

TONGA: UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION



1. Context

Tonga, an archipelago of 169 South Pacific islands, has a population of about 100,000, most of whom live on the main island of Tongatapu, home to the capital Nuku'alofa.¹ The population is young - around half are aged under 25 - and largely rural.² Tonga is predominantly bilingual, with Tongan use mostly in homes and cultural settings, however, the Legislative Assembly has maintained the local language as the formal language of the House. English widely used in government, education, and business. Tonga is a conservative hierarchical society where cultural traditions and Christian values shape daily life. Concepts such as Faka'apa'apa (respect for elders, royalty, God), Lototoo (humility and generosity), Tauhi Vā (maintaining relationships or loyalty), and Feveitokai'aki (sharing, cooperation, and passion or commitment) are the pillars of Tongan society and remain central to Tongan identity both at home and across its large diaspora.



Economically, Tonga faces constraints from its narrow productive base, reliance on remittances, and repeated natural disasters. Agriculture, fisheries, and a small tourism sector remain important, but recent persistent tropical cyclones, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 volcanic eruption and tsunami have left devastating losses in infrastructure and business and private properties. These events in combination with external global factors have accelerated inflation which have further stifled progress. Seasonal labour mobility schemes, predominantly with New Zealand and Australia, provide vital income but also contribute to labour shortages and social pressures.

Tonga is the only Pacific nation with an unbroken constitutional monarchy, having never been colonised, and joined the commonwealth in 1970 as an independent nation with its own monarch. Democratic reforms since 2010 have shifted some power from the monarchy and nobles to elected representatives, but traditional authority remains highly influential.

Tonga's media landscape is small but varied, spanning state-owned broadcasters, private radio stations, online news outlets, and an active social media environment. Digital broadcasting and wider internet access have reshaped the sector, with print newspapers largely replaced by online platforms such as Matangi Tonga, Talanoa 'o Tonga, Tonga Independent and Kaniva Tonga. The state-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) remains the dominant player in the sector, operating Radio Tonga 1, Kool 90FM, and two television channels.³ Several private and community stations also contribute to the media mix, offering local news, talkback, and cultural programming.

While the constitution guarantees media freedom, political pressure remains a concern. Journalists report instances of government sensitivity to critical coverage,⁴ and self-censorship is common when reporting on the monarchy or contentious political issues. Despite this, Tonga's media continues to play an important role in public communication, accountability, and emergency information.

Mobile coverage has expanded significantly since the deployment of a submarine fibre-optic

¹<https://commonwealthchamber.com/member-countries/tonga/> [Accessed 26/11/2025]

²Ibid. [Accessed 26/11/2025]

³TBC also operates a localised version of its primary channel, TV Tonga, specifically for the Vava'u island group (known as TV Tonga-Vava'u), effectively giving them three services across different regions.

⁴Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 – Tonga, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tonga/freedom-world/2023> [Accessed 26/11/2025]

cable linking Tonga to Fiji in 2022 (via the Southern Cross network), which underpins broad mobile and internet service across the main islands. Adoption of 4G (and the recent start of 5G rollouts) has improved speeds and capacity, especially in urban areas; for example, a 2025 upgrade by Digicel Tonga in the capital Nuku'alofa reportedly brought 5G service to about 30% of the city's population.⁵ Many rural and remote outer-island communities continue to depend on older 2G/3G networks or occasional satellite fallback when submarine cables are damaged.⁶ The geographic dispersion of islands, high costs of data and smartphones relative to incomes, and infrastructure vulnerability — especially to natural disasters — limit consistent, equitable connectivity across all of Tonga.

2. Research methodology

Data in this research briefing is based on a mixed method research study designed by BBC Media Action. The research was designed to understand the lives of communities in Tonga, their media access, usage and preferences, how information is shared and perceived, and how key national and local issues affect people's lives.

A nationwide mobile phone survey⁷ of 1,050 adults in Tonga aged 18+ was conducted from late January to early March 2025 by Tebbutt Research. Respondents were sampled via a randomly generated list of mobile phone numbers. Survey quotas were overlaid to ensure accurate representation by sex and age within each province in alignment with most recent population data. At the end of fieldwork, weights were applied to adjust survey proportions where needed. Based on this research methodology, all survey participants had access to a phone, either at home or elsewhere. Therefore, the percentage findings in this briefing reflect the media habits and preferences of Tongan adults with mobile phone access only. As such, the percentage findings presented in this briefing are not representative of the total adult population of Tonga.

Qualitative research was used to complement the nationwide survey. Twelve focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted across Tonga's Vava'u and Tongatapu divisions, intentionally selected for demographic and geographic diversity from August to September 2025. In each location, the sample sought to include a varied cross-section of the population, including those from marginalised communities and those with lower media access.



⁵Digicel Tonga (June 2025), Digicel Tonga completes the first phase of its 5G rollout covering about 30% of the population of Nuku'alofa. <https://www.digicelpacific.com/news/digicel-tonga-completes-the-first-phase-of-its-5g-rollout-covering-about-30-of-th> [Accessed 27/11/2025]

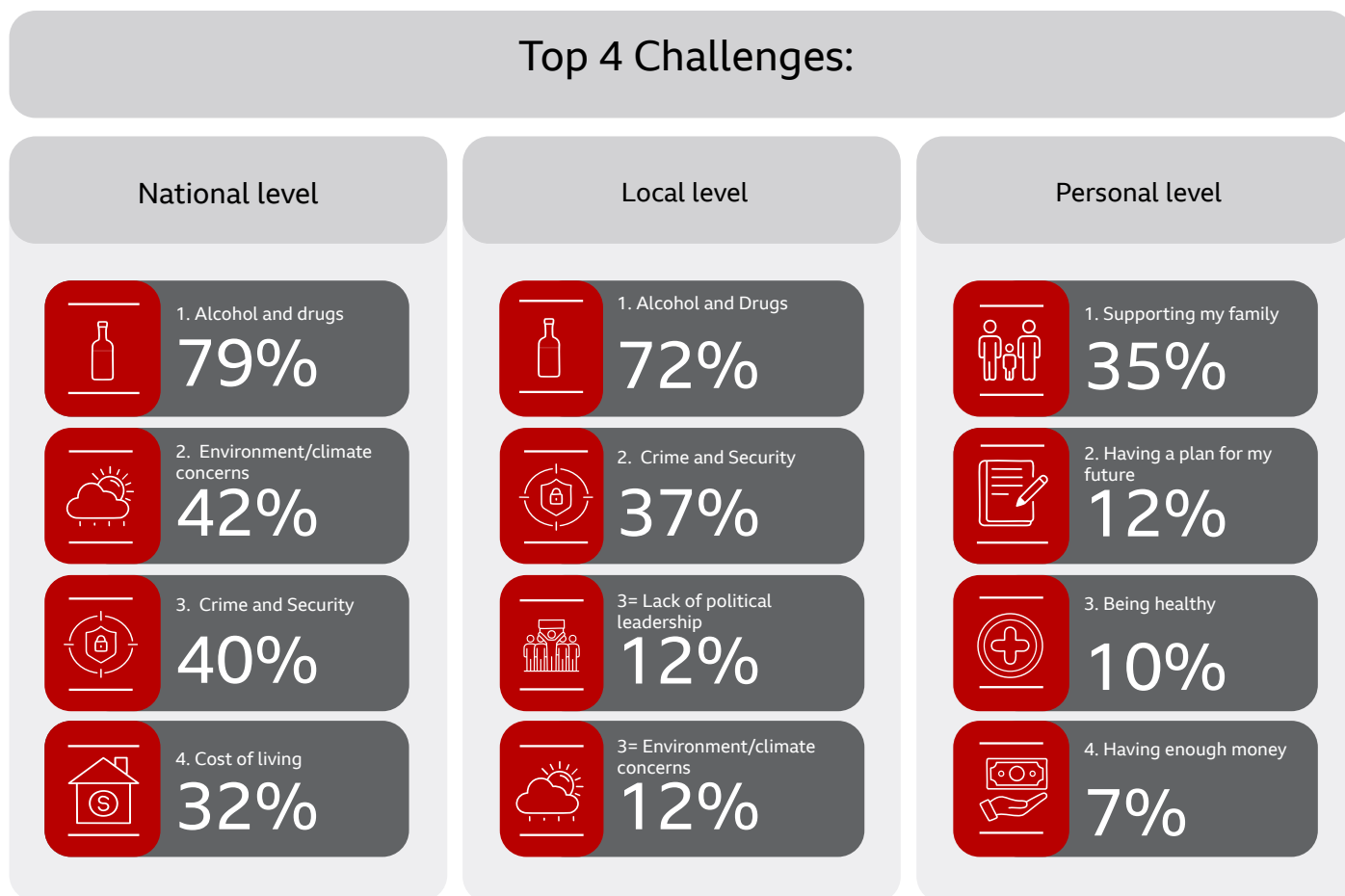
⁶Dominey-Howes, D., The Conversation, The Tonga volcanic eruption has revealed the vulnerabilities in our global telecommunication system (January 2022). <https://theconversation.com/the-tonga-volcanic-eruption-has-revealed-the-vulnerabilities-in-our-global-telecommunication-system-175048> [Accessed 27/11/2025]

⁷Although other data collection methods were considered for this research, the costs and logistics of face-to-face interviewing were not feasible in the scope of this study and were unlikely to be able to reach significantly more people in such geographic contexts due to the travel required.

3. Findings

3.1 What are the key concerns and issues affecting Tongans?

People were asked in the survey what issues were most affecting them on a personal, local, and national level.



Q. What do you think is your biggest challenge currently? In your opinion, what are the main issues/challenges affecting the country? And for you, what are the main issues/challenges facing your local area? Multiple responses allowed (n=1,050)

By far, the most cited issue of concern at the national and local levels was ‘drugs and alcohol’, an issue more likely to be named by low-income earners and people who identify themselves as ‘householders’. This reflects a country grappling with a methamphetamine crisis, fuelled by transnational networks and local collaborators, and founded on Tonga’s geographic position on a maritime route described as a “methamphetamine superhighway”.⁸ Crime and security was also commonly cited, as well as environmental concerns (particularly among those living in the Vava’u division). At the personal level, respondents most commonly reported concern about supporting their families.



⁸Pomana, S., Talanoa ‘O Tonga, Tonga’s meth crisis: fighting a ‘superhighway’ of illicit trade (January 20, 2025). <https://talanoaotonga.to/tongas-meth-crisis-fighting-a-superhighway-of-illicit-trade/> [Accessed 26/11/2025]

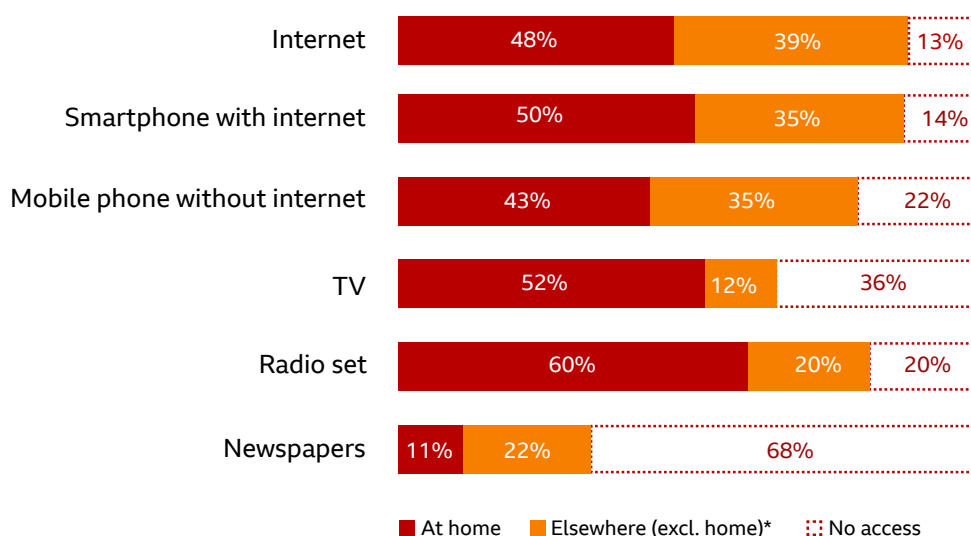
3.2 How do people in Tonga access and use media?

Mobile connectivity in Tonga is widespread but not universal. As of early 2025, active mobile connections were equivalent to about 89% of the population,⁹ with most (85%) mobile connections being broadband.¹⁰ At the start of 2025, 59% of the population of Tonga were using the internet.¹¹

BBC Media Action's survey of mobile users in Tonga¹² found that most respondents had access to a smartphone. While around half of respondents had access at home, a high proportion accessed these outside of the household. Despite this, overall use of the internet and social media was relatively frequent. Radio and TV were also popular in Tonga, with over half of respondents listening to the radio, and a third watching TV, daily.

Overall Media Access and Use Among Mobile Phone Users in Tonga¹³

Access to Media Overall



**While multiple responses were permitted for the question (i.e. access both at home and elsewhere), this chart presents responses as a single response – i.e., access at home, elsewhere only, or no access*

Q. And do you have access to these media devices in your home or elsewhere? Base n=1,050

⁹According to DataReportal's Digital Tonga 2025 report <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-tonga> [Accessed 26/11/2025]. Notably, counts of mobile phone ownership and Internet connections may overcount coverage among some groups while undercounting coverage among others – statistics refer to the number of connections without taking into account multiple device ownership amongst individual users.

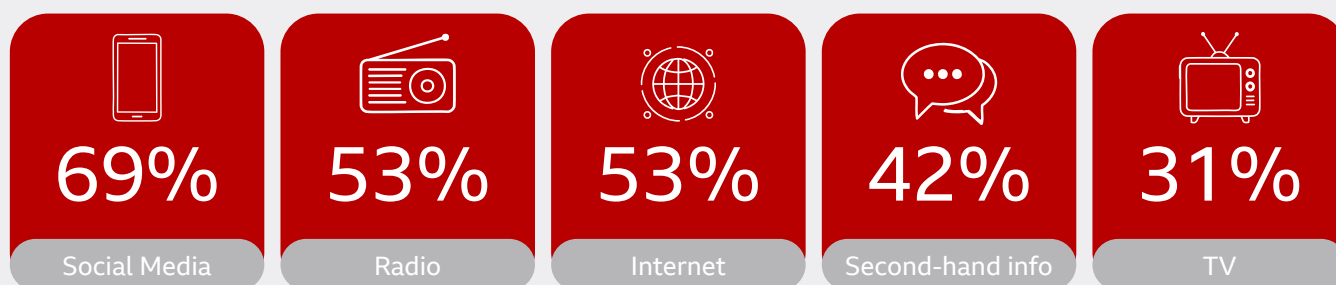
¹⁰ According to GSMA intelligence data via DataReportal: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-tonga> [Accessed 26/11/2025]

¹¹ Ibid.

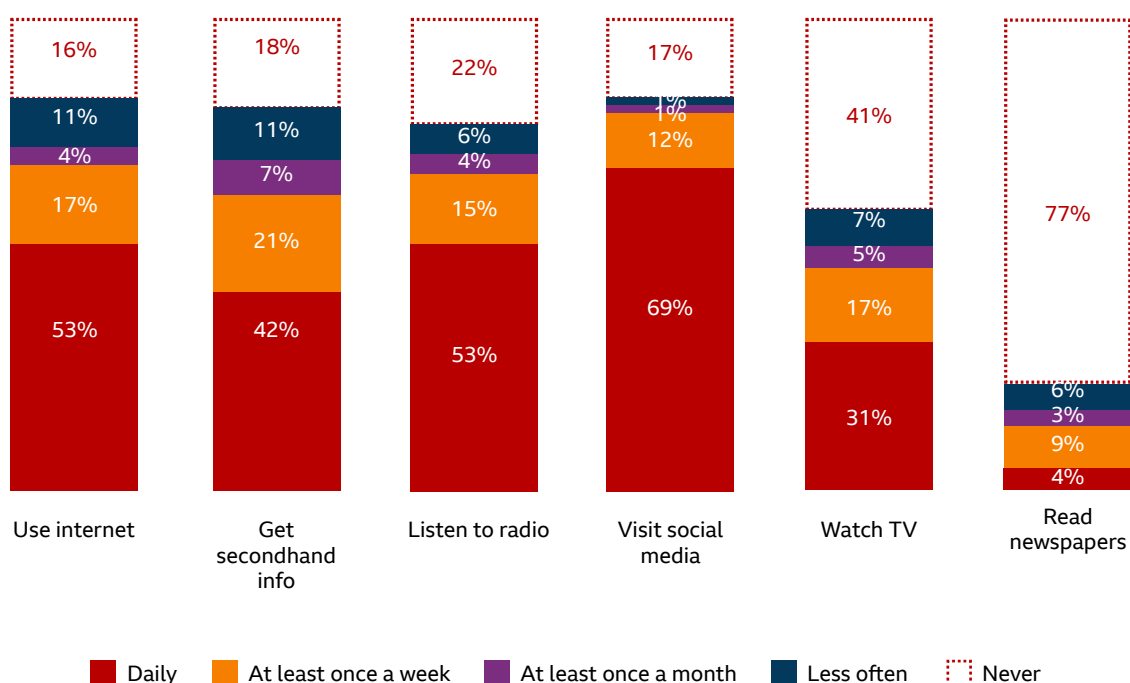
¹² Due to the research methodology, all survey participants had access to a phone. Therefore, the findings in this briefing reflect the media use, habits and preferences of Tongan adults with mobile phone access only and are not representative of the total adult population of Tonga.

¹³ Findings are representative of a sub-set of the Tongan population – those who have access to a mobile phone

Daily media use



Frequency of Media Use Overall



Q: How frequently do you do the following, if at all? Base: n=1,050

Whilst most people access the internet via a smartphone, limited network and access make it hard for some.

Smartphones are the main means of going online in Tonga. Most respondents reported access to the internet (87%) and/or a smartphone with internet (85%) - a trend also noted in a 2023 UNCDF report.¹⁴ While for half of respondents access was within their household, discussions revealed that smartphones were often shared among family members. For others (around one in three respondents), access was indirect - requiring them to leave home to get online. Limited network coverage in remote villages and outer islands restricts connectivity, with discussions revealing some users need to travel to main centres, such as Neiafu in Vava'u, to get a reliable signal. While just over half of respondents (55%) report having four bars of network coverage at

home, they are significantly more likely to be living in urban areas and/or Vava'u.

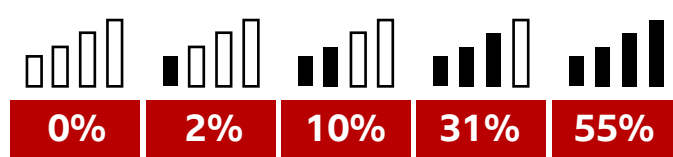
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I do not own a phone of my own...On occasion, if I am fortunate enough to borrow my mother's phone, I will use it.

– Female, 18-35, Urban

”

Network coverage at home



Q. How many network bars do you have on your phone where you live? Base: n=928 (respondents who have access to a mobile phone or smartphone)

Overall, internet access was significantly lower among people aged over 45, those with a low income and/or education, householders, and agricultural workers.

High daily social media use, with younger users driving heavy engagement and older groups using the internet more sparingly

Despite not everyone having their own smartphone, people in Tonga are using social media frequently: 69% of respondents reported visiting social media platforms on a daily basis.¹⁵ Accessing social media (71%) and connecting with other people (75%) were by far the most commonly mentioned reasons for using the internet. Just over half of respondents (53%) used their mobile phones for at least one hour each day and 62% reported spending at least T\$15 (Tongan Pa'anga) a month on their phone.

Young people (aged 18-24) were the most prolific users, being significantly more likely to report using their phones for at least three hours per day, and in discussions talked about using their phones constantly throughout the day, connecting with friends and family, visiting social media and for entertainment.

¹⁴ UNCDF, Assessing Digital and Financial Literacy in Tonga: A Survey on Knowledge, Skills and Access (December 2023), <https://www.uncdf.org/article/8578/assessing-digital-and-financial-literacy-in-tonga-a-survey-on-knowledge-skills-and-access> [Accessed 27/11/2025]

¹⁵ While 69% of respondents report visiting social media daily, just 53% report using the internet daily. The discrepancy in these figures (where daily use rates are not aligned, despite use of social media requiring access to the internet) suggests some confusion or misinterpretation around what 'using the internet' entails among respondents. This issue may have arisen partly due to the way in which the survey questions were asked. The survey asked: "How frequently do you use the Internet (including WhatsApp, Telegram)?" And "How frequently do you visit social media pages like Facebook, Instagram, etc." This may have led to misinterpretation among some survey respondents in terms of specific use of apps like WhatsApp etc. as opposed to using/browsing the internet generally. Furthermore, respondents may not be conscious that they are using the internet when they access social media, especially via apps on smartphones. It can be inferred that the higher figure (for frequency of social media use) is the effective rate of internet usage among respondents.

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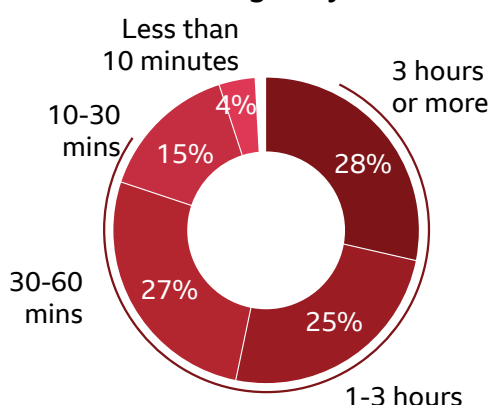
In my case, I might say twenty-four hours—I use it nearly all the time.

–Female, 18-35, Hala’ovave, Urban

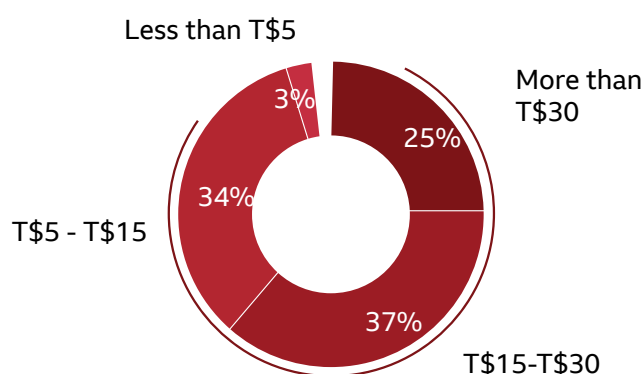
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Older people, over used smartphones for practical tasks such as work updates and school or church coordination or to access information unavailable via traditional channels. Those over 54 tended to use the internet even less, mainly to contact family.

Time Spent on Mobile Phone
(in average day)



Monthly Spend on Mobile Phone
(T\$ Tongan Pa'anga)



Q. How much time do you spend on a mobile phone on a normal day? Base: n=928 (respondents who have access to a mobile phone or smartphone)

Q. On average, how much do you spend on your mobile phone per month? Base: n=928 (respondents who have access to a mobile phone or smartphone)

Cost, connectivity, and digital skills limit online access in Tonga, amid rising concern over phone addiction and social media harms

Discussions revealed that the key barrier to getting and staying online was the high cost of mobile use, due to the cost of data bundles and the cost of electricity to charge a phone. Charging and power issues were reported mainly by older, rural participants, while limited digital literacy, especially challenges in navigating smartphones and apps, was also mentioned among elderly participants. Poor network signal and unreliable connectivity were also barriers for participants from remote villages and outer islands.

“

The main problem is the cost of data. Even a small top-up finishes quickly, especially if the children use it too. And the network is weak at times, especially when it rains.

Woman, 35-54, Rural Utulei Island

”

Concern around phone addiction and excessive use of social media were perceived to be a significant problem in discussion groups, with participants describing phones as a source of temptation, jealousy, and gossip, contributing to relationship breakdowns and mental health struggles.



“ From my personal experience, the phone brings with it many challenges. I often regard it as a kind of dangerous temptation—almost like a devil in disguise—because of the negative impact it can have on one’s life. ”

Woman, 36-44, rural, Holonga Village

Radio access is broad and listenership is a daily ritual for many in Tonga

Radio plays an important daily role in the lives of many Tongans. Radio access is widespread (80% access overall, 60% at home) and more than half of respondents (53%) report listening to the radio daily, a practice more common among men, those aged over 45, and those with a low income. Listenership is spread across a number of stations, with Tonga’s Broadcom 87.5 FM the most frequently listened to radio station among respondents (53% had listened to it in the last month). Radio Tonga 2 “Kool 90FM” (37%), Radio Nuku’alofa FM (35%), and Radio Tonga 1 AM (24%) were also commonly cited by respondents. Radio listenership peaks on weekday mornings, with people reporting listening to the radio throughout the day in their car or at work.

“ I don’t own a phone of my own. Instead, the first thing I engage with each morning is the radio. I hear it as soon as I wake up, and it becomes my first connection to the world outside. On occasion, if I am lucky enough to borrow my mother’s phone, I will use it, but otherwise the radio is my main source. ”

–Woman, 18-35, Urban Hala’ovave

TV access in Tonga is relatively widespread but uneven, with older and lower-income households missing out

While television access is also widespread in Tonga, it is slightly less equitable. While one in three respondents (31%) reported watching television daily, a greater share (41%) report never watching it. Respondents aged over 45, living in Tongatapu, with a lower level of education and income, and those who are householders were more likely to report having no access to television. TBC’s Television Tonga (TV Tonga) predominates viewership, with 72% of television viewers reporting watching it in the last month. The next most popular stations were sports channels (i.e. ESPN), watched by 9% of TV viewers. Television viewership peaks in line with evening news bulletins, forming part of a daily ritual.

Print newspapers have largely faded from Tonga’s media landscape, giving way to a growing online news sector

Traditional newspapers play a limited role in Tonga’s current media landscape, being described as virtually non-existent with the cost of printing and distributing across Tonga’s scattered

islands prohibitive.¹⁶ One in three respondents reported access to print newspapers, and just 4% said they read a newspaper daily. Conversely, 77% of respondents say they never read a print newspaper. Discussions revealed that newspapers are increasingly proving hard to get hold of, and that the news they contain is often considered outdated.

“ The newspaper is not available anymore, even this year will come to an end and we haven’t read or seen the ‘Times of Tonga’ or ‘Tonga Chronicles’ anymore.
– Woman, 55+, Rural Ovaka Island ”

Since the decline of print newspapers, almost all mainstream print media has moved online, with Tonga’s online news landscape led by outlets such as Matangi Tonga Online, Nepituno Tonga Online News, Tonga Independent and Talanoa ‘o Tonga, which provide national, regional, and diaspora-focused reporting. These online offerings are well utilised - one in three respondents (33%) reported reading news as the reason they go online.

3.3 How are Tongans consuming and sharing news and information?

With widespread smartphone use, social media and other digital media are important sources of information and social connection. Alongside this, word-of-mouth, especially through church and culturally embedded gatherings, is central to how Tongans share news. Even with the widespread use of these communication channels, radio continues to be the primary source for trusted and reliable information.

Community networks, Fono meetings, and Faikava groups are vital sources of news and information, but they are not well trusted

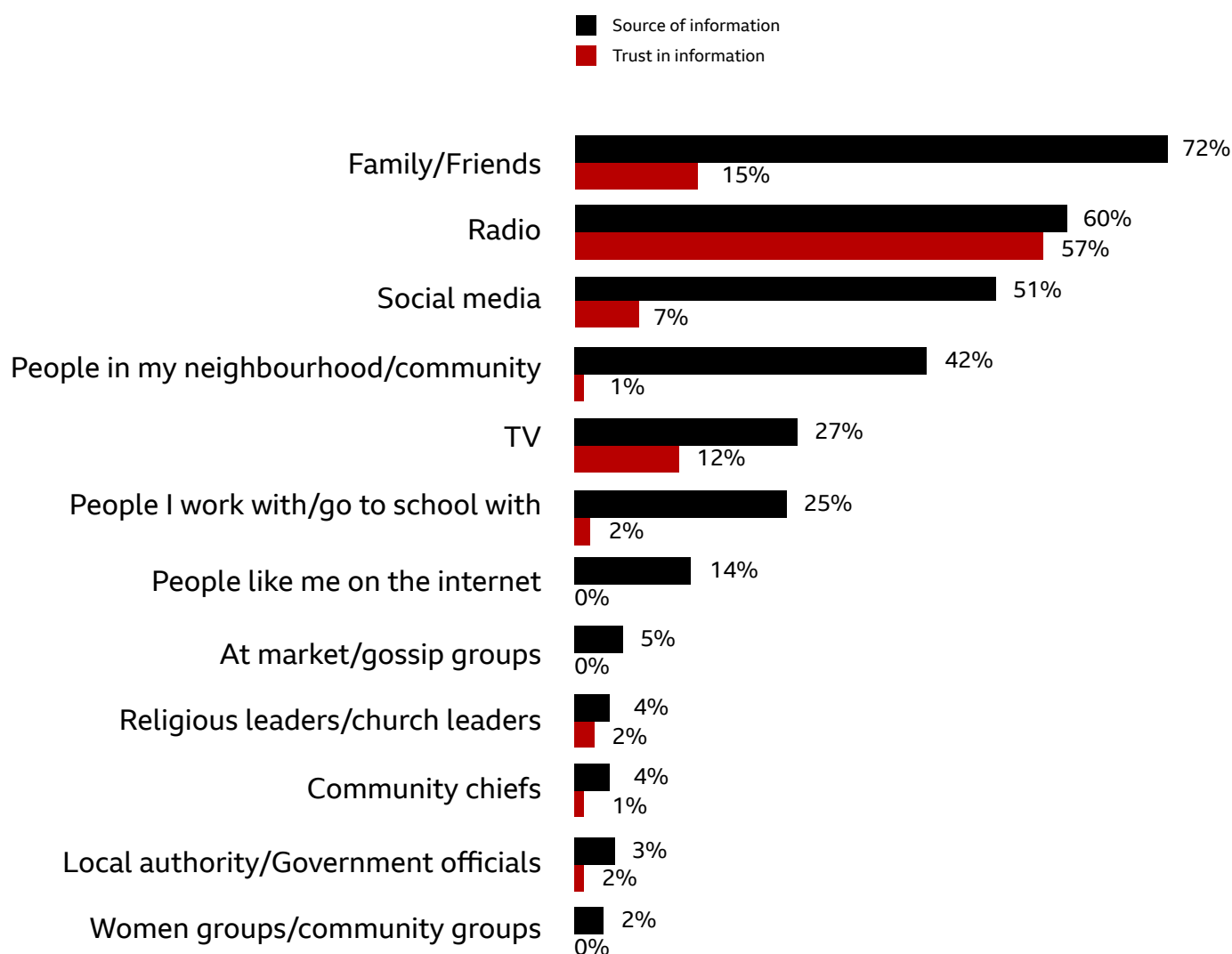
In Tonga, word-of-mouth and local community networks are central to how people access and share information – 42% of respondents said they get information second-hand every day, while a further 21% reported that this happens at least once a week. Second-hand sources of information include family and friends, church groups, and culturally embedded gatherings such as the Fono - a formal community meeting for discussing local and national news - and the Faikava group - a ceremonial gathering for sharing the kava drink where locals (especially men) share stories. These channels are particularly critical for residents of outer islands and remote areas, highlighting the continued importance of culturally grounded, community-based sources when access to media sources are limited.

“ Keep in mind that we live on an island, where we mostly just hear the news. We only get to see a few images or bits of information when we go to the mainland, but we often don’t know which one is actually correct. We sometimes just leave it at that, at least we hear the news.
– Woman, 55+, rural, ‘Utulei Island ”

¹⁶ABC International, State of the Media: Tonga (2025). <https://www.abc.net.au/abc-international-development/state-of-the-media-tonga-2025/105005712> [Accessed 26/11/2025]

While community networks are considered important and frequently utilised, they are not well trusted. Where 72% of respondents cited family and friends as important sources of news and information, just 15% felt they were trustworthy. Similarly, 41% of respondents mentioned people in their neighbourhood and community as key sources of information, but just 1% trusted them. Discussion participants noted that while a lot of news and information came via social gatherings, they consulted specific community members, such as church leaders and local authorities (town officers or police), for ‘important’ information, as they could be trusted to provide accurate information.

Source of, and Trust in, Information Sources



Q. Where or who do you usually go to find information about the issues? Base: n=1,050

Q. Among the sources you have mentioned, which ones do you trust? Base: n=970
(respondents who mention a source)

Radio serves as a reliable and essential source of news and information in Tonga

Radio is a central and trusted source of news and information for Tongans, with 60% of respondents citing it as an important source, and 57% considering it trustworthy. Discussion revealed that people often start their day by tuning into the radio, relying on it as a means to update them on important events, weather, and what is happening in the world. People described listening to the radio as background to their daily activities, such as household chores or plantation work, making it a consistent, integrated part of everyday life.

“ My daily routine includes listening to the radio, watching TV, and occasionally using my phone. However, I rely most on the radio because it provides timely updates and trustworthy information. TV and the phone are secondary sources for extra information or entertainment.

— Male, 55+, rural, Manuka Village, Tongatapu division

Radio is also considered a vital lifeline during natural disasters, including cyclones and tsunamis, particularly for rural communities and outer islands.

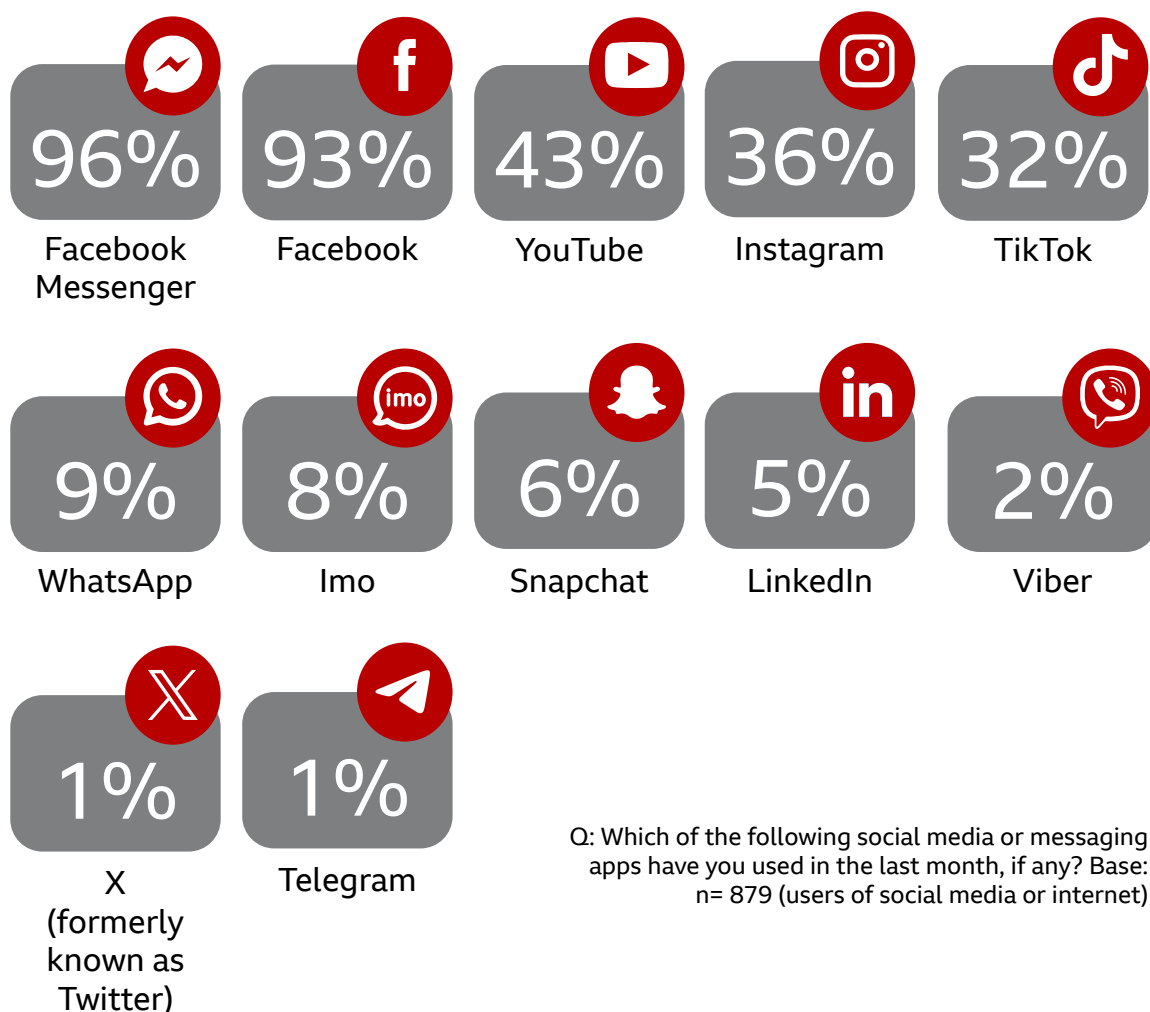
Social media connects Tongans, but concerns over reliability and misinformation persist

Social media plays an important role in connecting Tongans, particularly with friends and family overseas. It is less relied on as a primary news source. Discussions revealed that while younger people tend to use social media for news, valuing its speed and visual appeal, older participants were more inclined to find and share information offline, sourcing news and information via radio and/or television and sharing it in the community via word-of-mouth. Facebook and Facebook Messenger were the most widely used social media platforms – nearly all respondents reported accessing these platforms (93% and 96%, respectively). Despite the popularity of social media, discussions highlighted that people remain cautious about the reliability of information and the risk of spreading misinformation and were more inclined to rely on traditional sources of news and information.

“ Facebook works a lot like gossip—quick, attention-grabbing, even entertaining at times—but it becomes risky if you put too much trust in it.

— Male, 36-54, rural, Feletoa, Vava'u Division

Use of Platforms in Past Month:



Q: Which of the following social media or messaging apps have you used in the last month, if any? Base: n= 879 (users of social media or internet)

Women and men use media in a similar way

There is little in the way of differences in media access and habits by gender in Tonga. Women tend to be less regular users of radio (they are more likely to listen on a weekly, rather than daily, basis). Compared to males, they also are more likely to use their phones to send and receive text/SMS messages and to take photos, and less likely to use their phones to download and play games.



3.4 What do Tongans want the media to cover?

Most Tongan mobile phone users reported being interested in news, with 91% saying they are at least quite interested (including 31% who said they are very interested). Exploring programme consumption among respondents revealed a diversified mix of content: Music (58%), sports (55%), movies (48%), and religion (47%) were all widely consumed by respondents, while 45% said they had recently consumed news and current affairs content. Discussions revealed that topics in the news that resonated and were most relevant to people included the impacts of climate change, natural disasters, education, health, employment, religion and drug-related issues.

“ I am particularly interested in employment and climate-related issues. Stories that highlight job opportunities, local economic developments, or environmental changes impacting our community are very important to me. Unfortunately, I seldom see media content that focuses on these areas, and when I do, it often lacks detail or a local perspective.

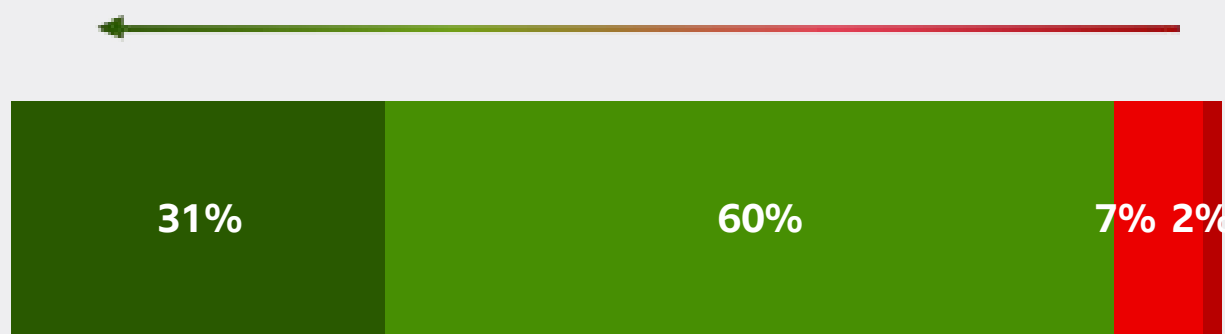
– Woman, 55+, Rural, Manuka Village



Interest in News

Very interested

Not interested



Q. How interested are you in news? Base: n=1,050

Tongans recognise misinformation as a widespread problem, driven largely by social media and word of mouth

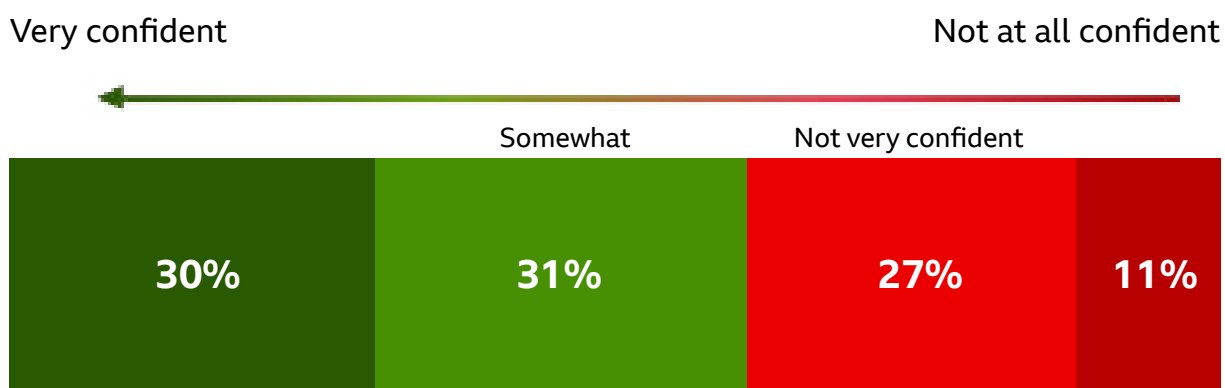
Many respondents believed they had encountered false or misleading information, with 42% saying they come across such information every day (particularly among those in Vava'u), and a further 16% at least weekly. Yet 22% of respondents believed they never encounter misinformation (19%) or that it does not exist (3%).

Friends and family were seen as the most common sources of false information (cited by 57% of respondents), followed by digital platforms (33%), reflecting both low trust in interpersonal networks and the perceived role of social media - especially Facebook - in amplifying unverified content. Participants recalled recent encounters with perceived misinformation on a range of topics, from natural disasters and COVID-19 remedies to celebrity stories and rumours about deaths. Discussion participants recognised the harms misinformation can cause, noting how quickly it spreads and confuses people, and how it can damage reputations and relationships, and cause divisions within communities.

While people express confidence in spotting misinformation, limited media literacy and social pressures influence how information is shared and verified

Over half of respondents (61%) expressed at least some confidence in their ability to identify misinformation, with 30% saying they are very confident to do so and 31% somewhat confident - especially younger and better-educated audiences. However, a sizeable minority (38%) lack confidence in their abilities, feeling either not very (27%) or not at all (11%) confident. While 83% of respondents recognise that accuracy of information matters more than speed of sharing it, social pressures still shape how people share information - for example, some admit to exaggerating news stories when they share them, a tendency more commonly acknowledged by men. Although people expressed concern about information accuracy and recognised the prevalence of misinformation, media literacy skills appeared to be limited, with few able to explain methods for verifying content. In discussions, participants described only basic verification strategies, such as consulting official sources, radio, trusted friends, church leaders, or local authorities, with occasional mention of cross-checking across multiple sources.

Claimed Confidence in Own Ability to Identify False Information



Q. How confident are you in your ability to identify false or misleading information? Base: n=1,050

3.5 What are the barriers to people being informed?

People overall feel they have access to information. However, a proportion of people do not feel there is enough content on some issues they are interested in.

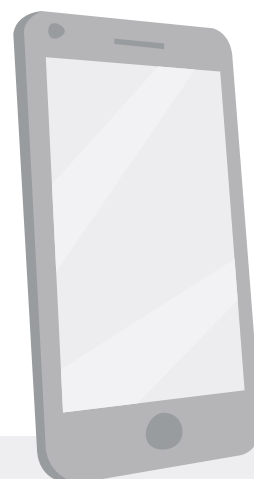
While most find it easy to access information, gaps remain in local and economic news, as well as coverage of issues affecting women and girls

The majority of respondents (90%) reported that it is easy to access information on topics that matter to them, with 27% describing it as very easy and 62% saying it is fairly easy. However, in exploring perceptions of the adequacy of media coverage of specific topics, findings indicate that current coverage overemphasises crime and corruption (over half of respondents felt there is too much of this content), while underrepresenting information for and about women and girls (61% say there is not enough of this content), local news (45% say there is not enough), as well as economic and business news (28% say there is not enough). Discussion participants cited a gap in information that directly affects their communities (especially rural villages) and felt that media is focused on issues affecting main centres. They also felt the media could do more to explain social and economic challenges facing the country.

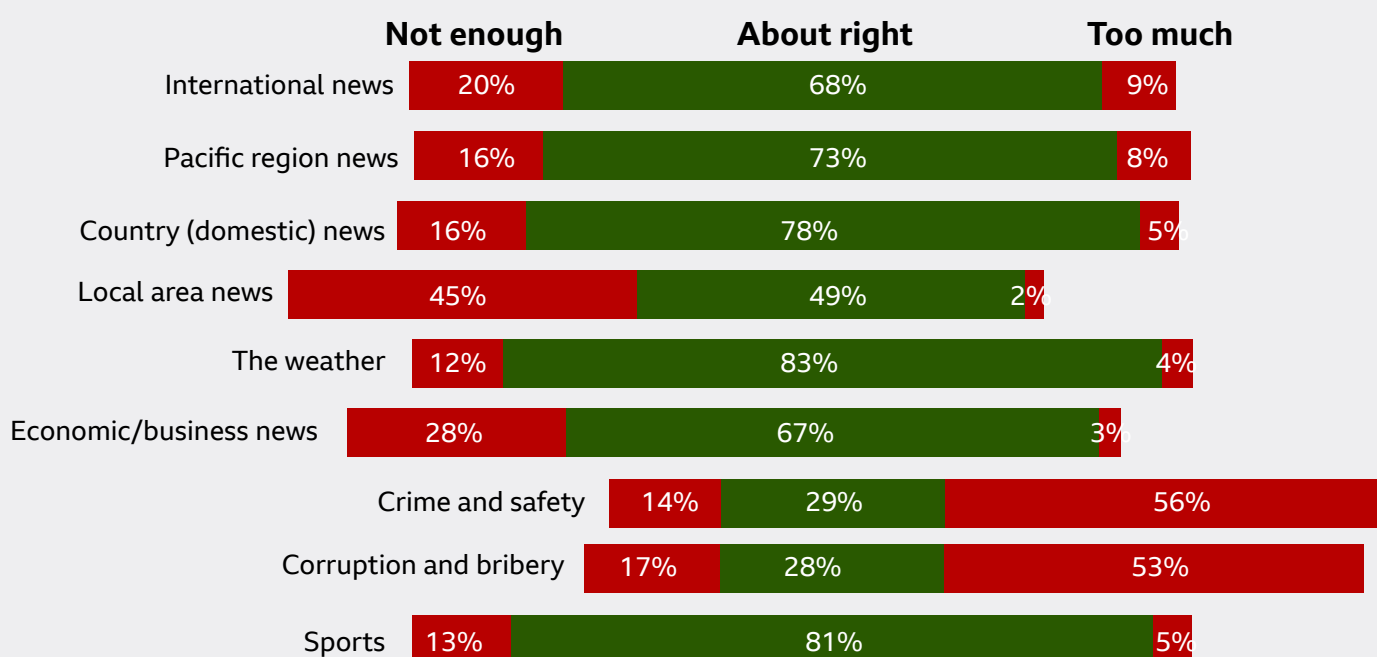
“ The national media tends to focus almost entirely on Nuku‘alofa, while our villages are rarely, if ever, given attention. It often feels as though our stories and concerns simply do not exist in their coverage.

– Male, 36-54, rural, Feletoa, Vava‘u Division

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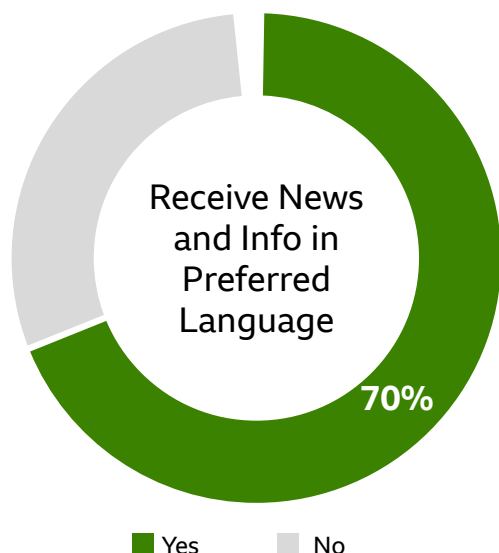
Perception of the Adequacy of News and Current Affairs Content



Q. Thinking generally about the news and current affairs available in the country, do you think that there is too much, about the right amount, not enough, or no media coverage about...? Base: n=1050 (media users)

Language barriers leave some urban and low-income audiences underserved

In the discussions, people found radio the most accessible media, as it was in the Tongan language. The survey showed that there was a need for more news in local languages with 28% saying that they could not access news in their preferred language, with urban respondents (32%) and those with low income (40%) more likely to report this.



Availability of News and Information in Preferred Language

Q. Do you get news and information from the media in your preferred language?

3.6 What do people want to see from the media?

Tongans seek media content that informs, empowers, and connects with their communities, while preserving and promoting their cultural identity

Respondents expressed a strong desire for more media coverage that is relevant to their daily lives and communities. Close to half of respondents (45%) felt that there is not enough content that highlights and celebrates Tongan culture, arts, and heritage. In discussions people talked about how they would like more in depth information on topics like the impact of climate change (i.e. rising sea levels, impacts on fishing, and conservation initiative) and signposting on how to access essential services, as well as information on employment and education opportunities. Programming that provides real-life, uplifting stories for young people and supports their development as responsible community members was also mentioned.

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We need coverage of the things that matter most to us—updates on farming, information on fishing regulations, and news of changes within the community. These are the issues that directly shape our daily lives and decisions.

– Man, 35-54, Rural Feletoa, Vava'u Division

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Information preferences prior to November 2025 general election

The Tongan general election was held on 20 November 2025, with voters selecting the 17 'people's representatives' for the national parliament, to sit alongside the nine noble representatives elected by hereditary chiefs. Voter turnout was low - only about 49% of registered voters cast ballots, a decline from the 62% turnout in the 2021 election.¹⁷ Notably, Fane Fotu Fituafefe was the only female to win a people's seat, making her the only female member in the newly elected parliament.

At the time the qualitative study was conducted in August and September 2025, Tongans were preparing for the elections in November. As part of the study, we examined people's understanding of the electoral process and their preferences for election-related information.

Audiences were interested in the upcoming elections, recognising their importance in representing citizens' voices and shaping the country's future. However, their knowledge of the electoral process was generally limited, and focused mainly on when to vote, the significance of voting, and their individual responsibility to select leaders. There was also a degree of scepticism about whether the elections would lead to meaningful change in Tonga.

People talked about how they relied on public officials - such as town officers, the election commission, and parliamentary committees - for election information, but also looked to the media, particularly radio and television, to help explain the process and candidates' platforms. Ahead of the elections, discussion participants had many unanswered questions and were seeking more detailed information on candidates' policies and positions, highlighting a need for accessible, clear, and locally relevant election coverage.



¹⁷ Fuatai, T., RNZ, Tonga election: Eight new MPs elected to parliament among continued decline in voter turnout, (November 2025) <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/579540/tonga-election-eight-new-mps-elected-to-parliament-amid-continuing-decline-in-voter-turnout> [Accessed 02/12/2025]

4. Recommendations

Strengthen local and community-focused reporting

There is a need to support media to prioritise coverage of issues that directly affect people's daily lives and meet the demand for more relevant and inclusive coverage. Expanding reporting at the community level will help bridge gaps in information, particularly for rural and outer-island populations, reporting on local issues such as community development and economic and small business news, as well as highlighting positive and inspiring stories about agriculture, fisheries, climate change, and entrepreneurship. Filling the perceived gap in localised (particularly rural) content is also essential to preserve and promote Tongan values and voices within the national media landscape, as well as content that highlights and celebrates Tongan culture, arts, and heritage.

Strengthening gender-inclusivity in media to ensure women and girls are accurately represented and their issues meaningfully covered

With audiences perceiving a lack of content for and about women and girls, media organisations should be supported to produce more gender-inclusive content. This may include provision of training, resources, and guidance on reporting that represents women and girls accurately and equitably. This could include dedicated programming on issues affecting women, amplifying female voices in news and current affairs, and highlighting the contributions of women in business, culture, and community leadership. Encouraging editorial policies that integrate gender perspectives across all content can help ensure that media reflects the experiences of women and girls.

Media literacy education to help audiences discern fact from misinformation is critical

With more than one in three respondents reporting that they are not confident in their ability to identify false information, comprehensive media literacy education should be strengthened across Tonga to help audiences recognise credible information and guard against the spread of misinformation and disinformation. This includes equipping people with the skills needed to critically assess information sources, verify facts, and understand the risks of sharing false or misleading content. Media organisations should be supported to strengthen staff media literacy, equipping journalists and editors with the skills to identify and responsibly counter false or misleading content. Public awareness campaigns and community workshops leveraging trusted figures like church leaders and local authorities can help Tongans navigate online and offline information more confidently.

Support media organisations to prioritise early, accessible, and trustworthy election coverage

Going forward, to prepare the media for future elections, support is needed to enable media outlets to provide clear, unbiased information on candidates, their manifestos, and the electoral process. Media outlets should be supported to collaborate with official organisations to amplify verified, easy-to-understand content via radio, television and online platforms. Strengthening the reach and clarity of election coverage will help ensure more informed and engaged participation.

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