

## **Despite media laws, Singapore journalists can still do a professional job: News veteran Patrick Daniel**

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***The Straits Times***, 17 February 2022

SINGAPORE - There is no untrammelled freedom of expression in Singapore, or in many other societies, and there are laws regulating the media. Still, there is wide scope for Singapore media to do a good and professional job, and it does, said news veteran Patrick Daniel on Thursday (Feb 17).

Speaking at the first of three Institute of Policy Studies lectures as an S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, Mr Daniel – who is also interim chief executive officer of SPH Media Trust, but said he was speaking in his personal capacity – posed five questions to the audience about the role of the media and the freedoms it has.

- Do the laws allow the media to do a good, professional job?
- Is there room for a responsible watchdog role?
- Should the media play a “nation-building” role?
- What about the notion of a “marketplace of ideas”?
- What changes are needed to allow for a greater diversity of views?

Outlining various laws that regulate the ownership, management and financing of Singapore’s newspapers and broadcasters, he said: “The Singapore media’s challenge is that it has to do its job within the ambit of all these laws. Now, I would point out that one feature about Singapore is that each law is applied. They’re not there for show, so we have to take them seriously.

“But thankfully, there is no, and never was any, regime of prior vetting of content in the news business. Even SPH management doesn’t do it.”

Mr Daniel touched on the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act and the Broadcasting Act, as well as the more recent Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (Pofma) and Foreign Interference Countermeasures Act (Fica).

“Journalists have to navigate this panoply of laws. There are hundreds of journalists... beavering away every day to produce good-quality, meaningful work, despite the laws,” he said at the hybrid event held at the National University of Singapore.

On whether there is room for a responsible watchdog role, Mr Daniel said he believed there is, but it cannot be the media’s only role.

“Can you imagine if I have a newsroom of journalists who come in every morning and they say: Right, who can I go after today?... Equally, I would say you can’t have journalists coming and saying: Which government policy can I support today?” he said.

“So what we want are editors and journalists who think hard about the stories that our readers want to read, or read more of.”

On whether the media should play a societal or nation-building role, he said Singapore media is not averse to it but it should also not be its sole role.

With regard to the notion of a “marketplace of ideas” – where the best idea wins the market and which argues against censorship and is pro-free flow of ideas, attributed to philosopher John Stuart Mill, Mr Daniel said: “While the marketplace of ideas may not be the best paradigm, there is a growing desire among Singaporeans, both young and old, for a greater diversity of views.”

He said: “The challenge for us is how to take a middle road, and strive for diversity and fairness.”

Mr Daniel said that looking at election results, it would be safe to say 30 per cent to 40 per cent of voters have a different view of many things, and the media has tried to reflect their views, too.

He said: “This part of the media’s job – telling the facts first – is unfortunately not well understood by many of our critics. Because now, it’s a jumble – facts, interpretation, opinion – all thrown into one. It’s called ... ‘adding value’.

“Now, if you do a story and readers like your interpretation or opinions, it’s a good story. If they don’t like your interpretations or the opinions you quote, it’s a bad story. And if you just give the facts, that’s also not good enough. So it’s becoming a very polarised world, even here in Singapore.”

Mr Daniel noted that which facts to select or omit is itself a challenge, but it is what professional journalists do every day.

“If we present facts, (critics) say we are regurgitating the Government’s views. But actually, we are just giving you the facts.”

For example, with a Committee of Privileges report that is more than 1,000 pages long, “we have to explain the who, the what, the where. We can do our commentary separately, but we do have to communicate the facts.”

On media laws, Mr Daniel noted that most countries have laws that restrict not just free speech, but also press freedom, such as libel laws, sedition laws, privacy laws and press ownership laws.

The rationale for media laws is that the press and broadcast players have tremendous power – both to advance the general good or cause harm, Mr Daniel added. The laws are to make sure they do not cause harm.

“A further rationale is that journalists and editors themselves need ethical guidelines, and I say this as a newspaper editor, so that they don’t abuse their powers. And the same goes to media owners,” he said.