

# STATE OF THE MEDIA TONGA

## RESEARCH BRIEF

**ABC**  
INTERNATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT

  
**PACMAS**  
Pacific Media Assistance Scheme

 **THE UNIVERSITY  
of ADELAIDE**



### AT A GLANCE



**1.** Media freedom is restricted under current legislation



**2.** Rapid digitalisation has posed challenges for media



**3.** Natural disasters pose a significant threat to digital connectivity

### ABOUT THE RESEARCH

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 serve as an accessible resource for media, civil society, and government organisations in support of development goals in the region.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a multi-method approach. 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.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. 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.

### 2. 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.

### 3. 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.

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