



Belgium-Luxembourg
Digital Media and
Disinformation Observatory

Who is susceptible to (political) disinformation? Evidence from Flanders, Belgium

Executive summary of deliverable 3.2.1.

Jonas LEFEVERE, Trisha MEYER



This project has received funding from the European Union under Grant Agreement number INEA/CEF/ICT/A2020/2394296. This report reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

EDMO BELUX is the Belgian and Luxembourgish hub for research on digital media and disinformation (EDMO BELUX). It brings together an experienced and extensive network of fact-checkers, media, disinformation analysts, media literacy organisations and academics to detect, analyse and expose emerging harmful disinformation campaigns. Through rapid alerts in the network, fact checks and investigative reporting will reach first responders to disinformation (media, civil society, government) in order to minimize the impact of disinformation campaigns. In addition, through media literacy campaigns, EDMO BELUX will raise awareness and build resilience among citizens and media to combat disinformation. Finally, the hub will embed its disinformation monitoring, analysis and awareness into a multidisciplinary research framework on the impact of disinformation and platform responses on democratic processes.

Within EDMO BELUX, the research pillar of the hub aims at assessing the impact of disinformation and disinformation responses.

Which citizens are most susceptible to disinformation that is spread online? In this report, we investigate patterns of susceptibility to disinformation amongst citizens from Flanders, the largest region of Belgium. First, we consider to what extent citizens' socio-demographic characteristics and socio-political attitudes help us understand which citizens are more (or less) likely to believe false claims. Second, we zoom in on the effect of exposure to disinformation online: to what extent does exposure to disinformation online lead citizens to increasingly believe these false claims? Our findings indicate that especially citizens who get their information through online channels such as news aggregators tend to have both higher exposure to, and belief in, disinformation. Relatedly, younger citizens tend to attribute greater credibility to disinformation, as do citizens that self-position on the right of the political spectrum. We also find strong evidence that those citizens who believe general conspiracy theories, have a high propensity to also fall for specific disinformation campaigns. Moreover, our experimental evidence finds that exposure to social media messages containing disinformation increases citizens' belief in the disinformation, which is worrisome. We also demonstrate that warning messages implemented by social media platforms only partially mitigate the impact of disinformation campaigns.