

Country fact sheet

Belgium



Context

In Belgium, there is no regular debate on the question of news deserts, but instead discussions and debates exist on the **viability of local news organisations**, the **diversity and quality of local news**, or the way young people consume local news.

Research shows that some regions and provinces, especially in the South of the country do not benefit from the same offer in terms of numbers of news outlets and coverage by journalists, in particular because they are **less densely populated** or **far from the political, cultural and economic epicentres**.

There is **no legal definition of local and community media**, except a **legal framework for the local television stations** in the French and Flemish communities (12 and 10 outlets respectively).



The most common media formats for local media in Belgium are **local radio stations**



Belgian newspapers preserve the pulse

The Flemish Media Regulator lists **231 local radio stations** or local branches of national ones. In French-speaking Belgium, there are currently 60 web radio outlets and 85 independent radio stations, PSM (*RTBF*) local networks and 14 radio outlets organised in a network.

The print sector, despite a global decline in the number of local editions/titles, **remains a non-substitutable player** due to the high number of journalists and freelancers who cover communities in rural and urban areas.

A look into the market concentration

Regarding ownership concentration, the situation **depends on the media format**.

There are two newspaper publishers in Flanders (*DPG* and *Mediahuis*) and two in the French-speaking Community (*Rosiel* and *IPM*): a **duopoly market in each of the two language communities** is taking place, also regarding the local titles.

The **situation is more contrasted for radio and television**, where there are more public or semi-public players. The magazine market, which publishes few local titles, is the most diversified sector in terms of ownership concentration.



Extra difficulties faced by local journalists

Local journalists may encounter distinct pressures or exertions of influence stemming from their **geographical closeness** and **relationships with some of their sources**.

These pressures typically manifest in subtle forms such as remarks, cautions, and observations, rather than overt coercion.



Some local media, among others in the daily press, pay their staff below the average of other players in the market, and potentially with average salaries below the national average in the journalism market.



Editorial independence under review

In terms of legal limitations to direct and indirect ownership control, **audio-visual media are more regulated** than other legacy media such as newspapers and magazines. The media authority's remit extends over local TV and radio stations.

Criteria for state subsidies are defined, and direct and indirect subsidies are distributed to all the news media -including local ones- both in a fair and transparent manner.

Legal texts say nearly nothing about the criteria of **distribution of state advertising**, or their fairness. Confidential data shows that there are no precise rules regarding state advertising. Moreover, the amounts and their breakdown lack transparency and consideration.



More efforts needed for social inclusiveness

A recent study from the Audio-visual Council (CSA) highlights the **lack of visibility of people from diverse backgrounds in audio-visual programmes**. This representation only increased by 1% between 2011 and 2021, and even showed a downward trend between 2017 and 2021. In Flanders, a study pointed out that the ethnic diversity of actors and sources was not sufficient in any of the news brands under study.

Ethnic minorities are often portrayed in traditional roles and contexts in news stories about national politics and law. The PSM newscast showed more ethnic minorities both as actor and as source than the commercial news broadcasters. Last, there is **no regular news or programmes in minority languages in Belgian PSMs**.

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