Time to censor the censors

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The arts community's latest statement on that perennial hot-button topic - censorship - offers policymakers and the public a number of issues to chew on.

Some 190 theatre, film, visual arts and literary arts practitioners are advocating that, with the current framework of age-appropriate ratings and consumer advisories, art works should not still have to be cut. Their point is that art should be regulated instead of censored.

The last 10 years have seen an end to outright bans on art works and performances. However, contentious works may continue to suffer any number of nips and tucks - in order for them to be classified as, say, an R21 film or R18 play and be watched by mature audiences.

As the government-convened Censorship Review Committee (CRC) ponders how to update Singapore's arts regulatory regime, the arts community is proposing that regulation be treated as separate from censorship.

Their position paper can be viewed online at http://sites.google.com/site/artsengagesg

How does this position differ from the Government's? The Media Development Authority (MDA), the regulatory body for the arts and film, is already moving away from censorship and towards regulation. On broad principles, artists and MDA are in agreement. The difference is of interpretation and latitude in a few sensitive areas - where the arts address race and religion, are seen to affect national interest and security, or appear to promote homosexuality.

These remain socially polarising subjects. The arts community's view is that any fallout should be negotiated through public debate and dialogue. The Government has always preferred to nip matters in the bud before they get out of hand.

The CRC, a 17-member citizen committee, will have to consider which is the better approach for society, or if there can be a middle ground. After all, one of the CRC's stated aims is to explore how more creative professionals can participate in co-regulating content. MDA's citizen committees that advise on regulatory matters are still overwhelmingly dominated by people who encounter the arts as audiences - and do not have actual experience in producing and distributing artistic content and navigating censorship.

For parents and others who hold more conservative views, the arts community stresses that it is not championing a free-for-all, 'anything goes' approach to artistic content. Singapore's laws on racial harmony and against sedition and obscenity must be respected. They argue that artists who break the law should be tried in open court, rather
than be restrained behind the scenes by a censorship trail that is often obscure and involves multiple government agencies.

As society matures and becomes more complex, my view is that it is increasingly unhelpful to see the censorship debate as one of 'conservatives versus liberals'. As individuals, there are all kinds of nuances in our world views that resist pigeonholing; one may be a political liberal but a moral conservative, or the other way round.

The censorship debate should hinge on these questions:
Is it the business of the Government to shield individuals from being offended by a work of art? Or should consumers be given information to decide whether or not to view it?

How can consumers be better empowered, and how should disputes over controversial works be managed?

At the most fundamental level, what kind of art does Singapore hope to foster?

The 190 arts community members who put out the proposal are not business people who import foreign works. They create original works that comment on life and society from a Singapore perspective. No artist sets out to do something that has been done before; the raison d'être of creative expression is that it is unconventional, risk-taking and true to one's beliefs.

With that in mind, what exactly is the C-word, censorship, and how different is it from regulation? The arts community says censorship prohibits the public presentation of artistic content, and breeds a risk-averse, secretive culture. Regulation, on the other hand, involves restricting access to a work of art, but not tampering with its content.

On its website, MDA says it has moved away from 'traditional censorship' towards classification and co-regulation with the industry. The process protects the young while providing adults with more choices. It also upholds societal norms and values, preserves racial and religious harmony and safeguards national and public interest.

Films may be classified under one of five ratings, the most stringent being R21, which is restricted to those aged 21 and above. Arts performances have three ratings, the highest being R18, for audiences aged 18 and above. MDA spells out on its website what makes a film or performance suitable for audiences of a certain age, and also states what content is not allowed for all ratings.

Rather than erring towards caution and proscribing content that fall into sensitive areas, one can argue that there needs to be more flexibility and sensitivity towards the artist's intentions, and more credit given to audiences that they do not simply lap up what they see and can judge critically.

The tendency for government agencies and even arts venues to play it safe in vetting content can be seen in nearly all of the 10 real-life accounts of censorship detailed in the arts community's paper. For example, in 2005, all references to the death penalty had to be excised from the script of a play by The Fun Stage, called Human Lefts. The reason given for the censorship was that the death penalty was a sensitive issue, as the play was staged the day after the hanging here of Australian drug trafficker Nguyen Van Tuong.
In 2007, a play about a possible bombing on an MRT train and its effects on race relations was denied a licence for an outdoor performance after the Ministry of Home Affairs objected.

The play, Trick Or Threat, is presented using forum theatre, in which actors stimulate and guide audience participation and discussion. As a genre, forum theatre was not funded by the Government from 1994 to 2003.

Ironically, the play by Drama Box has since had numerous successful indoor stagings. Members of Parliament who saw it have praised it for how it prepares Singaporeans to deal with the fallout of a terrorist threat. The play is now being used to train civil servants and grassroots leaders.

After the play's initial ban in 2007, director Kok Heng Leun said: 'There is never going to be a good time to talk about these things.'

Dialogue on touchy topics will always be uncomfortable but local audiences need to learn how to process these issues through rational debate. Proscription of such content does not help in that respect.

The CRC could recommend more age-appropriate tiers of classification to reduce the need for works to be cut. There could be an R21 category restricting very controversial performances to those above 21. With secondary school students growing up faster because of globalisation and the Internet, a new PG13 rating for films would keep out those under 13 and advise parental guidance on generally inoffensive movies dealing with teen-relevant subjects.

Just to put in perspective how tough Singapore is on censorship compared to other Asian societies, Taiwanese film director Doze Niu recently made a top-grossing and critically acclaimed Taiwanese gangster drama by consulting actual secret society members and even involving them in fight sequences, to ensure the film's authenticity.

If he were making his film Monga in Singapore and used the same approach, he would probably have been stopped from shooting those fight scenes and his film snipped for security reasons - so impressionable audiences would not be influenced by the secret societies. After all, Singaporean film-maker Royston Tan's award-winning 2003 film about young boys in gangland, 15, was heavily censored for using rap songs chanted by real secret societies.

If Singapore is serious about building a vibrant and internationally recognised creative culture, then in the long term, regulation rather than censorship must be the way forward. Otherwise, artists here will constantly have to expend energies and resources addressing the censor's demands, while artists elsewhere rise to greater heights.