

Press freedom ranking based on country's media laws, not quality: News veteran Patrick Daniel

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SINGAPORE - The commonly cited Reporters Without Borders (RSF) index reflects its assessment of media laws in a country, rather than the quality of the journalism there, said Mr Patrick Daniel on Thursday (Feb 17).

He noted how RSF's annual World Press Freedom Index ranked Singapore 160th in its 2021 edition, and questioned if Singapore deserved its ranking, which was one spot above Somalia, one below Sudan, and well below Russia and Myanmar.

"It's baffling to many people," he said at the Institute of Policy Studies lecture.

He pointed out that the index is a measure of "the level of freedom available to the media". It is not an indicator of the quality of journalism in the country.

"Many of our critics don't make that distinction."

RSF's view is that Singapore's media laws breach media freedom, Mr Daniel added.

When Singapore passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (Pofma) in 2019, "they punished us by dropping us seven places".

With the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (Fica) passed last year, Singapore's ranking will drop further, he said.

He was asked if the Singapore media should engage with the people behind the index.

Mr Daniel said that in his many years as editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Division, not once had those behind the index tried to engage him.

If anyone had asked to see him to discuss press freedom, he would have been happy to do so. "But there is a little bit of opacity in the methodology," he said. "I don't want to rubbish them, they've been doing it for a long time, but there should be some kind of audit of their methodology."

Of Pofma, he said in his lecture: "We will run afoul of people who are absolutist and say you can't have a Pofma. If you looked at what Pofma is, it just says you cannot communicate false facts, it's simple, that's it."

"So for everybody else who is doing a good job, talking truthfully, Pofma doesn't affect us."