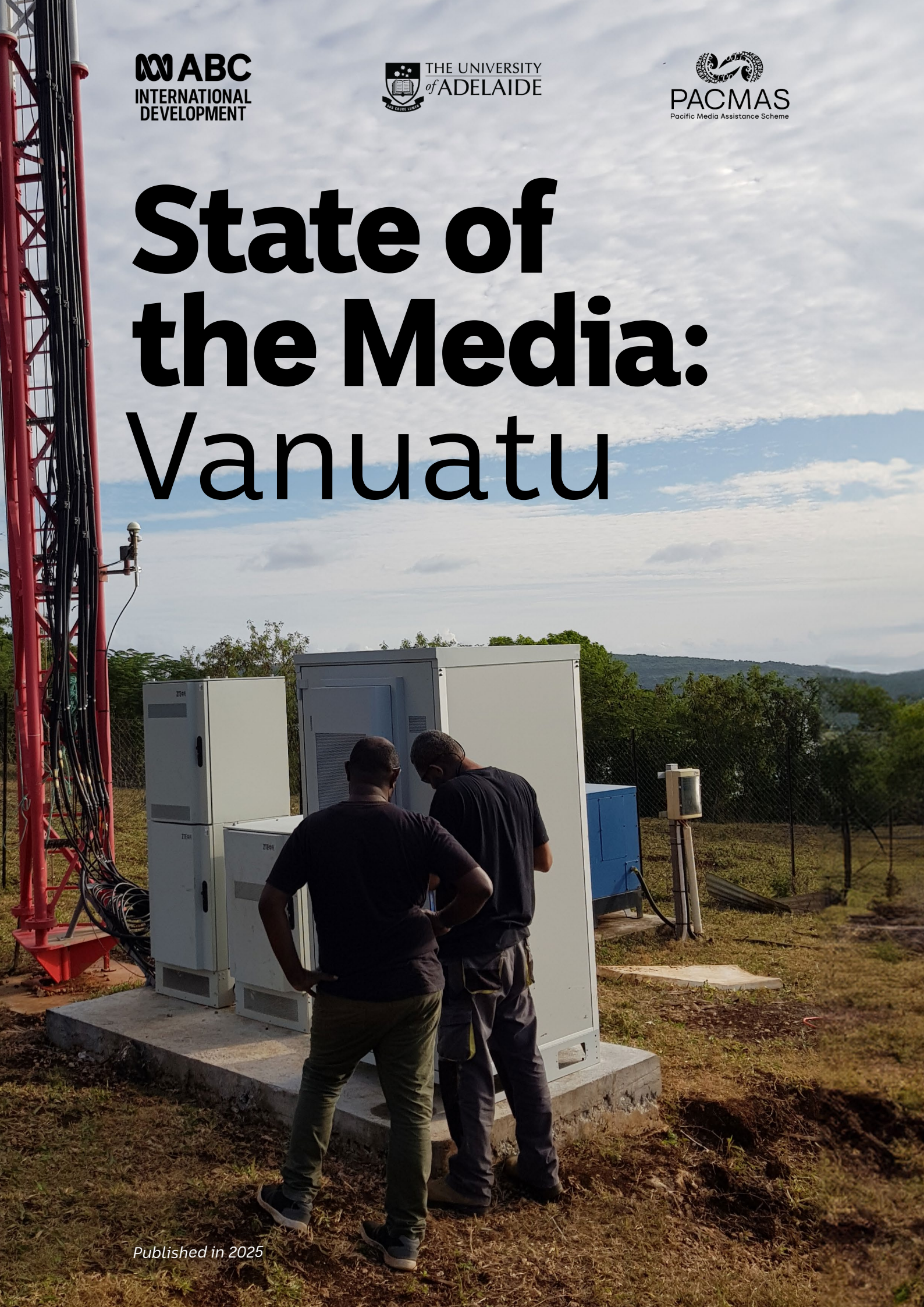


State of the Media: Vanuatu



State of the Media: Vanuatu

This study was led and designed by ABC International Development (ABCID), informed by our Pacific partners. The University of Adelaide's (UoA) Stretton Institute were implementation partners across the 12 countries studied. Fieldwork and data analysis was conducted by Pacific researchers. We would like to thank all the expert advisers and study participants for their time and generous contributions.

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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, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation or the University of Adelaide.

Photos in this report are from ABCID programs, ABC staff, and ABC archives, unless otherwise specified.

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Port Vila at sunset.

ACRONYMS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABCID	Australian Broadcasting Corporation International Development
AI	artificial intelligence
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CRI	China Radio International
FM	frequency modulation
GEDSI	gender, equality, disability and social inclusion
LGBTIQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other sexually and gender diverse people
MAV	Media Association of Vanuatu
MW	medium wave
N/A	not applicable
PACMAS	Pacific Media Assistance Scheme
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
RFI	Radio France Internationale
RTI	right to information
SW	shortwave
TBV	Television Blong Vanuatu
TRBR	Telecommunications, Radiocommunications and Broadcasting Regulator
UAP	universal access policy
VBTC	Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation
VPride	Vanuatu Pride

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a detailed snapshot of Vanuatu's media landscape. It outlines how this has evolved significantly over the last decade, with increased internet and information availability transforming the media ecosystem. The following themes were identified in the research.

Importance of improving physical access to rural communities for journalists

Radio remains the only viable medium for the rural population, as it reaches most of the Vanuatu archipelago via shortwave (SW) transmission. The Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC) upgraded its SW and medium wave (MW) services in 2019.¹ Despite improved audience access to radio, media practitioner respondents noted that media coverage and representation of issues in rural communities remain minimal. Respondents attributed this in part to challenges faced by journalists in accessing these geographically dispersed communities. They flagged that organisations lack funding for reporting in the field, and that issues around transport infrastructure need resolving to make rural reporting sustainable.

Greater market protections wanted for local media businesses

Media practitioner respondents from businesses specialising in Indigenous Ni-Vanuatu content expressed a desire for greater market protections against external competition, both regionally and internationally. Local media specialising in Indigenous content want to scale up and build their audiences without needing to diversify to compete for greater audience share. Respondents feel strongly that building the resilience of media organisations that produce Indigenous content would also preserve traditional storytelling values, which are a central part of Vanuatu's culture and history.

Accessing government information and ensuring media freedom remain a challenge

The Right to Information (RTI) Act was passed in 2016, giving the legal right to individuals (and media) to access information from any government agency. However, despite the improved legal provisions to facilitate information access, media practitioner respondents highlighted challenges in accessing information. Respondents flagged the considerable time lag between requesting and receiving information, which impacted the currency of news stories published. There are also media freedom concerns about the impact of the recent amendment to the Penal Code to include criminal libel and slander for both traditional media and social media platforms.

¹ Evan Wasuka, *ABC Pacific, Pacific Beat - Vanuatu Invests in Boosting Its Shortwave Radio Service, (audio), October 6, 2019.*



An interview at the Pepeyo Cultural Village in Port Vila.

Media self-regulation is viewed as critical for preserving media independence

Media practitioner respondents believe that media independence will only thrive in an industry that is self-regulated. The prevailing sentiment is that each media organisation should be held accountable in complying with its editorial guidelines. A self-regulated media industry was also seen as a cornerstone in developing investigative journalism and more independent inquiry into government issues. Self-regulation is an area that media practitioner respondents believe could be improved.

Opportunities for media to increase awareness on gender, disability and social inclusion

Media practitioner respondents asserted that there is minimal awareness of gender inclusion within the community and government. Inclusion is sometimes viewed as a foreign ideology, which can incite local resentment against initiatives that explicitly reference it. Local culture and churches were emphasised as being influential in maintaining gender stereotypes and stifling progress on gender equality. According to respondents, media have the potential to play a key role in shifting prevailing mindsets through their content, highlighting the significance of inclusive reporting through a locally relevant lens.



1. INTRODUCTION

Vanuatu is an archipelago of 83 islands in the Melanesian subregion of the Pacific, to the north-east of Australia. It has a population of around 326,740 people spread across 65 inhabited islands. Vanuatu became independent in 1980 and is a republic with a one-house legislative system comprising a 52-member parliament. Bislama, French and English are the official languages of Vanuatu. Vanuatu has a growing diaspora, particularly as many Ni-Vanuatu people participate in Australia's Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme.



VBTC's Charles Sumbe sets up for an interview.

The media climate in Vanuatu has evolved significantly over the last decade. Demands from the government and citizens for accountable and ethical media practices have become more prominent.² Media outlets in the country include print, radio, television, and online news platforms.

The two main media organisations are the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC) and the Trading Post Ltd. VBTC is the national broadcaster and is state-owned. It operates three radio stations and a TV station dedicated to fulfilling its mandate to disseminate information, educate, and entertain the public.³ The Trading Post Ltd is the largest independent media organisation in the country.⁴ The Vanuatu Daily Post, which it owns and operates, publishes daily and has an online news platform called the Daily Post Digital Network.

This report provides a detailed, up-to-date snapshot of the state of the media in Vanuatu. It is part of the State of the Media project, which comprises 12 country reports and one regional report. These reports serve as an accessible resource for media, civil society, and government organisations in support of development goals in the region. In addition to Vanuatu, the countries studied are: Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Kiribati, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Tuvalu.

² Josephine Tarianga, [The University of the South Pacific - Vanuatu Journalists Welcome New Era](#), June 23, 2023.

³ The functions and duty of the corporation are laid out in Section 10 of [Vanuatu Consolidated Legislation - Broadcasting and Television Act 2006](#).

⁴ [Vanuatu Daily Post - About Us](#), accessed September 2, 2024.



2. METHODOLOGY

The study's methodology was guided by core research questions identified by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's International Development unit (ABCID). It was designed to foreground the expertise of Pacific researchers and media professionals. Data collection, analysis, and report drafting were conducted by Pacific researchers.

The research team began with a desk-based review of relevant primary and secondary literature. Additionally, nine stakeholder interviews were conducted with media practitioners. At each step, feedback and advice were sought from the country expert advisor, Christina Thyna, who also crosschecked the accuracy of findings and co-authored this report. The research was approved by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee and steps were taken to mitigate risks to all research participants, including maintaining their anonymity.

A more detailed discussion of the project methodology is contained in the regional report.⁵

5 [ABC International Development - Research.](#)



Members of the Media Association of Vanuatu gather for a workshop in Port Vila.



3. MEDIA ORGANISATION FOOTPRINT

The media sector in Vanuatu has a blend of traditional and digital media consisting of print, radio, television, and online news platforms, with a mix of state-owned and private sector organisations. Radio is the most widely accessible medium throughout the country, primarily through VBTC's Radio Vanuatu.

Print

The Vanuatu Daily Post is the only regular newspaper in the country.⁶ Established in 1993, it covers mostly local news, as well as showcasing local products and businesses in a monthly magazine-style insert, Vanuatu Life & Style. The Vanuatu Daily Post also prints and distributes the official tourism newspaper for Vanuatu, What to Do. The daily newspaper

6 [Vanuatu Daily Post - About Us.](#)

prints 3,000 copies Monday to Friday and 3,500 copies on Saturday.⁷ It circulates in Efate only, after stopping circulation to the island of Santo in 2023 due to financial challenges. In February 2019, the Vanuatu Daily Post introduced Chinese-language content to its Monday issue, where local content from the preceding week is translated and reproduced in Chinese.⁸ It also publishes this content on its Chinese News webpage.

Several Vanuatu government offices produce and distribute electronic monthly newsletters, including the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the Office of the Public Service Commission, and the Department of Climate Change.

Sista, a non-government organisation that advocates for girls and women, also publishes a monthly newsletter. This focuses on issues affecting girls and women and showcases achievements across the community.

Radio

As the national broadcaster of Vanuatu, VBTC is a primary news source via its Radio Vanuatu service. This also provides a "forum for ni-Vanuatu people to express their voices and views on politics, culture, and development".⁹ It also serves as the national emergency broadcaster. Radio Vanuatu reaches most of the Vanuatu archipelago, facilitated by its upgraded shortwave (SW) and medium wave (MW) services.

VBTC also operates Paradise 98FM and Femme Pawa 99FM. Paradise FM, established in 2009, is a music-entertainment and youth-oriented station, and is reachable only in Port Vila. Femme Pawa FM is the latest addition to the VBTC radio line-up.¹⁰ It provides a participatory and inclusive platform for women to share and reflect on their aspirations and goals.¹¹ In a collaboration with Digicel, the three VBTC radio stations have been available via Digicel's GoLoud mobile app since 2021.¹²

The Trading Post Ltd owns and operates two radio stations: Buzz FM 96.3 and Capital FM 107. Buzz FM is a music and news radio station with coverage in Port Vila. The radio website hosts 24-hour streaming and access to podcasts of previously aired programs.¹³ Capital FM 107 was acquired in August 2023¹⁴ and has coverage across the country.¹⁵

Laef 102.5 FM and Adventist Radio Vanuatu 107.5 are Christian FM radio stations. Laef FM provides Christian music and teachings to Vanuatu and worldwide. Livestreaming is also available via their free mobile app. Its broadcasting covers Port Vila and Ambrym, with plans to expand into Hog Harbour, Samaria, Lenekal, and Luganville.¹⁶

⁷ [Vanuatu Media Marketing - website](#).

⁸ [Vanuatu Daily Post - Vanuatu Daily Introduces Chinese Language News](#), February 18, 2019.

⁹ [Vanuatu Broadcasting Television Corporation - About Us](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

¹⁰ [Vanuatu Daily Post - Australia's Support for Women's Radio Station in Vanuatu](#), November 1, 2019.

¹¹ [Vanuatu Broadcasting Television Corporation - Radio](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

¹² [Vanuatu Business Review - Digicel and VBTC Seal Milestone Deal](#), March 4, 2021.

¹³ [Buzz FM - website](#).

¹⁴ [Vanuatu Business Review - Vanuatu Daily Post Welcomes FM107 as One Media Family](#), August 5, 2023.

¹⁵ [Government of the Republic of Vanuatu National Disaster Management Office - Radio Broadcast Frequencies](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

¹⁶ [Laef FM - website](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

Foreign radio content is also available in Vanuatu:

- ABC Radio Australia is broadcast via 103 FM, reachable in Port Vila (Efate) and Luganville (Santo).
- China Radio International (CRI) is on air via 102 FM Port Vila (Efate) and Luganville (Santo).
- Radio France Internationale (RFI) is available on 100 FM in Port Vila (Efate) and 105 FM in Luganville (Santo).
- The BBC World Service (from the British Broadcasting Corporation) transmits via 104 FM.

Table 1. Radio

Organisation	Ownership/ Funding	Coverage	Language	Website/Social media	Sector
Radio Vanuatu (VBTC) MW 1125, SW 7260 and SW 3945	State	Vanuatu (SW) Shefa and Tafea (MW)	Bislama/ English/French	Radio Vanuatu (VBTC) - Radio homepage	Government
Paradise 98FM (VBTC)	State	Port Vila	Bislama/ English/French	Radio Vanuatu (VBTC) - Radio homepage	Government
Halo 98.1FM (VBTC)	State	Torba, Sanma, Penama, and Malampa	Bislama/ English	Radio Vanuatu (VBTC) - Radio homepage	Government
Femme Pawa 99FM (VBTC)	State	Port Vila	Bislama/ English/French	Radio Vanuatu (VBTC) - Radio homepage	Government
Capital FM 107 (Trading Post Ltd)	Private	Port Vila, Santo, Tanna, and the outer islands	English	Facebook	Commercial
Buzz FM 96.3 (Trading Post Ltd)	Private	Port Vila	English	Buzz FM - homepage	Commercial
Laef 102.5 FM	Church	Port Vila, Ambrym	English	Laef FM - homepage	Church
Adventist Radio Vanuatu FM 107.5 (Seventh-day Adventist Church)	Church	Port Vila	Bislama/ English	N/A	Church

Television

Television Blong Vanuatu (TBV) is operated by the national broadcaster VBTC. Through a collaboration with Digicel in 2021, TVB was made available for streaming on mobile phones via Digicel's PlayGo app, alongside 23 other channels.¹⁷

1Nomo TV is a privately owned, free-to-air channel in Vanuatu that provides a mix of terrestrial and web-distributed content on news and current affairs, entertainment, education, sports, and culture. It also places an emphasis on featuring user-generated content, such as homemade videos, and other locally produced content.

Hope Channel Vanuatu TV, which provides religious content, is operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Vanuatu and is part of the Hope Channel global network.

Table 2. Television

Organisation	Ownership/Funding	Language	Website/Social media	Sector
Television Blong Vanuatu (TBV)	State	Bislama/English/French	VBTC - website Facebook, X, YouTube	Government
1Nomo TV	Private	Bislama/English	1 Nomo TV - website Facebook	Commercial
Hope Channel Vanuatu TV	Church	English	Facebook	Church

Online

The most prominent online news platform is the Trading Post Ltd's Daily Post Digital Network. In 2022, it launched its premium paid digital subscription service. The network operates several websites, including Vanuatu Business Review, and Buzz FM.

The Vanuatu government has a notable digital presence. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has an active website that provides news and updates about government projects and official visits, and information about laws and ministries. The government portal can be accessed at <https://www.gov.vu/>. The Vanuatu Right To Information (RTI) Unit, a department within the PMO, also hosts an online portal. This provides information and guidelines on how to request information held by government agencies. The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, which also sits within the PMO, runs a further information portal. This office oversees the Government Broadband Network and related policy.

Vanuatu is also home to civil society organisations that produce a range of topical content on health, female empowerment, religion, and the arts. Some of these offerings lead to outreach initiatives in grassroots communities.

¹⁷ [Vanuatu Business Review, "Digicel and VBTC Seal Mileston Deal", March 4, 2021](#)

For example, Sista – a platform for Ni-Vanuatu women to connect, share, and encourage one another – was established in 2016 as an online magazine. Over the years, Sista has evolved into a women’s rights organisation.¹⁸ It has worked with several partners to deliver projects on issues affecting women in Vanuatu, such as the Roundtable online podcast. This project provides a platform for young Ni-Vanuatu women to discuss topics of interest, ranging from women’s health to non-traditional roles.¹⁹

Table 3. Key government and civil society online media

Organisation	Ownership/ Funding	Language	Website/Social media	Sector
Right To Information Unit	State	English	Right to Information Unit - website	Government
Office of the Government Chief Information Officer	State	English	Office of the Government Chief Information Officer - website	Government
Hope Channel Vanuatu (Seventh-day Adventist)	Church	English	YouTube	Church
Sista	Private	English	Sista - website	Community
Wan Smolbag Theatre	Donors	Bislama/ English	Wan Smolbag Theatre - website Facebook, X	Community

All media in Vanuatu have social media platforms where their news is also posted. Table 3 outlines the presence of key organisations on social media.

The popular Facebook forum Yumi TokTok Stret²⁰ has, according to media practitioner respondents, become central to local communities, often housing intense debates on a range of domestic and regional issues concerning politics, social welfare, economics, and other topics of interest that impact Vanuatu. It also serves as a space for diaspora communities to keep abreast of popular topics back home.

Table 4. Followers of top social media accounts, as of November 2024

Platform	Organisation	Facebook	LinkedIn	X	YouTube
Radio and TV	VBTC	148,429	N/A	799	3,630
Social media	Yumi TokTok Stret	140,079	N/A	779	N/A
Newspaper	Vanuatu Daily Post	56,013	9	3,004	N/A

¹⁸ [Sista - website](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

¹⁹ [Sista, The Round Table podcast, Index page - audio](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

²⁰ [Yumi TokTok Stret - Facebook page](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

Target audience

Newspaper, radio, and television organisations typically cater to the general public across all demographics, with program offerings covering local news, current affairs, and grassroots stories affecting Ni-Vanuatu. However, there are certain radio stations that have more niche offerings targeting specific audiences. For instance, VBTC's Paradise 98FM targets youth through its showcase of popular music and programs; its Femme Pawa 99FM creates content specifically for women and girls, amplifying their voices on a range of issues. Radio Vanuatu, through its SW transmission, is rural-oriented and an important source of information for people in these areas.

Media practitioner respondents highlighted that organisations catering to specific audiences often develop tailored branding and marketing to ensure relatability and build media trust. This may sometimes include collaborations with individuals such as influencers, or organisations that have a considerable following within target communities, to produce content (Vanuatu 02).

Facebook was unanimously regarded by media practitioner respondents as the primary mechanism for audiences to feedback on media content (especially if the media organisation in question has a social media presence). A considerable number of respondents also mentioned that in-person feedback is a popular and quick way for audiences to get their comments across to local media.

Buzz FM's Kizzy Kalsakau interviews Ati George Sokomanu and Sethy Regenvanu.



04

4. MEDIA CONTENT COVERAGE

Local news content is centred on events and issues in Vanuatu, and revolves around stories on politics and court cases, economics and finance, environment and climate change, and agriculture. According to media practitioner respondents, a key feature of media content coverage in Vanuatu is its strong emphasis on creating relatable stories that intersect with everyday experiences of local audiences. Respondents asserted that there is a desire to tell stories from the perspectives of Ni-Vanuatu, rather than having them told by “outsiders”: “I go for stories in the community, focusing on a unique perspective that draws a story from the lens of a Ni-Vanuatu” (Vanuatu 02).



Printing press at Vanuatu Daily Post.

Podcasting is viewed by respondents as an outlet highly conducive to connecting audiences with “slice-of-life” and human-interest stories. Respondents also noted it is used to contextualise global and regional news trending on social media within a local context. The prominent organisations podcasting in Vanuatu are Buzz FM, Sista, and the Vanuatu Bureau of Statistics. The bureau’s *Storian blong Gudfala Laef* podcast series combines traditional “storytelling with official statistics” and explores topics relevant to the people of Vanuatu “shared by storytellers from across our six provinces”.²¹ National and regional politics are also regarded as popular podcast topics that generate healthy debate and discussions within audience communities.

21 [Vanuatu Bureau of Statistics - *Storian blong Gudfala Laef*, Podcast Series - audio](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

Gender equality, disability and social inclusion

The stakeholder interviews with media practitioners aimed to capture top-level themes including gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) representation in media content coverage in Vanuatu. The findings below should not be viewed as exhaustive due to a small sample size. Rather, these insights provide an indication of potential trends in media practitioner perceptions of GEDSI issues.

Media content coverage on GEDSI-related issues is shaped by the level of GEDSI awareness more broadly in Vanuatu. According to published assessments of GEDSI, there is low level of community acknowledgement and understanding of the need to include vulnerable and marginalised groups in society.²² Existing literature identifies *Kastom*²³ and churches as factors that contribute to “maintaining gender stereotypes” and stifling “progress on gender equality”.²⁴

Media practitioner respondents explained that gender equality is still developing in Vanuatu due to prevailing cultural and religious beliefs. Respondents observed that concerns raised by LGBTIQ+ communities are not widely accepted and continue to receive backlash from the wider community. Media practitioner respondents asserted that there is minimal awareness of gender inclusion in the government as not many civil servants have “undergone gender sensitivity and social inclusion training” (Vanuatu 03). Respondents believe this has had a spillover effect on community knowledge of GEDSI-related topics. Additionally, one media practitioner respondent highlighted a perception in Vanuatu that GEDSI is an ideology coming from outside Vanuatu through foreign influence, leading to local resentment of initiatives that address gender inequality.

When interviews were conducted, respondents noted that social media was having a positive impact on gender equality by advancing discussions around issues concerning the LGBTIQ+ community, particularly through groups such as VPride. Since field research was conducted, the government has appointed a committee to draft a national policy banning all LGBTIQ+ advocacy in Vanuatu.²⁵ VPride has been inactive on social media since 10 October.

Media practitioner respondents shared their perspectives that the prominence of female leaders in local and national newsrooms, such as Vanuatu Daily Post and VBTC, has raised the importance of gender inclusion within the media organisations and in the content they produce.

Efforts have been made to promote positive images of people with disability in media reporting and in programming in general. According to media practitioner respondents, many journalists are sensitive to the need to capture the unique challenges faced by people with disability. This is in part due to the government’s advocacy for disability inclusion to be embedded more holistically in Vanuatu society.²⁶

22 [Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme \(SPREP\), Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion \(GEDSI\) - Considerations for the Climate Information Services for Resilient Development in Vanuatu \(VAN-KIRAP\) Project, PDF.](#)

23 ‘*Kastom*’ in Vanuatu refers to the traditional culture, customs, and practices of the Ni-Vanuatu people. The term is used in Bislama, the local Pidgin language.

24 SPREP, GEDSI Considerations VAN-KIRAP Project, 43.

25 [National Policy to advocate against LGBTQIA+ in Vanuatu: MoJCS, Nov 1, 2024.](#)

26 [Ministry of Justice and Community Services - Vanuatu Is Advancing Efforts to Promote Greater Inclusion for People With Disabilities, June 14, 2024.](#)

Non-government organisation, Wan Smolbag uses theatre, film and other creative media to raise topical issues in local communities. It has a strong history of producing GEDSI related content. Wan Smolbag's Rainbow Disability Theatre group raises awareness of the rights and special needs of people with disability through specialist productions.²⁷

Sista is a feminist non-government organisation that uses art, media and communication to empower women and girls and raise awareness on the issues that affect them. Their productions include podcasts, digital content and collaborations with mainstream media, such as the Vanuatu Daily Post.

27 Tallulah Bieundurry, *ABC International Development - 'Let's Not Forget Our Friends or Families That Have Disabilities': Vanuatu Theatre Pushing for Better Disaster Preparedness*, July 5, 2024.

Shooting an interview in vertical format for social media.





5. MEDIA BUSINESS RESILIENCE

The media sector in Vanuatu is small, with two main media organisations. The resilience of media organisations was tested during the COVID-19 pandemic. As one media practitioner respondent explained: “COVID really exposed how vulnerable all the media platforms were. VBTC was struggling financially. Capital FM went on sale to Daily Post and a lot of people were made redundant” (Vanuatu 02). These shifts in ownership and closures reminded media practitioner respondents of the fragility of media businesses, especially in the face of national and global economic downturns.

VBTC's funding comes from the Government of Vanuatu, foreign assistance, and advertising revenue from government departments and commercial advertisers.²⁸ The Vanuatu Daily Post relies on revenue from advertising and content monetisation, notably from its Daily Post Premium Digital Subscription via its online news platform. Owing to rising printing costs and other financial constraints, the Vanuatu Daily Post ceased circulation of its print newspaper to Santo in February 2023.²⁹

There is an overarching view among media practitioner respondents that external funding will be crucial to support small media platforms. There are concerns that this funding should not come from the government. One respondent stated: "We'd love to get support from any independent body rather than from the government because then they will not have any influence on us and our programs and what we say on our platform" (Vanuatu 01).

Media practitioner respondents also feel that there need to be specific market protections in place for media businesses that specialise in producing Indigenous Ni-Vanuatu content. This would provide the opportunity to scale up and build an audience following without having to grapple with increased competition from regional and foreign media. As one respondent put it: "The government must protect the industry, making sure that here in Vanuatu we have reserved industries for just Indigenous people" (Vanuatu 02). Respondents expressed a strong sentiment that building the resilience of organisations producing Indigenous content would also preserve traditional storytelling values, which are a central part of Vanuatu's culture and history.

Natural disasters like cyclones and earthquakes are also factors that impact the resilience of media infrastructure and businesses in Vanuatu, according to media practitioner respondents. In April 2020, Tropical Cyclone Harold severely damaged VBTC radio and television transmission towers and infrastructure in Santo and Malekula.³⁰ In March 2023, Tropical Cyclone Kevin caused extensive damage to both telecommunications transmission towers and power infrastructure; coming shortly after Tropical Cyclone Judy and a strong earthquake. Up to 80 per cent of Vanuatu's communications networks were reported to have been damaged.³¹ In December 2024, a 7.3 magnitude earthquake caused major damage to infrastructure in Port Vila, including to media infrastructure.

Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) is not widely used by the media in Vanuatu. A majority of media practitioner respondents said they have never applied AI in their work. Those who had applied AI in their work said they have experimented with it on activities such as video production, where it can be used to clean up grainy and shaky footage (Vanuatu 02). Others stated that AI can assist in news production, although details were not provided.

On the other hand, some media practitioner respondents who have never used AI believe that it is negatively impacting journalism and are concerned about its impact in eroding traditional journalistic values, potentially leading to widespread audience mistrust of media.

28 [Vanuatu Broadcasting Television Corporation - About Us](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

29 [Vanuatu Daily Post - Focus on Digital Version of Daily Post](#), February 1, 2023.

30 [Emergency Telecommunications Cluster - Vanuatu](#), accessed September 2, 2024.

31 [Relief Web, New Zealand Red Cross - IT and Telecommunications Specialists Head to Vanuatu to Assist in Restoring Communications](#), March 13, 2023.



6. MEDIA POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Media policy and legislation

Vanuatu has laws that regulate radio and television broadcasting services, newspapers and telecommunications. Recent amendments to the penal code cover both traditional media and social media; and cyberstalking is covered in the Cybercrime Act 2021.³²

³² [Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute - Vanuatu Consolidated Legislation 2006,](#)
[and Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute - Vanuatu Sessional Legislation.](#)



Anita Nalau, Joseph Tom and Kimera Kalsrap from VBTC's Digital First team.

Table 5. Policy and legislation

Platform	Policy	Legislation
Print	N/A	Newspapers (Restriction on Publication) Act 30 of 1982 Penal Code Cap. 135 (criminal libel)
Radio	N/A	Broadcasting and Television Act Cap. 214
Television	N/A	Broadcasting and Television Act Cap. 214
Online/Social media	National Harmful Digital Communications Policy 2023	Penal Code Cap. 135 Cybercrime Act No. 22 of 2021
Telecommunications		Telecommunications, Radiocommunications and Broadcasting Regulation Act No. 30 of 2009

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right protected under the constitution, although there is no specific provision for freedom of the media. It is enforceable under the constitution, which allows an individual to seek legal remedy for breaches via application to the Supreme Court. However, freedom of expression is not absolute and is limited to issues of public interest in “defense, safety, public order, welfare, and health”.³³

³³ [Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu - PD](#), Chapter 2 – Fundamental Rights and Duties, Part 1- Fundamental Rights, 5- Fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual.

While media freedom is generally respected, there have been reported instances where local and foreign journalists based in Vanuatu have faced threats from the government for perceived critical reporting. In 2019, the government refused to renew the work permit of a Vanuatu-based journalist and barred him from entering the country, on the grounds that a Ni-Vanuatu person should be trained for the role. The journalist and his organisation stated that the decision was a political one related instead to the newspaper's coverage of Chinese nationals in Vanuatu.³⁴ In response to the incident, the Media Asosiesen blong Vanuatu (Media Association of Vanuatu, MAV) reiterated that "silencing the media and journalists will only affect the good relationship media has with this government".³⁵ The Supreme Court of Vanuatu eventually ruled in 2023 that the government's refusal to renew the work permit was unlawful.³⁶

Media practitioner respondents highlighted that the amendments to the penal code allowing for criminal libel and slander, and the cyberstalking provision in the Cybercrime Act, are an ongoing concern. They highlighted that these laws have the potential to hamper freedom of expression and cause the media to self-censor in fear of imprisonment and heavy fines.

Accessing official information

The public's right to access government information is intrinsic to freedom of expression and the media's role in disseminating information and educating the public. Vanuatu is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which reaffirms the right of the public to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through the media.³⁷ In 2016 the government enacted the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2016, granting the public the legal right to lodge requests for information with government agencies.

This saw the establishment of an RTI Unit to facilitate access to information. However, the outcome of these requests for information is not made public. Requests are expected to be processed and expedited within 30 days. While the public can seek information from any government agency, there is certain information that the public cannot access, including that which is personal or confidential, covered by legal privilege, or relating to national security. The MAV commended the passage of the RTI act, stating it was a "major development and achievement not only for Vanuatu's growing media industry but for the Vanuatu government as well".³⁸

Despite the act, media practitioner respondents highlighted challenges in accessing information from government offices. For example, one respondent noted that "getting information that involves a police investigation is time-consuming because of the process, and by the time the information is provided, the news is old" (Vanuatu 09). The time lag between requests for and delivery of information has impacted the currency of news stories published, which affects the quality of content.

34 [Civicus Monitor - Media Groups Condemn Revocation of Vanuatu Journalist Work Permit and Denial of Re-Entry](#), November 20, 2019.

35 [ABC Pacific, Pacific Beat Podcast - Vanuatu Government Accused of Using Administrative Processes to 'Stifle Free Media' \(audio\)](#), November 7, 2019.

36 [Vanuatu Daily Post wins landmark case over work permit saga - RNZ](#)

37 [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(CCPR\) - PDF](#), (Dec. 16, 1966); CCPR/C/GC/34, art. 19 (Sep. 12, 2011).

38 [International Federation of Journalists - Historic Right to Information Act passed in Vanuatu](#), December 7, 2016.



The Code of Ethics and Practice was developed by the Media Association of Vanuatu in 2021. (MAV)

Media industry bodies and self-regulation

The Media Asosiesen blong Vanuatu (Media Association of Vanuatu - MAV) is the officially recognised organisation representing the media industry and journalists in Vanuatu. It adopted a comprehensive Code of Ethics and Practice in 2021. The code was revised in 2023 and released in English, French and Bislama. It reflects the shared values of the Vanuatu media community of practice, considering cultural, religious, and historical traditions and beliefs.³⁹ The code does not include any sanctions or penalties, nor does it provide for what happens in case of a breach. MAV also has an affiliated Social Media Association, bringing together freelance journalists, video creators, influencers and others who use social media as a platform for their work.

Media practitioner respondents strongly believe that media independence can only thrive in an industry that is self-regulated. One of the key reasons respondents gave for advocating self-regulation was to allow journalists to pursue investigative stories (Vanuatu 09); also, that government regulation will make it difficult for the media to remain trustworthy (Vanuatu 04). Further, respondents said that while regulation by an industry body is the better option (compared with government regulation), each media organisation needs to also ensure their journalists and reporters comply with editorial guidelines and are accountable for the stories they produce and publish.

We have a lot of complaints from the government and the public about the media. We have a Code of Ethics but there is no penalty in the case of a breach. I believe each media organisation should reinforce self-regulation in their newsroom and hold their journalists and reporters accountable if editorial guidelines are not followed because this is where news and information are produced and published. (Vanuatu 01)

Respondents agree that if enforcing accountability for upholding journalism standards and ethics rests with the media, there will be greater public trust in journalism.

³⁹ [Media Association of Vanuatu - Code of Ethics and Practice, 2021](#), (MAV 2021), 1.

07

7. MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Disinformation has emerged as a prominent issue in Vanuatu, primarily on social media and notably on Facebook. Several Facebook groups that present themselves as news platforms focused on Vanuatu have emerged since 2019. Some of these are operated from overseas and specifically target Vanuatu's position on West Papua.⁴⁰ Media outlets have sought to shed light on disinformation tactics by highlighting these groups to the public, with the hope of raising awareness on the need to distinguish between legitimate and fake news sources.

⁴⁰ Royson Willie, [Vanuatu Daily Post - Use of Social Media for Disinformation](#), August 5, 2019.



Reporters in the VBTC training room.

Mis/disinformation also became a concern during the COVID-19 pandemic. Misinformation on vaccination efforts and aid supplies was prominently shared in Vanuatu.⁴¹ To address misinformation, Vanuatu authorities launched a communications toolkit. The government also gazetted a law that required media outlets to have prior government authorisation to publish on COVID-19.⁴² While aimed at addressing mis/disinformation, the law raised concerns about media freedom and the ability of the media to document public-interest news stories.

As mentioned in the previous section, media practitioner respondents noted that provisions for criminal libel and slander under the penal code, and for cyberstalking under the Cybercrime Act, pose legitimate challenges to the ability of journalists to explicitly flag perceived misinformation without the threat of prosecution.

41 Vipul Khosla and Prashanth Pillay, [*ABC International Development - Curb the Infodemic: Media Reporting, Debunking Misinformation & Geopolitical Concerns*](#), August 22, 2022, updated October 4, 2023.

42 Tahlea Aualiitia, host, [*ABC Pacific, Pacific Beat podcast - Concerns About Press Freedom as Pacific Governments Try to Tackle Coronavirus Misinformation \(audio\)*](#), March 30, 2020.

08

8. MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURE

Telecommunications

*The government's Universal Access Policy (UAP) set a nationwide target of 98 per cent telecommunication coverage by 2018, including both urban and rural areas. By 2019, 98.8 per cent of the population had coverage for mobile voice and data services, achieving the UAP target.*⁴³

4G services were also expanded to cover Santo, Malekula, Pentecost, Efate, and Tanna, fulfilling the UAP target to ensure government offices and schools within those populated centres could access broadband data and internet services. With the UAP rollout, Vanuatu now has broadband high-speed internet in most areas, with 48 of 69 underserved areas now equipped with telecommunications infrastructure.⁴⁴ Media practitioner respondents regard this development as integral to motivating audiences to transition from broadcast media (television and radio) to digital media (livestreams on Facebook) (Vanuatu 02).

⁴³ [Telecommunications, Radiocommunications and Broadcasting Regulator - Universal Access Policy \(UAP\) Stakeholders Tenth and Final Report on the Status of Implementation of the Government's Universal Access Policy, 2019 \(PDF\)](#).

⁴⁴ [Telecommunications Radiocommunications and Broadcasting Regulator - Reports: TRBR Releases its 14th UAP Report on The Status of Implementation of the Government's UAP](#), accessed September 2, 2024.



Broadcast technicians at a site visit in Vanuatu.

Improved telecommunications infrastructure in Vanuatu has included the launch of Digicel Vanuatu's Play TV service in 2018. To access the Play TV service, customers are required to pay for a set-top box. Alternatively, mobile streaming is available through Digicel's PlayGo app.

Based on data derived from the Vanuatu Telecommunications, Radiocommunications and Broadcasting Regulator (TRBR), the key organisations licensed to operate telecommunications services are as follows:

- Telecom Vanuatu Ltd (trading as Vodafone Vanuatu)
- Digicel (Vanuatu) Ltd
- Wantok Network Ltd
- Interchange Ltd
- Pacific Link Ltd
- 3 Link
- Aelan Internet
- Kacific Vanuatu Ltd

These organisations all provide internet services; the first three also provide mobile and fixed services.

Starlink, a satellite network developed by SpaceX to "provide low-cost internet to remote locations"⁴⁵ via low orbit satellites is also gaining popularity in the country because of its high-speed internet connectivity. Starlink was granted a 15-year telecommunications licence by TRBR to operate in Vanuatu from August 2024. The approval of Starlink's licence is expected to have a profound impact on internet connectivity in rural and remote communities such as Ureparapara, Torres, Futuna, and Aneityum.⁴⁶ Media practitioner respondents noted that, because Starlink access requires minimal technical knowledge to set up, it can be easily installed on top of a truck to serve rural schools and health centres in remote areas. Starlink also provided a mechanism to communicate quickly after the December 2024 earthquake, when other telecommunications infrastructure was not operational.

⁴⁵ Tereza Pultarova and Elizabeth Howell, [Space.com - Starlink Satellites: Facts, Tracking and Impact on Astronomy](#), August 29, 2024.

⁴⁶ Dobby Morris, [Vanuatu Daily Post - Social Media Influencer's 2-year Advocacy Helps Bring Starlink to Vanuatu](#), August 23, 2024.

09

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for strengthening Vanuatu's media sector are informed by data collected from media practitioner respondents.

Better remuneration for journalists key to addressing high staff turnover

Media practitioner respondents overwhelmingly feel that media organisations should look after the welfare of journalists so the industry retains its skills and talents, as high staff turnover continues to be a challenge. Respondents noted that skilled investigative journalists have left the media because of low salaries, as they could not sustain their livelihoods. This brain drain has had, according to respondents, a direct impact on the quality of content. As one respondent explained:

Investigative journalists who have done those risky stories, stories that have actually had a big impact, left because their welfare were not taken care of and have set up in communication offices. And it ends up newspapers are getting thinner, news bulletins are getting shorter, the stories are starting to become shallow. (Vanuatu 04)

Respondents suggested that decent salary packages are needed to retain qualified journalists – a move that should, according to respondents, be regarded as a prerequisite to improving the quality of journalism nationally.



Members of Media Association of Vanuatu (MAV) attend digital skills training.

Increased media training on investigative journalism

Media practitioner respondents expressed a need for more media training on investigative journalism to ensure media remain independent and write balanced stories drawing on a variety of sources. Respondents believe that more targeted training for journalists in holding power to account would result in “less influence of politics and nepotism” (Vanuatu 08) in Vanuatu media. They also feel it would add more depth and balance to reporting on important social topics such as violence against women and discrimination.

Obtaining functioning computers and cameras for reporting

A lack of functioning equipment to produce work efficiently is regarded as a hurdle for reporters, broadcasters, freelancers, and content producers. For media to carry out their role effectively, respondents called for support to boost newsrooms’ working technical equipment. Overseas procurement is deemed cost-prohibitive due to taxes; most respondents think that the government should consider applying a tax exemption on imported electronic equipment specifically for the media.

Improving media access to remote areas

Respondents expressed a general sentiment that outer islands are not well represented in the media due to physical access issues, and that this has led to limited audience engagement within these communities. It is believed that improved travel infrastructure and increased funding would enable journalists to capture audience insights in these areas and to subsequently provide relevant programs for rural audiences, to raise their concerns about issues affecting them (Vanuatu 03).

CONCLUSION

The findings in this report foreground the importance of improving access to rural communities, so media can adequately represent issues relevant to Vanuatu’s geographically dispersed audiences. The report also identified opportunities for media to increase awareness of gender, disability and social inclusion through inclusive reporting on local issues. Local media specialising in Indigenous Ni-Vanuatu content expressed a desire for greater market protections to support scale and reach of their businesses. Finally, the report identified challenges around access to government information, despite Vanuatu having a Right to Information Act, in addition to media freedom concerns related to recent amendments to the Penal Code.