When liberal desires meet conservative fears

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The controversy over Stanley Kubrick's Eyes Wide Shut has rekindled the issue of censorship here. Is there a need to review censorship laws as Singapore strives to be a Renaissance City and an Information Economy? SUSAN LONG revisits a perennial problem.

EVERY night before she goes to bed, housewife Catherine Law kicks herself for putting a computer in her son's room.

For, under the cover of inky darkness, she thinks she hears the computer monitor whirring to life next door in her Sembawang five-room flat.

In a dozing stupor, her mind wonders if her 14-year-old is finishing his homework or surfing sex sites again.

His TV diet and weekend movie outings with his friends do not vex her much. The Government, censorship bodies and cinema ushers take care of that. "What he cannot watch, he cannot get into anyway," the 48-year-old mother reasons.

She hopes the authorities will beef up Internet policing and as a testimony of her faith, signed her son up for a government-linked SingNet account.

She wants tighter control.

Over in an East Coast condominium, Mr Douglas Tseng, 27, a film buff and MTV producer, bemoans censorship here.

He castigates: "Archaic, inconsistent, moral watchdog." He yearns to watch rude cartoons like South Park and art-house movies like Spanish Prisoner, which have not made it here yet.

In the meantime, VCDs are his "best friends". The avid Netizen thinks the Government should give up trying to prune the teeming World Wide Web wilderness. He bristles at control.

REALITY BYTES
Given a disparate populace at cross-purposes, censorship becomes an age-old feat of juggling liberal desires and conservative fears.

In the light of the city-state's dual bid to become a Renaissance City and an Information Economy, the game is set to become more mine-laden.
Last week, Minister of Information and the Arts Lee Yock Suan hinted at the possibility of another Censorship Review, as eight years have lapsed since the last one in 1991.

This is worth waiting for, say IT watchers. Because, beyond divergent tastes, this new Y2K-ready censorship mainframe will have to reflect the full-throttle, IT-driven arena and its inherent resistance to control.

With one click, IT has deleted the old efficiency of censorship, asserts an essay entitled Developing An Intelligent Island: Dilemmas Of Censorship.

Written by Mr Stephen Yeo, CEO of ST Computer Systems and Mr Arun Mahizhnan, deputy director of the Institute of Policy Studies, it was published last year in the book, Singapore: Re-engineering Success.

It points out that IT technologies have conflated many nation states into an almost borderless cyber-state, thwarting government control of information flow within each country.

Indeed, censorship in an Intelligent Island is a virtual oxymoron.

Block one pornographic site and another 1,000 are born.

Here, you may not be able to find Malaysian newspaper New Straits Times and Cosmopolitan magazine on the news-stand or ogle at Kate Winslet's frontal nudity in the movie Titanic, but they are all just a breezy click away on the Internet today.

Teenagers can also sneak peeks at Eyes Wide Shut cuts, learn how to cast a witch's spell or download David Bowie's new album on cyberspace.

Another Digital Age challenge stems from the non-physical nature of new information today. Taboo books, audio tapes or films can now be downloaded into digital form and these bits cannot be stopped at Customs or border points.

Reality bytes. There is no going back to Singapore's old hermetical bubble-wrap.

REBOOT 1991
THOSE days, Mr Yeo, who was formerly chief executive of the National Computer Board, says the only ones restricted from cyberspace are the illiterate.

He says the argument that the vast majority of Singaporeans are still not online, much less avid surfers, is losing ground.

Today, the dial-up Internet subscription rate is about 500,000, which works out to one in six Singaporeans, not counting public access in schools, libraries and cafes.

The dilemma, however, is that social mores have not kept pace with technological advances.

Refresh 1991. A 110-page survey commissioned by the Censorship Review Committee revealed that Singapore's moral majority disapproved of extra-marital sex, cohabitation, homosexuality, lesbianism and wanted tighter control on foul language, sex and violence.
The vocal minority sputtered "hypocrites" and heaved a collective sigh of relief when liberalisations, such as R movies, were allowed.

However, heartland cinemas were flooded with soft-porn Chinese shows and shortly after, the conservatives made their displeasure known in the General Election ballot box.

The lesson, says Ms Pang Cheng Lian, the chairman of the Films Appeal Committee, is that: "Notwithstanding technological advances, the opposing needs of these two camps, although the percentages might change, are still relevant."

She maintains that liberalisation should not lunge too far ahead of public tolerance.

"We have to recognise we are dealing with a complex population base. On one hand, we have the Internet-savvy, much travelled Cosmopolitan who can't understand why Singapore should have censorship laws.

"On the other, we have Heartlanders, who believe it is up to the authorities to block out undesirable social values," she says.

So, much as censorship sits uneasily with Singapore's Renaissance City aspirations, it still has to play default community referee.

SHELTOX STILL NEEDED
IT IS a sure-lose game of catch-up, when IT advances are hurting ahead at warp speed. Soon, political pundits predict state-nannyhood will become too onerous for the state to maintain.

They say the sluice gate of information has already broken open. So is it still tenable for the Government to attempt to manage the unstoppable tide?

Yes, says Mr Koh Buck Song, chairman of the Drama Review Committee and a member of the Films Appeal Committee. "It doesn't mean we surrender everything or that Sheltox will go out of production.

"There are billions of cockroaches around. Even though the nuclear holocaust will not be able to destroy them all, it doesn't mean that I, as an individual, should not buy Sheltox to protect my own home," he says, reflecting the conservative view.

Political pundits say the 1991 lesson was that resistance, however token, should be put up to establish Singapore's value system.

So although the Government is unable to prevent people from getting forbidden fruit, it should still block off certain sites to show what society holds as a moral norm.

Some argue that this desire boils down to face, keeping up the public facade, despite its ill-fit with private reality.

In 1991, then Information and the Arts Minister George Yeo described censorship's challenge as "distinguishing between moral norms that people want and what they themselves might do in private".
In other words, most Singaporeans still want to keep up a clean-scrubbed, child-safe societal veneer, even though in their private lives, they might fall short.

Censorship is thus seen as pruning, snipping off sick branches, so that healthy shoots can grow. And it has to be rooted in prudence.

So far, a knee-jerk, micro-management style has resulted in some loopholes. The banning of R(A)-rated video or LD imports here, for example, has resulted in VCD pirate stalls mushrooming all over the heartlands and doing a brisk trade.

So while ushers steer minors out of R(A) shows, Ms Pang points out, no one checks pornographic VCD swopping among 12-year-olds.

CIVIC IMMUNE SYSTEM
RATHER than make the Government sit in judgment and make bureaucrats dictate taste, Mr Koh says the way forward will be to encourage citizen panels to form their own censorship watch groups.

There should also be more classification for consumers, so the Government can play guide instead of gatekeeper. For example, Mr Tseng suggests Singapore can take a leaf from American websites like www.screenit.com and www.kidsinmind.com, which break down potentially offensive content in movies. This is not unlike putting Food and Drug Administration (FDA) labels to warn people what they are about to consume.

In their rating of the new PG-rated movie Astronaut’s Wife, for example, the websites highlight profanity (“one possible slang term for female genitals, five "asses" and five "hells"), violence (“A person commits suicide by electrocuting herself in the shower with a plugged-in radio”) and nudity (“Characters vigorously roll around under the covers”).

For other movies, they warn explicitly of "massive bleeding", "bullet wounds", even "excessive smoking".

But even if official reins loosen up, people will still be the great obstacle in building a civic immune system, laments Mr Yeo.

“Our complacence and dependence on others to do things for us,” he says. Sociologist Kwok Kian Woon agrees: "Ultimately, freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin; each can mutually reinforce the other.

"One who fears freedom will also not develop a heightened sense of social responsibility." Fortunately, there is a common departure point for both liberals and conservatives. Both believe that censorship is a parenting role.

Both also know that if parents claim to be too busy at work to pull their weight, then the Government is forced to play the morally-diminished role of nanny.

They both agree that in the IT age, parents simply have to do their job better.

As Mrs Law herself concedes: "Everything you want the government to do for you, it's not fair. It's your kids, you must handle it yourself."
She adds: "Because things are so well-regulated here, Singaporeans are scared to cross roads without traffic lights. We have lost the human instinct to survive and to manage our own homes."

One tip from sociologists: The best asset you can arm your child with is street-smart savvy.

Dr Kwok says in the Information age, people will be bombarded with a profusion of signs, symbols and ambush traps, ala cyber-dating.

"We need to be cleverer in making judgments, reading signs and selecting useful bits of information, independently and insightfully," he said.

Adds Mr Yeo: "In the past, there were filters and editors, now we are exposed to the Wild Wild West ... To borrow a Biblical phrase, one should be as innocent as a dove and as wise as a serpent."

So bon voyage on the Superhighway. Plug in, log on, strap up for the ride, you are on your own now.