The media environment in East Timor remained stable in 2011, largely owing to the implementation of a new penal code in 2009 that decriminalized defamation. Freedom of the press and expression is protected under Articles 40 and 41 of the constitution. The controversy over five draft media laws proposed by the UN Development Programme continued, as Timorese and regional press organizations argued that the laws would place new restrictions on journalists. The London-based freedom of expression advocacy group Article 19 noted a number of positive features in the laws, such as a provision giving the Media Council the power to mediate defamation cases. However, the council would also be given the authority to fine journalists and news organizations for violations that Article 19 called “vaguely defined.” Cases that could not be resolved by the Media Council would be sent to the courts.

A culture of deference and respect for hierarchy continues to pervade journalism in East Timor, and most news reported out of Dili, the capital, features verbatim accounts recorded during organized press conferences. While most public officials pay lip service to freedom of the press, not all are comfortable with its actual practice, and there is a sense among many—including some international advisers—that journalism should ideally be linked with the process of nation-building. However, journalists are able to cover the news freely, and there are few cases of reporters being harassed or attacked.

One weekly and three daily newspapers operate on a regular schedule in East Timor, and several more appear sporadically. Circulations are very small, and are hampered by the high price of papers relative to low consumer purchasing power, illiteracy, and a lack of distribution outside Dili. After the country gained independence in 2002, broadcast media became dominated by public radio and television outlets, but community radio stations—many with international funding—also play an important role in the media landscape. According to a 2009 Southeast Asian Press Alliance fact-finding mission, there are more than 15 community radio stations across the country, along with 1 national and 3 commercial stations. There is one national and one private television station. However, technical difficulties limit the reach of many broadcast media outlets in rural areas, leaving an estimated 16 percent without access to any media. A 2011 nationwide media survey commissioned by the UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste found that radio still has the highest reach of any communication medium (a weekly reach of 55 percent), with television trailing not far behind (a weekly reach of 48 percent).

The presence of internationally funded media-assistance organizations has had mixed effects on journalism in East Timor. These organizations have made significant financial contributions, thereby decreasing the importance of funding from the state and arguably increasing journalistic independence. At the same time, evidence suggests that their presence has contributed to what some Timorese journalists call a “project mentality,” in which news organizations become dependent on grants from nonstate actors and find it difficult to be independently sustainable. International media development organizations have
had limited success in attempting to train a new generation of local journalists, but media work continues to be poorly paid, and journalists with good language and writing skills can easily find work in other industries.

Internet access was limited to just 0.9 percent of the population in 2011 due to poverty and inadequate infrastructure. Nonetheless, the government does not censor websites or restrict users’ access to diverse content. More households have mobile phones, and they are becoming an important communication tool, especially in Dili, where 90 percent of the households surveyed owned a mobile phone.