

State of the Media: Timor-Leste 2024



ABC
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The Asia Foundation

State of the Media:
Timor-Leste
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ACRONYMS

3G	Third Generation (wireless technology)
4G	Fourth Generation (wireless technology)
ABCID	Australian Broadcasting Corporation International Development
ACC-1	Asia Connect Cable
AJTL	Asosiasaun Jornalista Timor-Leste Timor-Leste Journalist Association
AMARC	Association Mondiale des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters
ANC	Autoridade Nacional da Comunicações National Communications Authority
ARKTL	Asosiasaun Radio Komunidade Timor-Leste Association of Community Radio Timor-Leste
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEFTEC	Centro de Formação Técnica em Comunicação Technical Training Centre for Communication
CNRT	Congresso Nacional de Reconstrução de Timor National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
EDTL	Electricidade de Timor-Leste Timor-Leste Electricity
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
Fretilin	Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independent Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor
GMN	Grupo de Media Nacional National Media Group
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ID	Identity
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
IRI	International Republican Institute
ISP	Internet Service Provider
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
JPF Podcast	Juvita Pereira Faria Podcast
Khunto	Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nasional Timor Oan Enrich the National Unity of the Sons of Timor
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
LTE	Long-Term Evolution
MAG	Martial Arts Group

MAPKOMS	Ministériu ba Asuntus Parlamentares no Komunikasaun Sosiál Ministry for Parliamentary Affairs and Social Communication
MTC	Ministériu ba Transporte no Komunikasaun Ministry of Transport and Communications
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NWCS	North-West Cable System
PD	Partido Democrático Democratic Party
PLP	Partidu Libertasaun Popular People's Liberation Party
PPMN	Perhimpunan Pengembangan Media Nusantara Indonesian Association for Media Development
PVT	Partido os Verdes de Timor Green Party of Timor
RENETIL	National Resistance of East Timorese Students
RTTL	Rádio e Televisão de Timor-Leste Timor-Leste Radio and Television
SEKOMS	Sekretariu Estadu ba Komunikasaun Sosiál State Secretariat for Social Communication
SMNews	Samuel Mariano News
STL	Suara Timor Lorosae
TAF	The Asia Foundation
TELIN	PT Telekomunikasi Indonesia International
TIC	Agência Tecnologia da Informação e Comunicação Information and Communication Technology Agency
TLPU	Timor-Leste Press Union
TLSSC	Timor-Leste South Submarine Cable
TT	Timor Telecom
TV	Television
TVE	Televisaun Edukasaun Education Television
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UPJTL	União da Profissão de Journalista de Timor-Leste Timor-Leste Professional Journalist Association
WTO	World Trade Organization



Photo journalist.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 late 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.

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.

The key findings include:

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.

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.

TV 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 (village) 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.

Media's reliance on volunteer and low-paid labour

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.

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.

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.

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.



Mountain landscape in the municipality of Oecussi.

01

INTRODUCTION

The key objective of the report is to provide an up-to-date, national-level snapshot of the state of the media in Timor-Leste, serving as an accessible resource for media, civil society, and related organisations to support the strengthening of Timor-Leste’s media and national development goals. It represents the most comprehensive research into the Timor-Leste media sector to date.

Timor-Leste’s media sector is progressing in many important ways, yet some challenges show persistent and enduring features. These include limited revenues, periods of increased political pressure, and skills deficits among journalists. Gaps in coverage and infrastructure – in particular, the contrast between the capital, Dili, and rural areas – are particularly striking. These are issues that will be unpacked later in this report.



There are promising developments in the media sector, particularly the self-regulation of the Timor-Leste Press Council, examples of lively public debate around social change, and the steady rise of investigative journalism practices: journalists, editors, and their advocates have been able to maintain one of the most free media environments in Southeast Asia.¹

This research provides a detailed snapshot of Timor-Leste's media in late 2023. It explores the operations and business models of media outlets, the current legal landscape, the state of infrastructure ahead of an anticipated significant increase in digital connectivity in 2024, and the plans and program of the new CNRT-led government, elected in May 2023. Additionally, the research delves into the operational challenges faced by media, coverage of critical social issues, and concerted efforts to tackle mis/disinformation.

¹ At the time of writing, Timor-Leste is ranked 10th in Reporters Without Borders' Media Freedom Index, 17 positions ahead of Australia, 25 positions ahead of Taiwan (the next highest Asian country), and 98 positions ahead of neighbouring Indonesia. See <https://rsf.org/en/index> (accessed 23 Nov. 2023)



top: Display of historical newspaper front pages at the Timor-Leste Press Council. bottom: Filming in the RTTL TV studio.



Presenting while reading braille in the Radio Liberdade studio.

02

METHODOLOGY

A multi-method approach, comprising systematic desk reviews and semi-structured interviews, was adopted to investigate the areas of media policy and legislation, mis/disinformation, and the current and emerging media landscape.

The following key research questions were explored:

Key Evaluation Question 1: What is the current media policy and legislative environment in Timor-Leste?

Key Evaluation Question 2: What policies exist at the national level to address mis/disinformation?

Key Evaluation Question 3: What is the current and emerging media landscape in Timor-Leste, taking into account media access and coverage across print, broadcast, and digital?



In answering these questions, consistent focus was maintained on unearthing key insights around media infrastructure, challenges and strengths in media operations at organisational level, and audience consumption patterns. Findings were also analysed through the broad lens of gender, disability, and social inclusion, with relevant themes highlighted where appropriate.

As noted, the research utilised desk review and semi-structured interview methods as its primary tools of data collection. A total of 33 interviews were conducted with 44 respondents, the sample comprising: active journalists from 16 media outlets; representatives from industry bodies, including the Timor-Leste Press Council; communication officers in government, to understand government policy and initiatives impacting media; and subject experts across media and media law. A full breakdown of the interview subjects is available in the appendix.

Interviews were conducted mainly in Tetum, with a small number in English and one in Indonesian. The interview questions were administered to the sample following a brief screening survey to establish broader context around respondent roles and work. The survey was developed with input from media and human rights advocates and observers.

Interviews covered the following media:

National broadcast GMN-TV; RTTL

Local broadcast Radio Liberdade; Radio Mauloko; Radio Rai Husar; Radio Tokodede

Print Timor Post

Online only DiliGente; Hatutan; JPF Podcast; Lafaek News; Liquica Post; SMNews; Tatoli;

With the exception of state news agency Tatoli, online-only media outlets are generally smaller operations. However, this sector also shows much greater variety; for this reason, seven media outlets were included in the interview sample in accordance with their local prominence and reach. Community radio plays a critical and frequently solo role in serving audiences outside Dili; for this reason, three community stations were interviewed.

Desk research included documents and articles specific to the study's objectives. Relevant links and references are included in the report footnotes. Where appropriate, the research drew on recently published quantitative audience surveys, to ensure alignment with empirical work already conducted in this space and to prevent duplication. Specific quality-check measures were put in place to ensure that all previous studies cited incorporated a robust methodology and, where possible, were also conducted by The Asia Foundation (TAF), the implementers of this research.



Journalism training participants in Oecussi practice their interview skills.



RTTL journalists collaborating on a story.

03

MEDIA ORGANISATION FOOTPRINT

Timor-Leste's media sector includes the following outlets, classified in accordance with media type based on their primary platform offering.

Broadcast television. There are three broadcast television stations: the state-owned enterprise RTTL and GMN-TV, both broadcasting nationally on terrestrial networks and via satellite, and TV Edukasaun (TVE), broadcasting terrestrially to Dili and elsewhere online. RTTL became the national broadcaster upon independence in 2002, following on from the UN-administered television and radio broadcasts; the law establishing it as a state-owned enterprise was passed in 2008. GMN-TV was established in 2017.



Media type ²	Examples	Notes
National broadcast TV	RTTL	State-owned company, radio & TV. Terrestrial analogue, terrestrial digital, satellite broadcast
	GMN-TV	Commercial company, radio & TV. Terrestrial analogue, satellite broadcast. GMN Group also includes newspapers.
Local broadcast TV	TVE	Commercial company. Dili coverage, terrestrial analogue broadcast

Broadcast radio. There are some 26 radio stations across the country.³ Two consistently broadcast nationally – RTTL and GMN’s Nacional FM – while a third, Radio Maubere, run by political party Fretilin, also broadcasts across the country but only during election campaigns. The remaining six non-community radio stations are all based in and broadcast to the capital: Radio Liberdade, Radio Metro, Radio M3, Radio STL, Radio Timor Kmanek (of the Catholic Church), and Radio Vox. All but two of the seventeen community

² This denotes the main platform used. All legacy media also have digital platforms, often multiple; these are not included here.

³ This figure combines data from MAPKOMS, ‘Opiniaun Pùblika Sidadaun Nia Asesu Ba Meiu Komunikasaun Sosiál Iha Timor-Leste’; ARKTL’s website, at: <https://arktl.wordpress.com/profile-husi-estasaun/>; and government announcements on new community radio stations.



top: RTTL journalist interviews President José Ramos-Horta. bottom four photos: Journalists at work in Dili.



Man wearing a Kaibauk headdress at a traditional ceremony in Ermera.

Media type ⁹	Examples	Notes
National broadcast radio	RTTL	State-owned company. Terrestrial analogue and digital broadcast with online presence
	Radio Nacional	Commercial company, part of GMN Group. Terrestrial analogue broadcast with online presence
	Radio Maubere	National terrestrial broadcast during election period with online presence
Broadcast radio based in Dili	Radio Liberdade	Operates with Fundasaun Media Development Centre, providing training with online presence
	Radio Timor Kmanek	Owned by the Catholic Church, Dili Diocese with online presence
	Radio Vox	Commercial company with online presence
	Radio STL	Commercial company, together with STL print newspaper with online presence
	Radio M3	Commercial company with online presence
	Radio Metro	Run by government department SECOMS with online presence
	Radio Rakambia	Community radio with online presence, member of ARKTL
	Radio Lorico Lian	Community radio with online presence, member of ARKTL
Broadcast radio based outside Dili	Afoni Lifau, Radio Comunidade Maliana, Cafe Ermera, Rai Husar, Ili Wai, Radio Popular Colelemai Bucoli, Lian Matebian, Radio Comunidade Los Palos, Radio Povu, Don Boaventura, Radio Mauloko, Lian Tatamailau, Cova Taroman	Community radio, members of ARKTL. See map for locations. While majority of the stations outside of Dili have an online page and/or a social media page, not all are active.
	Radio Comunidade Lian Manu Koko, Lian Proklamador Francisco Xavier do Amaral	Community radio, not members of ARKTL

Print. Timor-Leste has five daily national newspapers based in Dili: Timor Post, Diario Nacional, STL, Jornal Independente, and Dili Post. Until recent years there was a small number of printed weekly and periodical publications; these have closed or moved exclusively online.

⁹ This denotes the main platform used. All legacy media also have digital platforms, often multiple; these are not included here.

Media type ¹⁰	Examples	Notes
Print	Timor Post	Commercial company. Provides training, own printing press
	Diario Nacional	Commercial company. Own printing press
	STL	Commercial company. Provides training (inactive)
	Jornal Independente	Commercial company. Provides training
	Dili Post	Commercial company

Online-only media. There are, unsurprisingly, a large number of online media outlets, including both online-only publications and an online presence for all broadcast media and print publications. Combined audience surveys identify eight as commonly accessed: government news agency Tatoli, Dili-Gente, Lafaek News, Neon Metin, Timor News, Naunil Media, Tempu Timor and Oekusi Post.¹¹

This research only encountered three online-only news sites dedicated to a municipal audience (beyond the websites and Facebook pages of community radio stations): Liquiça Post, the Mambae TV YouTube channel (occasionally updated) in Aileu, and Lian Orluli in Ainaro.

Media type ¹²	Examples	Notes
Online only, based in Dili	Tatoli	Government national news agency
	DiliGente	Support from Camões Institute
	Lafaek News	Self-funded. Includes video
	Neon Metin	Established by RENETIL. Includes video podcast
	Timor News	Commercial company
	Naunil Media	Commercial company
	Tempu Timor	Commercial company
	Oekusi Post	Commercial company (inactive)
Online only, based outside Dili	Liquiça Post	Supported by UNDP innovation grant. Based in Liquiça
	Mambae TV	Voluntary YouTube channel. Based in Aileu
	Lian Orluli	Based in Ainaro

¹⁰ This denotes the main platform used. All legacy media also have digital platforms, often multiple; these are not included here.

¹¹ MAPKOMS, 'Opiniaun Públika: Sidadaun Nia Asesu ba Meiu Komunikaun Sosiál iha Timor-Leste', 2022; and The Asia Foundation, *Tatoli Public Perception Survey, 2022*. The Tatoli survey 2022 also identified GMN's *Diario Nacional*, complementary to its offline media, as gaining significant online audience access.

¹² This denotes the main platform used. All legacy media also have digital platforms, often multiple; these are not included here.

Podcasting

A relatively recent feature of Timor-Leste's media landscape is the number of podcasts, which have proliferated in recent years; one podcast producer suggested this is a result of COVID lockdowns providing the time and space to develop and launch. Most podcasts are one-on-one discussions recorded as video in studios and posted on YouTube – in other words, a direct substitute for broadcast-only panel discussions. Podcasts vary greatly in nature: some are 'soft talk shows' by established media outlets; some focus on social justice and human rights; at least one offers to produce episodes on commission.

Media industry bodies. The Timor-Leste Press Council plays a key role in media advocacy and self-regulation; other key advocacy organisations are the Timor-Leste Journalist Association (AJTL), the Timor-Leste Press Union (TLPU), the Timor-Leste Community Radio Association (ARKTL), and (from 2023) the Timor-Leste Union of Professional Journalists (UPJTL). Most also run training events or workshops for journalists. Separately, the government-administered Technical Training Centre for Communication (CEFTEC) delivers a range of training to journalists, students, and government communication officers; universities including the National University of East Timor (UNTL) and Universidade Catolica Timorese (UCT) offer social communications streams.

Government agencies. The Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs and Social Communication (MAPKOMS) and, under that, the State Secretariat for Social Communication (SEKOMS) play a key role in media regulation, funding disbursement, and infrastructure; this has sometimes included infrastructure relating to digital broadcast rollout, while SEKOMS also runs the Dili radio station Radio Metro. The National Communications Authority (ANC) regulates the radio frequency spectrum. The Ministry of Transport and Communications (MTC) is responsible for elements of communication infrastructure and the digital transition, supported by the Information and Communication Technology Agency (TIC), which was recently incorporated within the ministry's portfolio.

Interview at phone company Timor Telecom.



RTTL journalists at work.



04

TIMOR-LESTE MEDIA: VISION AND MISSION

Concepts of Media Roles

For each media outlet, respondents who were media practitioners were asked to describe their outlet's history, role, and mission, and to discuss the reasons for the coverage they produced.

Respondents predominantly regarded the media's primary role as one dedicated to capturing the voices of the people, a commitment that guided their approach to content production and coverage. The general sentiment was that other media outlets did not sufficiently capture community voices – yet the various examples of coverage provided were often quite similar, generally comprising coverage of an impoverished family in dire need of support. In most (but not all) cases this came together with anecdotes in which individual government leaders (the prime minister, the president, etc) saw the story and then sent aid to the family concerned. This framing and illustrative examples were discussed by respondents from national broadcast TV/radio (both RTTL and GMN) as well as print and online-only media.



Through representing the voices of the people, the media saw the government as their primary audience. This was indicated both explicitly and implicitly by respondents. This approach to defining their audience involved publishing community perspectives, experiences, and needs, with the intent of informing the government so that it would take action to rectify a (usually localised or individual) situation or need – with the implication that, if nothing is being done, it is because the government is unaware.

The media's role in empowering citizens by serving as an information source was only highlighted by a minority of respondents. While several respondents emphasised the media's role in raising community concerns to the government, the inverse – i.e. informing communities of what the government is doing – was generally not highlighted, with some exceptions (Tatoli agency in particular, such coverage being part of their core mandate).

'Kontrolu sosial' was a term commonly used by media industry bodies and media advocates to describe the media's role. It signifies the role of the media in upholding social accountability, holding the government, security apparatus, parliament, and courts to account and serving as an advocacy platform around issues such as citizen rights and democracy. It is worth noting that interviewees from media industry bodies generally saw the media as a strategic space to facilitate citizen-led action, more so than respondents from media themselves.

Local broadcasters and online-only media outside Dili defined their primary role as one geared towards **servicing local communities**. This involved providing information so audiences could make decisions (the most straightforward example being telling farmers market prices); facilitating debate and supporting local conflict resolution (such as Radio Mauloko’s panel discussions around martial arts groups, discussed below); and empowering community members to produce their own media (such as Radio Liberdade’s training programs that focus on young people, also mentioned below).

Target Audiences

This section explores the broad target audiences of broadcast, print, and online media. Interviews with media representatives validated the notion that most media outlets did not have a defined target audience as part of their remit. Only a few outlets defined their audience according to specific demographics or interests; the location and reach of a media outlet’s own platform provided the main definition by default. Further to the above, respondents in media stated that there is no regular audience survey data collection to segment their audience across broadcast platforms.

It should also be noted that media coverage is overwhelmingly produced in Tetum. Among those media outlets included in the interview sample, Tetum was the main language with the exception of DiliGente, which was established as a result of scholarships from Camões Institute and which broadcasts in Portuguese. Community radio stations have some programming in local language; this varies in scale by location and was described overall as limited or minimal. A minority of outlets also have some coverage in Indonesian, and English, but this is on a much smaller scale than Tetum productions.¹³

National broadcast media: RTTL is mandated by legislation to meet the needs of audiences across the country, while GMN-TV’s mass-market strategy requires the same. Beyond news bulletins, audiences are understood to gravitate to particular shows and presenters that reflect their interests or preferences. At the time this research was conducted, neither RTTL nor GMN-TV had a defined demographic as their target audience.

Local broadcast media – meaning community radio located outside Dili – defined their audiences exclusively along geographical lines. They aim to respond to all issues affecting the community within their footprint. Radio Liberdade is an exception in that it engages with several specific social groups in training and production.

Print media, represented by Timor Post, defined their biggest audience as government personnel, followed by NGOs and other national and community-based institutions. Although coverage is broad, the general public is understood to be a minor part of their regular audience.

¹³ RTTL also produces some content in Portuguese and, more recently, with ABCID support, in English. Tatoli agency has coverage in Tetum, Portuguese, Indonesian, and English; on a lesser scale, so does Timor Post. GMN-TV has some limited programming in Portuguese; Hatutan states that it uses some Indonesian.

Online-only media showed the greatest variety in target audiences. SMNews and Lafaek News have no specifically defined audience; however, Hatutan understands its audience by level of education, aiming for those who have completed secondary education or above. Liquiça Post is similar to Radio Tokodede in that it aims to fulfil specific local community news and information needs. DiliGente targets Timorese young people and Portuguese speakers interested in rights and social justice issues, while the JPF Podcast explicitly locates itself within social activism and advocacy, particularly around developing youth leadership. As the government-run news agency, Tatoli is in its own category as a ‘national clearing house’ of news, producing coverage that serves as a reference for national and regional audiences.

Media Independente journalist interviewing a market vendor in Balibo.





top: Journalist with a mojo kit interviewing a market vendor in Dili. **middle left:** A group of broadcaster trainees outside Radio Liberdade. **middle right:** Journalists conducting an interview at an environmental journalism training workshop. **bottom left:** Journalists taking photos at Tasi Tolu in Dili. **bottom right:** Journalist filming at a community event in Ermera

Diaspora Audiences

Almost every online-only media outlet reported significant engagement with Timorese diaspora audiences, with Timorese based in Indonesia, the UK, South Korea, and Australia mentioned the most. For Hatutan, this audience outnumbers readers within the country; for other outlets, the figures were much lower, but remained significant. Radio Liberdade also reported diaspora engagement through its online platforms, with the same trend reported in the cases of RTTL and GMN-TV. The exception appears to be Liquiça Post, with its specific local community focus. However, beyond incidental coverage – for example the departure of seasonal workers from Timor to Australia, or the accidental death of two Timorese in South Korea – there has been no apparent attempt to identify or engage with the diaspora community through an assessment of their needs and experiences. The only possible exception among those outlets covered in interviews is SMNews, which is considering the possibility of establishing or supporting citizen journalists in places with high numbers of Timorese residents.

Audience Engagement: Social Media and More

All media outlets maintain a social media presence; for most this is additional to their main platform (broadcast, print, or website), with the exception of SMNews which uses Facebook as its main channel. All respondents reported engaging with commenters who had suggestions or constructive criticism, including adapting or improving some articles as a result. All stated that they accept criticism, but that they largely ignore it if it is perceived to hold specific political biases.

Online-only publications highlighted concerted efforts to moderate comments on their website as their prime publishing platform, deleting comments that use swear words or crude language, including defamatory comments that attack individuals. In most instances, no editorial guidelines are used to inform the moderation process, although there was a general awareness of the Timor-Leste Press Council's Code of Ethics as a key reference. However, the majority of media organisations interviewed do not moderate comments on their social media pages, which are viewed as the individual commenter's responsibility. None of the media organisations interviewed had formalised community guidelines around social media comments.

Although all outlets engage with audiences, respondents did not highlight any formalised audience data collection/research processes. One key exception is Radio Mauloko in Maubisse, which conducts a community survey every two years with the collaboration of village-level administrators; this then informs programming decisions. Another exception is Tatoli agency, which states that it carries out an evaluation every quarter, including reviewing online comments.

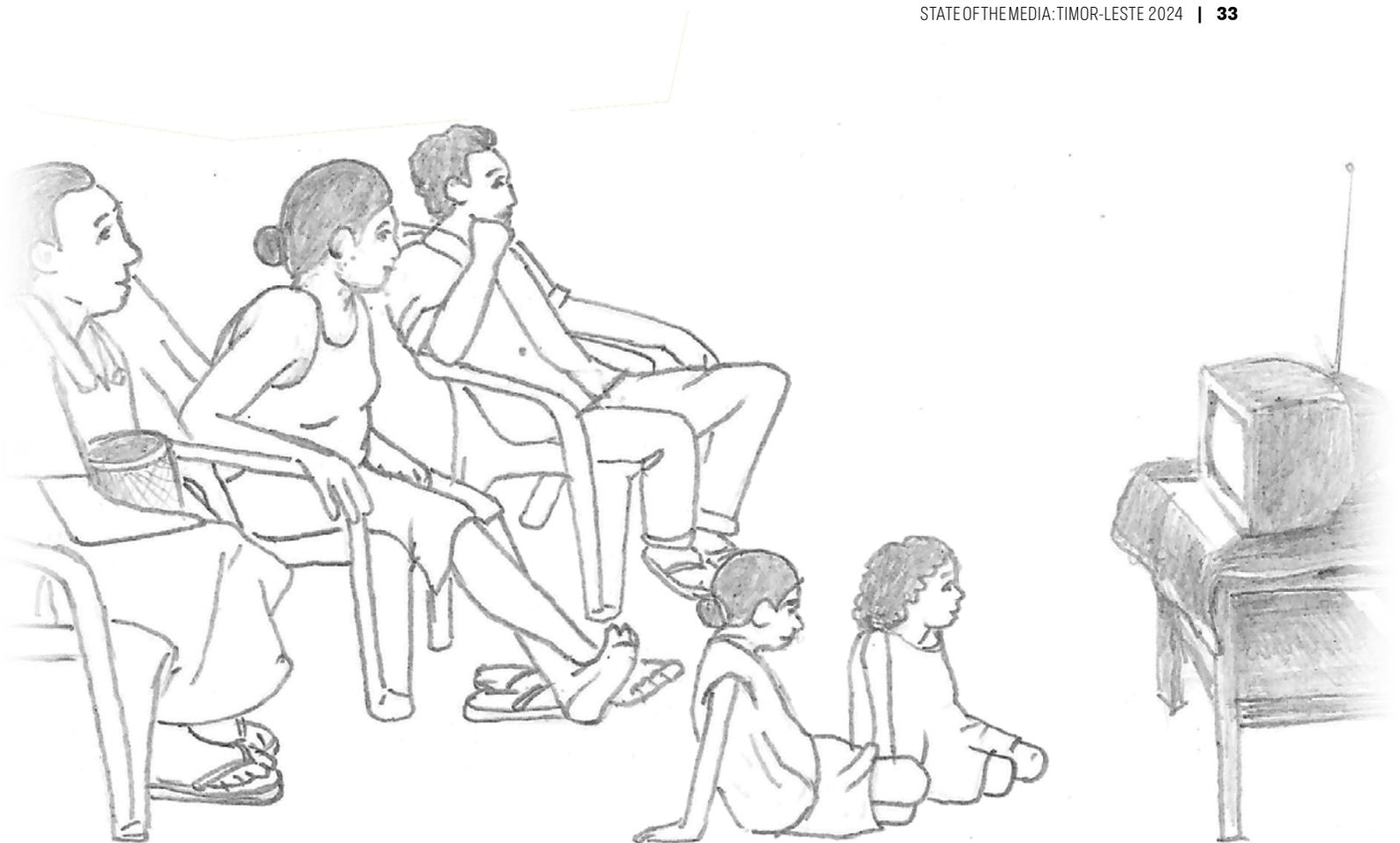
Other audience engagement includes face-to-face interactions (a common means for smaller media outlets), phone calls, and emails. Community radio and some smaller outlets also reported receiving visits from audience members either responding to, or asking for, particular coverage.

05

MEDIA ACCESS

Media Access by Platform

Availability of audience access data has been sparse owing to the lack of data infrastructure and resourcing within media organisations across Timor-Leste. To ensure consistency in analysis of media access, The Asia Foundation's 2023 Tatoli Public Perception Survey was utilised as the most applicable representation of citizen media access, given its statistically significant sample size (N=3,754) and the availability of a detailed methodology. The data in the published study were triangulated with insights obtained through key informant interviews as part of this research, to ensure accuracy.



Media type	Media access (Tatoli 2023 N=3,754)
Television	65%
Radio	32%
Print	NA
Social media	Facebook: 32% YouTube: 15%

The 2023 Tatoli Public Perception Survey looks at the most frequently used sources of information across the main media platforms. While the data show that TV is more frequently accessed than radio, interviews with radio broadcasters revealed that radio remains the platform of choice for audiences without TV access in rural areas. It should be noted that print media access was not covered by the 2023 Tatoli survey, but the 2022 iteration of the same survey (N=2,451) established a 2% national reach for print media. Due to differences in survey questions, The Asia Foundation has advised that the 2022 and 2023 media access survey data is not directly comparable.¹⁴ Further to the above, the surveys did not explore communities where people have no meaningful media access of any sort; this presents an opportunity for further research in this area.

¹⁴ The Tatoli survey question options changed between 2022 and 2023, making results across years not directly comparable. The 2023 study accordingly adjusts the results from previous years, with the 2022 figure for television access adjusted to 75% (from 77%) and the figure for radio adjusted to 26% (from 25%).

Media Access outside Dili

The 2023 Tatoli survey included data on citizen media access within and outside Dili and across urban and rural areas. The urban figures combine those for Dili and those for other municipal centres. In both urban and rural locations, television remains the most used media source, albeit to a lesser degree in rural areas. Radio is accessed marginally more in rural areas than in urban areas. Broadcast media, Facebook, and YouTube have higher penetration rates in urban areas due to variances in level of infrastructure, as addressed later in this report.

Tatoli Public Perception Survey 2023: Most Used Media Sources

	Television	Radio	Facebook	YouTube
Urban	74%	25%	44%	25%
Rural	60%	35%	26%	11%

Disability-Inclusive Accessibility

In interviews, only two respondents mentioned specific measures to improve platform accessibility for the disabled community: GMN-TV, which has one sign-language interpreter for news bulletins, and DiliGente, which has embedded audio options for its written articles. However, it should be acknowledged that there may be other disability-inclusive accessibility measures in place across other media outlets.

Media Outlet Reach

The 2023 iteration of the Tatoli survey did not capture the reach of individual media organisations, and the most recent data source available is the 2022 survey. The 2022 Tatoli survey captured weekly media outlet reach and platform reach, surveying audiences on (for example) which channels they most watched over the span of a week. A similar study was conducted by MAPKOMS in 2022, but it did not account for respondents who watch more than one channel; the study’s methodology was also not accessible. As such, results from the MAPKOMS survey are not included in this section on media reach.

A musician performs on the radio.



Kids look on as a journalist films in an outdoor market.



Tatoli 2022 (N=2,451) ¹⁵	
Television	50% of respondents indicated they watch television every day, while a further 17% reported they watch television a few times a week. RTTL (90%) GMN (69%) TVE (5%)
Radio	19% of respondents indicated they listen to radio every day, while a further 21% reported they listen a few times a week. RTTL (77%) Community radio (52%, aggregate for all stations) Radio Maubere ¹⁶ (22%) GMN (17%)
Print	4% of respondents indicated they read a newspaper every day, while a further 15% reported they read a newspaper a few times a week. 65% indicated they do not read newspapers. NA
Social media	75% of respondents indicated they use social media less than 1 hour per day, while a further 10% reported they use social media more than 3 hours per day. Facebook (Dili 98%, municipalities 95%) YouTube (62%)
Online-only news	NA

Media Platform Trust

A comparative analysis was undertaken on shifting levels of media trust in 2022 and 2023, drawing from the Tatoli surveys which examined how citizens rank their level of trust in selected media platforms. In 2022 television was the most trusted, at 70%, with Suco Council and local leaders coming in second, at 9% (11% outside Dili, 0.2% in Dili). Trust in radio was registered at 7%. There are no details on trust in specific media outlets or in other sources such as Facebook or other social media, with the implication that these would come in below 9%.¹⁷

In 2023, television was still the most trusted source, although the level of trust declined by 14 percentage points to 56%, with Suco Council and local leaders nominated by 26% of respondents as their most trusted source. Radio ranked third at 7%, aligning with 2022 trust levels. Urban respondents trusted television most (71%, compared to 49% in rural areas). Rural respondents trusted their Suco Council/local leaders more (34%, compared to 10% for those in urban areas).

¹⁵ Reach percentages for each organisation reflect percentage of sampled respondents.

¹⁶ The 2022 Tatoli survey also found that 23% of rural audiences indicated they listen to Radio Maubere, compared to 13% of those in Dili.

¹⁷ Although the Tatoli 2023 survey states that trust in radio reached 7% in 2022, the report of the Tatoli 2022 survey did not include this figure.

06

BUSINESS MODELS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Government Funding

Timor-Leste's economy is dominated by state revenue and expenditure.¹⁸ This inevitably shapes the media landscape, with most publications either dependent or relying to varying degrees on versions of state support. In the case of national broadcast media such as RTTL, although this is a state-owned enterprise it is expected to generate further funds (including revenue through paid airtime). As the national broadcaster, the bulk of its budget is from the state budget. GMN-TV is the only media interviewed that is self-sustaining on a commercial basis. This includes a specific unit, separate from the newsroom, that generates content for a fee.

¹⁸ See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/timor-leste/overview> (accessed 17 Oct. 2023)



Local broadcast media, comprising community radio outside Dili, rely significantly on funds from SEKOMS, which have varied depending on the presiding government. Funds are paid twice a year; these cover news production (at US\$2.50 per news item) and some other programming (e.g. 12 talk shows over six months are funded at US\$40 each, and dramas at US\$130).¹⁹ Further funds come from international agencies and NGOs; for example, UNICEF funds programming on child’s rights and CARE funds programming on women’s rights. The exception is Radio Liberdade, which operates the training institution Fundasaun Media Development Centre; this contributes to their funding, including training and program production workshops supported by international organisations such as The Asia Foundation and ABC International Development, among others.

Print media: Timor Post depends to a significant extent on government subsidies. It has some advertising and also runs paid training programs.

¹⁹ The funding is a set amount, decided by SEKOMS; while this is uniform for each station, respondents from different stations interviewed were not consistent on the total amount overall.

Online-only media have highly varied revenue sources. Among respondents interviewed from online media outlets, the following information on funding streams was obtained:

- Lafaek News generates revenue by providing audiovisual services to events.
- DiliGente is, in effect, the second-year practicum of a two-year Camões Institute journalism scholarship, which is about to run out.
- Liquiça Post gained primary funding through a UNDP-managed innovation grant, but struggles to generate funds from other sources.
- JPF Podcast primarily relies on ad hoc solidarity support.

Respondents noted that the majority of online-only media outlets give free advertising space to mobile phone providers, in exchange for data.

Media Staff and Salaries

Interview data show that 50% of the media outlets sampled rely exclusively or near exclusively on volunteers to operate. National broadcast media staff are all paid positions, while local broadcast are almost all voluntary. Radio Liberdade has a mix of staff and volunteers working across radio production, training, and administration. Some positions can be fluid, attracting payments when project funding is available but reverting to a voluntary nature when it is not. For print media, Timor Post staff are all paid, while online-only media are, again, mixed: Hatutan staff are paid; DiliGente's are students with scholarships and so a different category. SMNews, Lafaek News, and JFP Podcast are voluntary; Liquiça Post has 50% paid staff, while the work of voluntary personnel is regarded as on-the-job training. Outside voluntary positions, salary levels vary greatly, with government institutions noted as paying more. Interviews with the media revealed that there is significant turnover among lower-paid journalist positions. It was highlighted that journalists often take up work in political parties with the hope of gaining better-paid positions in government if their party is elected. The churn caused by this economic reality creates obstacles to building and sustaining skills and editorial systems, and is a significant structural challenge to a skilled media sector.

Social Inclusion and Diversity in the Media Sector

All respondents stated that their media outlet did not discriminate against minorities in its hiring policies; however, none has an explicit policy of diversity in hiring. Representation of minority groups among paid staff or volunteers is low; almost all examples of minority staff in media came from community radio or Radio Liberdade, illustrating the importance of media platforms where community access and involvement are regarded as core principles.

No media outlet acknowledged the presence of LGBTQ+ staff, although two community radio stations had previously had an LGBTQ+ volunteer. From the interviews, it was also evident that there is limited awareness of disability classifications and inclusive strategies in the workplace across the media sector, including the provision of physical accessibility measures (e.g. wheelchairs).

Five of the media outlets interviewed have women in management or directorial positions. Women are still a minority in terms of representation at leadership level relative to men in all sampled media organisations. Among editorial staff, most publications have a mix of women and men, with women in the majority in five outlets.



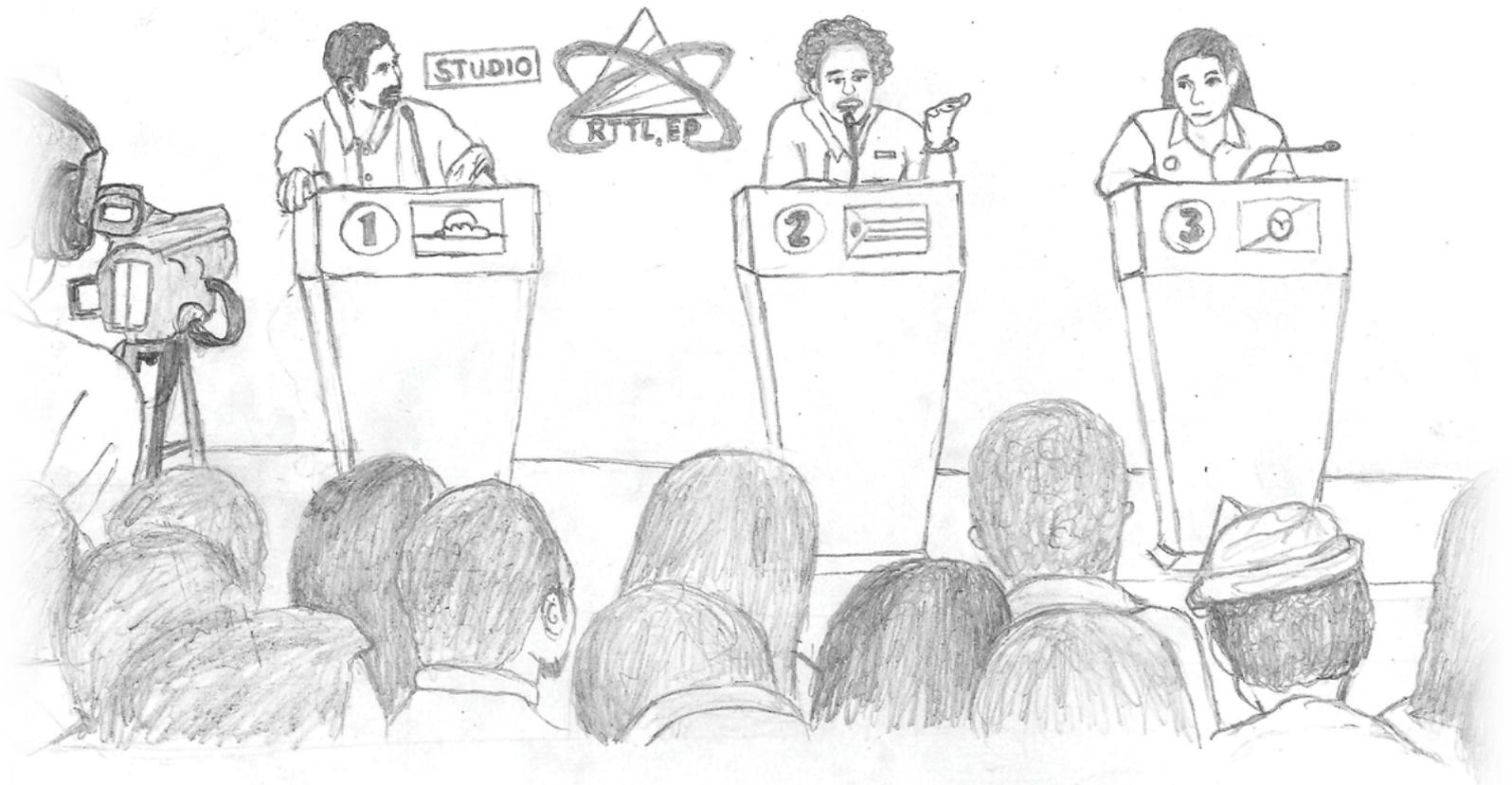
top: A broadcaster who is blind presents his show on Radio Liberdade. *left:* Trainees attend a workshop at Fundasaun Media Development Centre. *right:* UNTL media interns with a Radio Liberdade journalist.

07

MEDIA COVERAGE

Interviews, along with recently published material, were also used to explore media coverage content, with the aim of understanding key trends in coverage across news and cross-cutting topics such as gender and civil society. The MAPKOMS media monitoring initiative remains the primary survey of media coverage content across Timor-Leste. The study broke coverage down according to national, municipal, and international news as follows:

DEBATE PARTIDU POLITIKU ELISAUN PARLAMENTU 2024



MAPKOMS Media Monitoring: Type of News Coverage

	Municipal	National	International
Television	2%	87%	11%
Radio	2%	78%	20%
Online	28%*	71%	1%
Print	3%	34%	64%

* The higher level of online municipal news coverage is likely due to Tatoli agency, which is mandated to be a 'national clearing house' of information, and which produced half of all online news items monitored for this study.

The results starkly show that, as well as having reduced access to media, municipal communities are underrepresented in coverage. Of note is that just over half the television news monitored was produced by RTTL, while a little under 40% of the radio coverage was also from the national broadcaster. However, it is important to note that this monitoring occurred during COVID restrictions, which may have limited municipal journalists' movements; this context is not discussed in the study.

Role of Press Council in Monitoring Election Content

The Timor-Leste Press Council played an integral role in assessing media coverage of the 2023 election campaign. As part of its regular media monitoring, the Press Council reviewed media reporting during the 2023 parliamentary elections, including quantifying the scale of coverage of different political parties by various media.

The Press Council highlights that some media did provide comparable coverage of different parties, with monitoring showing that RTTL's 'Dalan ba Parlamentu' (Road to the Parliament) and 'Jornal Eleisaun' (Election Journal) programs, in particular, gave space to all parties in the campaign. While GMN-TV's 'Direito de Antena' (Right of Antenna) also gave space to all parties, it gave far more coverage to the larger parties, especially to the CNRT (National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction), the opposition party during the campaign and the leading party in government following the election.²⁰

The relative scale of Timor Post's coverage of different political parties varied greatly by platform, usually including only a few parties in each case. In the print version, Fretilin (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) received significantly greater coverage, followed by PLP (People's Liberation Party), then PD (Democratic Party) and CNRT. For Timor Post Online, CNRT received by far the greater coverage, with PVT (Green Party of Timor) and Fretilin some distance behind, while on the Timor Post YouTube channel, Fretilin received around half of total coverage, with CNRT far behind in second.

Hatutan's coverage included a wide range of parties, with CNRT receiving the most, then Khunto (Enrich the National Unity of the Sons of Timor), PLP, and Fretilin. Tatoli agency also covered a wide range of parties, with Fretilin and CNRT receiving the most coverage by some margin, followed by Khunto, PLP, and PD.

Media outlets sampled by the Press Council's media monitoring initiative mostly produced coverage that disproportionately focused on a small number of parties, with often just one party dominating. The exceptions were RTTL, Hatutan, and Tatoli, whose reporting was designed to provide access to all parties. The Press Council's media monitoring did not assess whether the coverage was critical/negative, and hence it should be noted that high levels of coverage do not necessarily equate to positive coverage.

The Press Council's media monitoring also identified eight journalists, editors, and media leaders using or promoting political party symbols or positions in their own social media posts. Following its monitoring of the campaign, the Press Council's report recommended sanctions for media outlets and journalists who directly promoted political parties. The Press Council proposed that further training on election reporting be considered via the AJTL, TLPU, and UPJTL.

²⁰ Also monitored was coverage by *Jornal Diariu GMN* (print, with around 40% of articles covering CNRT, and 20% Fretilin); *TVE* (with its livestreaming providing greater time to CNRT, while another program provided the bulk of available time to Fretilin); *Independente TV* (livestreaming, only providing time to Fretilin); *Independente Online* (website, spread across multiple parties); *Independente Jornal* (print, preponderantly Fretilin, followed by PVT); *STL News*, and *STL Jornal* (all providing greater space to Fretilin, followed by CNRT); *Oekusi Post* (exclusively CNRT, though only 3 reports); *Loluwari* (exclusively PDC); *Sap News* (prominently PD and PDC); *Naunil Media* (5 parties including PDC, PLP; not CNRT); *Midia Esperansa* (only 6 reports in total); *Neon Metin* (10 parties, with PVT receiving the most coverage at 4 articles); and *Dili Post Jornal* (11 parties, greater coverage of Khunto followed by Fretilin).



top: Dili's annual Pride march. *middle left:* A journalist interviews a participant at a Dili Pride march. *middle right:* Fretilin supporters take to the streets in the lead up to an election. *bottom left:* A small Catholic shrine. *bottom right:* Broadcaster on air.



Cristo Rei statue in Dili.

Key Thematic Narratives in Media Coverage

The study asked participants to discuss the nature of their own coverage and that of media more broadly. The aim of this section is to foreground the sector-wide factors that influence reporting on cross-cutting topics such as gender, the church, and civil society groups, subject areas that were regarded by respondents as central to media engagement in Timor-Leste.

Media Coverage of Social Inclusion and Diversity

Nine media organisations volunteered that they regularly prioritise coverage of diverse and/or marginalised social groups. Most Dili-based media said that the bulk of coverage of such groups occurs when the media are notified or called to events such as international days of recognition or similar, with the disability and LGBTQ+ communities discussed as examples; coverage of Dili's annual Pride march was widely mentioned.

Media outlets whose coverage emphasises a social advocacy perspective take this further, for example by orienting their work around defending minority rights, with in-depth coverage (DiliGente), or promoting debate on marginalised communities or rights issues (JFP Podcast; Lafaek News, with an emphasis on disability). Radio Liberdade delivers training to members of different social groups, including young people, women, and people with disability; members of these groups are then often involved in producing relevant coverage or discussions.

Media focused on specific communities outside Dili – community radio stations and Liquiça Post – also have frequent coverage of different community groups, including people with disability (mentioned by all), young people, women, children, and LGBTQ+ people.

RTTL emphasised the importance of representing diversity in its mandate. Tatoli agency stated that it sets its own annual coverage targets that include gender balance in representation, although information on whether those targets were met was not available at the time this research was conducted.

Women

Virtually all respondents agreed – many emphatically – that Timorese society is strongly patriarchal, to the degree that it is difficult to eradicate stereotyped gender frames from journalists' coverage. Over the years there have been several stories of abandoned infants, and a number of editors highlighted the headline 'Mother Abandons Baby' as encapsulating such stereotypes, noting that it is used even though it is often impossible to know who actually abandoned the child and who else may also be responsible for the act. There was no editor who thought this an acceptable portrayal, which suggests that criticism of that particular stereotype has had an effect; a search of some relevant coverage shows that, while the framing certainly still exists (including in commentary

from church officials),²¹ it is far from uniform across all media,²² with some less judgemental coverage also in evidence.²³

Some editors characterised broad media practice as habitually blaming women in these and similar situations and ignoring men – one saying they are ‘contaminated by patriarchy’ – and indicated that women’s rights remain marginalised as ‘not serious’ compared to issues of security or defence. However, another said that media are not responsible as they are merely ‘following socialisation’ or established norms in not prioritising this in coverage. Only two outlets volunteered that women’s rights and gender equality is an explicit priority, with one listing a range of related coverage about topics such as forced and underage marriage, sex education, and abortion. Another editor stated that they often have to explain to journalist staff that women’s rights (and representation) are not a ‘private woman’s problem’ but a social issue, and that stereotypical headlines cause damage.

A key observation by respondents was that a lack of journalistic skills and confidence plays a big part in reinforcing stereotypes within coverage. Respondents also noted that it was common practice for journalists to simply default to following dominant social narratives, including those purported by authorities, due to a lack of skills in analysing the reporting context and objectively assessing the evidence at hand independently of political pressure or external influence.

Catholic Church

The majority of interviewees affirmed that many journalists are afraid to publish criticism of the church. An example raised was around reports on the case of American priest Richard Daschbach, who was convicted of child sex offences committed over decades at an orphanage in Oecusse. Although the story received significant coverage internationally, within Timor-Leste Neon Metin is widely recognised as having followed and published on the issue, including victim/survivor perspectives; Tempo Timor also produced a number of reports.²⁴ Most media, however, limited their coverage, often to following the court case only – something directly acknowledged by several respondents.

On this and other cases implicating the church, some interviewees relayed discussions with journalist colleagues who are reluctant to investigate or publish because of the backlash they will receive – either from the public or, depending on the issue, from church officials themselves; self-censorship on these issues is reportedly common. Respondents gave example rationalisations for not pursuing coverage: belief in and respect for God, that priests as God’s representatives are above reproach, that sex is a need and ‘we’re all sinners’, and that the church ‘supported the independence struggle’.

21 See <https://tatoli.tl/2022/03/25/uma-kreda-lamenta-ho-inan-soe-bebe/> (accessed 10 Oct. 2023)

22 See <https://tempotimor.com/latest-news/3301-durante-tinan-5-ema-soe-bebe-49>, <https://tempotimor.com/latest-news/10415-ema-deskonesidu-soe-bebe-mane-ida-iha-laga-sagadate> (both accessed 10 Oct. 2023)

23 See <https://www.thediliweekly.com/tl/notisias/16138-presiza-analiza-kean-kauza-inan-soe-bebe> (accessed 10 Oct. 2023)

24 See <https://www.laohamutuk.org/Justice/2021/RD/21Daschbach.htm> (accessed 10 Oct. 2023)

However, there was also the presiding sentiment among respondents that attitudes on self-censorship are starting to change, with newer, smaller, online media – especially those which have emerged from advocacy-related backgrounds, such as Neon Metin and JFP Podcast, as well as Diligente – typically more prepared to take these issues on. This shift was noted by respondents to coincide with an increasingly younger audience.

Three respondents noted they had been attacked online, and two threatened for critical coverage; fear of authorities – whether the church, politicians, or others – means that when one outlet breaks or expands coverage on a controversial story, other media outlets may simply sit back. Some respondents noted that when Neon Metin covered the Daschbach story in depth it also became a main target for attacks, while other media limited their reporting.

Respondents also highlighted that the reluctance to cover church-related controversy could also be based in limited understanding of how to exercise ethical practice when reporting on such cases. Intimidated by the risk of being caught in legal implications and by a lack of understanding of what could and could not be published, most journalists interviewed preferred to avoid controversial reporting. Fear, then, is not only caused by the power of authorities and backlash, but is also due to a lack of some critical skills in navigating these challenges.

Martial Arts Groups

Timor-Leste has a number of martial arts groups (MAGs) with large public memberships that form a key part of civil society. These groups were highlighted by respondents as the subject of criticism from politicians for inciting violence during political campaigns.

The majority of respondents stated that media coverage of MAGs focuses on acts of violence, especially between rival groups. Journalists' own opinions were varied: some believe MAGs are a danger and should all be shut down, while others are MAG members themselves. A number of respondents said that MAGs are 'sports groups', stating that reports of intergroup clashes are often misrepresentations of personal disputes (mistaken reporting that can easily escalate a situation). Other interviewees in locations outside Dili spoke of previous security concerns that have since been resolved; in these areas MAGs now provide security at events together with the police.

Several Dili-based media stated that the MAG context is complex and the main challenge is not having sufficiently skilled journalists able to report on this. Respondents revealed that much coverage of an event is limited to 'he said, she said' journalism, stopping at the statements of local leaders (administrators, police, and so on) and the leaders of MAGs themselves.

Respondents also mentioned that due to a lack of journalistic investigation skills, there is a tendency for media to follow narratives set by political leaders. For example, if MAGs are identified by those leaders as sources of violence and instability, that is the media frame. If they are described as 'sports groups', the frame shifts accordingly. The general sentiment expressed was that MAGs are more complex than both those characterisations and that simply following the framing of political leaders likely indicates a fundamental need for greater journalistic training. For Timor-Leste's media, a clear need for stronger skills and practice in conflict-sensitive reporting was expressed.



MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

All interviewees agreed that mis/disinformation is a significant problem in Timor-Leste, particularly around elections, overwhelmingly attributing this to political party supporters – generally those more educated. The concepts of ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’ were not distinguished by respondents during the interviews, and differences in the meaning of the two concepts were not regarded as part of common understanding.



The term used much more frequently was ‘hoax’ (also common in Indonesia) as a catch-all for all false, fabricated, or untrue information – including reporting – with the implication that such information was, at least initially, deliberately generated. Other terms that were raised in the same discussions were ‘trata malu’ (abuse and insult), ‘ataka ema nia privasidade’ (attacks on individuals’ characters), and ‘diskursu odiu’. This last translates directly as ‘hate speech’ or ‘hate discourse’, and it was mostly applied to situations where a group characteristic – race or religion – was deployed in attacks on an individual. The example most frequently raised was attacks on the Fretilin party leader Mari Alkatiri that were based on his Muslim religious identity.²⁵ While this example targets group characteristics of an individual’s identity, no respondent raised an example of hate speech that targeted an entire group.

In the interviews conducted, every respondent referenced these terms – ‘trata malu’, ‘ataka privasidade’ – to denote different forms of bullying, which exist not only in political contexts but also at a community level. These terms – whether misinformation, hoax, or hate speech – may not always be defined or deployed in ways equivalent to their use in international debates. They do, however, consistently indicate that respondents are looking at the whole online environment, and not limiting their discussion and concerns to mis/disinformation. This suggests that design of any support around

²⁵ This attack was by CNRT leader Xanana Gusmao; see ‘Media Coverage’, above. Another ‘diskursu odiu’ example, raised in interviews only once, was attacking current prime minister Xanana Gusmao as ‘mixed blood’ and not ‘pure Timorese’.



misinformation and disinformation may be more fruitful if it also incorporates and examines the concerns expressed by these local terms, to inform the development of relevant frameworks.

All respondents stated that their media outlet tackled misinformation/hoaxes, with a process usually described as ‘verifying correct information with the relevant authorities’; this task fell to the relevant journalist or editor covering the issue or story in question. None described a more detailed or specific process, such as specific methods or techniques used to confirm or debunk information in circulation; none stated that they had a fact-checking unit or particular senior journalists or editors who had developed specific skills in this area and could then be a point of reference or mentor within a newsroom. Several respondents pointed to other media outlets as occasionally or frequently disseminating mis/disinformation – some of those interviewed were indicated by other respondents as commonly engaging in this practice or habit. Some respondents noted that journalists also lack skills to identify instances of mis/disinformation.

Although some sources or references mention a regulation from the previous government specifically relating to mis/disinformation, enquiries with the former Secretary of State for Social Communication confirmed this did not exist. Further policies, practices, or legislation for tackling this do not appear on the program of the newly elected CNRT-led government.²⁶ Nevertheless, the new Secretary of State for Social Communication, Expedito Dias Ximenes, stated that tackling misinformation

²⁶ See <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?cat=39&lang=en#prog2.9> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

and disinformation will be a key part of their activities. At the time of interview, the government was still in the process of reviewing existing policies and programs; detailed proposals or frameworks were not available. However, the secretary noted a number of potential areas of activity, including:

- a campaign on media literacy (in collaboration with the Timor-Leste Press Council);
- regulating fake news/hoaxes and online libel (discussed in connection with the Cybercrime Law, although – as noted below under ‘Media Legal Landscape’ – the current draft does not include these elements);
- the potential to review or revise various other laws, including the Social Communications Law (passed in 2014, also called the Media Law), the Broadcast Law, and the Timor-Leste Press Council’s own statute (see ‘Media Legal Landscape’, below);
- a government platform dedicated to tackling hoaxes;
- regulation of fake identities, especially as relates to vilification or libel (‘menjelekkkan’);
- training and capacity building for journalists in general.

The previous government also implemented media/hoax literacy initiatives, including a competition among prominent YouTubers to produce related material that could then be promoted.

According to Secretary Ximenes, this training would also be delivered in collaboration with the Timor-Leste Press Council, for which disinformation has been a focus in recent years. This has included trainings in fact checking in 2020,²⁷ 2021,²⁸ and 2022 (covering journalists, Press Council staff, university students, and youth groups);²⁹ moves to develop an anti-disinformation alliance;³⁰ an election disinformation workshop in 2022;³¹ and media literacy training for secondary school students in 2023.³² With the support of those involved in Indonesia’s CekFakta.com, the council launched a fact-checking initiative³³ for the national elections held in May 2023; however, at the time of writing the site was no longer active. Interviews with respondents make clear that newsrooms would still benefit from consolidation of information around mis/disinformation.

27 See <https://conselhoimprensa.tl/eventu/atividade/499-ci-no-undp-realiza-treinamentu-journalism-fact-checking> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

28 See <https://conselhoimprensa.tl/eventu/atividade/665-ci-no-unesco-realiza-tot-kona-ba-online-fact-cheeking> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

29 See <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-supports-creation-fact-checking-alliance-timor-leste> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

30 See <https://conselhoimprensa.tl/eventu/atividade/660-ci-no-unesco-realiza-forum-editorial-kona-ba-dezenvolvimentu-aliasa-kombate-dez-informasaun-ih-tl> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

31 See <https://conselhoimprensa.tl/eventu/atividade/631-ci-serbisu-hamutuk-ho-perludem-no-facebook-realiza-workshop-kombate-disinformasaun-eleitoral-ih-timor-leste> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

32 See <https://conselhoimprensa.tl/eventu/atividade/692-conselho-de-imprensa-fasilita-media-literacy-training-ba-estudante-sekundariu-sira> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

33 See <https://aji.or.id/read/press-release/1575/timor-leste-fact-check-diluncurkan-menjelang-pemilu-parlemen-timor-leste.html> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)



MEDIA LEGAL LANDSCAPE

The media legal landscape of Timor-Leste comprises a complex intermix of legacy legal frameworks and new regulations, which, according to respondents, have both positive and negative implications for the media and its independence.

Articles 40 and 41 of **Timor-Leste's Constitution**³⁴ guarantee, respectively, press freedom and freedom of expression. However, there have been several examples of proposed or actual legislative changes where elements of this have been at risk; defending and improving these protections, and anticipating challenges to them, remains a preoccupation for many in the sector.

³⁴ See http://timor-leste.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Constitution_RDTL_ENG.pdf (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)



The 2014 **Social Communications Law** (Lei da Comunicação Social,³⁵ commonly called the Media Law) created a legal framework for media beyond solely the use of the criminal code. While that is positive, some elements of the law have been identified as problematic: for example it sets out conditions to work as a journalist that include the requirement to register, which is only possible after internship with a recognised media outlet and is subject to required qualifications. This and other features of earlier versions of the law – including what many believed were inappropriate penalties for a variety of breaches – resulted in sustained debate and advocacy efforts, with some changes implemented in the final version.³⁶

The actions the law requires of media outlets (‘organs of social communication’) include:

- establishing an editorial council;
- developing and adopting an editorial statute;
- registering as a media publication (although there is no penalty for not registering, and a large number of media outlets do not appear on the list maintained by the Press Council);
- publishing the names of owners;³⁷
- limiting foreign ownership of any publication to 30%.

³⁵ See <https://www.mj.gov.tl/jornal/?q=node/6488> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

³⁶ NGO La’o Hamutuk participated in and documented the advocacy process and documented the results; see <https://www.laohamutuk.org/misc/MediaLaw/14MediaLaw.htm> (accessed 5 Oct. 2023). The page includes a link to a rough translation of the earlier draft, but not one of the final law.

³⁷ While this is required by law, the list of media owners is apparently not compiled in an accessible location.

The law also requires community radio stations to be established by the relevant community, through a recognised community association.

The law established the right of reply in disputes over media coverage. Under Chapter VII, it also established the Press Council (its statute subsequently approved by decree in 2015),³⁸ with (among others) the following functions:

- approve and oversee the implementation of the journalist Code of Ethics;
- mediate or arbitrate in disputes with citizens, organisations, or government bodies that relate to journalist activity;
- register media publications (as an administrative process, not as authorisation), with this later published in the *Jornal da Republica* (government document of record);
- administer disciplinary processes related to journalists, including establishing infractions and sanctions;
- grant, review, suspend, or revoke official journalist certification; and
- support journalist organisations and the development of journalists' skills and capacities.

The law includes no reference to digital media, by default excluding references in the title to 'journalist', individual citizen journalists and non-media organisations which may run Facebook pages, blogs, YouTube channels, and similar – even though the nature of this work falls under the legislation's definition of journalistic activity. This also means there is no enshrined right of reply, as administered by the Press Council, in relation to those outlets. For this and other reasons, media advocates including the Timor-Leste Press Council believe the law needs revision, although lack of resources means detailed options for any changes are yet to be developed.

Legal Protection for Journalists and Media

The Social Communications Law lists several journalist rights, with Article 41 providing for up to two years' imprisonment for those who stop, threaten, prohibit, or deny space to those working as journalists; Article 19 lists other rights including access to official sources, public events, and protection of sources. Although there has been a small number of documented cases of threats and intimidation of journalists by officials, none has resulted in prosecution.³⁹

³⁸ See https://www.mj.gov.tl/jornal/public/docs/2015/serie_1/SERIE_I_NO_29.pdf (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

³⁹ IFJ, *Holding the Line* (2019); see <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/reports/detail/holding-the-line-south-east-asia-media-freedom-report-2019/category/publications> (accessed 17 Oct. 2023)

Criminal Defamation

Current Criminal Penal Code

The use of criminal defamation against media outlets and journalists has been a constant concern in the sector. The 2009 Criminal Code deliberately does not include criminal defamation – but it does include ‘slandorous denunciation’ (covered by Article 285),⁴⁰ meaning publicly accusing someone of a crime when the accuser knows that no such crime has been committed.⁴¹ This is the law that has been used in cases against journalists in the past, including charges filed by the then-prime minister, Rui Maria de Araujo, against Raimundos Oki and Lourenco Vicente Martins in 2016.⁴²

Criminal Code: Further Articles

Article 183 of Timor-Leste’s Criminal Code also strongly protects privacy, creating strict definitions of public and private interests, under which it is actionable if media publish details of, for example, a politician’s personal affairs without that person’s consent. The penalties can include fines or a one-year prison sentence. Article 184 penalises the divulgation of secrets, whether of state or business (company records can be secret) without consent, with fines or prison terms the possible penalties.

Other Legislation

Cybercrime Law

A draft Cybercrime Law⁴³ was submitted by the prosecutor-general to the government in January 2021. Some media freedom and freedom of expression advocates fear this may lead to some online censorship measures similar to those that exist in Indonesia’s notorious Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) Law.⁴⁴ Government representatives have urged that the law tackle online pornography⁴⁵ or ‘regulate’ behaviour on Facebook, such as the use of fake IDs and ‘terrorising’ others online; the Secretary of State for Social Communication has also voiced support for some of these options.⁴⁶ (See ‘Misinformation and Disinformation’, above, for more on approaches

⁴⁰ See <https://rsf.org/en/country/timor-leste> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

⁴¹ A 2002 UN executive order, issued before the restoration of independence, decriminalised defamation; the 2005 Criminal Code then criminalised it; see https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/Holding_the_Line_2019.pdf (accessed 6 Oct. 2023). The current 2009 Criminal Code was largely copied from Portugal, which does have criminal defamation – this was deliberately removed, but ‘slandorous defamation’ (‘denuncia calmunhosa’) remained, likely by oversight (research interview).

⁴² See <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ASA5764142017ENGLISH.pdf> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

⁴³ See <https://www.laohamutuk.org/Justice/defamation/cybercrime/PropostaLeiCibercrime26Jan2021pt.pdf> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

⁴⁴ See <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/attempts-to-revise-draconian-ite-law-stumble/> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

⁴⁵ See <https://www.tic.gov.tl/tp/content/timor-leste-seidauk-iha-lei-espes%C3%ADfiku-hodi-kontrola-s%C3%ADtiu-pornogr%C3%A1fiku> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

⁴⁶ See <https://tempotimor.com/justisa/8021-governu-sujere-pn-diskute-lei-sibernetika-regula-midia-sosial>

– or the absence of these – to social media.) Such measures are not present in the law’s current draft, which is designed to comply with the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime⁴⁷ and to cover areas not part of the criminal code; this is part of Timor-Leste’s moves to comply with ASEAN and WTO requirements around intellectual property and related areas.

Even without potential censorship measures, respondents from both the media and the legal sector have raised some concerns with the current draft, stating that it does not provide safeguards around computer surveillance or the seizure of computer data. A key concern is that it lacks relevant protection for whistle-blowers and could also lead to closure of media outlets, civil society organisations, and businesses by making them liable for violations committed on their premises or by an employee by (for example) receiving or using data provided by a whistle-blower.⁴⁸

Data Privacy and Protection Law

A draft law was developed in 2021 prior to the time of writing, and has been held by the Ministry of Justice. Timor-Leste’s Constitution has strong privacy safeguards, meaning that any number of initiatives – particularly around the development of a unique digital ID for citizens, a key part of the Timor Digital 2032 strategy (discussed under ‘Media Infrastructure’, below) – requires an overarching law that can define issues such as how citizens give consent for their data to be shared across agencies. Legislation in this area is also key for both citizens and investors ahead of the changes that will come with increased connectivity delivered through Timor-Leste’s first submarine fibre-optic cable (see ‘Media Infrastructure’, below).

Broadcast Law

No law sets the terms for journalistic radio or television broadcast in Timor-Leste; while stations need a licence from the National Communications Authority (ANC) to use the broadcast spectrum, the terms to apply for and receive this are purely technical and do not differ from those for other users of the spectrum.⁴⁹ This means there are no measures, for example, to ensure that radio and television broadcast licences respond to public needs or interests; to mandate local content; to guarantee technical quality of broadcast and therefore reception (an accessibility consideration); or to safeguard against political use of, or interference in, broadcasts – among other considerations. In early 2021 the Timor-Leste Press Council and ANC agreed to develop a memorandum of understanding on the issue;⁵⁰ however, a new Broadcast Law was approved by parliament in 2022.⁵¹ This was sent to the president’s office and on to the Court of Appeal

47 See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cybercrime/the-budapest-convention> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

48 For a detailed discussion, see http://www.laohamutuk.org/Justice/defamation/cybercrime/ICNL%20Comments%20on%20Draft%20Law%20Cybercrime%20Law_Timor-Leste_March2021.pdf (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

49 The application form is available here: <http://anc.tl/media/2020/01/BC-BT-Application-Form.pdf> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

50 See <https://conselhoimprensa.tl/en/activities/565-ci-and-anc-agree-to-establish-an-agreement-on-electronic-media-registration> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

51 See <https://www.parlamento.tl/node/2111?language=tl> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)



Timor-Leste Press Council president Otelio Ote speaks to a room full of journalists.

(Tribunal de Recurso), which rejected the legislation stating that it allowed broadcasts to disseminate propaganda (i.e. enabled political party-owned broadcast media), which, it determined, violated the Constitution's principle of equal rights to free expression. The president then vetoed the law,⁵² and a new version has yet to be presented to parliament. Regulation of the sector is part of the newly elected government's stated program.⁵³

Freedom of Information

Access to Official Documents Law

There is no freedom of information law; however, there are a number of laws that affect transparency and freedom of information in practice. On the positive side is the Access to Official Documents Law,⁵⁴ a law which, according to respondents, most journalists were unaware of and did not utilise. Under this legislation, any member of the public can request access to public documents by citing the document in question, and can also request that information not yet documented be transcribed. This still comes with challenges (include finding out which government department is the owner of a particular document), but the mandated period for delivery, once requested, is 10 days. (The government also has a 'Transparency Portal',⁵⁵ covering areas such as budget expenditure, aid, and procurement.)

Criminal Code, Article 184

The state has a public responsibility to share information, but there is also a lack of protection for whistle-blowers: in fact all government staff are obliged to maintain confidentiality, with investigations and disciplinary procedures possible if information reaches the public sphere. This was described in interviews as a contradiction in government departments' own understanding of their transparency obligations. In at least some cases, it is possible for journalists, once tipped off, to avoid placing sources in jeopardy by requesting the information they need through the Access to Official Documents Law, but research interviews for this study did not find any examples of this in practice.

52 See <https://pt.tatoli.tl/2023/05/05/pr-comenta-inconstitucionalidades-do-tribunal-de-recurso-na-proposta-de-lei-de-radiodifusao/> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

53 See <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?cat=39&lang=en#prog2.9> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

54 See <https://www.mj.gov.tl/jornal/public/docs/2016/traducao/DL%20n%C2%BA%2046-%202011.pdf> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

55 See <http://transparency.gov.tl/english.html> (accessed 6 Oct. 2023)

Journalists and Legal Literacy

Justice is a popular news staple, yet legal experts consulted for this research commented that most journalists – including many of those who report on it – largely do not have a good understanding of the law and legal systems, highlighting this as an area that needs improvement. These gaps can be in understanding the actual stages of the legal process, or in particular areas – one area cited was poor understanding of what happens when someone is accused or convicted of corruption; another was confusion around whether sexual harassment constitutes a crime.

Reporting practices around protection of identity for (especially) victims of sexual crimes were described as haphazard: faces might be blurred and names obscured, but simply giving initials or information about where someone lives can still reveal identity. This situation, according to respondents, is compounded by the court system itself, with judges often not clearly communicating the rationale behind their decisions and inadvertently violating the victim's privacy when delivering their verdict.

Indonesia - Timor-Leste Border.



10

MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURE

Broadcast Infrastructure

Timor-Leste's media infrastructure is at the precipice of change. Provisions for digital broadcasting (television) have taken root, amid national plans for the establishment of a submarine cable via the Timor-Leste South Submarine Cable (TLSIC) project, which will potentially lower internet connectivity costs and increase speeds. This section explores the latest developments across broadcast and digital infrastructure.



A desk review of publicly accessible documents on Timor-Leste’s media infrastructure noted an absence of a definitive map of television (or radio) broadcast coverage – whether actual footprint across the country’s topography, the position and power of all broadcast towers, or similar. The closest relevant document is ‘Sound and Television Broadcasting Plans for Timor-Leste’ (2008), produced by the International Telecommunications Union, which outlines principles of broadcast planning, and the ‘Master Broadcasting Plans for East Timor (Timor-Leste)’.⁵⁶

However, although no detailed map of radio or television broadcast footprint exists, the scale of the challenge is indicated by the Tatoli Public Perception Survey 2023, in which 33% of rural audiences said that poor radio and TV signal hampered access to those sources, compared to 25% of urban audiences. The absence of electricity was also a challenge for 34% of rural audiences, compared to 14% of urban audiences; 30% of rural audiences also said they had no place to access media.

⁵⁶ This covers details on the existing AM (MF) broadcast towers, including locations and broad footprint coverage; frequency blocks by geographic area for FM (along with existing broadcasts and their necessary adjustments); frequencies and channels by area for Terrestrial-Digital Audio Broadcasting (T-DAB) and for TV (VHF and UHF, analogue and digital). Broadcasting plans not accessible online.

A pilot project around the establishment of a digital television system was installed at RTTL in 2019 with support from China and was subsequently launched in 2021. As of early 2024, the project remains inactive due to a presiding technical issue. The Timor-Leste government is investing in towers to support RTTL's transition to digitalisation. In 2024 the Australian Government funded a design and scoping study for digital television in Timor-Leste.⁵⁷

While the development of digital television is gaining momentum in Timor-Leste, this research encountered no plan to establish or expand digital radio broadcasting.

Digital Infrastructure

Digital Divide

Mobile phones provide by far the greatest share of internet connectivity as accessed by Timorese Timor-Leste's citizens, with the study reporting that 94% of respondents access the web through mobile Android devices.⁵⁸ But enormous barriers remain, especially around cost: in The Asia Foundation's 2023 Tatoli survey, 66% of respondents had a monthly income under US\$100 a month, and 59% cited limited funds to pay for connections as restricting their access to media. (This is not exclusive to digital, and may include other media connections such as satellite dish receivers or parabolas.) Half of respondents to the Tatoli survey also said they had limited or no access to internet reception or connection.

The Digital Last Mile

Government regulation mandates that each mobile phone provider must cover 98% of the country's territory (even though in some places this is only 3G), leaving a significant last-mile challenge to inclusion. The Information and Communication Technology Agency (TIC) is working with international partners, including the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), on programs to resolve this and is connecting 12 municipalities with optic fibre to enable greater access to government services; previously they had been renting use of private operators' infrastructure.⁵⁹

National Connectivity

Timor-Leste has three mobile phone providers, with a fourth, Ceslink, approved in 2021.⁶⁰ Established by a consortium led by Portugal Telecom in 2002, Timor Telecom (TT) was initially granted a 15-year monopoly by the government, a policy that switched to a liberalised approach in 2012, with Brazilian company Oi emerging as majority owner in 2013. In 2023 the Timor-Leste government approved buying Oi's shares, which would give it a majority stake in TT.⁶¹ Other providers include Telkomcel (business name TELIN),

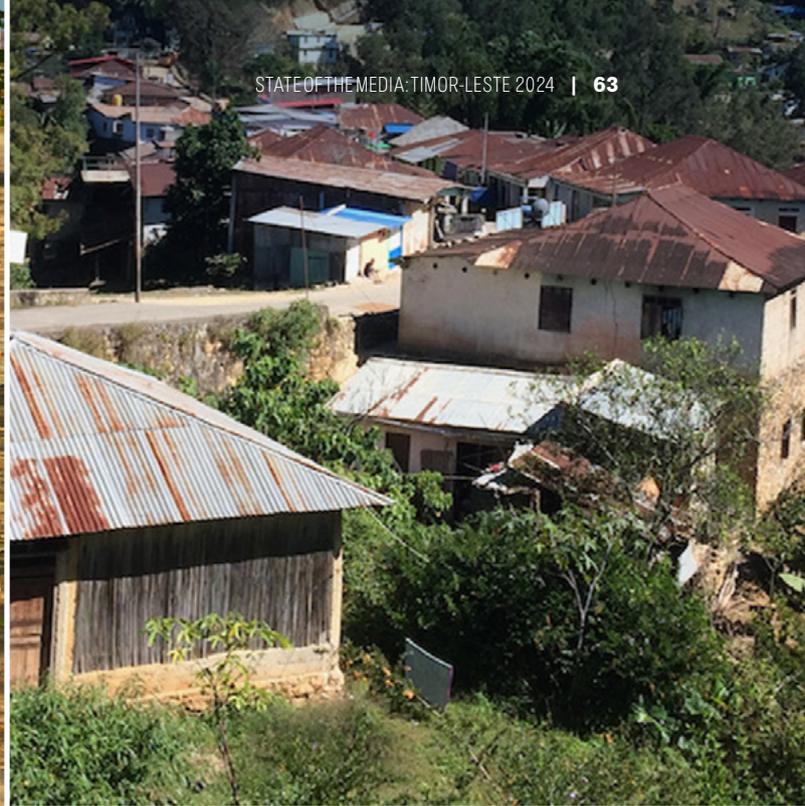
⁵⁷ See <https://www.abc.net.au/abc-international-development/timor-leste-planning-for-digital-tv-transition/103514076> (accessed 5 April. 2024)

⁵⁸ MAPKOMS, *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Authors interview with TIC

⁶⁰ A fourth submitted its application in 2019 and has been approved; set-up is still in process. See <https://en.tatoli.tl/2021/09/16/a-new-telecommunications-service-provider-to-operate-in-tl/> (accessed 5 Oct. 2023)

⁶¹ See <https://developingtelecoms.com/telecom-business/operator-news/14920-timor-leste-advances-buyout-of-oi-s-timor-telecom-shares.html> (accessed 4 Oct. 2023)



left: Goats on a beach in Oecussi. *right:* Rooftops in the town of Maubisse.

launched in 2013 as a subsidiary of PT Telekomunikasi Indonesia,⁶² and Telemor, a subsidiary of Vietnam's Viettel, launched a few months after Telkomcel.⁶³ All providers launched 4G services in 2017 and LTE services in 2019; they together cover around 95–98% of the population with at least 3G services.⁶⁴

Radio Spectrum Frequencies

Expanding mobile data services and new technologies require management of radio frequency allocations, the role of the National Communications Authority (ANC). At the end of 2020, the government revised policy guidelines to maximise spectrum use, inviting mobile phone operators to apply for allocations in the 1800MHz, 2300MHz, and 2600MHz bands (all used for LTE services) and publishing providers' allocated frequencies in March 2022.⁶⁵ The ANC also issued an updated draft frequency allocation plan⁶⁶ for public consultation in 2022. The full allocation by service type – i.e. not by individual user – was published in December 2022.⁶⁷

⁶² See <https://www.commsupdate.com/articles/2013/01/21/telkom-launches-in-mobile-market-under-telkomcel-brand/> (accessed 4 Oct. 2023)

⁶³ See <https://www.commsupdate.com/articles/2013/04/17/viettel-introduces-mobile-services-under-telmor-brand/> (accessed 4 Oct. 2023)

⁶⁴ See <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Timor-Leste-East-Timor-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses> (accessed 4 Oct. 2023)

⁶⁵ See <http://anc.tl/radio-frequency-spectrum-assignment/index.html> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

⁶⁶ See <http://anc.tl/the-consultation-paper-on-national-radio-frequency-spectrum-plan/index.html> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

⁶⁷ See <http://anc.tl/media/2023/04/NFAT.webp> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)



RTTL media workers edit a story.

In addition, Timor-Leste has a number of internet service providers (ISPs), whose activities include the use of radio links; as well as the mobile phone providers, eight ISPs are currently registered to operate.⁶⁸

Interviews indicated that there are two national fibre-optic networks: one established by the government's power agency Electricidade de Timor-Leste (EDTL), initially as a means to manage the electricity network, and another established and owned by Telemor. However, within the terms and the timeframe of this research, it has proven difficult to fully confirm all information on the current state of the terrestrial fibre-optic network. In part this may be because the government is in transition, with changeover of personnel since the May 2023 election; there is also no clear official reference that brings information together. Interview respondents indicated that there is a need for consolidated information on the technical details behind the progress and establishment of the terrestrial fibre-optic network.

International Connectivity: From Microwaves and Satellites to Submarine Cables

Timor-Leste currently has no international fibre or submarine cable connection, meaning that international connectivity is limited to microwave connections to Indonesian networks (connections run either by Telkomsel or private operator Metrolink, a subsidiary of Indonesian company Moratalino), as well as low-orbit satellites, greatly reducing speed and carrying capacity. In November 2020 the government approved the Timor-Leste South Submarine Cable (TLSSC) project, signing the contract with Alcatel Submarine Networks in May 2021; the project connects the country to Australia's North-West Cable System (NWCS).⁶⁹ to go live in the later part

⁶⁸ See <http://anc.tl/list-of-operators/index.html> (accessed 4 Oct. 2023)

⁶⁹ See <https://id.tatoli.tl/2022/05/31/pasang-fiber-optik-dari-australia-pemerintah-dan-alcatel-tandatangani-kontrak-38-juta/> (accessed 4 Oct. 2023)

of 2024⁷⁰ and to significantly increase internet speeds⁷¹ and reduce costs for both consumers and media outlets. While TLSSC is government funded, a second privately funded cable, known as the Asia Connect Cable (ACC-1), initiated by Australian company Inlgo Networks, is in development. A further, third submarine cable connection to the south has also been discussed.⁷²

The ITU's Infrastructure Connectivity Map sketches current fibre-optic (blue) and microwave (green) connections. The map includes a fibre-optic link to Dili that connects to Indonesia's national Palapa fibre network, when none currently exists; this appears to be the planned ACC-1 cable.

Timor-Leste Current Connections: Fibre-Optic (Blue) and Microwave (Green)



Source: ITU Infrastructure Connectivity Map⁷³

Connectivity Opportunities and Challenges

Respondents from the media sector noted that increased digital connectivity and lower data costs through improvements to digital infrastructure will allow them to deliver more media training to media practitioners in various municipalities. There was also the sentiment that the notion of 'citizen journalism' would become more feasible in municipal locations. Further to this, there was a belief that Timor-Leste would have a bigger presence globally and within ASEAN.

⁷⁰ Research interview with TIC. Another map resource appears to show the cable already in place; see <https://www.submarinecablemap.com/> (accessed 5 Oct. 2023)

⁷¹ Current microwave links limit provider speeds to a maximum of 20GBps; the submarine cable will provide a maximum of 15TBps though it will start at 800GBps, with the government procuring 200GBps and expanding later (author interview with TIC).

⁷² Research interview with TIC

⁷³ See <https://bbmaps.itu.int/bbmaps/> (accessed 4 Oct. 2023)

Specific challenges were also raised by respondents (specifically, media practitioners) in regard to increased connectivity. A key challenge is that the workforce does not have the required skills and expertise to both apply and maintain the systems and equipment. This is also highlighted by ESCAP,⁷⁴ with universities and secondary schools yet to fully integrate ICTs in their curriculum; many schools have limited to no access to a sustained electricity supply needed to achieve this.⁷⁵ As discussed, limitations in media literacy are already a challenge when confronting current levels of mis/disinformation; the importance of this will only increase as internet access expands. Connectivity also requires much stronger cybersecurity, cybercrime, and data protection laws (noted above); while legislation for areas such as cybercrime and data protection is necessary, it is not sufficient: the actual physical systems – and skills to manage them – also need to be in place.

At the time of writing, Timor-Leste does not have a telecommunications law. The absence of this creates difficulties managing investment in the sector,⁷⁶ including the development of a national broadband policy.⁷⁷ Finally, various sources including ESCAP have pointed to overlapping areas of responsibility and lack of coordination among different government bodies, including ANC, TIC, and the Ministry of Transport and Communications; the fact that both ANC and TIC are now under the ministry may help resolve this.

Timor Digital 2032

Launched in 2023, Timor Digital 2032 outlines the country's plan for digital and ICT development.⁷⁸ Its focus is naturally far wider than the areas which will directly affect media; it incorporates five strategic pillars and five enabling pillars, several of which respond to the challenges noted above. The TIC holds the key role in coordinating and implementing this plan, which requires sustained collaboration and input across multiple ministries. It comprises the following strategic pillars:

- Governance, including a consolidated portal for all e-governance needs;
- Inclusive Economy, enhancing market participation including Suco portals;
- Health, including connecting all clinics and care facilities;
- Education, including connecting all schools and installing ICT labs;
- Agriculture.

A key element of Timor Digital 2032 is establishing a unique digital ID for every everyone to access services; see 'Media Legal Landscape', above.

⁷⁴ See ESCAP, 'Regulatory Policies and ICT Trends: Insights from Timor-Leste', 2019, p. 6, available at: <https://www.unescap.org/resources/regulatory-policies-and-ict-trends-insights-timor-leste> (accessed 5 Oct. 2023). This includes not just computer science and ICT, but also electrical engineering and telecommunications and industrial engineering.

⁷⁵ Tertiary institutions that teach relevant skills include the UNTL's Informatics Department in the Faculty of Engineering, the Dili Institute of Technology's Computer Science Department, and the ICT Department at the Institute of Business. According to research interviews, at this stage the market does not absorb the number of graduates. The ICT Association conducts some of its own skills development sessions for members, which number around 100.

⁷⁶ Research interview with TIC

⁷⁷ See <https://www.flipsnack.com/8AABB9DD75E/timor-digital-2032.html> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)

⁷⁸ See <https://www.flipsnack.com/8AABB9DD75E/timor-digital-2032.html> (accessed 12 Oct. 2023)



Outside GMN's building in Dili.

Print Infrastructure

Timor Post, Diario Nacional, and STL have their own printing presses. Distribution is limited; Timor Post – the most read daily newspaper, according to the MAPKOMS citizen media access study – distributes only to Baucau, Aileu, Manatuto, and Manufahi municipalities, with a total of 700 national daily copies. There was a considerable lack of information in research interviews around practitioner sentiments on how traditional infrastructure and digital infrastructure models would co-exist in the future. This remains a gap to be addressed in future research.



GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS AND PRIORITIES

Other areas of government policy focus, beyond the media legal landscape, mis/disinformation, and media infrastructure, include:

Decentralisation and Municipal Media

The government's policy to devolve decision making and implementation of government programs to the municipalities will require greater local media capacity to ensure that communities are informed and that relevant entities can be held accountable. Preparing for this is part of the new government's program; there is an emphasis on ensuring that communities have access to information about government programs – including explaining the decentralisation policy itself – as one of the new administration's priorities, as well as delivering training for municipal journalists. At this stage, early in the new government's term, all local media interviewed in this research stated that there has been no significant or detailed discussion on what decentralisation might mean for their roles and operations.



Reflections on potential benefits and/or pitfalls varied from all three community radio stations interviewed. There was a general concern about the local administration potentially appropriating the station as their official communication channel. Further to this, respondents believe that the role of community radio is still not well understood by either national or local administrators. These positions reflect different perceptions of current circumstances, with all three stations stating that their current relationships with local administrations are positive and productive.

Naroman ba Suku

Beginning in 2019, the previous government began establishing village community information centres, dubbed ‘Naroman ba Suku’ (Illuminate the Village). These have been established in 24 sukus,⁷⁹ with dialogues around this process held in another 8.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ In the following municipalities: Same-Manufahi (Suku Rotutu, Suku Bubu Susu); Same-Turiscari (Suku Fatucalo); Aileu (Suku Liurai, Suku Seloi-kraik); Atsabe / Ermera (Suku Batu-Manu, Suku Hatolia A); Bobonaru (Suku Soi-Lesu, Suku Leo-Hitu); Bobonaru-Kailako (Suku Purugua); Baucau (Suku Haeconi); Baucau-Venilale (Suku Wailaha); Los Palos (Suku Lore II, Suku Maupetine); Los Palos / Iliomar (Suku Fuat); Suai-Covalima (Suku Dato Tolu, Suku Fatumea); Maubara-Liquiça (Suku Lisadila); Ainaro (Suku Mulo); Oecussi / Raéoa (Suku Malelat, Suku Bobometo, Suku Bene-ufe); Viqueque (Suku Waimori); Viqueque-Uatolari (Suku Makadiki).

⁸⁰ In the following municipalities: Ermera-Hatulia (Suku Leomia Kraik); Bobonaro (Suku Lontas); Baucau (Suku Saelari); Baucau-Quelicai (Suku Laisorulai de Baixo); Baucau-Vemasse (Suku Waigere); Atauro (Suku Makadadi, Suku Bequeli); Viqueque-Hossu (Suku Nahareka)



RTTL English program films a feature interview.

The program has various functions, ensuring that citizens can access information about government activities; that citizens can directly raise their concerns and preoccupations with government; promoting local tourism; and launching local online media.⁸¹ The new administration states that it will continue with the program – although it may use the name ‘Centru Informasaun Suco’ instead – with possible changes still to be determined; the focus is on delivering information about government programs, including increasing transparency and combating corruption.⁸² This can include using the centres to provide public internet access and as a place to access newspapers purchased and made available by the government.⁸³

⁸¹ See, for example: <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=22007&lang=tp&lang=tp>; <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=21996&lang=tp&lang=tp>, and <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=23089&lang=tp&lang=tp> (accessed 27 Sep. 2023)

⁸² Research interview with SECOMS

⁸³ Research interview with SECOMS

Community Radio Stations

The new government program also includes establishing more community radio stations and supporting ARKTL, the community radio association.⁸⁴ At the time of the research interview, ARKTL was not aware of this specific commitment and stated that the association found it difficult to gain government access. The shape of this community radio support, and how new stations might be established, were still to be developed. ARKTL and certain community stations have a long-standing position that the current method of government payments – received by individual stations direct from SEKOMS for production of specific news and programming – should change to one administered with or through ARKTL, as the representative body that reflects the understandings and operations of community radio as a sector.

Tatoli Agency and RTTL

The national news agency and national broadcaster are both priorities for the new government. This includes further developing Tatoli as a news source and delivering new facilities, including studios, to RTTL. (At the time of writing, a new building has been under construction with delivery deadlines extended three times to date.)⁸⁵

Press Council and Journalist Training

The Timor-Leste Press Council is identified as having a key role, including support, in the new government's program; this includes delivering training, countering mis/disinformation, and working on any media freedom and freedom of information legislation.⁸⁶ (The current Secretary of State for Social Communication, Expedito Dias Ximenes, was, in a previous role, a member of the council.) The government also intends to establish a Journalists Training Institute, expanding on existing training resources including the Technical Training Centre for Communication (CEFTEC) and relevant social communication programs run by different universities.

Women and Gender Perspectives

The government's programs include goals dedicated to increasing women's access to and participation in media, and improving gender perspectives and representation of the role of women in media coverage.

Other elements of the government's program include: following through on the Broadcast Law (see 'Media Legal Landscape', above); continuing and reviewing subsidies to commercial media, in particular print; promoting the use of official languages; supporting national journalist associations; training media officers in ministries and municipalities; and promoting Timor-Leste on digital platforms.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ See <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?cat=39&lang=en#prog2.9> (accessed 27 Sep. 2023). Tetum version available at: <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?cat=39&lang=tp>

⁸⁵ See <https://www.hatutan.com/2023/08/07/sekoms-ho-ekipa-tekniku-sei-haree-fali-projetu-harii-torre-tolu-ho-konstrusaun-edifisiu-rttle-p/> (accessed 3 Oct. 2023)

⁸⁶ Research interview with SECOMS; the last answer was provided in response to an interview question, and is not currently listed in the government's own program.

⁸⁷ The full program is available here: <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?cat=39&lang=en#prog3.7> (accessed 11 Oct. 2023)

12

RECOMMENDATIONS AND POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS

Respondents were asked what they wanted to improve in their own media outlets. Key recommendations drawn from their answers are featured below.

Funding and Revenue

Respondents in the media sector revealed that lack of funds, limited sources of revenue beyond government, and the compromises and pressures both of those bring create many of the challenges faced by Timor-Leste's media sector. Highlighted below are key recommendations on funding and revenue raised during the interviews.



Arm's-Length Public Funding

It was noted that the lack of diversity in the country's economy means that complete non-reliance on government funding is not a viable option in the public interest. Respondents mentioned that the proposal for ARKTL to administer public funds targeting community radio stations would go some way to removing the possibility, or even the perception, of government priorities impinging on the public interest in media outlet considerations. The role and positioning of ARKTL make this approach for community radio eminently feasible, notwithstanding the need for clear criteria and transparency in operations, including expanding the association's own ability to administer these funds and to be responsive to its membership.

Audience Identification and Targeting

Media outlets noted that they typically engage with audiences in an organic manner, without embarking on systematic audience research. There was a presiding desire to deliver more tailored content in ways that could also help improve revenue options. This includes gaining greater insight from established audiences – for example through online surveys and other tools – or identifying niche audiences within larger, established audiences and targeting them specifically. The same logic would also apply to underserved audiences such as the Timorese diaspora, particularly people who have gone overseas to work (and others still in the country who desire to do this).

Legal Landscape

The range and nature of existing and upcoming laws potentially affecting media is significant, and will grow in complexity – in both design and implementation – with increased connectivity. This includes several laws and regulations already on the books, of which many journalists and editors are unaware: some which enable their work but are underutilised, and others which impose restrictions but have not yet been enforced to any great degree.

Media workers and advocates are well aware of many issues they have confronted in relation to the legal landscape, and others which may emerge. However they lack the time and skills to fully engage with analysing and advocating on these issues; for example the Timor-Leste Press Council believes the 2014 Social Communications Law (the Media Law) requires review, but is unable to engage consultants with necessary skills to develop a detailed proposal. The same holds for upcoming cybercrime and other legislation, an area where specialist support can provide a significant boost.

This study has generated a snapshot of these laws. Respondents noted that a more in-depth audit of existing and upcoming legislation, along with guidelines on the use of those laws and regulations, could help generate a useful resource, both as a reference and for training or orientation activities.

Capacity Building

Several training institutes exist, and key organisations have delivered a large number of workshops and short-term training programs. It was noted that an audit/examination of media skills training initiatives could provide an overview of available training curriculums that can be further built upon. This would include a review of the quality of materials delivered and effectiveness of pedagogy employed.

Digital Connectivity

Timor-Leste's media landscape will likely be transformed once faster and cheaper connectivity begins to arrive from late 2024. Yet beyond the immediate and vital aspects of speed and cost, as well as concerns around mis/disinformation, the research found little engagement around what this might mean. Some advocates and media producers have already begun to connect with digital rights campaigners elsewhere in the region, an effort that is widely believed to require a large-scale boost in awareness and capacity, as well as input into law and policy, ideally before increased connectivity becomes a reality. Scenario development – including both opportunities and challenges – among leading media practitioners and advocates, informed by other countries' experiences, was deemed to be a valuable part of this effort.

The Timor-Leste Media Development program is part of the Australian Government's Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy (2022 – 2026). The program is implemented by ABC International Development.



Launch of the Timor-Leste Press Council's 'Diversity and Inclusion' handbook.

APPENDIX

Organisations and stakeholders interviewed:

- representatives from media support and advocacy organisations, namely the Timor-Leste Press Council, the Timor-Leste Press Union (TLPU), and the Timor-Leste Community Radio Association (ARKTL)⁸⁸
- 17 media outlets, including 2 citizen journalists⁸⁹ and 1 municipal correspondent
- the Secretary of State for Social Communications, to understand current government programs
- officials from the Ministry of Justice, the Information and Communication Technology Agency, the National Communications Authority (via WhatsApp), and the Human Rights and Justice Ombudsman to understand key considerations and current plans around digital connectivity
- 5 practising legal specialists
- 3 civil society human rights advocates and researchers
- 1 independent ICT expert.

The research drew on published quantitative audience surveys, as well as monitoring of media content where relevant, especially:

- MAPKOMS, ‘Opiniaun Públika Sidadaun Nia Asesu ba Meiu Komunikasaun Sosial iha Timor-Leste’ (Public Opinion: Citizen Access to Social Communication Media in Timor-Leste), 2022
- MAPKOMS, ‘Relatóriu Monitorizasaun Dadus Husi Imprensa, Eletrónica no Pájina Online’ (Report on Monitoring Data from Print, Electronic, and Online Media), 2021
- Timor-Leste Press Council’s monitoring of coverage during the 2023 parliamentary elections
- The Asia Foundation’s Tatoli Public Perception Survey, 2022 and 2023⁹⁰
- International Republican Institute (IRI), ‘National Survey of Timor-Leste’, 2023⁹¹

⁸⁸ The president of the Timor-Leste Journalist Association (AJTL) was co-researcher.

⁸⁹ For the purposes of this study, a citizen journalist is someone who deliberately takes on the role of producing public interest information published in a personal capacity rather than via a media outlet with its own name. Other contexts may have named media outlets running as citizen journalist efforts; however, the scale of volunteerism in combination with paid journalism within many of Timor-Leste’s media outlets and the significance of community media with specific mandates and management structures make a broader definition of citizen journalism less useful for the purposes of this discussion.

⁹⁰ See <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/2022-tatoli-public-perception-survey/> and <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/tatoli-a-survey-of-the-timorese-people-2023-results/> (accessed 17 Oct. 2023)

⁹¹ See <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-timor-leste-february-march-2023/> (accessed 17 Oct. 2023)

Other studies on the country's media that were also utilised include:

- International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), 'Holding the Line: South East Asia Media Freedom Report', 2019⁹²
- AMARC, 'The State of Community Media and Community Radio in Timor-Leste', 2021⁹³

Several studies are also available from earlier years; however, due to the rate of change these did not contribute significantly to the final data utilised.

The research referred to several laws, including:

- Social Communications Law 2014 (Lei da Comunicação Social)
- Draft Cybercrime Law

Other recent laws were either not readily available in their current form or had been rejected or withdrawn and were yet to be redrafted.

The research also drew on legal analysis, including:

- International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), 'Timor-Leste's Draft Cybercrime Law', 2021⁹⁴

Regarding digital infrastructure, the research drew on:

- ESCAP, 'Regulatory Policies and ICT Trends: Insights from Timor-Leste', 2019⁹⁵

Finally, in discussing media coverage and narratives, the research drew on:

- Fundasaun Mahein, 'Politicisation of Martial and Ritual Arts Groups: Implications for National Security, Peacebuilding and Development', 2023⁹⁶

The remaining background desk research was gathered from national, international, and industry media coverage; government announcements; civil society commentary and analysis; and similar sources. Approximately 200 articles were consulted.

92 See <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/reports/detail/holding-the-line-south-east-asia-media-freedom-report-2019/category/publications> (accessed 17 Oct. 2023)

93 See <https://amarc-ap.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-State-of-Community-Media-in-Timor-Leste.pdf> (accessed 17 Oct. 2023)

94 See http://www.laohamutuk.org/Justice/defamation/cybercrime/ICNL%20Comments%20on%20Draft%20Law%20Cybercrime%20Law_Timor-Leste_March2021.pdf (accessed 17 Oct. 2023)

95 See <https://www.unescap.org/resources/regulatory-policies-and-ict-trends-insights-timor-leste> (accessed 17 Oct. 2023)

96 See <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2023/07/14/politicisation-of-martial-and-ritual-arts-groups-implications-for-national-security-peacebuilding-development/> (accessed 17 Oct. 2023)