IN MY colleague Susan Long’s Insight article last week on a possible review of censorship laws, a mother was quoted as saying that she regrets putting a computer in her son’s room.

She is concerned that he is spending his nights surfing sex sites on the Internet instead of doing his homework.

I sympathise with her. Many parents find the Internet at best bewildering and at worst a threat. Even if they are computer-literate, they cannot control completely their children’s access to it. It is just not feasible unless they quit their jobs and watch over their children 24 hours a day.

But is more state censorship the answer? The answer is obviously no.

The news that the Information and the Arts Ministry may review censorship codes is the best piece of government news I have heard in recent weeks.

Let me declare my interest from the outset. I enjoy going to the movies but nothing mars my enjoyment more than censorship.

Yes, young children should be protected from sex and violence until they are old enough to decide for themselves.

But if a movie is rated R(A), which means that only adults are admitted, I find it offensive that some civil servant still deems it necessary to snip bits of dialogue here or snatches of action there because he thinks it is for my own good.

If I know that an R(A) movie I want to watch has been censored, I boycott it at the cinemas here and try and catch it overseas. It is not a satisfactory solution.

Technological advances will make it increasingly difficult for the state to police what its citizens are reading, watching and listening.

Today, you can download clips of movies on the Internet. Pretty soon, you will be able to download entire movies on your computer, bypassing the hardworking censors here.

As it is, people here are downloading popular American television shows from the Net. These are shows that are either banned here, such as the cartoon South Park, or are being shown here a season or two late, such as Buffy The Vampire Slayer (TCS, are you listening?).
Of course, there are people who argue that the state must maintain a certain "moral tone". It may not be able to stop people from doing what they want to read, watch or listen, but it can signal that certain materials are still objectionable and not allowed in public.

Most people will accept this when it comes to materials dealing with religious and ethnic sensitivities, pornography and paedophilia.

But beyond that, it is time to re-look censorship criteria. Singapore has changed much in the eight years since the Government accepted the proposals of the Censorship Review Committee for more flexible censorship.

In 1991, cable television had not taken root and you could count the number of television channels on one hand. Internet users were mostly academics and researchers and the mobile phone was relatively unheard of.

Since then, the winds of liberalisation have been blowing through every sector, from finance to telecommunications. In schools, a quiet revolution is taking place. Students are being encouraged to be creative, ask questions and look for answers themselves.

How does all this square with a condescending censorship code that still deems it unwise to let adults watch movies uncensored?

It will be hard to reconcile the objective of nurturing the inquiring spirit in children with the state's desire to control what they can watch, read and listen when they grow up.

It is generally accepted that when censorship criteria were relaxed and the R rating was introduced in 1991, a conservative backlash prompted the Government to tighten the R rating to R(A) and raise the age limit to 21.

But if you look back at the movies that were allowed to be shown under the R rating then, most of them were soft-porn vehicles starring the then popular actress Amy Yip.

I do not think people were upset that swear words or a bare breast had been allowed in movies. They were objecting to pornography.

In line with the move to encourage people to be civic-minded, to start thinking for themselves and not look to the Government, the state should start treating adults as adults and let them watch their movies in peace, and uncut.

Lest the conservative heartlanders be alarmed, it can still restrict the screening of the uncut R(A) movies to cinemas in town, well away from HDB estates.

And while we are at it, it is time to drop the word "artistic" from the R(A) rating. It is misleading and makes a mockery of the term when you consider some of the movies that Golden or Yangtze cinemas screen. Those movies are for adults, yes, but artistic? Not by a long shot.

Any censorship review committee should also re-examine the guidelines for PG films. The censors can be surprisingly lax when it comes to violence.
Earlier this year, Ravenous, starring Robert Carlyle (The Full Monty) and Guy Pearce (LA Confidential), was not only passed clean but rated PG. And this is a movie about cannibalism!

Nicholas Cage’s 8 mm was rated PG because, as a Mita officer said in a letter to the ST Forum page, it is “a thriller about a young runaway who ends up murdered”.

This is not telling the whole story. The movie is about the snuff film industry and how a young girl was killed so that her death could be filmed for perverse kicks. It is hardly PG material, no matter how you cut the film.

In Susan Long’s Insight article, it was suggested that one way of helping cinema patrons, especially parents, is to break down the potentially offensive content in movies -right down to the number of swear words and violent scenes that appear in a movie.

It is a worthwhile suggestion which should be considered. This way, a more conservative person who walks into an uncut R(A) movie will not be taken by surprise and fire off an indignant letter to the ST Forum page or Mita.

The reviews of this newspaper can take a leaf from The New York Times and do a similar breakdown.

The idea is to let a cinema patron have enough information so that he can think for himself and make an informed choice.

The onus should be on the individual, and not on the state, to decide what is desirable viewing material for adults. Increasingly, parents too must rely on self-regulation and not state regulation to block out undesirable influences on their children.

They must realise that rapid changes in technology will soon reduce the state’s control to a token act. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority, which regulates the Internet and broadcasting, may have blocked out scores of pornographic sites but users can still bypass the authorities here to access the thousands more on the Net.

The emphasis is on community policing and any censorship review should be conducted in the same spirit of self-regulation. It should continue to help parents and set guidelines for what is permissible for children to watch. But it should also refrain from treating adults as children and stop censoring R(A) movies.

Singapore may be a small island but surely there is enough space to accommodate the liberals and the conservatives on this.