

State of the Media: Tonga



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

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Any opinions represented in this report are those of the authors and research participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation or the University of Adelaide.

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

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Nuku'alofa, Tonga.

ACRONYMS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABCID	Australian Broadcasting Corporation International Development
AI	artificial intelligence
AM	amplitude modulation
CCTV	China Central Television
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEO	chief executive officer
CGTN	China Global Television Network
COP28	28th session of the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention
FM	frequency modulation
GEDSI	gender equality, disability and social inclusion
GSM	global system for mobile communications
ICT	information and communications technology
kHz	kilohertz
LGBTIQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other sexually and gender diverse people
MAT	Media Association of Tonga
MEIDECC	Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications
N/A	not available
NGO	non-government organisation
PACMAS	Pacific Media Assistance Scheme
P4SP	Partnerships for Social Protection
RSF	Reporters sans frontières (Reporters Without Borders)
TBC	Tonga Broadcasting Commission
TCC	Tonga Communications Corporation
TCRFM	Tonga Christian Radio FM
TLA	Tonga Leitis Association
TOT	Talanoa 'o Tonga
TV	television
UN	United Nations
UNCAC	United Nations Convention Against Corruption
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN-PRAC	United Nations Pacific Regional Anti-Corruption

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a detailed snapshot of Tonga’s media landscape in 2024. It outlines how the shift to digital broadcasting and the increased availability of internet access have transformed the media landscape. Traditional media platforms such as print newspapers have almost entirely disappeared, replaced by online sources, including internet news platforms. However, radio remains very important, particularly as a communication system during natural disasters. The following themes were identified in the research.

Media freedom is restricted under current legislation

The media landscape in Tonga is closely connected with Tonga’s transition to democratic governance. While the independent media plays a vital role as watchdog, it is challenged by restrictions on media freedom. For example, journalists can be penalised under criminal law related to defamation, such as the Communications (Infringement Notice Regime) Declaration 2020, which prohibits “unlawful publication of sensitive information” without defining exactly what this entails. The Electronic Communications Abuse Offences Act 2020 also has the potential to suppress freedom of speech and prevent journalists from reporting on public issues, due to heavy fines and jail time imposed under the act.

Rapid digitalisation has posed challenges for media

While the continued growth of online platforms in Tonga has increased access to news and information, it has also created ideal conditions for misinformation and disinformation to spread, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has prompted calls from media to improve resourcing and training for newsrooms and journalists so that they can improve the quality of their output and counteract mis/disinformation online.

Natural disasters pose a significant threat to digital connectivity

The disappearance of print media in Tonga has led to increased engagement with online media and traditional broadcast radio. However, the 2022 Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha’apai volcanic eruption and tsunami severed an undersea telecommunications cable, wiping out reliable internet connection for most of Tonga for more than a month, and a 2024 earthquake severed a different cable to Vava’u and Ha’apai, temporarily knocking out internet access for a third of Tonga’s population. Only those with access to satellite internet, such as Starlink, remained connected. These events have highlighted that radio, and its role in emergency broadcasting, plays a key role in keeping Tongans connected during disaster.



Learning to shoot with a mobile phone at Tonga Broadcasting Commission.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tonga is located in the Polynesian subregion of the Pacific Islands. It has a population of approximately 99,026 across 169 islands. Tonga was never formally colonised and is the only constitutional monarchy in the Pacific Islands region, with a political system that reserves 9 of its 26 parliamentary seats for representatives of the country's 33 noble titles. Tonga has a large diaspora, mainly concentrated in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.



88.6FM Radio Nuku'alofa, Tutu on the Beach and Ordinary Tongan Lives team up as Niu Initiative to talk about issues in Tonga.

The media landscape in Tonga consists of radio, television, print media (although this is virtually non-existent), and online news. It is dominated by the Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC), a state-owned enterprise, which operates two radio stations and three TV stations.

Tonga is vulnerable to natural disasters, which means its media plays an important role in keeping its citizens safe.¹ Tonga has the third highest disaster risk worldwide.²

The Tongan constitution guarantees the freedom of the media. There are a variety of independent news outlets. However, 'politicians have a history of exerting pressure on the media in response to critical coverage'.³ In 2021, the Electronic Communication Abuse Offences Act came into operation. The law provides for fines and prison terms of up to three years for the use of a communication platform to abuse, harass, or otherwise harm another person. This has raised 'concerns that it could be enforced in a way that restricts journalistic activity or personal expression'.⁴

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

¹ Nanise Fifita, head of the school of journalism and media at Tonga National University, quoted in Tallulah Bieundurry, *ABC International Development - "A voice for the voiceless": Foundations of Journalism program to train next generation of Pacific journalists*, June 13, 2024.

² Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft, *The World Risk Report 2021 PDF*.

³ *Freedom House - Freedom in the World 2023, Tonga*, accessed September 6, 2024.

⁴ *Freedom House - Freedom in the World 2023, Tonga*, accessed September 6, 2024.

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2. METHODOLOGY

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

The research team began with a desk-based review of relevant primary and secondary literature. Additionally, nine stakeholder interviews with media practitioners and audience members were conducted. At each step, feedback and advice was sought from the Tonga country media expert adviser Rev. Dr 'Ungatea Fonua Kata, who cross-checked the accuracy of findings and co-authored this report. The research was approved by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee, and steps were taken to mitigate risks to all research participants, including maintaining their anonymity.

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

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



Lipe and Lala livestreaming from the rugby field for Radio Nuku'alofa (Facebook: Radio Nuku'alofa 88.6FM).



3. MEDIA ORGANISATION FOOTPRINT

Radio

The government-owned TBC operates two radio stations: Radio Tonga 1 – also known as “The Call of the Friendly Islands” – and Radio Tonga 2, known as Kool FM 90.⁶ Radio Tonga 1 broadcasts via AM frequency 1017 kHz, or call letters A3Z, while Radio Tonga 2 transmits via FM 90. TBC also supports the broadcast of ABC Radio Australia in Tonga via FM 103⁷ and relays China Global Television Network (CGTN) radio content on FM 92.1.

⁶ [Tonga Broadcasting Commission - web archive, 2017.](#)

⁷ [Radio info - ABC and Tonga Broadcasting Commission sign MOU, February 18, 2024.](#)



Live to air from TBC's OB van (Facebook Tonga Broadcasting Commission News and Content).

Besides the TBC radio offering, there are several private commercial and community radio stations operating in the country:

- FM 98, or Letio le'ō 'o e kakai, is Tonga's first women-led community radio station, initiated in 2011. This station is dedicated to promoting United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (on women, peace, and security), peacebuilding and dialogue, and empowering women in Tonga.⁸ It is a community media project in partnership with FemLINK Pacific that uses "suitcase radio" – that is, its equipment fits into a suitcase weighing about 20 kilograms, has a low-powered transmitter, and is portable to assist with community broadcasts.⁹
- Letio Faka-Kalisiatane FM 93.1, or A3R, is Tonga Christian Radio FM (TCRFM). It broadcasts across the main island of Tongatapu and is looking to extend its transmission to the outer Ha'apai and Vava'u islands and to stream globally from mid-2024. It livestreams its programs on Facebook.
- Le'ō 'o Tonga FM 88.1 is a news and music entertainment radio station that operates in Nuku'alofa.
- FM 87.5, or BroadCom Broadcasting, broadcasts "programs from current, educational, political, social, spiritual to community based events" according to its Facebook page.¹⁰ It has a wide audience because it uses the link masts of the Tonga Communications Corporation (TCC) to transmit nationally. It is also accessible via Online Radio Box, and live broadcasts of its news content and stories can be accessed via its Facebook page.
- 89.5 FM has coverage reaching Tongatapu and 'Eua and can also be accessed via its website.
- Kele'a Voice transmits via FM 91.5 and livestreams via its Facebook page. Its website is not functioning at the time of writing.
- FM 89.1, or A3V Magic, is a music entertainment radio station.
- FM 88.6 Radio Nuku'alofa provides music entertainment and local news and stories, including livestreaming via its Facebook page.

⁸ [Ma'a Fafine Moe Famili Inc - 98FM, March 25, 2019.](#)

⁹ [CathNews New Zealand - Suitcase Radio St, April 8, 2011.](#)

¹⁰ [BroadCom 87.5 FM - Facebook page, accessed September 6, 2024.](#)

Television

Television Tonga and Television Tonga 2 are two free-to-air TV channels operated by TBC. China Central Television (CCTV) broadcasts on another TBC channel and provides free-to-air Chinese news and culture.¹¹ TBC has a Facebook page for TV livestreams, as well as a website (but is defunct at the time of writing).

Table 1. Radio and TV

Platform	Station/Channel	Ownership/ Funding	Language	Website/Social media	Sector
Radio	Radio Tonga 1, 1017 AM, A3Z	TBC	Tongan/English	Facebook	Government
	Radio Tonga 2, Kool FM 90	TBC	Tongan/English	N/A	Government
	Letio le'ō 'o e kakai, FM 98.0	Private	Tongan/English	N/A	Community
	Letio Faka- Kalisiatane, FM 93.1, A3R	Church	Tongan/English	Tonga Christian Radio - website Facebook	Church
	Le'ō 'o Tonga, FM 88.1	Taimi Media Network	Tongan	Facebook	Commercial
	Radio BroadCom, FM 87.5	Private	Tongan	Facebook	Commercial
	Letio Vake-Tali- Folau, FM 89.5	Private	Tongan	Leito Vake-Tali- Folau FM 89.5 - website Facebook	Commercial
	Tonga Radio, Magic FM 89.1, A3V	Private	English	Tonga Radio - website Facebook	Commercial
	Radio Nuku'alofa, FM 88.6	Private	English	Facebook	Commercial
	Kele'a Voice FM 91.5	Private	Tongan	Facebook	Commercial
TV	Television Tonga	TBC	Tongan/English	Facebook	Government
	Television Tonga 2	TBC	Tongan/English	N/A	Government

¹¹ ["Tonga-China Relation", Embassy of the Kingdom of Tonga in China](#), accessed September 6, 2024.

Print

Print media in Tonga has been described as “dead”, because social media has become a popular way to disseminate news, and people can now access newspaper, radio, and television content using a mobile phone.¹² Concurrently, the loss in newspaper advertising revenue and increasing cost of printing and distribution, particularly in geographically dispersed countries like Tonga, have compounded the threat to newspaper viability.¹³ There is only one newspaper in Tonga distributing a print edition (Koe Kele’a; most have either moved online or shutdown). Church media distribute physical newsletters; however, these are printed overseas. The Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga’s Tohi Fanongonongo (Information and notices) and the Catholic Church’s Taumu’a Lelei, which has been published since 1929, are both monthly publications for their respective congregations, in Tongan.

There are also several newsletters published in Tonga. The Office of the Ombudsman and the Ministry of Fisheries produce quarterly newsletters, which are uploaded to their respective websites. The Ministry of Revenue and Customs also produced newsletters, but the last edition uploaded to its website was January–February 2023.

Table 2. Print media

Publication	Ownership/ Funding	Language	Website/Social media	Sector
Koe Kele’a	Private	Tongan	Facebook	Commercial
Tohi Fanongonongo (Information and notices)	Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga	Tongan	Tohi Fanongonongo - Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga - website	Church
Taumu’a Lelei	Catholic Church in Tonga	Tongan	Taumu’a Lelei - website Facebook	Church
Office of the Ombudsman newsletter	Government	English	Office of the Ombudsman newsletter - website Facebook	Government
Ministry of Fisheries newsletter	Government	English	Ministry of Fisheries newsletter - website Facebook	Government
Ministry of Revenue and Customs newsletter	Government	English	Ministry of Revenue and Customs newsletter - website Facebook	Government

¹² Kalafi Moala, quoted in [Ombudsman Tonga, Quarterly Newsletter, no. 21, December 2021 PDF](#).

¹³ Nnamdi Tobechukwu Ekeanyanwu, Herbert Batta, and Jo Ita Oyokunyi, “The Economics of Decline in the Media Industry: Survival Strategies of American Print Media Firms and Implications for Diminishing Print Media Industry in Nigeria,” *Journalism and Mass Communication* 7, no. 8 (2017): 427–45.

Online

Since the decline of newspapers in Tonga, almost all mainstream print media has moved online, and new online media outlets have also been established:

- Matangi Tonga Online is a news website operated by Tongan publishing company Vava'u Press Limited that provides news in English and Tongan. According to its website, it is “independent and has no allegiance to government, or to any political body”.¹⁴ It also has Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) accounts.
- Nepituno Tonga Online News is based in Tonga and provides news coverage on issues such as tourism, health, climate change, religion, court reporting and crime, sports, and business.¹⁵
- Talanoa 'o Tonga (TOT), which means ‘Stories of Tonga’, is a public interest news site.

Table 3. Online media

Outlet	Ownership/ Funding	Language	Website/Social media	Sector
Matangi Tonga Online	Privately owned	English	Matangi Tonga - website Facebook, X (Twitter)	Commercial
Nepituno Tonga Online News	Privately owned	Tongan/ English	Nepituno Tonga - website	Commercial
Talanoa 'o Tonga	Privately owned	English	Talanoa 'o Tonga - website Facebook	Commercial

Social media is also popular in Tonga, providing a convenient way for citizens to access information and engage with media. As of January 2024, there were 66,500 social media users, which is around 61% of the population. Facebook is the most popular social media platform by a significant margin, with 66,500 users, compared with Instagram (15,100), LinkedIn (15,000), and X/Twitter (1,900).¹⁶ Media organisations in Tonga are leveraging the popularity of social media through livestreams on Facebook.

Social media use appears to be increasing, but with its popularity come certain challenges. According to one of the interviewees, one of these challenges is cyberbullying, where there is a “tendency to use and abuse social media to bully others and access unfiltered content” (Tonga 01). Also, as noted above, the 2022 Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha’apai volcanic eruption and tsunami severed an undersea telecommunications cable, leaving much of the population without access to the internet for weeks – emphasising the impact natural disaster can have on access to online and social media.¹⁷

¹⁴ [Matangi Tonga Online - About Us](#), accessed September 6, 2024.

¹⁵ [Nepituno Tonga Online News - website](#), accessed September 6, 2024.

¹⁶ Simon Kemp, [Data Reportal - Digital 2024: Tonga](#), February 23, 2024.

¹⁷ Jonathan Yerushalmy, [The Guardian - What Lies Beneath: The Growing Threat to the Hidden Network of Cables that Power the Internet](#), August 9, 2024.

Government and civil society

Government communication forms part of the media sector in Tonga. The Prime Minister's Office uploads news and information to its website. The government also has an online portal that functions as an information hub for all government ministries and departments and provides news updates; it also has social media accounts on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook. The Tonga Ministry of Communications also has an online information hub.

The Government of Tonga uses Facebook for delivery of news and information to its citizens and for visibility. This exemplifies the popularity and convenience of Facebook as a platform for disseminating information to the general public.

Target audience

Most mainstream media in Tonga target the general population. In the absence of print media, online media platforms are the main way, besides radio, that people in Tonga access insights, news, and information. The prominent online news media organisations in Tonga focus on local news and stories affecting the lives of people in Tonga. At the same time, online media are aware of the Tongan diaspora abroad, who are keen to read and hear stories from Tonga. Thus, according to key media practitioner respondents, journalists in Tonga often cover and write stories relevant to both Tongans living in Tonga and the diaspora. For instance, Matangi Tonga Online's audience includes both people living in Tonga and the diaspora.

Behind the scenes at TBC's outside broadcast of the Royal Funeral of HRH Princess (Facebook: Tonga Broadcasting Corp).



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4. MEDIA CONTENT COVERAGE

Tonga is a conservative society, defined by its cultural and Christian values, and the Catholic Church's monthly newsletter, Taumu'a Lelei, and Tohi Fanongonongo, of the Free Wesleyan Church, have survived longer than any commercial newspaper. Both are published in Tongan with content including religious stories, events, announcements, and teachings.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has a reporter based in Tonga, who reports on stories relevant to Tonga, Australia, and the wider Indo-Pacific region for ABC Australia (television), Radio Australia and ABC Pacific (all available locally in Tonga) and other programs across Australia's national broadcaster.

CGTN radio is relayed via FM 92.1 in Tonga. CGTN is the international arm of state-run Chinese Central Television (CCTV); according to its website, part of its aim is “promoting communication ... and enhancing cultural exchanges between China and other countries”.¹⁸

Gender equality, disability and social inclusion

The stakeholder interviews with media practitioners aimed to capture top-level themes around GEDSI in media content coverage in Tonga. The findings below should not be viewed as exhaustive due to a small sample size. Rather, these insights provide an overview of noteworthy trends in how media practitioners in Tonga perceive the state of GEDSI in the media. Key media practitioner respondents suggested that the media often covers GEDSI-related issues as these are generally regarded as uncontroversial, under some of the restrictive conditions characterising the media environment in Tonga.

Media in Tonga operates under several legal policy and regulatory frameworks that shape the content coverage on GEDSI-related issues. One GEDSI area that the media in Tonga highlights in its reporting is the LGBTIQ+ community. However, there are still strict laws that discriminate against members of the LGBTIQ+ community. For example, under the Criminal Offences Act “sodomy” is criminalised and “cross-dressing” is illegal. These issues were discussed at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2023, where the 2021 murder of Polikalepo Kefu was also mentioned. Kefu was a prominent LGBTIQ+ rights activist who was also president of the Tonga Leitis Association (TLA), which aims to advocate for, educate, and provide support to the country’s LGBTIQ+ communities.¹⁹

Disability and social protection are prioritised through the Ministry of Internal Affairs Social Protection and Disability division. Development partners are working with stakeholders in Tonga to increase inclusion of people with disability in social protection systems.²⁰ Media coverage of disability affairs is limited.

In relation to gender equality, Tonga came close to ratifying the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2016 under then-prime minister Akilisi Pohiva. However, ‘some lawmakers and religious groups raised concerns that ratification would force Tonga to change laws governing the male-only succession to the throne and to legalize same-sex marriage and abortion, though nongovernmental organisation supporting the treaty insisted that this was not the case. After a number of protests and petitions, Pohiva said that the government was backing away from its bid to ratify CEDAW’,²¹ and Tonga remains one of only seven countries in the world that has not done so.²² However, media do their best to maintain gender inclusion, with key media practitioner respondents mentioning that, besides writing and producing news that is current, content should be produced by a balance of women and men and feature a balance of voices.

18 [China Global Television Network - About Us](#), accessed September 6, 2024.

19 [Civicus - Tonga: Civil Society and UN Raise Concerns Around Lack of Press Freedom, Restrictive Laws at Human Rights Review](#), May 18, 2023.

20 [Australian High Commission, Kingdom of Tonga - Building Economic Growth, a Cornerstone for Australia's Support to Tonga](#), media release, June 1, 2024.

21 [Freedom House - Freedom in the World, Tonga 2016](#).

22 A total of 186 countries out of 193 have ratified CEDAW. The remaining countries yet to do so are: Tonga, Nauru, Palau, Iran, Somalia, Sudan, and the US.

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5. MEDIA BUSINESS RESILIENCE

Independent media has long faced challenges in Tonga. For instance, Tonga's first independent newspaper, Taimi 'o Tonga, and its prolific publisher and editor Kalafi Moala were critical of the then-government. This led to Moala being 'repeatedly banned from publishing his controversial newspaper and, in 1996, he and his deputy editor were jailed for 30 days for contempt of parliament'.²³ Moala sold his business in 2021 and has since run the online news platform, Talanoa 'o Tonga. Another newspaper, Talaki, operated by Moala's former-deputy editor at Taimi 'o Tonga, Filo 'Akau'ola, has also ceased operation.²⁴

²³ Dale Husband, [E Tangata - Kalafi Moala: I Never Wanted to Replace the Monarchy](#), February 6, 2016.

²⁴ [Talanoa 'o Tonga - About Us](#), accessed September 6, 2024.

Newspaper viability has declined in Tonga for various reasons, including cost pressures associated with audiences shifting to the internet and a restrictive media freedom environment. However, some Christian newsletters remain with a loyal audience base. These are the monthly Taumu'a Lelei (Catholic Church) and Tohi Fanongonongo (Free Wesleyan Church). Taumu'a Lelei is able to survive through funding from the church locally, as well as international assistance from the Catholic Church and other donors.

Media organisations are being required to diversify income streams in order to maintain their long-term viability. For example, Matangi Tonga Online's sources of revenue, besides income derived from advertising, include the selling of photos and stories to international organisations. Audiences regularly pay other media organisations to livestream private (weddings, funerals, etc.) and public events. Beyond the need to diversify income, all key media practitioner respondents highlighted several areas for improvement that will be vital for the ongoing viability of news organisations in Tonga. These include: skills training for journalists; technical and equipment support; and educating young people about the importance and role of public interest media. One key respondent highlighted the struggles associated with journalist retention: there is "a shortage of staff because many journalists have left the media sector. There should be more training and workshops to encourage and boost the media sector and to attract people to join the sector" (Tonga 04).

Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) does not appear to be broadly used in the media industry, based on key media practitioner respondent feedback. However, its potential impact, both positive and negative, on Tongan society has been discussed at a high level. In November 2023, the prime minister highlighted Tonga's interest in leveraging AI technologies to tackle climate change during the 28th session of the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention (COP28). An example of this was showcased at the convention, where AI platforms were used to project sea level rise for the islands of Tongatapu.²⁵ Additionally, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and Royal Oceania Institute hosted a workshop in Tonga in May 2024, attended by media representatives, where discussions highlighted concerns around the potential of AI to help scammers spread misinformation and disinformation more effectively.²⁶

Only one key respondent said they used AI, and their only experience of AI was transcribing interviews using Otter.ai. Others rarely or never tried using AI, and, if they did, it was to help in editing news content. One respondent stated: "I don't use ChatGPT because I think it takes away what it means to be a journalist" (Tonga 03) – indicating that AI is considered something of a threat to journalistic work.

²⁵ [Department of Climate Change, Ministry of MEIDECC - Prime Minister of Tonga Advocates for the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Climate Action, November 30, 2023.](#)

²⁶ [Matangi Tonga Online - Misinformation Spreads Faster When Scammers Use Artificial Intelligence, May 8, 2024.](#)

06

6. MEDIA POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE ENVIRONMENT

There is no specific legislation regulating the media sector, but there are laws regulating print publication, radio, social media, and telecommunication, as well as certain laws that either directly or indirectly limit freedom of expression and access to official information.

Freedom of expression

Media freedom has not always been guaranteed or protected in Tonga. Media are afforded freedom of the press under the constitution, but there are exceptions. In 2017, Nepituno Online News reported that TBC was labelled an “enemy of the government” because it had not supported the government’s work.²⁷ Moreover, two TBC seniorjournalists were transferred from the newsroom to the NGO Services division because their news coverage was “not pro-Government” – a move considered contrary to public broadcasting principles of impartiality, freedom, and fairness.²⁸ In the same year, Reporters Without Borders ranked Tonga 49th out of 180 countries in its world press freedom index, a drop from 37th the previous year.²⁹

In 2020, the Ministry of Communications adopted a law that could penalise media for publication of sensitive information,³⁰ which was seen as a threat to freedom of speech³¹ and perhaps also contributed to a further drop in Tonga’s press freedom ranking, to 50th. As of 2024, Tonga is ranked 45th of 180 countries.

The Constitution of Tonga protects freedom of speech and the press, aligning with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights on freedom of expression and media. This freedom is restricted by laws on defamation, official secrets, and the protection of the king and royals.³²

Accessing official information

The Constitution of Tonga does not provide for a right to information or access to information; rather, it protects official secrets. The Official Secrets Act protects government information and prohibits the communication of information that is prejudicial to the interest of the state or public.³³ A government officer is required to take an oath of secrecy under this act.

However, steps have been taken towards implementing freedom of information legislation. Tonga launched an information disclosure policy in 2012³⁴ and ratified the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) in February 2020.³⁵ UNCAC provides for access to information, including publishing information on corruption. Recently, a new digital system was set up to ‘promote public access to information and public reporting through the revamped website of the Ombudsman Tonga, supported by the Government of New Zealand through UNDP’s UN-PRAC project’.³⁶ Tonga has also had an anti-corruption commissioner since 2024, after the parliament passed legislation

27 [Nepituno Tonga Online News - Tonga’s PM Says Tonga Broadcasting Commission Has Failed to Fulfill Its Role](#), May 3, 2017.

28 [Nepituno Tonga Online News - Tonga Media Council Expressed Its Grave Concern over the Treatment of the Two Most Senior Journalists at TBC](#), October 21, 2017.

29 [Reporters Without Borders - RSF Index 2016](#), accessed September 6, 2024.

30 [Communications Act 2015 and subsequent regulations quietly adopted by the Ministry of Communications under the Communications \(Infringement Notice Regime\) Declaration 2020](#); see [Communications Infringement Notice Regime Declaration 2020 PDF](#).

31 [Asia Pacific Report - Fury in Tonga at New ‘Spot Fine’ Limits Quietly Imposed on News Media](#), August 17, 2020.

32 [Constitution of Tonga](#), 71.

33 [Official Secrets Act 2016](#), chapter 04.24.

34 [Sonja Stefanovska-Trajanoska, Pacific Community - Open Data and Right to Information – Vital Tools to Enhance Transparency and Accountability and Reduce Corruption](#), February 8, 2022.

35 [Tonga is the 187th member of UNCAC](#); see [Government of the Kingdom of Tonga, press release - Tonga Attends Its First Conference of the State Parties of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption](#), press release, December 11, 2023.

36 [UNDP Pacific Office - A Week of Right to Information Dialogue and Advocacy in Tonga](#), press release, January 27, 2023.

for their appointment in 2023.³⁷ This was considered by Ministry of Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications CEO, Paula Ma'u, to be “a good sign to successfully implementing the freedom of information policy as we already have the draft legislation to this effect.”³⁸ However, key media practitioner respondents emphasised that accessing government information is still a challenge in Tonga. One informant observed:

The government tends to focus more on its media outlet, TBC. It is very difficult getting information from the government. It's very easy to work with private firms, local and small businesses, to get information from them and organisations that are not related to the government. (Tonga 02)

Print

Despite the lack of domestic print media, there is legislation in place governing publication. For instance, the cabinet may prohibit the importation of any publication that is contrary to the public interest, under the revised Prohibited Publications Act 2020.³⁹ The Protection from Abuse of Press Freedom Ordinance 2003 is enacted to protect “the king, royal family, government and people of [Tonga] from abuse of press freedom”. This legislation broadly makes it unlawful for any person to publish, distribute, or import any publication that is prohibited under the act. Parts of this act give power to the cabinet to prohibit publications that it deems abusive towards the king, royal family, government, or people of Tonga. It was under the schedule of this act that the Taimi 'o Tonga newspaper was listed as prohibited.

Defamation

Defamation of character, which covers libel and slander, is a criminal offence in Tonga under the Defamation Act 1988. A 1993 amendment⁴⁰ categorises fines for defamation (e.g. defaming the king or queen can incur a fine of T\$2,000), but both criminal and civil action may be brought for defamation. A 1999 amendment to the constitution gives power to the legislative assembly to imprison any person who defames it.

Broadcast media

The TBC is regulated by the Tonga Broadcasting Commission Act 1988.⁴¹ This act established the TBC as a commission to provide broadcasting services for the information, education, and entertainment of the public. The act also gives TBC's board of directors power to make policy for the TBC. Furthermore, the prime minister has the power to direct the commission to broadcast certain programs while the cabinet may prohibit the broadcasting of certain subjects.⁴²

Other broadcasting services and standards are regulated under the Communications Act 2015,⁴³ including the licensing of the radio frequency spectrum.

In May 2020, the Communications (Infringement Notice Regime) Declaration came into

37 [Parliament of Tonga - Tonga's Anti-Corruption Commissioner Briefs MPs on His Role and Importance of Integrity, July 3, 2024.](#)

38 Paula Ma'u, CEO, MEIDECC, quoted in UNDP Pacific Office, “A Week of Right to Information Dialogue.”

39 *Prohibited Publications Act 2020, chapter 8.10.*

40 *Defamation Act 2020, chapter 5.02.*

41 *Tonga Broadcasting Commission Act 2016, chapter 35.08.*

42 *Tonga Broadcasting Commission Act 2016, sections 14, 15.*

43 *Communications Act 2015, chapter 15.01.*



top: Broadcast technicians on a site visit. middle: 2020 launch of the Media Association of Tonga's Press Club. bottom: The Media Association of Tonga meets in July 2023 (Media Association of Tonga).

force. This declaration outlines that a person may be penalised up to T\$2,000 for “unlawful publication of sensitive information”⁴⁴ – without defining the term “sensitive information”. The media sector in Tonga was not aware of the law until it was passed, and they fear that it may be open to abuse and stifle freedom of speech with the heavy fines it imposes.⁴⁵

Telecommunications

The telecommunication sector is regulated by the Communications Act 2015 (replacing the Communications Act 2000). Together with the Communication Commission Act 2015, this established a licensing and regulatory framework to support and oversee national regulatory development. The commission established by the Communications Commission Act 2015 is a statutory body mandated to perform functions and duties as imposed by the Communications Act.

The Communications Act is a detailed legal framework that provides for the management of the radio frequency spectrum; the management and issuing of licences to network operators; content standards for broadcasting and service providers; competitive conduct; and consumer protection.

The Tonga Communications Corporation Act 2000 established the TCC, a telecommunication network operator in Tonga. The TCC is a wholly state-owned enterprise and presently controls the entire market for fixed telephone lines, with a market share of 70 per cent of dial-up and broadband internet and more than 50 per cent of GSM mobile services, with the ‘widest cellular network coverage in Tonga’.⁴⁶

Online

In 2019, the government proposed to shut down Facebook in Tonga in response to vicious allegations made on Facebook against the royal family, saying that it had compromised national security.⁴⁷

In December 2020, the Tongan parliament passed the Electronic Communications Abuse Offences Act 2020, regulating electronic communication abuse in Tonga and making it an offence to use social media platforms for cyberbullying. In June 2022, an individual was charged under section 4 for allegedly using a service to abuse and cause harm by posting an electronic communication. The person was later convicted and sentenced to 11 months’ imprisonment.⁴⁸

Like the regulations for penalising publications or broadcasting of sensitive information under the Communications (Infringement Notice Regime) Declaration 2020, the Electronic Communications Abuse Offences Act sparked concern from the

44 *Communications (Infringement Notice Regime) Declaration 2020, section 24.*

45 [Asia Pacific Report - Fury in Tonga at New ‘Spot Fine’ Limits Quietly Imposed on News Media, August 17, 2020.](#)

46 [Timeless Tonga - Tonga Communications Corporation, accessed September 6, 2024.](#)

47 [Kaniva Tonga - Gov’t May Shut Down Facebook Following ‘Disrespectful, Obscene’ Allegations Against King; PM Seriously Concerned, August 10, 2019.](#)

48 [Kaniva Tonga - First Offender Convicted Under Tonga New Electronic Communications Abuse Offences Law, June 4, 2022.](#)

media in Tonga that these new laws are about “protecting people in power” and have the potential to impede the freedom and independence of the media. Moreover, due to a fear of bankruptcy from being sued by politicians, some journalists reported censoring themselves.⁴⁹

Besides legislation, Tonga’s public service has also adopted a social media guideline (2020) for official and personal use of social media by public servants.⁵⁰ Posting or commenting on social media in such a way as to bring the public service into disrepute is also prohibited. Breach of the guideline is subject to the Public Service (Disciplinary Procedures) Regulations 2003.⁵¹

In terms of cybersecurity, the Tonga National Cybersecurity Framework 2022 aims to provide a safer and ‘more reliable digital environment for Tonga’.⁵² It applies to ‘Tongan government agencies to improve the overall security profile and ICT capabilities across government’.⁵³ It also applies to the public for awareness of cybersecurity. The Tonga Cybersecurity Manual aims to ‘provide strategic and practical guidance’ on how government agencies ‘can protect their systems and data from cyber threats’.⁵⁴

49 [Civicus - Freedom of Expression Further at Risk in Tonga with New Cyberlaw Following Media Regulations](#), February 26, 2021.

50 [Government of Tonga - Social Media Guideline for Tonga’s Public Service Commission PDF](#), June 30, 2020.

51 *Ibid.*

52 [Government of Tonga - Tonga National Cybersecurity Framework PDF](#), January 4, 2022.

53 *Ibid.*

54 [Government of Tonga - Tonga Cybersecurity Manual PDF](#), accessed September 6, 2024.

Reporter Vahefonua Tupola gets creative with a mojo kit.



7. MEDIA INDUSTRY BODIES

The Tongan Media Council was a professional organisation for Tongan news media established in 2003.⁵⁵ In 2018 it was replaced by the Media Association of Tonga (MAT).^{56, 57}

MAT is an industry organisation that supports the development of Tongan media organisations and practitioners. MAT launched a series of press club events in July 2020,⁵⁸ providing a platform to feature prominent individuals speaking about issues that affect Tongans and offering a forum for journalists to ask questions of leaders. In recent years, students have also been encouraged to attend, to generate interest in public issues and the work of journalism. In 2021, MAT launched the Parliamentary Reporters' Handbook and the Code of Ethical Practice and Behavior for Media and News Reporting to support journalists of Tonga.^{59, 60}

⁵⁵ As reported by [Matangi Tonga - New Media Council Incorporated for Tonga](#).

⁵⁶ As reported by [Radio New Zealand - Tonga Launches a New Media Association](#), May 14, 2018.

⁵⁷ Adrian Morrison, [Australian High Commission, Kingdom of Tonga - Australia Proud to Support Tonga's Media on World Press Freedom Day](#), May 3, 2020.

⁵⁸ [Matangi Tonga - Press Club for Journalists Launched](#), July 27, 2020.

⁵⁹ As reported by [Radio New Zealand - Tonga Launches a New Media Association](#), May 14, 2018.

⁶⁰ Adrian Morrison, [Australian High Commission, Kingdom of Tonga - Australia Proud to Support Tonga's Media on World Press Freedom Day](#), May 3, 2020.



top: MAT led the church service to commemorate World Press Freedom Day 2023 (Media Association of Tonga).
bottom: Women in Media retreat (Facebook Media Association of Tonga).



8. MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

In recent years, the most prominent mis/disinformation in Tonga has related to public health concerns: like many other Pacific countries, COVID-19 misinformation has been a challenge, with a range of unsubstantiated claims about vaccines circulated online.⁶¹

⁶¹ Vipul Khosla and Prashanth Pillay, [ABC International Development - Curb the Infodemic: Media Reporting, Debunking Misinformation and Geopolitical Concerns](#), August 22, 2022, updated October 4, 2023.



Launching the Tonga Parliamentary Reporters' Handbook (Legislative Assembly of Tonga).

At times, the prevalence of mis/disinformation has led to heated online debates, escalating to threats and abuse against the monarchy and royal family.⁶² This has led to suggestions to ban Facebook in Tonga, but the Tongan government has not followed through.

Recent conferences – such as one organised by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Royal Oceania Institute, with Tongan government officials and parliamentarians – have sought to raise discussion on the impact of mis/disinformation in Tonga and the Pacific.⁶³ Fact-checking efforts have also emerged within Tonga, as an attempt not only to mitigate health-related mis/disinformation but also to clarify political discussions.

⁶² Mackenzie Smith, [Radio New Zealand - 'We Can't Control the Demons' – Tonga Mulls Facebook Ban After Royal Slander](#), August 14, 2019.

⁶³ [Royal Oceania Institute - Training Program for Tonga: 'Disinformation: Government and Media Challenges](#), May 8, 2024.

9. MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURE

Telecommunications

The TCC operates the largest telecommunications infrastructure in Tonga and offers telecommunications and internet services in most of the islands. Digicel Tonga Limited, a privately owned company, also offers high-speed internet connectivity across Tonga. WanTok is a Vanuatu-based company providing high-speed internet connectivity across the main island of Tongatapu.⁶⁴ Tongatapu was connected to a submarine cable in 2013; however, the cable broke in early 2022 following the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcanic eruption and tsunami (as mentioned above), disconnecting communications within Tonga and with the rest of the world for about 10 days.

⁶⁴ [Logistics Cluster - Tonga Telecommunications](#), accessed September 6, 2024.

The fibre-optic cable was fully restored five weeks later.⁶⁵ In November 2022, an agreement between TCC and Kacific, ‘a satellite-based mobile backhaul solution’,⁶⁶ promised to ‘improve connectivity in underserved areas’.⁶⁷ Tonga is now targeting universal internet access by 2025,⁶⁸ aided by a second international telecommunications cable being built in partnership with Australia and New Zealand.

In July 2024, the islands of Vava’u and Ha’apai were disconnected from the network when the undersea cable that connects internet services to the northern islands was damaged in an earthquake. An alternative connection to the internet in some circumstances was Starlink, a provider of high-speed satellite internet. This meant that remote islands in Tonga could still access internet after disconnection from the undersea cable network. In July 2024, the Tongan government granted Starlink a six-month permit to operate in Tonga, having initially moved to shut it down,⁶⁹ subject to conditions “aimed at ensuring compliance with government regulations and aiding to [sic] the disruption of domestic cable to Vava’u and Ha’apai”.⁷⁰

Broadcast transmission

Radio broadcasting via amplitude modulation, or ‘AM’, transmission comprises a core part of broadcast transmission in Tonga.

[AM transmission] remains one of the most important communication channels in Tonga to reach communities for early warning and disaster recovery messages. AM radio plays an important role in sending messages to outer island communities including information about scheduled arrivals of shipping and airline services and has a vital role in broadcasting regular weather reports and cyclone and tsunami warnings. It is a vital lifeline during times of natural disasters’.⁷¹

Radio Tonga 1, broadcasting on 1017 AM, can be accessed throughout Tonga, provided the household has a radio. Tongans can also access online radio and social media platforms if they have access to the internet.

65 Edwina Seselja, [ABC News - Joy and Relief as Tongans Reconnect with Loved Ones After Volcano-Damaged Internet Cable Is Repaired](#), February 24, 2022.

66 This involves the use of satellites to transmit data to and from terrestrial networks in remote locations.

67 Kacific, “Kacific and Tonga Communications Corporation.”

68 [Pacific Islands Forum - Tonga Targets Universal Internet Access by 2025](#), reported by Pacific Islands Forum, March 10, 2023.

69 Doug Dingwall and Marian Kupu, [ABC News - Pacific Countries Are Still Weighing Elon Musk’s Starlink, Despite Hopes Its Satellites Will Connect Their Remote Islands](#), July 21, 2024.

70 [Ministry of Communications, Government of the Kingdom of Tonga - Government of Tonga Grants Provisional Temporary Permit to Starlink](#), July 19, 2024.

71 Logistics Cluster, “Tonga – 3.4 Telecommunications.”

In July 2022, the Japanese government handed over a new TBC broadcasting building, studio, and radio equipment, including a new early warning system as part of the Japanese government's Nationwide Early Warning System (NEWS) Project, which aims to "minimise damages caused by natural disasters."⁷² TBC radio broadcasts were instrumental during the volcanic eruption in 2022, disseminating emergency and evacuation information.⁷³ The new emergency warning system covers the whole of Tonga and has reduced the time to broadcast for emergency warnings to eight minutes, down from around 90 minutes.⁷⁴

The main AM station, Radio Tonga 1, simulcasts on FM 90, Radio Tonga 2, and its combined reach covers the main islands of Tongatapu, Vava'u, Ha'apai, and 'Eua. BroadCom 87.5 FM, a commercial radio station, also covers Tongatapu, Vava'u, Ha'apai, and 'Eua, and can reach the two most northerly islands, Niuatoputapu and Niuafu'ou, via internet.

Media access

Tonga had planned a switch to digital TV in 2016, but cabinet did not approve the proposal. According to a report by MEIDECC's director of information, presented at the Pacific Media Partnership Conference 2015, a proposed date to switch from analogue to digital was set for 29 April 2016. However, one of the requirements for the transition to happen successfully was that the government assess the ability of Tongan households to pay for set top-boxes and develop payment plans or a subsidy scheme for low-income households.⁷⁵

The switch from analogue to digital TV in Tonga is still in the transition stage. The World Bank is helping develop Tonga's 'capacity for digital public service delivery' through the Tonga Digital Government Support Project,⁷⁶ announced in 2019 and launched in July 2021.⁷⁷ The project aims to improve Tonga's digital public service delivery capacity by supporting the government's digital initiatives, including setting up a government portal so Tongans can access services and information across government ministries and agencies, and developing regulations on data protection and privacy and cybersecurity.⁷⁸

Tonga has a small but competitive telecommunications market consisting of three mobile network operators and internet service providers, Digicel, TTC, and WanTok. Digicel provides coverage everywhere in Tonga except Nuias, which are the northern group of islands, while TTC covers all of Tonga.⁷⁹ The WanTok network covers Tongatapu, Ha'apai and Vava'u only.⁸⁰

72 [Ministry of Communications, Government of the Kingdom of Tonga - Handover Ceremony of the New Studio Building of TBC Under Japan's NEWS Project, press release, July 22, 2020.](#)

73 [Fred Hooper, ABC News - 'It Gave Them Courage' National Broadcaster Stayed on Air During the Volcanic Eruption in Tonga, January 13, 2023.](#)

74 [Fred Hooper, ABC News - Tonga Broadcasting Commission Welcomes New Facility That Includes an Early Warning System, October 7, 2022.](#)

75 [Andrew Toimoana, Pacific Media Partnership Conference - Media and Communication Challenges for Tonga PDF, 25-27 August 2015.](#)

76 [World Bank Group - Tonga Digital Government Support Project.](#)

77 [Prime Minister's Office, Government of the Kingdom of Tonga - Tongan Digital Government Support Project, July 21, 2021.](#)

78 [Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific - Tonga Digital Services Upgrade, May 31, 2019.](#)

79 [Logistics Cluster, "Tonga - 3.4 Telecommunications."](#)

80 *Ibid.*



top: TBC's previous studio, before the opening of its new headquarters in 2022. bottom: TBC's new building funded by the Japanese government.

10

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations on strengthening the Tongan media sector are informed by data collected from media practitioner respondents.

Support for media to become more digitally smart

Respondents feel the media sector needs assistance to respond to the presence of social media and the use of mobile phones and smart devices, which have changed how people consume news. The mainstream media no longer monopolises the media space and now faces the challenge of staying relevant if it is to remain viable. This means it must use ICTs, and newsroom staff and journalists must upskill to adjust and adapt to technological changes. Some key areas include foundational skills (such as writing), as well as access to new equipment for production of news content. These can perhaps be addressed by providing the necessary training, technical support, and equipment required for online news production, such as mobile journalism kits.



Journalists at a doorstep interview training.

Increase professional development opportunities to staff

Respondents highlighted that more training and workshops would help boost the media sector to retain current journalists and attract more to the industry. Development initiatives could increase awareness and understanding of the role of the media in Tonga while also improving the quality of media output.

More rigorous implementation of editorial policies

Support should be provided for the adoption of editorial policies to help guide the ethics and values of media organisations and journalists. Maintaining professional standards and ethics is a duty that journalists should adhere to, so that news content produced and presented is accurate, factual, impartial, and balanced. According to key media practitioner respondents, these are core values that provide an effective defence against the mis/disinformation that has proliferated with the rise of social media.

CONCLUSION

The media landscape in Tonga is in a state of digital transition, as it adapts to increasing audience demand for digital content and associated challenges relating to misinformation and disinformation.

The findings in this report highlight how increased internet access in Tonga has transformed the media landscape – where traditional formats such as print have been almost entirely superseded by digital publishing. Concurrently, there has been a rise of online misinformation and disinformation. Radio was found to play a critical role in emergency broadcasting, keeping Tongans connected in times of natural disaster, when submarine internet cables may be vulnerable. The report uncovered media freedom in Tonga is challenged by laws which have the potential to suppress and criminalise free speech, while the absence of a right to information law results in an opaque relationship between the media and government.