of the Parliament.<sup>133</sup> On 7 January 2018, he wrote the following on his personal blog: 'With the arrival of Trump, Twitter and Facebook have also made progress in Flanders' political communication. Members of the Government and party chairmen are continuously in

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Theo Francken, '@Francken Theo: de puntjes op de i.' Twitter (2 January 2018) <[https://twitter.com/FranckenTheo/status/948137007146065920?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rtf.be%2Finfo%2Fbelgique%2Fdetail\\_pourquoi-charles-michel-a-t-il-choisi-facebook-pour-defendre-sa-politique-migratoire%3Fid%3D9801571](https://twitter.com/FranckenTheo/status/948137007146065920?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rtf.be%2Finfo%2Fbelgique%2Fdetail_pourquoi-charles-michel-a-t-il-choisi-facebook-pour-defendre-sa-politique-migratoire%3Fid%3D9801571)>

<sup>127</sup> Charles Michel, 'Charles Michel: le sens de la nuance et des responsabilités' Facebook (2 January 2018) <<https://www.facebook.com/notes/charles-michel/le-sens-de-la-nuance-et-des-responsabilites/1705489479507443/>>; Romuald La Morté, 'La guérilla contre les « Fake News » est en marche' *Le Vif* (15 January 2018) <<http://www.levif.be/actualite/international/la-guerilla-contre-les-fake-news-est-en-marche/article-opinion-783929.html>>

<sup>128</sup> Nicolas Vlaeminck, 'Woordvoerder premier Michel: "Communicatie over Soedanezen via Facebook heeft zijn doel bereikt' *VRT NWS* (3 January 2018) <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/01/03/woordvoerder-charles-michel---communicatie-via-facebook-heeft-zi/>>

<sup>129</sup> Charles Michel, 'Charles Michel, 'Jobs, jobs, jobs: het werk gaat voort' Facebook (16 January 2018) <<https://www.facebook.com/notes/charles-michel/jobs-jobs-jobs-het-werk-gaat-voort/1719562388100152/>>; Roel Wauters, 'Premier Michel op Facebook : "we gaan onze inspanning opvoeren"' *De Morgen.be* (16 January 2018) <<https://www.demorgen.be/politiek/premier-michel-op-facebook-we-gaan-onze-inspanning-opvoeren-b458ebfa/>>

<sup>130</sup> Dries Bervoet, 'Facebook-bericht maakt van Michel nog lang geen Trump' *De Tijd* (3 January 2018) <<https://www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie-federaal/Facebook-bericht-maakt-van-Michel-nog-lang-geen-Trump/9968591>>

<sup>131</sup> Tim Verheyden created the Pano report on 'fake news'

<sup>132</sup> Tim Verheyden, 'Analyse- Als we fake news begraven, is het probleem van desinformatie dan opgelost? Wel, neen' *VRT NWS* (4 January 2018) <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/01/03/als-we-fake-news--eindelijk--begraven--is-het-probleem-van-desin/>>

<sup>133</sup> Eric Van Rompuy, 'Geen respect voor parlement' *EricVanRompuy.be* (7 January 2018) <<http://www.ericvanrompuy.be/2018/01/geen-respect-voor-parlement/>>

the news. We can follow these politicians 24 hours a day on news websites. Their statements are used by both the news on radio and TV, talk shows and newspapers, through which they always stay online. Some members of the government have nearly become a test picture for news sites. Political and social debates take place outside parliament [...] The real debate now takes place in the media and with the rise of social media this process is further activated'.<sup>134</sup> In his blog post, he especially points to the N-VA, and more particularly to Theo Francken and Bart De Wever, who make use of social media as "strategy".<sup>135</sup> According to Van Rompuy, Theo Francken communicated on the edge of *fake news* about multiple events, such as the *refoulement* of Sudanese immigrants.<sup>136</sup> He also claimed that Bart De Wever's post of a yawning dromedaris on Facebook was 'Trumpist'.<sup>137</sup> Following the so-called Sudan affair and Theo Francken's possible resignation, Bart de Wever posted a holiday picture of a yawning dromedaris, under which he wrote 'I have been asking here whether Theo should step out', which illustrates his support for Theo Francken. According to Eric van Rompuy, 'the N-VA carries a non-stop political offensive in the media in order to place its political themes, regarding migration and security, on the media and political agenda'.<sup>138</sup>

Notwithstanding the above, *Het Laatste Nieuws* made clear that social media are used by most Belgian political parties but that N-VA was the first to use it.<sup>139</sup> According to that news article, Theo Francken collected, in 2017, the most 'likes', 'shares' and 'comments' on social media (amounting to 3.36 million). He was followed by Guy Verhofstadt (OpenVld) with 2.7 million social media reactions. In third place came Vlaams Belang, the far-right political party, with 1.08 million reactions. The N-VA came fourth.<sup>140</sup> In that article, reference is often made to Sofie Verhalle, a social media strategy expert, who explains the power of social media. According to her, the power of social media lies in the absence of an editor or journalist to frame or reframe subjects, if needed. This allows 'politicians to present affairs in a sharper way than they really are [...] Furthermore, social media is accessible, which means that everyone can join the conversation, resulting in a lot of noise, which in turn can sometimes lead to real facts being hidden'.<sup>141</sup> According to that article, social media will play a huge role in the next municipal elections.<sup>142</sup>

### **2.5.3 Trust in politics and the media**

In November 2017, Whyte Corporate Affairs, a Belgian corporate affairs company, published a report about the trust of Belgians towards different actors.<sup>143</sup> The last time the company

---

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> HLN, 'Eerst de likes, de stemmen volgen wel' (6 January 2018) <<https://www.hln.be/de-krant/eerst-de-likes-de-stemmen-volgen-wel~a1292339/>> Ben Serrure and Sofie Vanlommel, 'Het geheime wapen van N-VA' De Tijd (18 December 2016) <<https://www.tijd.be/dossier/krant/Het-geheime-wapen-van-N-VA/9842907>>

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Whyte Corporate Affairs, 'Studie over de geloofwaardigheid van politieke en socio-economische actoren', November 2017, <<http://blog.whyte.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Tabellen-Credibility-Survey-NL-V3.pdf>>

conducted such a study was in 2012, which makes it interesting for comparative purposes. Importantly, the report was conducted among 1,029 Belgians (576 Flemish and 453 French people) and the margin of error is 3%.<sup>144</sup> According to the latest report, Belgians express most trust towards universities, experts and scientists (83%). Political parties are the least trusted (11%).<sup>145</sup> The French-speaking, left-wing party ‘Ecolo’, which stands for the environment’s protection, was voted most trusted French-speaking party (24%)<sup>146</sup> and, regarding Dutch-speaking parties, N-VA occupied that position (34%).<sup>147</sup>

After scientists, the most trusted actors are ‘peers’ (76%). Peers include ‘neighbours, colleagues, family, friends on Facebook, followers on Twitter and reviewers on TripAdvisor’.<sup>148</sup> The study further indicates that 52% expressed feeling better informed than before, whereas 38% expressed the contrary.<sup>149</sup> Accordingly, their decrease in trust was mainly due to the amount of incorrect information (including fake news).<sup>150</sup>

Concerning types of media, traditional media, stemming from professional journalists, are still the most trusted (television: 53%; newspapers and magazines, including their online version: 56%; radio: 65%). Social media are considered the least trusted media (less than 20%), after advertising sites (15%).

This brings us to interesting conclusions. The trust in traditional media is still very much present, which is in line with the latest Reuters Report. Little trust is expressed towards political parties and social media. Moreover, the report shows that Belgians seem aware of the ‘fake news’ phenomenon, which was also reflected in the Reuters report. When combining all the different survey results, we could infer that ‘fake news’, through social media, which is used as political tool by political parties, will have little effect on Belgians as they will not trust such news. However, when taking into account that, in Flanders, most trust is expressed towards the political party N-VA whereas this party makes the most use of social media and has been accused of ‘fake news’ practices (as detailed in the previous section), such a conclusion cannot be drawn. This could possibly be explained by the public’s high trust in peers, as they play a crucial role in the dissemination of ‘fake news’ and political statements on social media (see previous section). Moreover, as indicated by the latest Reuters report, a considerable amount of news consumers share news through social media or e-mail (27%) and 16% of them comment on news they read online. Consequently, the public’s low trust in politics and social media might be by-passed by the high level of trust in peers.

## **2.6 The culprits – according to the Belgian media**

---

<sup>144</sup> Whyte Corporate Affairs, ‘Etude de crédibilité des acteurs politico-socio-économiques’, November 2017, <<http://blog.whyte.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Paper-étude-de-crédibilité-FR-V3.pdf> >

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 1

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 8

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 1-2

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 13

According to Joyce Stroobant, a researcher at the Centre for Journalism in Ghent, the problem of ‘fake news’ does not lie in its creation but rather in its massive ‘diffusion’ on social media.<sup>151</sup> She reminds us that fake news has always existed but that the difference nowadays lies in its reach. Valentine François, animator for educational workshops concerning the media<sup>152</sup> shares the same opinion: ‘it is the environment through which disinformation is spread which characterizes its propagation. In a world governed by clicks, likes and shares, even traditional media cannot refuse such source of advertisement income’.<sup>153</sup>

Furthermore, Stroobant claims that the term should be better used and not misused in relation to investigative journalism. Despite what the term makes believe, she argues that ‘fake news’ is not a journalistic problem.<sup>154</sup> Tim Verheyden, the aforementioned journalist, declared that the underlying mechanisms behind ‘fake news’ constitute the real problem.<sup>155</sup> Big players such as Facebook, Google or Twitter make money through targeted advertising, which are based on Big Data.<sup>156</sup> Social media thus makes it possible to diffuse targeted news, advertisements, propaganda or disinformation on a large scale. Such targeting makes it very hard to recognize ‘fake news’ and to distinguish between what is legitimate information or tailor-made propaganda aimed at influencing opinions.<sup>157</sup>

When discussing ‘fake news’ in a broader sense, which includes ‘inaccurate and misleading articles, ‘Pano’ indicated that news consumers are also part of the problem: ‘we [consumers] demand a lot from the media. We demand them to inform us every day about what has happened in the world, both through newspapers, radio, television or online and with as much interaction as possible, such as with videos, infographics, etc. This [news content] has to be produced in a very short amount of time since; in the meantime, social media keeps on running. This [lack of time] leads to errors or sloppiness which is not always a good thing, but which, somehow, is a logical result of what we, as news consumers, expect, namely as fast and as much news as possible’.<sup>158</sup>

### 3. Parliamentary and wider political discussion

---

<sup>151</sup> Joyce Stroobant, ‘Fake News is geen journalistiek probleem, al levert het journalisten wel wat problemen op’ Knack (14 June 2017) < <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/fake-news-is-geen-journalistiek-probleem-al-levert-het-journalisten-wel-problemen-op/article-opinion-865833.html> >

<sup>152</sup> These workshops are called ‘Action Médias jeunes’, < <http://www.actionmediasjeunes.be/> >

<sup>153</sup> Emilie Eickhoff, ‘Les « Fake news » menacent-elles particulièrement nos jeunes?’ RTBF.be (15 December 2017) < [https://www.rtb.be/lapremiere/article/detail\\_les-fake-news-menacent-elles-particulierement-nos-jeunes?id=9790660](https://www.rtb.be/lapremiere/article/detail_les-fake-news-menacent-elles-particulierement-nos-jeunes?id=9790660) >

<sup>154</sup> Joyce Stroobant, ‘Fake News is geen journalistiek probleem, al levert het journalisten wel wat problemen op’ Knack (14 June 2017) < <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/fake-news-is-geen-journalistiek-probleem-al-levert-het-journalisten-wel-problemen-op/article-opinion-865833.html> >

<sup>155</sup> Tim Verheyden, ‘Als we fake news begraven, is het probleem van desinformatie dan opgelost? Wel, neen’ VRT NWS (4 January 2018) < <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/01/03/als-we-fake-news--eindelijk--begraven-is-het-probleem-van-desin/> >

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Watch the report here: Eén, ‘Fake news: welke nieuws mogen we nog geloven?’ (12 April 2017) <<https://www.een.be/pano/fake-news>>, watch at 38’.

### 3.1 View of the Belgian government on legislative measures to counter ‘fake news’

How to counter ‘fake news’ has been at the heart of Belgian political debates, especially since French President Macron unveiled his plan to adopt a law prohibiting ‘fake news’ during election periods.<sup>159</sup> According to Jean-Claude Marcourt, Vice-Minister-President of the Walloon government and Minister for the media, such legislation would not solve the problem of ‘fake news’. It would lead to practical and legal difficulties, such as having to define ‘fake news’.<sup>160</sup> Gaël Lambinon, Marcourt’s spokesman, pointed out that ‘Marcourt is conscious about the fact that fake news has to be countered, without therefore infringing the right to freedom of expression, which is a fundamental right. He agrees with the principle that fake news should be limited and pleads in particular for discussions at European level’.<sup>161</sup> According to the Minister, because of its rapid online spread, ‘fake news’ is an international problem. In light of this, he claims that the issue cannot, in practice, be countered at the national level.<sup>162</sup> He therefore welcomes the European initiative,<sup>163</sup> which started in November 2017 and is aimed at tackling the issue at Union level.<sup>164</sup> Minister Marcourt favours a collective effort between the media, journalists, news users and competent authorities. He also stated: ‘one way to counter disinformation in French-speaking Belgium is to act at the level of ethics of journalism, namely through the Council of Journalistic ethics (CSJ)’.<sup>165</sup>

Concerning Flemish politicians, Koen Geens, Federal minister of Justice (CD&V), expressed the need to support ethical journalism and to improve media education among the youth.<sup>166</sup> At a parliamentary meeting he expressed his reluctance towards the adoption of a law regulating ‘fake news’.<sup>167</sup> He emphasised the dangers such a law could represent for individuals’ right to

---

<sup>159</sup> See : Reuters, ‘Macron plans law to fight ‘fake news’ in 2018’, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-macron/macron-plans-law-to-fight-fake-news-in-2018-idUSKBN1ES1LJ> >

<sup>160</sup> RTBF.be, ‘Marcourt doute de la praticabilité d’une loi anti-« fake news » comme proposée par Macron’ (16 January 2018) < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail\\_marcourt-doute-de-la-praticabilite-d-une-loi-anti-fake-news-comme-proposee-par-macron?id=9813100](https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail_marcourt-doute-de-la-praticabilite-d-une-loi-anti-fake-news-comme-proposee-par-macron?id=9813100) >

<sup>161</sup> La Libre.be, ‘Marcourt « sur la même longueur d’ondes » que Macron au sujet du contrôle des fake news’ (4 January 2018) < <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/politique-belge/marcourt-sur-la-meme-longueur-d-ondes-que-macron-au-sujet-du-controle-des-fake-news-5a4e3dc1cd7083db8b608670> >

<sup>162</sup> RTBF.be, ‘Marcourt doute de la praticabilité d’une loi anti-« fake news » comme proposée par Macron’ (16 January 2018) < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail\\_marcourt-doute-de-la-praticabilite-d-une-loi-anti-fake-news-comme-proposee-par-macron?id=9813100](https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail_marcourt-doute-de-la-praticabilite-d-une-loi-anti-fake-news-comme-proposee-par-macron?id=9813100) >

<sup>163</sup> European Commission, ‘Next steps against fake news: Commission sets up High-Level Expert Group and launches public consultation’, 13 November 2017, < [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-4481\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4481_en.htm) >

<sup>164</sup> RTBF.be, ‘Marcourt doute de la praticabilité d’une loi anti-« fake news » comme proposée par Macron’ (16 January 2018) < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail\\_marcourt-doute-de-la-praticabilite-d-une-loi-anti-fake-news-comme-proposee-par-macron?id=9813100](https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail_marcourt-doute-de-la-praticabilite-d-une-loi-anti-fake-news-comme-proposee-par-macron?id=9813100) >

<sup>165</sup> La Libre.be, ‘Marcourt « sur la même longueur d’ondes » que Macron au sujet du contrôle des fake news’ (4 January 2018) <<http://www.lalibre.be/actu/politique-belge/marcourt-sur-la-meme-longueur-d-ondes-que-macron-au-sujet-du-controle-des-fake-news-5a4e3dc1cd7083db8b608670> >

<sup>166</sup> RTBF.be, ‘Marcourt doute de la praticabilité d’une loi anti-« fake news » comme proposée par Macron’ (16 January 2018) < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail\\_marcourt-doute-de-la-praticabilite-d-une-loi-anti-fake-news-comme-proposee-par-macron?id=9813100](https://www.rtbf.be/info/belgique/detail_marcourt-doute-de-la-praticabilite-d-une-loi-anti-fake-news-comme-proposee-par-macron?id=9813100) >

<sup>167</sup> Knack, ‘Minister Geens twijfelt aan doeltreffendheid wettelijk verbod op fake news’ (10 January 2018) < <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/minister-geens-twijfelt-aan-doeltreffendheid-wettelijk-verbod-op-fake-news/article-normal-949215.html> >; Le Soir.be, ‘Koen Geens sceptique concernant une loi sur les Fake News’ (



freedom of expression and media freedom.<sup>168</sup> According to him, ‘the first persons concerned are the managers of communication and media channels who are responsible for verifying the truthfulness of the messages they disseminate and, where necessary, for prohibiting their dissemination’.<sup>169</sup> He also stated that ‘their responsibility could be engaged, through legal proceedings, if the dissemination of ‘fake news’ were to cause serious damage’.<sup>170</sup> In light of this, he pointed to existing laws, such as libel or slander, which already permit, to a certain extent, the countering of ‘fake news’.<sup>171</sup> Hendrik Vuye and Veerle Wouters, members of Parliament, also emphasized the dangers of a law regulating ‘fake news’: it would threaten people’s right to freedom of expression and, in turn, undermine democracy.<sup>172</sup>

On 16 January 2018, during a Committee meeting of the Flemish Parliament, criticism was expressed concerning the adoption of legislation that targets internet companies.<sup>173</sup> Tom van Grieken, the leader of the right-wing political party, ‘Vlaams Belang’, expressed his fears towards Germany’s adoption of its *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* law. This German law threatens social media companies, with fines amounting to 50 million Euros, for not removing illegal content within the required period (within 24 hours is the general time-frame).<sup>174</sup> According to him, such a regulatory measure could lead to censorship. In light of this, Geert Bourgeois, the Minister-President of the Flemish Government declared that it would be better to tackle the issue through the companies’ policies (self- or co-regulation), instead of by imposing sanctions. Such self-regulatory measures, in the context of ‘illegal content’, have already been encouraged by the European Commission through the Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech online<sup>175, 176</sup>.

The next two sections will discuss a selection of the responses to ‘fake news’ by different actors and at different levels, namely European and national levels.

#### 4. European responses to ‘fake news’

---

10 January 2018) <<http://www.lesoir.be/133320/article/2018-01-10/koen-geens-sceptique-concernant-une-loi-sur-les-fake-news> >

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Hendrik Vuye and Veerle Wouter, ‘Opinie - Wetgeving om fake news te bestrijden, ondermijnt essentieel element van de rechtstaat’ Knack (8 January 2018) < [www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/wetgeving-om-fake-news-te-bestrijden-ondermijnt-essentieel-element-van-de-rechtsstaat/article-opinion-947699.html](http://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/wetgeving-om-fake-news-te-bestrijden-ondermijnt-essentieel-element-van-de-rechtsstaat/article-opinion-947699.html) >

<sup>173</sup> Vlaams Parlement, Commissievergadering – Commissie voor Buitenlands beleid, Europese aangelegenheden, Internationale samenwerking, Toerisme en ontroerend erfgoed’, 16 January 2018, <<https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/commissies/commissievergaderingen/1221527/verslag/1222938> >

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> European Commission, ‘Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech online’, 31 May 2016, <[http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/hate\\_speech\\_code\\_of\\_conduct\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/hate_speech_code_of_conduct_en.pdf) >

<sup>176</sup> Vlaams Parlement, Commissievergadering – Commissie voor Buitenlands beleid, Europese aangelegenheden, Internationale samenwerking, Toerisme en ontroerend erfgoed’, 16 January 2018, <<https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/commissies/commissievergaderingen/1221527/verslag/1222938> >

## **4.1 The EU's responses to 'fake news'**

### **4.1.1 The High-Level Expert Group to counter 'fake news'**

At EU level, the European Commission appointed, in January 2018, a High-Level Expert Group (HLEG) in order to issue recommendations on a European Strategy aimed at countering 'fake news'.<sup>177</sup> The findings of the HLEG were presented in March 2018 and they encourage the adoption of a "multi-dimensional approach" to disinformation.<sup>178</sup> That approach rests on five pillars: promoting media literacy; safeguarding the diversity and sustainability of the European news media eco-system; having in place a transparent digital information ecosystem; developing tools to positively engage with news consumers; and periodically monitoring the effectiveness of taken measures.<sup>179</sup> While the former two are long-term actions; the latter three are short-term ones. The report outlines different actions already taken by various stakeholders and, on the basis of that, recommends *inter alia* Member States to take several actions.<sup>180</sup>

The report emphasises two very important points. First, simplistic solutions, such as the implementation of laws that are designed to counter 'fake news', should be avoided. Second, instead of using the term 'fake news', the term 'disinformation' should be used. Disinformation is defined in the report as including 'all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit'.<sup>181</sup> It is restricted to deliberate misleading news and therefore excludes satire and parody.<sup>182</sup> In order to counter disinformation, the term 'fake news' should thus be abandoned as it gives the impression that the problem primarily concerns quality journalism.

### **4.1.2 The European Commission's Communication on 'tackling online disinformation'**

Following the HLEG's report, the European Commission issued a Communication titled 'Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach'.<sup>183</sup> It guides Member States on the ways to counter disinformation online, while emphasising the different principles that have to be taken into account when doing so. It also sets out the different actions that the Commission intends to take in that regard. Importantly, the scope of the instrument is limited to 'disinformation', the definition of which mirrors the one adopted in the HLEG's report. This definition does not cover 'reporting errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan

---

<sup>177</sup> See for the list of experts: European Commission, 'Experts appointed to the High-Level Group on Fake News and online disinformation', 12 January 2018, <<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/experts-appointed-high-level-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>>

<sup>178</sup> European Commission, A multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation: Report of the Independent High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, March 2018. <<https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6ef4df8b-4cea-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>>

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 22-34.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 14-17.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 35

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach', 26 April 2018.

news and commentary’.<sup>184</sup> After having identified the main causes of online disinformation, which include the ‘profound transformation of the media sector by the rise of platforms’, it outlines a European approach to tackle online disinformation. This approach comprises four points of attention: improving transparency; promoting information diversity; fostering information credibility; and implementing inclusive solutions.

Regarding transparency, the Commission encourages, *inter alia*, the use of self-regulation by online platforms in order to provide their users with more information on political advertising and sponsored content. These actions should, at all times, respect individuals’ right to freedom of expression, thereby not leading to any form of censorship. The Commission clarified that it may take actions of a regulatory nature if self-regulatory measures should prove unsatisfactory.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, the use of fact-checkers shall be valued and promoted in order to enhance the credibility of news. In that regard, explicit reference is made to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) Code of Principles, which sets out different standards to which fact-checkers have to adhere, in order to be part of that Network.<sup>186</sup> Unlike in the Netherlands,<sup>187</sup> no Belgian media actors are part of that network yet. The report also recommends guaranteeing online accountability in order to foster transparency.

Since disinformation has already been used to influence elections, the Communication recalls the importance of developing measures in order to guarantee secure and resilient election processes. Particular importance is also given to the fostering of media literacy and the need to enhance support for quality journalism. Regarding the latter, Member States should invest more in quality journalism and a more balanced relation shall be sought between the media, on the one hand, and online platforms, on the other.

## **4.2 The Council of Europe’s responses to ‘fake news’**

### **4.2.1 The Council of Europe’s report: ‘Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making’**

In September 2017, the Council of Europe issued a report authored by Claire Wardle (Executive Director of First Draft) and Hossein Derakhshan (an Iranian-Canadian writer, blogger and researcher).<sup>188</sup> The aim of the report is twofold: it strives to examine and understand the ‘information disorder’ phenomenon and, subsequently, to address the identified challenges. The authors’ intention not to use the term ‘fake news’ is explicitly mentioned.<sup>189</sup> Therefore, instead of referring to ‘fake news’, the report rather refers to ‘information pollution’, which better grasps the complexity of the issue.

---

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>186</sup> See: Poynter., ‘International Fact-Checking Network fact checkers’ code of principles’, <<https://www.poynter.org/international-fact-checking-network-fact-checkers-code-principles> >

<sup>187</sup> T. McGonagle et Al., ‘Inventarisatie methodes om “nepnieuws” tegen te gaan’, 25 April 2018, p. 31.

<sup>188</sup> Council of Europe, ‘Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for Research and Policy-making’, 27 September 2017.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

In order to correctly address the different challenges, the report identifies three different types of information within the ‘information disorder’ phenomenon: mis-, dis-, and mal-information.<sup>190</sup> While mis- and dis-information both designate ‘false’ information, the former is not meant to cause harm whereas the latter does involve such an intention. Mal-information, by contrast, concerns ‘genuine’ information, but it is shared with the intention to cause harm. It includes hate speech and harassment.<sup>191</sup>

According to the report, it is important to take account of the different elements of information disorder, namely the person making the statement (the agent); the message as such (e.g. its target and whether it is fabricated, legal or illegal), and how the message has been interpreted (e.g. whether it has been shared because of people’s support or opposition).<sup>192</sup> Moreover, three different phases of information disorder must be distinguished: when the message is created (creation phase); when it is turned into a media product (production phase), and when the product is distributed or made public (distribution phase).<sup>193</sup> Importantly, the report identifies ‘content that plays on people’s emotions, encouraging feelings of superiority, anger or fear’ as being the most ‘successful’ problematic content. This is why social platforms, which allow emotional content to be shared quickly and on a large scale, contribute to the information disorder phenomenon.<sup>194</sup>

Finally, the report outlines different existing initiatives to counter ‘information disorder’ and in light of this, it proposes various ways to strengthen such initiatives. Thirty-four recommendations, directed at various actors, such as technology companies, national governments and education ministries, are introduced and explained. Regarding national governments, the report recommends, *inter alia*, to ‘regulate ad networks, roll out advanced cybersecurity training and enforce minimum levels of public service news on to the platforms’.<sup>195</sup>

## 5. Belgian responses to ‘fake news’

### 5.1 Governmental responses to ‘fake news’

As stated in the introduction, the Federal Minister for the Digital Agenda, Alexander de Croo, has appointed a group of experts to come up with recommendations on how to counter ‘fake news’ in Belgium. These recommendations should strive to strike a balance between, on the one hand, respect for individuals’ right to freedom of expression and, on the other hand, the effective countering of disinformation. He also launched the website [www.stopfakenews.be](http://www.stopfakenews.be) on which citizens can make recommendations and show approval (by liking) or disapproval (by disliking) of others’ recommendations. On 17 May 2018, he also organised a public

---

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

debate, at the digital campus ‘BeCentral’ in Brussels, with experts and academics on how to counter ‘fake news’.<sup>196</sup>

Besides this initiative, different governmental initiatives have already been launched and all seem to focus on one particular aspect, namely media education.

### **5.1.1 Media education**

In February 2017, Alain Onckelinx, member of the Walloon Parliament and of the left-wing socialist party (PS), asked Jean-Claude Marcourt’s opinion about the French ‘*Cross-check*’<sup>197</sup> initiative and on his views to counter ‘fake news’.<sup>198</sup> Minister Marcourt pointed out the dangers of such initiatives, where Web giants collaborate with journalistic students serving as fact-checkers. According to him, this might lead to these web giants becoming the new guarantors of quality journalism.<sup>199</sup> He therefore declared that ‘the search for solutions must be done upstream, as part of the media education policy’.<sup>200</sup> Moreover, he emphasised the fact that ‘disinformation’ is mainly a problem for social media and search engines, less for traditional media, which already have ‘fact-checking’ measures in place.<sup>201</sup>

He emphasized the relevance of projects carried out by the Superior Council for Media Education (CSEM)<sup>202</sup> of Wallonia-Brussels Federation.<sup>203</sup> In October 2017, the CSEM organised ‘two weeks of media education’ around the topics ‘fake news’ and disinformation.<sup>204</sup> Many schools of that region taught their students about the concept ‘fake news’ and the importance to distinguish between real and fake information on social media.<sup>205</sup>

Flanders has also primarily focused on media education in order to counter ‘fake news’. Sven Gatz, the Flemish Minister for Culture, announced in March 2017 that the Flemish government would give 600,000 Euros of subsidies in support of ‘Mediawijsheid’, the media literacy centre for Flanders and Brussels.<sup>206</sup> Mediawijsheid, which was launched in 2013,<sup>207</sup>

---

<sup>196</sup> < <https://brussels.carpediem.cd/events/6669742-het-grote-stop-fake-news-debat-at-becentral/> >

<sup>197</sup> This initiative is a collaborative project between Google and French press publishers, see: <<https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.org/france-en/faq/>> ;

<sup>198</sup> Parlement de la Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles, ‘Question écrite posée à Jean-Claude Marcourt, Vice-Président et Ministre de l’Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et des Médias’ AlainOnkelinx.be (21 February 2017) <[www.alainonkelinx.be/lutte-contre-fake-news/](http://www.alainonkelinx.be/lutte-contre-fake-news/)>

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Conseil Supérieur de l’éducation aux médias, ‘< [www.csem.be/](http://www.csem.be/)>

<sup>203</sup> Parlement de la Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles, ‘Question écrite posée à Jean-Claude Marcourt, Vice-Président et Ministre de l’Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et des Médias’ AlainOnkelinx.be (21 February 2017) < <http://www.alainonkelinx.be/lutte-contre-fake-news/>>

<sup>204</sup> CSEM, ‘Deuxième quinzaine de l’éducation aux médias (21 August 2017) < [http://www.csem.be/evenement/deuxieme\\_quinzaine\\_de\\_leducation\\_aux\\_medias](http://www.csem.be/evenement/deuxieme_quinzaine_de_leducation_aux_medias)>

<sup>205</sup> Fabrice Grosfilley, ‘Faut-il perdre son temps à démentir les fake news’ RTBF.be (18 October 2017) < [https://www.rtbf.be/info/dossiers/chroniques-de-fabrice-grosfilley/detail\\_faut-il-perdre-son-temps-a-dementir-les-fake-news-fabrice-grosfilley?id=9739618](https://www.rtbf.be/info/dossiers/chroniques-de-fabrice-grosfilley/detail_faut-il-perdre-son-temps-a-dementir-les-fake-news-fabrice-grosfilley?id=9739618)> ;

<sup>206</sup> Website media van de Vlaamse overheid, ‘Sven Gatz investeert €600 000 in mediawijsheid’ (10 March 2017) < <https://cjsm.be/media/nieuws/sven-gatz-investeert-eu-600000-mediawijsheid>>

<sup>207</sup> Ministeries van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, ‘Persmededeling van Viceminister-President Ingrid Lieten Vlaams Minister van innovatie, overheidsinvesteringen, media en armoedebestrijding’, 11 January 2013,

aims to help parents, youth workers, teachers, library staff, socio-cultural workers and the public at large to develop critical skills regarding the media and the internet.<sup>208</sup> In 2017, the focus was on the countering of ‘fake news’. A digital dossier, containing multiple articles related to ‘news and information literacy’, was therefore created.<sup>209</sup> The dossier covered articles ranging from ‘how to recognize misleading and wrong articles’<sup>210</sup> to ‘news on snapchat: what does the youth think?’.<sup>211</sup> In light of this, Sven Gatz stated: ‘we will not invent warm water, but this is a beginning. Over time, concrete measures will have to be developed for the public at large’.<sup>212</sup>

On 31 January 2018, Sven Gatz announced that his next ‘burgerkabinet’, which aims at involving citizens in the making of policy recommendations through debates, would focus on ‘fake news’.<sup>213</sup> Until 7 April 2018, citizens were able to share ideas on a platform about how they would like to be informed by the media. It led to 171 ideas, 59 reactions and 38 votes.<sup>214</sup> Three different online panels were organised, involving 55 citizens. On 21 April, a ‘real’ discussion, with more than 50 citizens, took place in the Flemish Parliament in order to issue policy recommendations for the coming year.

## 5.2 The news media’s responses

### 5.2.1 Raising awareness

Unlike the Netherlands<sup>215</sup> and France<sup>216</sup>, Belgian news media seem reluctant to develop any future ‘fact-checking collaboration’ with social media sites. In February 2017 and in light of the French *Crosscheck* initiative, Daniel van Wylick, president of LA PRESSE.be stated: ‘if this cleaning is done in order to profit the image of Facebook and Google, is it our task to do

---

<<https://cjsm.be/media/sites/cjsm.media/files/public/pb-minister-van-media-zet-nieuwe-jaar-mediawijs-in20130111.pdf> >

<sup>208</sup> Vlaamse Regering, ‘Sven Gatz Minister van Cultuur, Media, Jeugd en Brussel’, 13 March 2015 <<https://cjsm.be/media/sites/cjsm.media/files/public/20150311-persbericht-kenniscentrum-mediawijsheid.pdf> >

<sup>209</sup> Mediawijs, ‘Dossier: Nieuws- en Informatiegeletterdheid’ (2017) <<https://mediawijs.be/dossiers/dossier-nieuws-en-informatiegeletterdheid> >

<sup>210</sup> Mediawijs, ‘Hoe herken je misleidende en foutieve informatie’ (10 October 2017) <<https://mediawijs.be/dossiers/dossier-nieuws-en-informatiegeletterdheid/hoe-herken-je-misleidende-en-foutieve-informatie> >

<sup>211</sup> Mediawijs, ‘Nieuws op Snapchat: Wat denken jongeren?’ (2017) <<https://mediawijs.be/dossiers/dossier-nieuws-en-informatiegeletterdheid/nieuws-snapchat-wat-denken-jongeren> >

<sup>212</sup> Ludwig De Wolf, ‘Sven Gatz steunt Kenniscentrum Mediawijsheid in strijd tegen Fake news’ VRT NWS (10 March 2017) <[https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2017/03/10/sven\\_gatz\\_steuntkenniscentrummediawijsheidinstrijdtegenfakenews-1-2914299/](https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2017/03/10/sven_gatz_steuntkenniscentrummediawijsheidinstrijdtegenfakenews-1-2914299/) >

<sup>213</sup> Open VLD, ‘Sven Gatz lanceert het 4<sup>e</sup> Burgerkabinet’ (31 January 2018) <<http://www.openvld.be/?type=nieuws&id=1&pageid=96598> >

<sup>214</sup> Burgerkabinet, ‘Hoe wordt jij graag geïnformeerd? Wat vindt je daar belangrijk bij?’ (2018) <<https://www.burgerkabinet.be/burgerkabinet-media/> >

<sup>215</sup> See the initiative from Nu.nl: Gert-Jaap Hoekman, ‘Redactieblog: Waarom Nu.nl helpt met factchecken op Facebook’ (2 March 2017) <<https://www.nu.nl/blog/4509129/redactieblog-waarom-nu-nl-helpt-met-factchecken-facebook.html> >

<sup>216</sup> Reuters, ‘Facebook, Google join drive against Fake News in France’, 6 February 2017, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-facebook/facebook-google-join-drive-against-fake-news-in-france-idUSKBN15L0QU> >

it? Don't lose sight that they are our first competitors in terms of advertisement space as well as free content'.<sup>217</sup>

Most news media have, until now, mainly focused on creating awareness and educating people to distinguish between 'fake' and 'real' news. In November 2016, *De Standaard* published an article in which the different types of 'fake news' were outlined.<sup>218</sup> In October 2017, *RTBF.be* published an article in which five tips were given to avoid 'fake news'.<sup>219</sup> In December 2017, *De Wereld Morgen* published an analysis in which the different underlying concepts behind 'fake news' were explained.<sup>220</sup> This analysis was based on results of the 'information disorder report',<sup>221</sup> issued by the Council of Europe (discussed in Section 4.2, above).

Different events were also organized in order to raise awareness about the phenomenon 'fake news'. Example of such events was the 'Media Fast Forward' conference, organised on 5 December 2017 by *VRT* in collaboration with *VAR* and *Bozar*, which is the Centre for Fine Arts (a cultural venue).<sup>222</sup> On 26 April 2017, *VRT NWS* organized in collaboration with *Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)* the event, 'fake news', in which journalists, scientists and social media experts discussed the issue.<sup>223</sup>

### **5.2.2 Quality labels**

In February 2017, Muriel Hanot, General Secretary of the Council of Journalistic Ethics, called for the creation of a 'quality label'. Such a label would allow Belgian media to indicate which sites are subject to the decisions of the Council, which would demonstrate their respect for ethical journalism.<sup>224</sup> In April 2018, Reporters without Borders launched, in collaboration with France Presse (AFP), the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and the Global Editors Network (GEN), a project called the 'Journalism Trust Initiative' aimed at promoting trust and transparency in the media through the adoption of a certification process.<sup>225</sup> In order to do

---

<sup>217</sup> Dominique Delhalle, 'Des médias s'associent avec Facebook et Google pour chasser les fausses infos' *RTBF.be* (8 February 2017) <[https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail\\_des-media-verifient-des-informations-que-propagent-facebook-et-google?id=9524988](https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail_des-media-verifient-des-informations-que-propagent-facebook-et-google?id=9524988)>

<sup>218</sup> De Standaard, 'De betere fictie' (29 November 2016) <[http://m.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20161128\\_02597453?shareId=4f7ece98b4ca3173ccd59b679](http://m.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20161128_02597453?shareId=4f7ece98b4ca3173ccd59b679)>

<sup>219</sup> Tom Salbeth, 'Cinq conseils pour éviter les fake news' *RTBF.be* (18 October 2017) <[https://www.rtbf.be/info/societe/onpdp/detail\\_5-conseils-pour-eviter-les-fake-news?id=9740049](https://www.rtbf.be/info/societe/onpdp/detail_5-conseils-pour-eviter-les-fake-news?id=9740049)>

<sup>220</sup> Thomas Decreus, 'Analyse -Wat we maar niet willen begrijpen over Fake News' *De Wereld Morgen* (7 December 2017) <<http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2017/12/07/wat-we-maar-niet-willen-begrijpen-over-fake-news>>

<sup>221</sup> Council of Europe, 'Information Disorder', DGI (2017) 09, 27 September 2017, <<https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/PREMS-162317-GBR-2018-Report-désinformation-1.pdf?x21951>>

<sup>222</sup> See : <https://www.mediafastforward.be/> where you can also watch all the presentations

<sup>223</sup> *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, 'Debat : Fake News' (26 April 2017) <[www.vub.ac.be/events/2017/vrt-nws-vub-fake-news](http://www.vub.ac.be/events/2017/vrt-nws-vub-fake-news)>

<sup>224</sup> Le Vif, 'Les médias à l'assaut des « Fake News »' (3 February 2017) <[www.levif.be/actualite/international/les-medias-a-l-assaut-des-fake-news/article-normal-608767.html](http://www.levif.be/actualite/international/les-medias-a-l-assaut-des-fake-news/article-normal-608767.html)>

<sup>225</sup> Reporters without Borders, 'RSF and its partners unveil the Journalism Trust Initiative to combat Disinformation' (3 April 2018) <<https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-and-its-partners-unveil-journalism-trust-initiative-combat-disinformation>>

so, a set of standards will be developed, which will focus on elements such as transparency, independence, media ownership, sources of revenues and compliance with ethical norms.<sup>226</sup> In case a media actor satisfies these different indicators, it will receive a public label.<sup>227</sup> The 'labelled' actors will, in turn, receive benefits: have better visibility, a greater reach and more advertising sales through preferential algorithmic indexation in search engines and social media platforms.<sup>228</sup>

### **5.2.3 Fact-checking of videos**

Veriflix is an initiative from Roularta Media group, in collaboration with KU Leuven University and the start-up, Look Live Media.<sup>229</sup> It offers a set of tools in order for news media organisations to counter 'fake news', stemming from user-generated videos, through artificial intelligence.<sup>230</sup> This will permit publishers to 'distribute authentic, fact-checked, quality content related to online news stories'.<sup>231</sup> In December 2017, Google decided to support this project with EUR 400,000.<sup>232</sup>

## **5.2 Civil society's responses to 'fake news'**

Belgian civil society organisations have also responded to the issue. As mentioned earlier, in 2017, the Flemish media literacy centre, Mediawijs, focused on educating people to engage more critically with 'fake news'.<sup>233</sup> Furthermore, every year, a media-education project called 'news in the class' is organized. This is an initiative by Vlaamse Nieuwsmedia and the Flemish government and it now involves collaboration between Mediawijs, Vlaamse Nieuwsmedia, Ppress and Media.21.<sup>234</sup> It aims to stimulate students to consult and interpret news critically.<sup>235</sup> Teachers are provided with 'educational packages', one of which recently concerned the countering of 'fake news'.<sup>236</sup> Through such packages, students learn about the

---

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> RTBF.be, 'Reporters sans frontières crée un dispositif de lutte contre les fake news' (4 April 2018) <[https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail\\_reporters-sans-frontieres-cree-un-dispositif-de-lutte-contre-les-fake-news?id=9884139](https://www.rtbf.be/info/medias/detail_reporters-sans-frontieres-cree-un-dispositif-de-lutte-contre-les-fake-news?id=9884139)>

<sup>228</sup> Reporters without Borders, 'RSF and its partners unveil the Journalism Trust Initiative to combat Disinformation' (3 April 2018) <<https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-and-its-partners-unveil-journalism-trust-initiative-combat-disinformation>>

<sup>229</sup> Innovation Fund, Veriflix, <<https://digitalnewsinitiative.com/dni-projects/veriflix-intelligently-managing-user-generated-content-round-4/>>

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Knack.be, 'Google geeft Roularta 400.000 euro om fake news te detecteren' (18 December 2017) <<http://datanews.knack.be/ict/google-geeft-roularta-400-000-euro-om-fake-news-te-detecteren/article-normal-940857.html>>

<sup>233</sup> Mediawijs, 'Dossier: Nieuws- en Informatiegeletterdheid' (2017) <<https://mediawijs.be/dossiers/dossier-nieuws-en-informatiegeletterdheid>>

<sup>234</sup> Nieuws in de Klas, 'Nieuws in de klas. Jouw afspraak met het nieuws!', <<https://www.nieuwsindeklas.be/contact/>>

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Nieuws in de klas, 'Fake news? What's in a name' (2017) <[https://www.nieuwsindeklas.be/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Fake-News\\_lesmap.pdf](https://www.nieuwsindeklas.be/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Fake-News_lesmap.pdf)>; Mediawijs, 'Fake News? What's in a name' (2017) <[https://mediawijs.be/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/fake\\_news\\_-\\_difference\\_day\\_1.pdf](https://mediawijs.be/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/fake_news_-_difference_day_1.pdf)>



‘filter bubble’ and how to discern false and misleading news.<sup>237</sup> Similar initiatives have also been launched in Wallonia, by the Superior Council for Media Education.<sup>238</sup> On 18 October 2017, the Council organized the ‘day of media education’, which started with a debate around ‘fake news’.<sup>239</sup>

To mark World Press Freedom Day, on 3 May 2017, the Bozar hosted ‘Difference Day’. Four debates were organised around the theme ‘fake news’. Students had the opportunity to ‘speeddate’ with Dutch and French-speaking media experts.<sup>240</sup> The initiators of this event were, *inter alia*, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and Erasmus Hogeschool Brussels (EHB).<sup>241</sup>

A ‘march for science’, which is a US-based initiative, took place on 22 March 2017. The message was simple: more focus on research and less on alternative facts and fake news.<sup>242</sup> Another response to ‘fake news’ came from ‘EU Disinfo Lab’,<sup>243</sup> an international NGO co-founded by Nicolas Vanderbiest, who played a crucial role in the “Macronleaks”.<sup>244</sup> The NGO’s aim is to fight disinformation by providing scientific support to civil society actors fighting disinformation.<sup>245</sup> It does so by using its own methodology, called the ‘Social Network Analysis’. It monitored the influence of ‘fake news’ in the latest French<sup>246</sup> and Italian elections.<sup>247</sup> Together with the Atlantic Council, a US-based Council for International Affairs, it has launched a platform concerned with the issue of disinformation. This platform is called the ‘the Transatlantic Forum on Disinformation’ and it ‘gathers experts and organisations throughout the Western world, letting them exchange best practices, cooperate and develop new approaches to countering disinformation’.<sup>248</sup>

The ‘Sleeping Giants’ is another, yet older, initiative in response to ‘fake news’. It consists of ‘naming and shaming’ brands that are advertised on sites that spread ‘fake news’, such as *Breitbart News Network*.<sup>249</sup> The movement originated from the US, but citizens worldwide have joined the movement. In order to make advertisers aware of their presence on

---

<sup>237</sup> Vlaamse Nieuwsmedia, ‘Nieuws in de klas: Fake News op Difference Day’ (2017) <<https://www.vlaamsnieuwsmedia.be/newsroom/2017/04/nieuws-in-de-klas-fake-news-op-difference-day>>

<sup>238</sup> Conseil Supérieur de l’éducation aux médias, ‘quinzaine de l’éducation aux médias’, <[www.csem.be/outils/operations/la\\_quinzaine\\_de\\_leducation\\_aux\\_medias](http://www.csem.be/outils/operations/la_quinzaine_de_leducation_aux_medias)>

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Vlaamse Nieuwsmedia, ‘Nieuws in de klas: Fake News op Difference Day’ (2017) <<https://www.vlaamsnieuwsmedia.be/newsroom/2017/04/nieuws-in-de-klas-fake-news-op-difference-day>>

<sup>241</sup> Difference Day, <[www.differenceday.com/](http://www.differenceday.com/)>; European Commission, ‘Difference Day – ‘The truth about fake news’ (3 May 2017) <<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/difference-day-truth-about-fake-news>>

<sup>242</sup> De Morgen.be, ‘March for Science in Brussels: “Wetenschap staat onder druk door Fake News” (22 April 2017) <<https://www.demorgen.be/wetenschap/march-for-science-in-brussel-wetenschap-staat-onder-druk-door-fake-news-b77e4184/>>

<sup>243</sup> EU Disinfo Lab should not be confused with EUvsDisinfo

<sup>244</sup> EU Disinfo Lab, <<http://disinfo.eu/aboutus/>>

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> EU Disinfo Lab, ‘projects – French Elections monitoring’, <<http://disinfo.eu/projects/#italian-elections>>

<sup>247</sup> EU Disinfo Lab, ‘projects – Italian Elections monitoring’, <<http://disinfo.eu/projects/#italian-elections>>

<sup>248</sup> <http://disinfo.eu/aboutus/>

<sup>249</sup> Gavin Heaton, ‘Sleeping Giants take on Fake News and Brands – Is your Brand Ready?’ Constellation Research (10 January 2017) <<https://www.constellationr.com/sleeping-giants-take-fake-news-and-brands-your-brand-ready>>

‘misleading’ sites, the Sleeping giants make screenshots of the ads at issue and put these on Twitter. The post is accompanied by the tag @slpng\_giants. This practice results in less advertisement revenues for fraudulent websites, in turn resulting in less financial resources to promulgate ‘fake news’. In March 2017, RTL info announced that three Belgian ‘sleeping giants’ actively took part in this project.<sup>250</sup>

### **5.3 Collaboration with internet companies**

Internet companies, such as Facebook, Twitter and Google, have been put under serious pressure to counter ‘fake news’. Each of them has launched various initiatives. These include the development of tools aimed at fact-checking,<sup>251</sup> credibility rating,<sup>252</sup> flagging or contextualizing<sup>253</sup>.<sup>254</sup> All these measures could be classified as short-term responses in the sense of the High-Level Expert Group report.

In March 2018, Minister Jean-Claude Marcourt clarified that there is no collaboration with internet giants in the strict sense. The only forms of collaboration that have taken place are ‘funding collaborations’, where Google has financed the launch of Belgian media projects.<sup>255</sup>

## **6. Conclusion**

This case study has discussed the emergence and presence of ‘fake news’ in Belgium, the reasons behind it and the dangers it represents for society. It also outlines the measures that Belgian actors have already taken to counter the issue. As was shown in the 2018 Reuters Report, the level of trust towards traditional media is still considerably high. Traditional media are trusted significantly more than social media. The report indicates that Belgians are aware of the presence of ‘fake news’ and are also concerned about it, more particularly about ‘stories in which facts are distorted in order to achieve certain goals’.<sup>256</sup>

---

<sup>250</sup> Mathieu Tamigniau, ‘Des Belges s’organisent pour lutter à leur manière contre les ‘fake news’ qui influencent l’opinion publique : voici leur stratégie’ RTLInfo.be (13 March 2017) <<https://www.rtl.be/info/vous/temoignages/des-belges-s-organisent-pour-lutter-a-leur-maniere-contre-les-fake-news-qui-influencent-l-opinion-publique-voici-leur-strategie-899208.aspx> >

<sup>251</sup> T. McGonagle et Al., ‘Inventarisatie methodes om “nepnieuws” tegen te gaan’, 25 April 2018, Section 4.2.; Google News Lab website: <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/training/>

<sup>252</sup> T. McGonagle et Al., ‘Inventarisatie methodes om “nepnieuws” tegen te gaan’, 25 April 2018, Section 4.4.2.1.; Sheera Frenkel and Sapna Maheshwari, ‘Facebook to let users rank credibility of News’ The New York Times (19 January 2018) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/19/technology/facebook-news-feed.html> >

<sup>253</sup> T. McGonagle et Al., ‘Inventarisatie methodes om “nepnieuws” tegen te gaan’, 25 April 2018, Section 4.3.1.

<sup>254</sup> See the Report of the High Level Expert Group as it gives an overview of various measures taken by different IT companies: European Commission, A multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation: Report of the Independent High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, March 2018, p. 14-18. <<https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6ef4df8b-4cea-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en%20%3E> >

<sup>255</sup> Alain Onkelinx, ‘La lutte contre les Fake News’ AlainOnkelinx.be (19 March 2018) <[www.alainonkelinx.be/lutte-contre-fake-news-2/](http://www.alainonkelinx.be/lutte-contre-fake-news-2/) >

<sup>256</sup> I. Picone and R. Vandenplas, ‘Policy Brief #16 Ook Vlaming maakt zich zorgen over Fake News’, 14 June 2018, p. 3 <<http://smit.vub.ac.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/POLICY-BRIEF16-1.pdf> > (only available in Dutch).

In light of this concern, Belgium should not overlook the issue of politicians increasingly using the term ‘fake news’ to discredit news media. As was shown throughout this case study, Belgian politicians have the tendency to by-pass traditional media, which can contribute to the emergence of ‘fake news’. Their messages are ‘liked’, ‘commented’ and ‘shared’ by their audience, which results in statements taking the form of ‘news’. As was shown in the Whyte Corporate Affairs Report, Belgians trust their ‘peers’ above all other actors. This might be a factor explaining why these social media posts, stemming from politicians, have the power to influence the public opinion. This could have an impact on electoral votes.

This case study has also shown that the term ‘fake news’ presents many facets. It is used as an umbrella term to cover a wide range of content, serving multiple purposes. The term is both used in relation to ‘untrue’ news, stemming from quality journalists, as well as intentionally misleading articles, such as ‘clickbait’ practices. Given the vagueness of the term ‘fake news’, it is submitted that ‘disinformation’ is a more appropriate term to use. Different academics have indicated that usage of the term ‘fake news’ results in a lack of trust towards professional journalists. The European High Level Group of Experts and the Reuters Report suggested that it would be more appropriate to abandon the term ‘fake news’ and use the term ‘disinformation’ instead. This term is restricted to ‘false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit’.<sup>257</sup> Citing a lack of harmful intention, satire and parody are thereby excluded from its scope. The Council of Europe’s study further explained the need for a clear distinction between ‘mis-, dis- and mal-information’ in order to counter these types of speech appropriately.

Furthermore, the 2018 Reuters report has made clear that Belgians could perform better in terms of media literacy. This stands in great contrast with the numerous Belgian measures that were aimed at increasing media literacy. It may therefore be time to review, ameliorate or build further on the existing measures. Belgians’ media literacy level might have an influence on the credibility of their responses regarding their ‘exposure to fake news’ (a low exposure rate). As was pointed out by the Reuters report, ‘exposure relies on people’s ability to correctly identify information that has been deliberately designed to mislead’.<sup>258</sup> Media literacy helps to identify such (dis)information, which might indicate that Belgian news consumers are confronted with disinformation much more often than they in fact realise.

Concerning the responses, Minister Jean-Claude Marcourt has made clear that the international nature of social media platforms calls for European and international responses to the problem of ‘fake news’. More transparency from these platforms, about their underlying algorithms and news-selection would therefore be very welcome. Enhancing transparency was one of the long-term measures proposed by the European High-Level Expert Group. However, as was made clear by this expert group, individual Member States should complement EU measures. Both short and long-term actions should be developed.

---

<sup>257</sup> European Commission, A multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation: Report of the Independent High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, March 2018, p. 35.

<sup>258</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2018, p. 38, < <http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf?x89475> >

Importantly, the report discourages the adoption of regulatory measures. These endanger individuals' right to freedom of expression and, ultimately, democracy.

Unlike France and Germany, Belgium currently does not seem inclined to adopt legislative measures regarding 'fake news'. It has, until now, mostly responded to the problem through educational projects and by raising awareness. The efficiency of these projects was however not mirrored in the latest Reuters report, which indicated that Belgians scored lower than average in terms of media literacy. It is therefore important for those educational projects to not merely discuss 'fake news' on a superficial basis. The media's underlying structure should be explained, as well as terms such as 'pluralism', 'media independence' and 'democracy'. Moreover, these measures should reach all age categories, as disinformation affects everyone.

The importance of media literacy should not be overlooked. It is a promising tool with long-term effects. Such long-term effects can be illustrated by the Chinese proverb, which states: 'give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime'. However, as was shown by the Reuters report, more media literacy might lead to less trust in the media.<sup>259</sup> Trust in the media and media literacy are two distinct elements, which therefore need individual responses. Furthermore, since 'disinformation' is not restricted to the digital environment, educational responses should also pay attention to 'offline' news sources.<sup>260</sup>

Having regard to the forthcoming elections in Belgium and to the fact that Belgian politicians are increasingly making use of social media to reach their audience, short term measures should also be adopted. Taking into account the multiple 'facets' of fake news, such short-term responses should best be adopted by a wide variety of actors, including journalists, civil society organisations and internet intermediaries. Moreover, in order to avoid a fragmented approach, short-term solutions should preferably be taken at both Federal level and Regional levels.

---

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.