

MEDIA, ART & TECHNOLOGY

in the

NINE

PORTUGUESE
SPEAKING CULTURES



Editor José Manuel Simões

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EAST TIMOR



VIDEO



THE MEDIA SYSTEM AS A LEVERAGE FOR DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN EAST TIMOR

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Abstract: East Timor is a very young nation-state (located in the island region of Southeast Asia), and, as in any consolidated or emerging democracy, the media plays a fundamental role, as it is a key instrument for strengthening civic participation and transparency in political decision-making, as well as for combating - and denouncing - inequalities and political agendas that are not in line with the general interests of society. Not exclusive to countries with developing democracies, East Timor has a weaker media ecosystem with more limited resources than consolidated democracies. From an economic perspective, it can be said that the media market in East Timor is small and limited in resources (namely advertising investment, purchasing power, and literacy levels). But is such a scenario that is evolving and has the potential to grow. It can also be said that positive impacts can be expected on the media system in this country. In this context, this chapter deals with the importance of the media in countries with developing democracies, but with a total focus on the case of East Timor. Thus, the main purpose of the work is, on the one hand, to characterise the media situation in East Timor and, on the other, to understand to what extent the media system is contributing to strengthening democracy in the territory. The chapter addresses various aspects related to the media system and the context in which journalistic activity takes place, including aspects of regulation, the market, and other social, economic, political, and technological dynamics.

Keywords: Media System, Market, Politics, Democracy, Journalism, Market and Regulation Development, Digital Media

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INTRODUCTION

The media in emerging democracies play a doubly important role in (i) shaping public opinion, (ii) strengthening institutions, (iii) promoting pluralism of opinion, and (iv) promoting civic participation. However, in many circumstances, the media in these countries face unique additional challenges - because the institutions and structure of society are not consolidated on democratic principles - including political pressures, lack of press freedom, limited resources, and insufficiently prepared human resources.

In this context, press freedom can be limited, with governments exercising total control over the media, anchored in autocratic laws, censorship, and intimidation of journalists, for example. In these circumstances, the media system is fragile and unable to leverage the existence of pluralistic journalism and impartial information - unfiltered by the state. Directly or indirectly related to this aspect is the *concentration of media ownership* - in other words, media ownership is often concentrated in a few owners, something that can lead to a monolithic editorial orientation and a lack of diversity of approaches to the social, political and cultural dynamics of these countries.

However, some of these problems can also occur in countries with more consolidated democracies, but the negative impact on society may be less because there are other institutions (regulators, courts, universities, associations, etc.) with the critical capacity to alert citizens to bad practices that may be observed in journalistic activity. Of course, the influence of commercial and political interests on the media can condition the practice of independent and objective journalism, but it is important to emphasise that these problems can also occur in more consolidated democracies - and this is why media funding, including the role of the state in this process, is a recurring issue in the debate on public policies.

The role of the media, and particularly journalism, cannot be dissociated from the quantity and quality of the infrastructure and technologies available in a given country or region. In some emerging democracies, media support infrastructures are underdeveloped and outdated, with limited access to the Internet and modern information and communication technologies in rural areas or more peripheral territories.

This can create difficulty in accessing knowledge, as well as creating greater disparities in the dissemination of information and access to the media by citizens.

The spread of disinformation - and media manipulation - are potentially more pronounced and common problems in emerging democracies, as political actors and other interest groups more often use the media to promote agendas with specific interests, as well as to promote rumors aimed at damaging the reputation of political opponents or other institutions that could call into question some of the political decisions of the installed power.

Despite the increased challenges in emerging democracies, the media play a fundamental role in galvanising and mobilising civil society. This includes from monitoring government activity and decisions to providing *accountability* for decisions taken.

It is also in this context that new forms of communication and public intervention (digital media, social activism, and citizen journalism) have emerged all over the world, including in emerging democracies, initiatives from journalistic projects and digital activism whose main purpose is to alert society to the existence of *fake news* and other disinformation initiatives that limit the diversity of opinion and inhibit a broader discussion of the debate in the public space. In this context, this work is divided into two main parts. The first highlights the role of the media, including the emergence of digital projects, in East Timor, with a historical background on the relationship and cooperation with Portugal. The second part focuses on the analysis of various fundamental aspects that are pillars of the media system (regulation, laws, market, policies, technologies, political regime, infrastructure, etc.) and that influence, positively or negatively, the exercise of journalistic activity in East Timor and, therefore, in any country.

1. Timor and Portugal: cooperation, history, diplomacy and the media

East Timor has cultural and historical ties with Portugal that go back 400 years to the colonial period and subsequently played a significant role in the long struggle for self-determination of the territory, which was abandoned to its fate in 1975 and, to a certain extent, to Indonesian hands. East Timor would later become the 'cause célèbre' of Portuguese foreign policy after Portugal joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986, and would benefit from the simultaneous occurrence of certain political and economic contingencies in both Indonesian domestic politics and the international community, which facilitated the dramatic change in the territory that would culminate in the 1999 independence referendum (Novais, 2014). Finally, Portugal unconditionally supported the different UN missions during periods of political instability and violent conflict in the aftermath of the referendum, which culminated in the formal declaration and international recognition as an independent country in 2002 (Público, 2002; Centeno & Novais, 2006).

1.1. New Projects and Dynamics on the Media Scene in East Timor

Since 2002, more than two decades of bilateral relations between the two countries have covered various areas, including trade, economic cooperation, education, and technical assistance. One of the main cultural "bridges" between Portugal and Timor is through Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP). Firstly, RTP's international reach through its online and satellite broadcasts, which can include programming accessible in East Timor. RTP has also contributed, over time, to audiovisual production on themes related to Timor - in 2022, for example, it produced the film "Abandonados", which deals with the Japanese invasion of the Timorese island during the Second World War. The film, in turn, gave rise to an RTP series, which was shown simultaneously in Portugal and Brazil. Although RTP has no delegation or correspondent in Timor, it does cover it by sending journalists to the Southeast Asian country - mostly whenever there are official trips or events related to cooperation with Portugal.

Another cultural bridge of interest worth mentioning is the cooperation between the East Timorese government and the Camões Institute in promoting the Portuguese language and ensuring the production of news content in Portuguese. As a result of this cooperation, the first native Timorese digital media outlet whose news content is produced exclusively in Portuguese was born in early 2023 - *Diligente* (UCCLA, 2023). The *online* project brings together young Timorese journalists who have completed their training at the *Language Consultancy for Journalists*, a project supported by the Camões Institute to strengthen Portuguese language skills, specifically in the media sector (Sapo, 2023).

In addition to its importance in terms of affirming the Portuguese language in the territory, which will be analyzed later, the appearance of *Diligente* reveals several dynamics taking place in the media landscape in East Timor that deserves more detailed analysis. Firstly, it shows the change in journalism management models. The self-creation of their own business or brand is an alternative in a precarious job market, something that has been encouraged by the reduction in the cost of producing and distributing journalistic content and by the environment of digital platforms. Associated with this is the need for *Diligente*, like other digital natives, to diversify his form of financing.

To overcome the so-called sustainability crisis of the traditional media business model based on dependence on advertising, *Diligente*, resorted to the formula of *crowdfunding*, or collective financing and dissemination on social networks, without neglecting the other possibilities of subscriptions, associations, and philanthropy through grants or patronage (Antelava, 2018; Birnbauer, 2019; Lusa, 2023; Sapo, 2023). Despite the generalist orientation of the title, it ends up being located in a nano-niche market due to the low penetration of Portuguese in the territory, despite it being one of the country's official languages. Therefore, what *Diligente's* entrepreneurial journalists are aiming for at this embryonic stage, rather than profit, is to keep the project running so that they can "offer quality content" (*Diligente*, n.d.).

Secondly, and although closely related to the previous one, the case of *Diligente* is also illustrative not only of the reorganization of news production work environments but also of the progressive fragmentation or erosion of sizeable institutional newsrooms (Deuze & Witschge, 2016). The seven journalists who make up the editorial staff will be required to have multiple skills to carry out the most diverse tasks associated with news production, as well as those related to managing the media title itself. And it is curious to note that this is not an isolated case if we look at what is happening in parallel with the other news portal - *Hatutan* (<https://www.hatutan.com/>) - whose coverage has been achieving increasing prominence, despite the relatively small number of journalists (Sapo, 2023).

As a result, however, information professionals can be expected to feel more committed and responsible in the production of content, to the extent that they can participate in strategic editorial decisions and are only under the scrutiny of the public.

This is evident when *Diligente's* editorial team sets out to "disseminate impartial information" with "easy-to-understand content" capable of "explaining complex issues simply" to help people face "all social and economic issues with critical thinking", so that "everyone is aware of what is going

on in the country” (Diligente, n.d.). Thirdly, being an alternative media outlet implies a certain obligation to offer a differentiated discourse. The alternative facet can manifest itself, on the one hand, in the news approaches and perspectives in contradiction or diverging from the dominant discourse of the traditional media (Bailey et al., 2008). By taking a critical stance on reality that challenges the hegemonic channels, these media form a third voice between state media and *mainstream* commercial media, with potential benefits for the information system and, in addition, for civil society. On the other hand, the alternative orientation can be manifested by the experimental and innovative nature of its news presentation (Holt, 2018, p. 51).

This willingness to transcend the filters of the media monopoly and the growing focus on new media is evident when *Diligente* journalists say they are "eager to improve the media industry in East Timor ", aspiring to be "an innovative project", betting on "investigative work, reports, *podcasts* and other news content" that gives citizens a voice and promotes debate, while showing "the world the cultural richness of East Timor and the aspects that make it unique" (<https://www.diligenteonline.com/>). Of particular note in this area of innovation, in terms of news dissemination support, is the SMNews project, which uses Facebook directories as its main form of coverage (Sapo, 2023).

Finally, the emergence of new titles in the digital space and on social networks, the growing process of digitisation of existing ones - with particular emphasis in this area on Rádio e Televisão de Timor-Leste (RTTL) - and the progressive democratic maturity have also promoted epistemological reflection around the reconfiguration of journalistic roles (Carlson, 2020; Ekström & Westlund, 2019). Rather than a purely deterministic approach focused on technological potential, the core of the discussion in the next section of this chapter concerns journalists' conceptions of the functions or roles associated with their professional practice.

1.2 Journalism in East Timor: from resistance to transition and affirmation

Previous studies indicate that journalists emphasise different professional roles in the context of different types of democracy (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Assuming that the discourse of journalistic roles is the central arena where journalistic identity is reproduced and contested or the place where actors fight for the preservation or transformation of journalism's identity", the different levels of democratic maturity that occur at a given historical moment in the country where they work force journalists to periodically rethink the way they conceive and perceive their roles (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 129; Lewis & Westlund, 2015; Peters & Broersma, 2013).

Whatever happens in East Timor's future, the country already has a place in history as the first new nation of the 21st century. Journalism and media institutions, in turn, are inextricably linked to the territory's past, present, and future, albeit with constant adaptations to the different contexts over the last almost 50 years, in an ongoing struggle by journalists to affirm their work and legitimise their role. In a preliminary phase, they contributed to the survival of the Timorese national identity in the troubled period between the declaration of independence from Portugal at the end of 1975 - but which would result in the invasion by Indonesia the following year and the subsequent occupation consummated in the annexation of the territory as the 27th province - until the longed-for self-determination and effective constitution as a sovereign state

in May 2002 (Centeno & Novais, 2006). During this period, the media and journalism helped to create a latent culture of resistance (Novais, 2010), both during the long years of Suharto's strict dictatorship (until 1998) and his short-lived successors: Jusuf Habibie (1998-1999), Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001) and Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004).

This role was ironically played by the unsuspecting *Suara Timor Timur* newspaper, founded in 1993 to be "the voice of East Timor", even under the aegis and tight control of the Suharto regime's press rules (Steele, 2007). Like its Indonesian counterparts, or even more so because it was an area of conflict and contestation, *Suara Timor Timur* indexed or subordinated its content to the service of the nation's development rather than the local interests of the proclaimed 27th province. Consequently, positive news about economic and social progress prevailed, to the detriment of any signs of ethnic, religious, racial, or class conflicts that did not merit approval in the tight sieve of official censorship, unless they were concealed (Romano, 2003, pp. 37-52).

It is also only fair to mention that, as well as keeping East Timor on the Indonesian national news agenda, East Timorese journalists at the time were able to discreetly leak information to the international media about the resistance activities in the territory of the Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) or its armed wing, the Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor (FALINTIL).

In the post-independence period, the press in the territory faced a decisive new challenge: that of "allying" itself with the new authorities in the pursuit of national goals and interests, taking on functions and roles usually associated with the conventional model of development journalism. In this new context, rather than breaking the bonds of Indonesian traditionalism, and replacing it with modern values and practices, the role of the media would be to forge national identity and unity, foster economic development, and promote literacy and social education (Melkote, 1991, pp. 24-29). In addition, Timorese society was required to make an effort towards national reconciliation to deal with the territory's violent past (Parahita et al., 2020). As was the case in other countries, including some Portuguese-speaking countries in the post-colonial period, the critical function of the press was softened or superseded by the ideals of national development (Novais, 2019; Wilcox, 1975, p. 24).

More than two decades after independence, however, there are signs of a transition from the development model of journalism to a model prevalent around the world, which endorses professional roles and values that emphasize neutrality, objectivity, and scrutiny by those in power (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Novais, 2019; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Weaver & Willnat, 2012).

By focusing on "free and rigorous information" and investigative and reportage journalism, *Diligente* aims to play this role by critically examining some of the country's most pressing problems, without social constraints and in the public interest, guaranteeing editorial independence from government interests (Stier, 2015). "We are aware that the social reality, 20 years after the restoration of independence, still falls far short of what would be expected," according to Eduardo Soares, "and democracy privileges some groups to the detriment of others" (Sapo, 2023).

Although Timorese journalists are generally free to report the news - being the only Southeast Asian nation considered 'free' by Freedom House - this freedom "does not correspond to reality" due to some structural limitations. A "culture of deference and respect for hierarchy" continues to permeate Timorese journalism, to the extent that some editors "are content to reproduce" press conference announcements" or "accept being paid" to be present (Robie, 2023).

In addition to "news treatment criteria", the 2021 Study of the Training Needs of East Timorese Journalists, drawn up as part of the Language Consultancy for Journalists project, highlighted other of the main difficulties journalists face in practicing their profession in East Timor: "the lack of critical thinking among active professionals", "awareness of the mission and practice of their profession", as well as the inability "to investigate and propose new topics for news content" (Observador, 2022).

Exposure to some forms of external pressure also limits the freedom of Timorese journalists and encourages self-censorship (Santo, 2023). A paradigmatic example is the lack of correspondence between the authorities' theoretical support for press freedom and its practical implementation. The same Study of the Training Needs of Journalists indicated difficulties "in the relationship with sources" and in access to information resulting from the "strong politicization of the news" and the "proximity between journalists and the political class" which, being often of a family nature, is a conditioning factor "taking into account the cultural value of the family in East Timor" (Observador, 2022).

Another external source of pressure on the media and journalists is related to the issue of criminal defamation (Parahita et al., 2020; Steele, 2007). Although freedom of the press is constitutionally guaranteed (Article 41), the exercise of journalism is overshadowed by the phantom Article 285 of the Penal Code, on false defamatory information (or "slanderous denunciations"), which has been used by politicians and authorities in East Timor to retaliate against journalists involved in reporting on corruption cases in public and private institutions (Oki, 2022). Back in 2017, for example, two journalists, Oki Raimundos and Lourenço Martins, faced the spectre of imprisonment for defamation for their articles about Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araújo, published in 2015 (IFJ, 2022).

More recently, Francisco Belo, editor-in-chief of local news portal Hatutan.com, was the target of a lawsuit by East Timor's Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Media, Francisco Martins da Costa Pereira Jerónimo, over a report that exposed the minister's involvement in a corrupt deal for a Beijing-funded project to digitise the country's largest broadcaster (IFJ, 2022). Incidentally, the same journalistic work earned him the "International Anti-Corruption Champions" award from the US State Department for his work in the fight against corruption, accountability, the rule of law, and freedom of the press (Platform, 2023). The dependence on government advertising in a country without a strong media industry further increases the scale of the significant challenge for the media to assume the role of "watchdog" of power. This often results in the diagnosis of "uncritical journalism that doesn't bother, doesn't raise problems, and doesn't compromise the country's position in the international ranking" of press freedom (Santo, 2023).

Finally, in addition to pressure from government authorities, the Timorese media also face the dominant influence of other institutions with socio-cultural weight, such as the Catholic Church (whose religion is professed by the overwhelming majority of the population), which tries to prevent or stop journalists from covering certain topics that are considered socially sensitive. They can also discourage journalists from covering certain sensitive issues, such as the emancipation of women, the right to abortion, or pedophilia in the clergy (Robie, 2023). "In these few months of work, the most effective pressures we have felt have been concerning articles involving the workings of the church," says *Diligente* journalist Nicodemos Espírito Santos (Martins, 2023).

In January 2022, *Tempo Timor* was subpoenaed for its coverage of a Roman Catholic priest's report on abuse, which openly identified the victims. In June, journalist Raimundos Oki was placed under investigation for violating judicial secrecy after interviewing girls who said they had been abused by Father Richard Daschbach, who was convicted of child sexual abuse in 2021 (Freedom House, 2023).

In short, the effort to promote "quality, impartial and taboo-free information about East Timor, addressing issues that are normally silenced in the Timorese media" has earned "a lot of praise" but also "incomprehension, some insults, pressure, and even death threats" (GoFundMe, 2023).

2. *Challenges of the Timorese Media Ecosystem, Market Potential*

Southeast Asia's youngest democracy is an island nation whose population has increasing access to the media, both traditional and digital.

In this sense, and to better understand the media ecosystem in Timor, it is important to identify and describe some of the main dimensions that are fundamental to leveraging the sustainability and plurality of the media, namely (i) the media companies operating in the market, (ii) the context in which they carry out their activity; (iii) the system, institutions, and regulatory model; and (iv) the market structure and environment.

In the context of media companies in general, they all face similar challenges concerning management strategies and practices, which fall into a panoply of categories: either focusing on value creation and covering innovation in production practices, the creation of new products and the diversification of revenues; or related to management, involving investment in technology, cooperation with companies, as well as the management of brands, projects, and portfolios; sometimes related to communication, namely promotion and publishing, multi-platform content, audience engagement, and production synergies, such as branded content and native advertising; sometimes related to operational efficiency, which includes reorganising work, reducing costs, talent management and continuous training (Faustino & Noam, 2019).

2.1 Media Companies Operating in the Market and the Regulatory System

In East Timor, the media play a critical role in disseminating information and shaping public opinion. One of the characteristics - of each type of media - that is often associated with countries with emerging democracies is the important role that radio plays because it is the medium that usually has the greatest territorial capillarity - in other words, it is the medium that best covers the territory and partly mitigates some of the gaps in the available telecommunications infrastructure, including, of course, the Internet and the quality of existing broadband.

At the national level, there are three main telecommunications providers and a developing fibre optic infrastructure, so the digital infrastructure is still insufficient. Most Timorese access the Internet via cell phone, but face major barriers, such as the high cost and limited network, especially in rural areas (ABC International Development, 2024). In this context, the main means of communication operating in East Timor are presented below, as well as a brief description of their relevance in the territory:

Radio: Radio is one of the main sources of information and entertainment in East Timor. Radio Timor-Leste is the country's public radio station and plays an important role in covering news and broadcasting cultural and educational programs.

Television: Television is also a popular source of news and entertainment in East Timor. TVTL (Televisão Timor-Leste) is the national television station and offers a variety of programs, including news, dramas, documentaries, and educational programs.

Newspapers: Although the number of printed newspapers is limited in East Timor, some publications provide news and analysis on local and international issues. Some of the best-known newspapers include "Suara Timor Lorosae" and "Timor Post".

Internet and social media: With increased access to the internet, many Timorese also get their information online. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter play a significant role in the dissemination of news and social interaction.

News agencies: National and international news agencies, such as Agência Lusa and Agence France-Presse (AFP), also provide news coverage in East Timor, helping to report on local and global events.

The ABC International Development (2024) report presents a detailed analysis of the media situation in East Timor in 2024. Through some tables, which we reproduce below, the media development unit offers a comprehensive view of the different types of media, highlighting some characteristics.

Table 1 shows that local broadcast television has a more limited reach because it is limited to terrestrial transmission, unlike the multiple forms of transmission of national broadcast television (RTTL and GMN-TV), which use analog terrestrial and satellite transmissions.

Table 1 | Television

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

Source: ABC International Development, State of the Media: Timor-Leste 2024

The following table shows the main radio stations in East Timor, where it can be seen that there is a diversity of forms of transmission and that the online presence stands out.

Table 2 | Radio

Media type	Examples	Notes
National broadcast radio	RTTL	State company. Terrestrial analog and digital broadcasting with an <i>online</i> presence
	Radio National	Commercial company, part of GMN Group. Terrestrial analogue broadcast with online presence
	Radio Maubere	National terrestrial broadcast during the election period with an <i>online</i> presence
Radio transmission based in Dili	Radio Liberdade	Operates with Fundasaun Media Development Centre, providing training with an online presence
	Radio Timor Kmanek	Owned by the Catholic Church, Dili Diocese with an online presence
	Radio Vox	Commercial company with an <i>online</i> presence
	Radio STL Radio M3	The commercial company, together with STL print newspaper with an <i>online</i> presence Commercial company with an <i>online</i> presence
	Radio Metro	Run by the government department SECOMS with an online presence
	Radio Rakambia	Community radio with <i>online</i> presence, member of ARKTL
	Radio Lorico Lian	Community radio with <i>online</i> presence, member of ARKTL
Radio transmission based outside of 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 the map for locations. While the 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

Source: ABC International Development, State of the Media: Timor-Leste 2024

In addition to television and radio, East Timor has national daily newspapers, as shown in Table 3, which invest in training and printing infrastructure.

Table 3 | Print Media

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

Source: ABC International Development, *State of the Media: Timor-Leste 2024*

Table 4 illustrates some of the exclusively *online* media, with details on the nature and financial support of each. The number of examples presented is a reflection of the growing presence of the Internet not only in Dili but also in other regions.

Table 4 | Average exclusively online

Media type	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 of Dili	Liquiça Post	Supported by the UNDP innovation grant. Based in Liquiça
	Mambae Television	Voluntary YouTube channel. Based in Aileu
	Lian Orulil	Based in Ainaro

Source: ABC International Development, *State of the Media: Timor-Leste 2024*

The aforementioned report, *State of the Media: East Timor 2024*, also presents the results of a survey - Tatoli Public Perception Survey 2023 - regarding the sources of information used.

Table 5 | Most frequently used sources of information

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

Source: ABC International Development, *State of the Media: Timor-Leste 2024*

The data shows that television is the most used medium, information that is corroborated by the data in Table 6. Radio continues to be the public’s preferred platform in some rural areas, where access to television is limited or non-existent. It can be said that the predominant use of certain communication platforms is related to urban and rural areas, although the absence of data on the press somewhat limits this conclusion since this medium was not included in the survey.

Table 6 | Tatoli Public Perception Survey 2023: Most used media sources

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

Source: ABC International Development, *State of the Media: Timor-Leste 2024*

Concerning the percentage of use of Facebook and YouTube, it can be seen that these social networks are used more in urban areas than in areas where digital infrastructure is limited.

Table 7 | The reach of the media

Total 2022 (N=2,451)	
Television	<p>50% of respondents indicated they watch television every day, while a further 17% reported they watch television a few times a week.</p> <p>RTTL (90%)</p> <p>GMN (69%)</p> <p>TVE (5%)</p>
Radio	<p>19% of respondents indicated they listen to the radio every day, while a further 21% reported they listen a few times a week.</p> <p>RTTL (77%)</p> <p>Community radio (52%, aggregated for all stations)</p> <p>Radio Maubere (22%)</p> <p>GMN (17%)</p>
Print	<p>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.</p> <p>NA</p>
Social media	<p>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.</p> <p>Facebook (Dili 98%, municipalities 95%)</p> <p>YouTube (62%)</p>
Online-only news	NA

Source: ABC International Development, *State of the Media: Timor-Leste 2024*

Based on Table 7, it is possible to identify patterns in media consumption among the Timorese. Television stands out, with 50% of respondents saying that they watch television daily, with public television being the most popular. It should be noted, however, that the rate of daily newspaper reading is quite low - only 4% - and contrasts with the high rate of use of social networks, albeit for short periods.

As has already been mentioned, it should be noted that although there is a variety of media outlets in East Timor, this does not mean that access to them is easy - in other words, access to information may present some constraints in more peripheral and rural areas. In addition, it is not unreasonable to consider that issues such as freedom of the press, pluralism of information

and opinion, as well as the existence of a context adverse to the independence of journalistic activity, can pose additional challenges in emerging democracies because they are not leveraged by sufficiently robust media systems, including from the point of view of regulation.

Although the regulation of the media in East Timor is essentially undertaken directly by the government, the participation of some organisations representing civil society, as well as other entities, is not prohibited.

According to Brinca (2021),

"East Timor's Media Law has 54 articles, divided into eight chapters, one of which is specifically dedicated to the activity of journalists, another to the media, one to the right of reply and rectification, another to forms of liability and one that provides for the creation of the Press Council and establishes its duties and powers and defines its general mode of operation, in addition to the chapters dedicated to the fundamental and final provisions, respectively" (p. 29).

In this context, the following laws and institutions that makeup East Timor's media system can be highlighted.

Press and Media Law: East Timor has laws governing the media, including the Press and Media Law. This law establishes the rights and responsibilities of the media, as well as the sanctions for violations such as defamation or incitement to hatred.

Press Council of East Timor (CI): The Press Council of East Timor is an independent body that works to promote press freedom and to ensure compliance with ethical standards in the media. The CI can receive complaints from the public about the conduct of the press and carry out investigations.

Government bodies: The government of East Timor also plays a role in regulating the media, through bodies such as the Ministry of Social Communication. These bodies can establish media-related policies and ensure that the media operates within legal limits.

It can be said that East Timor has a relatively free and pluralistic press, with a variety of news sources, including newspapers, radio, television, and online media. Media liberalisation has been supported to promote diversity of opinion and access to information. Despite efforts to promote press freedom, East Timor still faces challenges such as a lack of resources and technical capacity, as well as political pressure on the media. In addition, defamation and censorship issues can still be a matter of concern on some occasions. Overall, media regulation in East Timor reflects efforts to balance freedom of expression with the need to guarantee ethical standards and responsibility in the media. In this regard, Brinca (2021) states that.

"Essentially, the priority will be to equate the role that is intended to be given to the state in the sector, and in particular to the government in office at any given time, or the possible empowerment of civil society and media professionals as watchdogs of the established power and, therefore, in need of broad guarantees of freedom and independence, which are compromised in the current model" (p. 68). As Baldwin, Cave and Lodge (2012) point out, "it has become accepted not only that regulation is necessary for the functioning of a market economy, but also that regulatory oversight remains essential in the management of public services, especially those involving naturally monopolistic elements such as networks" (pp. 9-10).

2.2 Context of Journalistic Activity, Support, and the Market

As has already been suggested, the media situation in East Timor is characterised by many challenges, but there has also been some progress.

Because East Timor is a young nation, that achieved independence in 2002, it does not yet have a consolidated media system, a circumstance that contributes to the existence of added challenges in the development of its media and pluralism of information. For example, in terms of *freedom of the press*, East Timor has a relatively free press, with several active media organisations covering various subjects. In addition, the presence of international organisations (Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), The Asia Foundation) can directly or indirectly exert some pressure for the adoption of good journalistic practices. However, this does not mean that cases and accusations of political pressure and self-censorship can be identified - albeit more occasionally.

For example, last year, the *Diligente* newspaper team was the target of offensive comments and threats on social media, especially on Facebook, after publishing a report revealing alleged mistreatment of young people at the Nossa Senhora de Fátima Minor Seminary (Diligente, 2023). In addition to reports of digital bullying and possible influence by the Catholic Church, others involve prominent state figures. During a press conference on the Anti-Corruption Commission (CAC), Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão threatened a professional from the newspaper *Independente* (Noano, 2024). In another incident, journalist Desy Reis, from *Rádio Liberdade*, was assaulted by the security team while covering the Becora market, after which she was expelled from the premises (Noano, 2024).

Recently, in the Cómoro market in Dili, one of the journalists trying to cover an allegedly forced and illegal eviction process carried out by the state was arrested by the security forces (Lusa, 2024). This incident was decisive for the East Timor Press Council to denounce the existence of threats to press freedom in the country (e-Global, 2024; Lusa, 2024).

The examples mentioned above show a worrying pattern of repression, especially of female professionals, and reflect a worsening of episodes of censorship and intimidation of journalists. This alarming picture is corroborated by the result of the 2024 press freedom ranking drawn up by the NGO Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in which East Timor dropped ten places compared to 2023 (Noano, 2024).

It should be noted that “the phenomenon of media concentration constitutes one of the most important and liveliest discussed trends of the media industry related to the pluralism of information (including in Portugal)” (Faustino, 2018, p. 128). In any case, it can be said that there is pluralism and diversity of media outlets in East Timor, namely newspapers, radio, television, and online platforms. This circumstance fosters a relative diversity of voices and perspectives in the country’s media sphere, whereas economic and financial sustainability is also a structural problem that significantly conditions future developments in the media sector in East Timor. Thus, not being a situation exclusive to emerging democracies, and in particular East Timor, both the independence and relevance of the media sector are related to the structure and conditions of the market. The economic challenges in the media in East Timor are significant and are faced with economic weaknesses resulting from the scarcity of human and material resources, especially funding. And, as already mentioned, the infrastructure is precarious and, in some of the more peripheral - and rural - areas, access to the media is conditioned by the existence of inadequate infrastructure. In many cases, there is a lack of electricity and internet.

On the other hand, media literacy is a structural problem in East Timor, which is why it is imperative to organise and promote initiatives aimed at educating and making the public/citizens aware of the need to ensure the practice of independent journalism and promote a society with critical capacity, which contributes to strengthening democracy and civil society in general. Although the Timorese media cover a variety of fundamental topics aligned with democratic principles (including issues related to politics, the economy, culture, and society), certain topics can be sidelined due to the lack of financial resources or structuring public policies that leverage a consistent media system.

The media in East Timor operate in a context of relative freedom compared to countries with emerging democracies, or even in analogy with countries in the Asian region. The continued development of the media, induced by international policies and support, is crucial to strengthening democracy and society in East Timor. They still face significant challenges, including financial constraints, as the media market is relatively small, but with potential for development. Still, the Timorese have had relatively easy access to the media, both *online* and *offline*. In this context, the following fundamental aspects characterise the media system in East Timor:

Media Market and Challenges: Despite the challenges facing the media system, the media market in East Timor has potential for growth, especially with the increase in Internet penetration and the growing interest in the democratisation of information and freedom of the press. The media market faces several challenges, including limited resources, as well as an underdeveloped infrastructure, and an evolving regulatory environment. Financial sustainability is also challenging for many media organisations that are dependent on state revenues, which have direct implications for press freedom,

impartiality, and the plurality of voices in the country. GMN-TV is the only media outlet that is self-sustainable in commercial terms. To this end, it has a specific unit dedicated exclusively to the production of paid content (ABC International Development, 2024).

Traditional Media: Before East Timor’s independence in 2002, the media was highly controlled by the political power and limited in terms of supply. After independence, there was significant growth in traditional media, including newspapers, radio, and television. The main newspapers include “Suara Timor Lorosae” and “Timor Post”.

Radio and Television: Radio is one of the most popular media in East Timor, due to its accessibility in rural and remote areas. Television also has significant coverage, with national and international channels available.

Digital Media: With the increase in Internet connectivity, digital media is becoming increasingly important in East Timor. People consume online news, social media, and video content through platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

As a result, the media market in East Timor is small but developing considerably - given the dominant culture in the region and also because it is a young nation-state. Despite these constraints, journalistic projects can be identified in both traditional and digital media. It is to be hoped - with continued support from the international community (USAID, Freedom House, for example) - that the media system can continue to develop and that the Timorese population will have progressively easier access to more and better information and entertainment. It is also to be hoped that the economy can further develop and create better conditions to finance the media market and, in this way, leverage the emergence of more journalistic projects and provide the Timorese population with more diverse and plural information and entertainment content.

CONCLUSIVE SUMMARY

Strengthening press freedom, promoting diversity of voices, as well as developing infrastructure and technological capacities, are key to ensuring that the media contribute to strengthening emerging democracies. In turn, it is important that any form of support for the media is implemented transparently and respects the principles of press freedom and editorial independence. In this context, in general, it can be suggested that the media system in East Timor has similar characteristics to other countries with developing democracies, namely:

- (i) Radio is one of the most important media, as it penetrates rural and remote areas more easily;
- (ii) Television is also widely watched, with national and international channels available;
- (iii) With the growth in Internet penetration, digital media are becoming more important as informational, educational, and entertainment media, through social networks and video content on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

As is also characteristic of emerging democracies, the development of the media system in East Timor faces some challenges. Firstly, due to the multilingual nature of the territory, which goes far beyond the predominant Tetum, Portuguese, and even English. On the other hand, the fact that the infrastructure supporting the media sector is underdeveloped - with limited access to the Internet and low penetration of modern communication technologies in rural or marginalised areas - can represent some constraints for the exercise of journalistic activity in a more consistent and transversal way across Timorese society.

Such circumstances of infrastructure limitations and weaknesses - can lead to asymmetries in the production and dissemination of knowledge and information to different segments of society. Similarly, another aspect that can create constraints on the existence of a plural media system is the excessive concentration of ownership, a problem that also extends to other Asian countries and Western democracies). Although there is no automatic relationship between the concentration of ownership and the reduction of information pluralism, there are significant risks of this happening. It may lead to a monolithic perspective in the approach and discussion of issues and, therefore, condition information pluralism and the diversity of voices.

Despite the existing challenges and limitations, the media market in East Timor has growth potential, especially with the increase in Internet penetration and the growing interest in the democratisation of information and freedom of the press, a prospect that seems to be valued and discussed by Timorese society. In this context, it is worth highlighting the existence of new projects emerging in the digital space of the media landscape in East Timor in recent years.

For their part, foreign or foreign-language media also play an important role in disseminating international information and diversifying news sources for the Timorese. However, it is essential that the Timorese also have access to local news sources to better understand the problems and events affecting their country. In this context, as recommendations, the following challenges and opportunities for leveraging the media system based on public policies are presented, namely through the following interventions:

i) *Legislation and regulation.* Laws and regulations can be developed to protect press freedom and ensure a more favorable environment for the media to operate in. This can include laws that protect journalists, guarantee access to public information, and promote transparency and informational pluralism.

ii) *Training and projects for the media.* Training and capacity-building programs aimed at journalists and other professionals (including management, marketing, and commercial professionals) in the media can be strengthened, to improve their skills and knowledge. The Government partnered with civil society organisations and international institutions, can implement projects and programs to strengthen the media system in East Timor, including the development of media support infrastructure, as well as support for content production and the promotion of diversity and plurality of voices in media companies.

iii) *Funding and support for the media.* The government can provide direct or indirect funding to the media through subsidies (direct and indirect), government advertising, or other forms of financial support. The media can receive support in terms of access

to resources, such as equipment, technology, and infrastructure. The key to the success of this type of support will depend on the creation of transparent criteria and truthful information.

As in other emerging democracies, the media in East Timor is fundamental to (i) shaping public opinion, (ii) strengthening democratic institutions and (iii) encouraging the participation and emancipation of civil society. The media market in East Timor is very limited in its size and available resources, so it faces some demanding challenges, namely (i) improving the infrastructure supporting the media system and (ii) improving the regulatory environment. And in a more economic approach, financial sustainability is a key challenge for news organisations, especially privately owned ones.

Given East Timor's recent fall in the world press freedom rankings and the cases of censorship mentioned before, it is pivotal to mitigate the state's influence on the media. Possible solutions include transparent administration of public funds and strict application of well-defined criteria. In addition, more efficient audience segmentation could allow for more targeted content, contributing to an increase in revenue and, consequently, to the sustainability of the media. A detailed review of current and future laws would also be relevant, to strengthen the legal framework supporting the media and guarantee their independence and pluralism.

To sum up, despite the adversities observed in the territory, there have been some appreciable developments. East Timor may even set an example for other emerging democracies, in that the effort made to adopt democratic principles seems to be moving in the right direction and can be expected to be consolidated. Furthermore, awareness of the importance of the role of the media in this process of social construction also seems to be being acknowledged by Timorese institutions and society.

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