

SPH Media Trust must show it is 'worthy of funding'



News veteran Patrick Daniel speaking at the first of three Institute of Policy Studies lectures as an S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. PHOTO: IPS

SMT's interim CEO says company will use govt grant prudently and account for its use

Tham Yuen-C
Senior Political Correspondent

The up to \$180 million annually that the Government will give to SPH Media Trust (SMT) over the next five years comes with a heavy responsibility, and everyone in the not-for-profit company will have to demonstrate that they are worthy of it, said news veteran Patrick Daniel yesterday.

The company will use the grant prudently and account for its use, he added at a public lecture.

The Government has said that it expects the money to go towards investments in technology and digital talent, as well as building capa-

bility and training, particularly for the vernacular newsrooms.

He also welcomed the assurance of editorial independence from the Government, quoting Minister for Communications and Information Josephine Teo, who said in Parliament on Tuesday that "no one gains if these products lack credibility and are ignored by audiences".

Mr Daniel, who is SMT interim chief executive but was speaking in his personal capacity, said the funding is also an acknowledgement of what the company has been saying – that trusted and credible media is a public good.

"But it can't just be a slogan. We'll have to live it, we'll have to guard it, we'll have to make sure

that we don't betray it."

His remarks at the first of his three lectures on the Singapore media as the Institute of Policy Studies' 11th S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, comes amid scrutiny in Parliament on how SMT will use the funding, which was revealed on Tuesday.

Mr Daniel noted that Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh had asked in Parliament how Singaporeans can be assured that SMT publications would not be tainted by allegations of political interference.

He said: "The problem for us is that... to taint with allegation is easy, to disprove or prove them is harder. This is why I have all along taken the line... that even if we get funding, the proof is in the pudding, in particular, the judgment of readers. And if we lack credibility, no one will read us,

no matter how much money we get."

Ms Teo Lay Lim, former chairman of Accenture Singapore, will take on the role of chief executive of SMT on March 1.

At a question-and-answer session moderated by Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, Mr Daniel also rebutted the perception that SMT publications are government mouthpieces that will not run pieces contrary to the Government's views.

He said opposition party members often criticised him over this, but the very fact that people know about them is because the mainstream media has written about them.

The People's Action Party MPs also often complained about their views not being published, and he would explain to them that the newsrooms make such decisions based on newsworthiness.

His lecture also gave an overview of the history of the Singapore media, noting that the Government's intervention in the media landscape since independence has been in two areas – through crackdowns against newspapers and editors, and also reshaping of the media sector.

In particular, crackdowns in the 1970s led to the closure of the Eastern Sun, the suspension of the licence of The Singapore Herald, and arrests of top executives at Nanyang Siang Pau.

A period of mergers followed, driven by the Government. First, rival papers Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh merged in 1982 to form Singapore News and Publications Limited (SNPL). Then, SNPL and Straits Times Press merged to form Singapore Press Holdings (SPH).

In 2000, when the birth of AOL Time Warner in the United States stoked fears here that the old media business model would be overturned, there was an attempt to merge SPH and Mediacorp, said Mr Daniel.

This did not happen, but SPH was given a TV licence and Mediacorp a newspaper permit, to compete. Both companies bled money, and after four years, the media industry went back to square one.

Mr Daniel, who has held positions including editor-in-chief of SPH's English/Malay/Tamil Division and deputy CEO of SPH, also addressed the criticism that SPH had not moved fast enough to address digital disruption.

He said SPH faced the incumbent's dilemma because its legacy business was still lucrative. "It's not as if we had our heads in the sand and didn't see the coming disruptive technology... our problem simply was that disrupting and cannibalising your own lucrative legacy business is easier said than done."

Over time, as digital ad revenues grew – Google's ad revenue grew from zero in 2000 to US\$209 billion (S\$281 billion) last year – SPH saw a gradual, secular decline, and eventually made a loss in 2020, he added.

Even then, there was one "saving grace", he said, noting that Singapore's legacy media never lost its audience. For instance, across all of SPH's platforms, the reach is about 73 per cent, boosted by growth in the digital audience.

He said the SMT model, which is a combination of the commercial and public model, will take some time to work through, adding that he hoped it would bring good results.

yuenc@sph.com.sg

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Ranking 'based on country's media laws, not quality'

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.

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."

Goh Yan Han

Wide scope for media to do a professional job, says news veteran

Goh Yan Han
Political Correspondent

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 the Singapore media to do a good and professional job, and it does, said news veteran Patrick Daniel yesterday.

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 On-

MEDIA'S ROLE

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MR PATRICK DANIEL

line Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (Pofma) and Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (Fica).

"Journalists have to navigate this panoply of laws. There are hundreds of journalists... beaver 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 the 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.

gyanhan@sph.com.sg