

## HOW DOES MY PERSONALIZED NEWSFEED FUNCTION?

Digital news consumption in Flanders is still on the rise. According to [imec.digimeter 2020](#), in 2020 65% (an increase of 3% compared to 2019) of the Flemish people consumed news via their computer and 74% (+9%) via their smartphone. For the first time, more Flemish people consult apps of local news brands daily than via the paper version. 63% of the Flemish people and even 83% of the young people use social media for news consumption. Social media are being less used as a

primary source of news, but function more as a sounding board for the processing of news socially.

With the increase of digital news consumption, news algorithms have also made their way into the media sector. In the past, these algorithms were mainly used by large tech platforms such as Facebook, Netflix or Google, but more and more news organisations apply them to personalise their news offer.

In this brAinfood, you will find out more about **algorithmic news selection**, how this **works** and how you can maintain more **control** over your newsfeed.



### HOW DOES A NEWS FEED FUNCTION?



#### General news selection

Websites use browser cookies, IP addresses and other tools to keep track of various statistics about you (e.g. location data, which articles/pages you visited and how much time you spent on them). This is used to analyse which articles or topics are **popular** and thus generate **many visitors**. This information is interesting for **advertisers**.



#### Personalized news selection

When you are logged into a website, the collected information is associated with **your personal account**. Articles that match your profile will appear on the home page, or the website will add a personalised **'for you' section**. The articles that you then see are filtered through an **algorithmic ranking system** that differs from website to website and is constantly updated. It is therefore difficult to know exactly how it works. Some **factors** that determine the personalised relevance score of an article, and thus its visibility to the reader, are: the subject, the amount of interaction, the time and who posted the article.



## WHY BE CAUTIOUS WITH ALGORITHMIC SELECTION?

In a **democratic society**, the **media** inform citizens and expose different viewpoints on political issues. This allows citizens to form their **own opinion** and to take part in democratic decision-making processes.

**Algorithmic news selection** can play a **disruptive role** in this, for example, when media prioritise the generation of clicks and likes (quantity) rather than the quality of the news.

Below, we explain three terms that may be the **result** of algorithmic news selection:



1. A **filter bubble** is created when you visit a website or open an app and you get presented with **different news items** than other users. The service is adapted to your **personal preferences** that you yourself have communicated to the medium or that the website/app derives from **your surfing behaviour**. In a filter bubble, news algorithms isolate you from information and perspectives in which you have not (yet) shown an interest, which also means that you miss out on certain information.



2. The **echo chamber effect** occurs when you are overexposed to news that you like or agree with, which **distorts your perception of reality**. While a filter bubble is the result of an algorithm, an echo chamber refers to an **environment** in which you only see or hear information and/or beliefs that match your own. This can be online (e.g. a chat group on WhatsApp) or offline (e.g. in a café). Algorithms can recommend certain information, allowing you to interact with a group of 'like-minded people'.



3. The **uncritical acceptance of information** when it reinforces an existing **belief or attitude**, even when presented with contradictory evidence, can be seen as **confirmation bias**. News or opinions that contradict the information are ignored or dismissed as 'fake news'. Just the feeling that you are right is enough to stop your pursuit of new/other knowledge/information.



## HOW CAN YOU MAINTAIN CONTROL OVER YOUR NEWSFEED?

### Some general tips for avoiding personalisation:

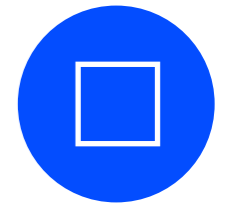
- Add an **ad blocking software** as an extension to your web browser.
- Do not only read **various news websites and blogs**, but also ones that give a different perspective on the information.
- Use an **incognito browser**, delete your **search history** and **stay logged out** if possible, so you do not feed your profile with every click.
- Always look at the **general feed** as well, even if a personalised feed is presented to you.

### Some tips for personalising your feed more consciously:

- Indicate your preferences in the **settings** of the platform (e.g. with Facebook's 'See First' you can determine the order of the posts in your feed). You can also give **feedback** by indicating whether the content interested you or not.
- Indicate which information you do or do not want to see by installing specific **browser plug-ins** (e.g. [Remove All Politics From Facebook](#) of Google Chrome and [Social Fixer](#) of Mozilla Firefox).
- Avoid selection algorithms by using **RSS feeds** that contain links and previews of articles from your favourite (news) sites or blogs. You can still click on the items and go to the (news) site or blog in question if you want to read more.
- Make use of **specific applications and newsletters** that help you
  - to get out of your filter bubble by juxtaposing news items with different or contradictory perspectives (bv. [AllSides](#)).
  - to visualise biases in your reading habits, but also for instance how diverse your news is (e.g. [Read Across The Aisle](#)).

## CONCLUSION

With these tips, you can maintain control over your newsfeed. In this way, you will be more aware of any filter bubbles you might find yourself in, in how far the echo chamber effect and confirmation bias are present in your news consumption. This allows you to stay informed in a diverse way. Still, some websites don't take the risks of algorithmic news selection into account and give no or little options for control to you as a user. For example, by recommending 'popular' articles by default. **Always pay attention and critically evaluate the information you read in your newsfeed.**



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