

Plugging into Timor-Leste's digital ecosystem: Preparing for the nation's first submarine internet cable

About the research

Timor-Leste is on the verge of significant changes to its communications, culture, and economy – with high-speed internet to be available for the first time with the introduction of the Timor-Leste Submarine Cable (TLSSC) scheduled to go live in mid-2025^[1]. Internet access to date has been patchy, low-speed, and expensive.

This research sets out to understand how Timorese media practitioners, consumers, and stakeholders are conceptualising and preparing for increased digital connectivity. It also looks to the Pacific region to find out what lessons can be learned from countries that gained submarine cable connectivity in recent years. The research explores digital transformation through the lenses of mis- and disinformation, digital safety, digital literacy, and media trust. Study findings inform recommendations for how international and local partners can work alongside Timorese media professionals to explore imminent digital opportunities and manage anticipated challenges.

Methodology

The study draws from ABC International Development's (ABCID) research into the **State of the Media: Timor-Leste**, conducted in late 2023 in collaboration with The Asia Foundation. This involved a review of 120 institutional documents and 45 semi-structured in-person interviews with media practitioners across mainstream, government, and community media in Timor-Leste.

To expand on findings, and gain a regional perspective, a further 90 documents and websites were reviewed in mid-2024 to understand relevant existing research in Timor-Leste and the Pacific Island region. Data was validated with the Timor-Leste Press Council in November 2024. Researchers from Timor-Leste, Australia, Solomon Islands, and Tonga contributed to this study.



^[1] Based on field-data collected from Secretary of State for Social Communication (SECOMS).

1. Plugging into opportunities and challenges

Respondents were hopeful that increased digital connectivity would bring lower data costs and greater accessibility. Capacity to grow audiences and find new online revenue streams were noted potential benefits. Further to this, with Timorese media highly centralised in the capital of Dili, it was anticipated that increased connectivity would allow greater collaboration between urban and rural/regional based media practitioners. There were also aspirations that Timor-Leste would be able to grow its presence globally and within the ASEAN region with greater digital connectivity.

However, respondents noted that the media workforce did not yet have the required skills and expertise to both apply and maintain the systems and equipment associated with high-speed internet. Limitations in media literacy were described as already being a challenge when confronting current levels of mis- and disinformation; it is anticipated that the importance of this will only increase as internet access expands. Respondents also mentioned that with heightened connectivity, stronger cybersecurity, cybercrime, and data protection laws will be required, accompanied by systems and skills to manage them.

2. 'Wait and see' approach to navigating impacts

Research indicates that Timorese media, and broader society, have largely adopted a 'wait and see' approach to navigating impacts of increased internet connectivity. At the time of data collection (August 2024), discussion of the submarine cable did not appear in public documents nor was it raised without prompting by research respondents. There was little demonstrated institutional-level awareness of how better connectivity would impact the media sector and communities more broadly.

3. Digital evolution before revolution

In navigating slow and unreliable internet, many of Timor-Leste's young and increasingly urban population have developed creative and determined approaches to producing and accessing content online. Grassroots online journalism websites have emerged and have a strong track record for feature and investigative reporting. Independent podcasts and livestreaming are new features of the media landscape, while traditional media outlets have also been using online platforms for dissemination and engagement.

Despite challenges relating to online safety and mis- or disinformation, research shows that young people are largely considerate and cautious in their online interactions, accounting for community and cultural norms.

Several trainings and initiatives from the national government, the Timor-Leste Press Council, and international and local NGOs have also occurred over recent years to support digital literacy and the development of skills relating to areas such as fact-checking and online journalism.

4. Overseas research dominates

Research addressing digital issues in Timor-Leste, and more broadly across the Pacific, has primarily been produced, or supported and driven, by international entities. Outputs produced by Timorese individuals or organisations were usually brief, often comprising of training or conference presentations. This indicates a structural power imbalance in research and analysis; this is also affirmed in the rare examples of in-depth academic interrogations, which were also carried out by international researchers or entities.

5. Varying understandings of mis- and disinformation discussion

There was a significant disconnect between how international and Timorese stakeholders defined and discussed concepts relating to mis- and disinformation, with Timorese referring to these concepts within a broader ecosystem of internet-related challenges.

Timorese respondents did not often use the terms misinformation and disinformation without prompting, instead preferring 'hoax' (also common in Indonesia) as a catch-all term for false, fabricated, or untrue information. Other terms that were raised in the same discussions were *trata malu* (abuse and insult) and *diskursu odu* (hate speech).

Similar challenges exist in finding a clear definition of digital literacy which is frequently invoked as the solution or mitigation for mis- and disinformation, and digital safety challenges. Understanding of digital literacy varies across contexts relating to media training, school education, financial digital literacy, and academic research.

There is potential for Timorese and international collaborators to misconstrue each other when working on initiatives to address these key issues due to lack of common understanding of terms.

6. Tapping into regional knowledge

Drawing on documented experiences faced by Pacific Island Countries using undersea internet cables, it was found that that cable connectivity alone did not guarantee cost-effective and sustainable digital access by their communities.

Countries such as Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea have reportedly seen little change in data pricing following cable connection. This has been, in part, due to high costs accrued to fund cables effecting consumer pricing.

Fast internet via 5G remains the exception in the Pacific region, with countries prioritising 4G and 3G uptake as more realistic and compatible with existing digital ecosystems. Pacific experiences have also shown that while cables are a crucial part of the 'first mile' of connectivity, they do not close digital divides caused by 'middle' and 'last mile' connectivity gaps.

7. Online gender-based violence prevention: Gap in action?

No evidence was found of research or programmatic initiatives addressing online gender-based violence (OGBV) experienced by media workers in Timor-Leste. However, respondents flagged OGBV as a significant issue troubling women journalists in particular, deriving from patriarchal societal norms.

Research in neighbouring Indonesia and Pacific Islands Countries affirms that OGBV is a significant issue regionally, warranting further investigation of this issue in Timor-Leste amid anticipated increased connectivity.

Key Recommendations

Cumulatively, this research points to the need for increasing efforts to ensure knowledge gaps around the submarine cable are addressed, and that definitions and analyses of topics such as mis- and disinformation, and digital literacy, are developed, shared, and adopted in ways that respond to Timorese concerns and experiences.

This would require supporting Timorese-led and owned approaches and solutions to the knowledge gaps, defined through collaboration and consultation with key actors and stakeholders, taking account of the time and resource pressures within which they already operate. Timorese media leaders and government should be recognised as key stakeholders in digital connectivity research and programmatic initiatives.

A key need appears to be communicating what the submarine cable may or may not deliver for connectivity speeds and data costs, possibly drawing from the varied experiences of Pacific Island countries. This will enable expectations and preparations to be evidence-based and adapted to the Timorese context.

This study is part of the Timor-Leste Media Development Program implemented by ABC International Development (ABCID) under the Australian Government's Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy.

Disclaimer: Any opinions represented in this report are those of the authors and research participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, Australian Broadcasting Corporation or The Asia Foundation.

