

# STATE OF THE MEDIA

Timor-Leste

**RESEARCH BRIEF**

**ABC**  
INTERNATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT



The Asia Foundation





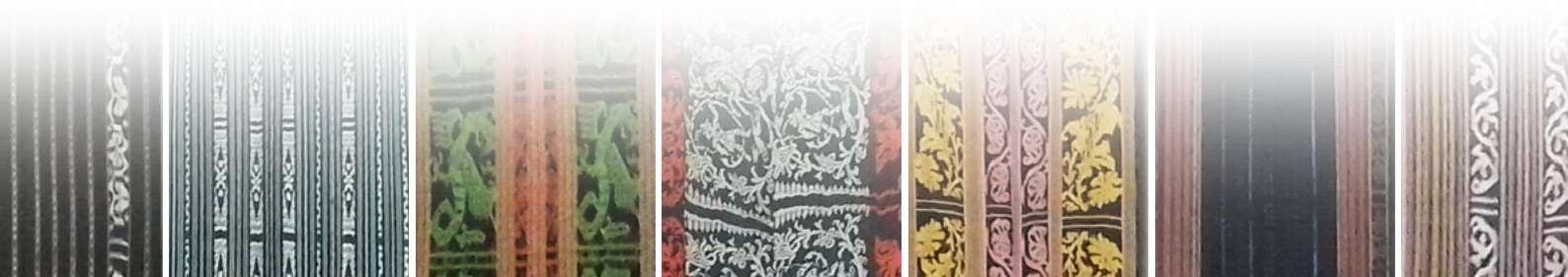
## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

*This study provides a detailed snapshot of Timor-Leste's media in late 2023, exploring the operations and business models of media outlets, the legal landscape, proposed government programs impacting media, and relevant infrastructure ahead of an anticipated significant increase in digital connectivity from 2024. This research aims to serve as an accessible resource for media, civil society, and related organisations to support the strengthening of Timor-Leste's media and national development goals.*



## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a multi-method approach. A desk review was conducted of publicly accessible documents on Timor-Leste's media policy and legislation, media infrastructure and coverage, and audience consumption patterns. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 44 respondents: media practitioners across mainstream and community media, communication officers in government media, and representatives from civil society organisations working closely with media.



## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. Media as representing the voices of the people

According to respondents, Timor-Leste's media sector is committed to capturing 'the voices of the people' as a way of apprising the government of community perspectives and experiences across key issues to inform policy and decision making. Only a minority of media practitioners interviewed saw media as a platform to empower citizens through information dissemination or to raise public awareness of government plans. Media industry bodies, however, such as the Timor-Leste Press Council, defined the media's role in broader terms, around holding decision makers to account and championing citizen rights.

### 2. TV most accessed but radio use remains dominant in rural communities

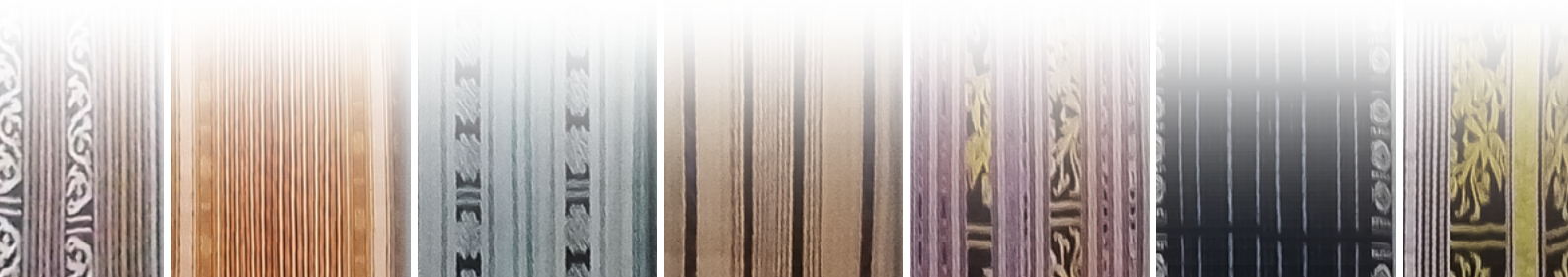
Television (TV) is more frequently accessed than radio across urban and rural locations, but radio remains the platform of choice for audiences without TV access in rural areas. Through triangulation of data from the Tatoli 2023 survey against data from semi-structured interviews with media representatives, it was established that around 65% of the weighted audience sample (N=3,754) have access to television and 32% have access to radio. Around 32% have access to Facebook and 15% to YouTube.

### 3. Television the most trusted media platform

A desk review of publicly accessible data on media trust, including the Tatoli 2023 survey, revealed that TV was the most trusted media source amongst citizens, followed by Suco Council/local leaders. Radio was the third most trusted source. Rural-based audiences, more so than their urban counterparts, trust Suco Council and local leaders as sources of credible information.

### 4. Insecure media workforce

Economic sustainability was raised by respondents as the biggest challenge for media, with many smaller operations dependent on volunteer labour. Most broadcasters – including community radio – depend to some degree on government funding and subsidies. This was reported as a key reason for low salaries in the media sector and a contributor to challenges in maintaining media worker rights. Due to the economic precarity of the media sector, there remains a high staff turnover among journalists. As a result, developing and sustaining journalist and editor skills over time is significantly compromised.







## 5. Industry-wide challenges to balanced reporting

Media respondents noted that Timor-Leste's media coverage tends to be dominated by stereotyped gender frames, often attributing blame to women for family disputes with minimal coverage on the role of men. Further to this, respondents highlighted a general fear within the industry of publishing criticisms of the church, due to anticipated backlash from both church officials and the public. The tendency to abide by dominant social narratives is also perpetuated, according to respondents, by a lack of skills in the media sector to assess evidence independently of broader societal pressure.

## 6. Pervasive impact of misinformation/disinformation

Mis/disinformation was highlighted by respondents as a significant problem in Timor-Leste, with election periods identified as a hotbed for such narratives to take root. The issue was also raised by communication officials in government as a policy focus. The concept of mis/disinformation is locally referred to as 'hoax', a catch-all term to refer to false and fabricated information with the assumption that such information is almost always deliberately generated. Instances of perceived bullying and/or character assassination in the media were also considered 'hoaxes'. Interviewees noted that Timor-Leste's media sector considers misinformation and disinformation as challenges intrinsic to the broader media and political environment, rather than localised instances.

## 7. Perceived challenges with heightened digital connectivity

Both media practitioners and representatives from civic organisations noted that the anticipated increase in digital connectivity through the establishment of a submarine cable, via the Timor-Leste South Submarine Cable project, necessitates greater focus on building national digital literacy skills, including the strategic introduction of technology in teaching. It was also felt that cybercrime laws and cybersecurity measures will need further refining in building safeguards around computer surveillance and protection for whistle-blowers.