

Film Classification in Singapore

Media Development Authority (MDA)

Film classification in Singapore comes under the purview of the *Board of Film Censors (BFC)* a part of the Media Development Authority (MDA). MDA was formed in January 2003 by the merger of the:

- Singapore Broadcasting Authority
- Films and Publications Department
- Singapore Film Commission

The two essential roles of MDA are:

- To promote the growth of the media industry.
- To manage content so as to protect core values and safeguard consumers' interests.

Film classification

All films to be distributed and exhibited in Singapore must be submitted for classification and certification by the Board of Film Censors. With the introduction of film classification on 1st July 1991, films are classified into four ratings:

- G or General
- PG or Parental Guidance
- NC16 or No Children below 16 years old
- R(A) or Restricted (Artistic) for persons above 21 years old, to be shown only in the city areas and not the residential heartland.

Background to Current Classification System

Prior to July 91, there was a single tier system and films were approved for a general audience. Classification was introduced as a result of:

- Frequent complaints by parents on the lack of indication on whether a film is suitable for viewing by their children. The single-tier system also did not cater to different age groups

- Inability to allow films uncut resulted in certain acclaimed films being withdrawn as in the case of *Platoon* because the producer, Oliver Stone, wanted the film to be screened intact. Film societies and cultural organisations such as Singapore International Films Festival also adopt the principle of no cuts for films.
- The reduction of a crucial rape scene in the film, *The Accused*, sparked off an intensive debate on the limitation of the system.

Classification was introduced on 1st July 1991 to allow the adult audience with:

- More choices with minimal or no cuts
- Preserve the artistic integrity of the film
- And at the same time protect the young from unsuitable films.

There were 3 ratings introduced in 1991:

- G (General),
- “PG” (Parental guidance) and
- “R” (Restricted).

The “R” restricted patrons to those 18 years and above. However, following concern over the influx of sex-exploitative films screened within the first month of the classification system, the “R” rating was replaced by the R(A) rating. “A” stands for “artistic” and only films with artistic merits are allowed under this rating. It was hoped that in addition to protecting the young from unsuitable films, artistic integrity would also be preserved. Under the R(A),

- The age restriction was raised to 21
- Films were not allowed within the housing estates so as not to affect its wholesome ambience.

Another rating “NC-16” was introduced later in 1992.

Video Classification

Currently, videos are classified only up to PG standard. Films that have been given a higher rating for theatrical screening would need to be edited to PG standards for video distribution.

Censorship Review Committee (CRC)

Major changes to censorship policies and guidelines are made by a Censorship Review Committee (CRC) appointed by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MITA). This is a process to remain relevant in and to keep pace with the changes in society. Based on the committee's recommendations, a comprehensive process of public and industry consultations, new censorship policies and classification guidelines are drawn.

A new CRC was appointed in April 2002. The members are made up of prominent citizens and they review the current censorship policies and classification guidelines to make recommendations for relevant changes. It is submitting its report in September 2003 detailing its recommendations on films, videos, broadcasting, publishing, video games and new media.

The previous committee was set up in 1991, so it has been about 10 years since the last committee made its recommendations. Most of the present film and video guidelines were the recommendations of this committee.

The censorship environment has undergone major changes, driven largely by the forces of technology and globalisation. New media like the Internet have resulted in an influx of information directly transmitted to end-users, posing a strong challenge to censorship. Media convergence is also increasingly testing traditional censorship concepts. Singaporeans have also become better educated and more discerning, with increased exposure to external influences via the media, Internet and travelling abroad.

Changes to Film Classification

1. Introduction of M18 category

In view of the social and technological changes, the CRC is recommending modification to the current film classification system. The main recommendation is to introduce an intermediate category of Matured 18 (M18) between NC-16 and R(A) as the gap between 16 and 21 is wide. The age restriction of 21 is the highest among countries that have a film rating system. However, a censorship survey in 2002 indicates strong public support (65%) for the retention of this restriction. It is only a

slight dip from (70%) from the survey in 1991. This will allow more choice for the film audience.

2. Films Rated up to M18 in Cinemas in Public Housing Estates

It is also recommending that films classified up to M-18 be allowed to be screened in cinemas in public housing estates (heartland). Currently, only films classified G, PG and NC-16 are allowed in cinemas in public housing estates while films rated R(A) are only allowed in city areas. The introduction of the R(Restricted) films in the public housing estates where the majority of Singaporeans lived in apartments built by the government had caused an uproar as the conservative group were alarmed by the influx of sex-exploitative films. To ensure that there is no public backlash against having M-18 films in public housing estates, BFC needs to ensure that the criteria for an M-18 rating is sufficiently stringent to ensure that it is not too explicit. BFC needs to also work with the industry to ensure that the publicity materials for this category of films are conducive to the heartland environment.

The new film Classification will be:

- G
- PG
- NC-16
- M-18
- R21

3. Changes In Guidelines

At the same time, content regulators have been asked to protect the young by applying stricter standards for content that is easily accessible by them. This calls for changes to current guidelines across the various ratings to better reflect changing community standards. There is a need to balance between allowing more space for creativity and maintaining moral standards. In implementing the content guidelines, considerations should be given to the artistic merits and context. This will be implemented in 2004.

4. Introduction of Consumer Advice (CA)

CRC is also recommending the introduction of CA to promote parental guidance and informed decision. Industry players will be encouraged to make greater use of CA for sensitive content such as violence, sex, coarse language, drug consumption, race and religion.

5. Releasing Films Under a Different Rating

Simultaneous dual rating for a film is generally not practised in other countries as it may confuse consumers. CRC recommends that a film distributor be given a choice to request for a previously released film under a new rating to cater to different age group of consumers on the condition that the two versions are not screened simultaneously, Sequential dual rating will minimise confusion to the consumers.

6. Introduction of Video Classification of up to M-18

Another major initiative is the introduction of video classification, which will now have a wider range of classification, from G to M-18. It will be similar to the film classification except that the upper limit will be the M-18 category. This is a move towards greater classification, rather than censorship (ie editing). This would remove the technical difficulties of classifiers editing videos in digital format, and preserve the integrity of films. Increasingly, more cinemas are being built in public housing estates. In line with this, greater emphasis will be placed on public education to inculcate a sense of parental responsibility among the public.

The new film and video classification system will reduce the need for editing. Currently while companies are allowed to do their own editing, most prefer to leave to BFC for reasons such as lack of equipment or time constraints. As the result BFC has to deal with issues of how a film is edited. More categories will enable BFC to concentrate on its responsibility in film rating and encourage greater industry responsibility. The role of editing should fall with the distributor and not with BFC.

7. Sale of Videos rated up to M-18 in Public Housing Estates

This is a new initiative compared to the single-tier system previously. The sale and marketing of videos under the higher restrictive category would be regulated by BFC to prevent abuse. Stricter standards for classifying should be exercised. Adults

should exercise greater responsibility over access to videos and video shops should enforce stricter control at the point of sale. Sale of videos above the PG categories have to be implemented cautiously to prevent the backlash similar to that when R(Restricted) films were introduced in public housing areas.

8. Classification Across All Media

To reduce inconsistency in the differentiated approach to film regulation in various media, the CRC recommended the introduction of classification across all media viz video games, publications.

9. Renaming Board of Film Censors

In line with the future role of BFC, that of classifying films, CRC recommended a change in name. Hence, BFC will be renamed as the Board of Film Classification. This move will signal a significant change in approach to film censorship.

Challenges

Advances in communications technology have impacted tremendously on censorship. Both desirable and objectionable content is now being transmitted easily to our young through the Internet. This development has challenged BFC to review its current censorship policies and classification guidelines so as to maintain their relevance in the age of convergence. There will be stricter standards for content with strong violence or elements of torture, targeting at the young through higher ratings. Increasingly, we are moving towards using classification, belting, and zoning rather than an outright ban, as censorship tools. Such tools act as the means to shift greater responsibilities to the industry and the community.

Although rapid advances in technology have made censorship more difficult to enforce, it is still relevant in today's context. For all the changes, including accessibility through the Internet, governments over the world recognise that there must always be some form of regulation of the media. Like all countries, Singapore wants to protect its young from unsuitable content

Singapore is also a young nation that only recently celebrated its 38th year of independence. Singapore is a multi-racial country with 4 main language groups.

These are English, Chinese, Malay and Indian. It is also a multi-religious population. Hence film censorship in Singapore needs to preserve racial and religious harmony. It must take into account the sensitivities of Chinese, Malays and Indians who make up the population. In the Singapore context, censorship plays a role in fostering a morally wholesome and socially cohesive society. It helps safe-guard core community values such as the importance of family, respect for one's elders and moral integrity.

Greater involvement by the community not only contributes to more sensitive guidelines and sensitive interpretations of them, but also enables the public to be better informed and take greater responsibility.

Public education has been increasingly used as an additional tool by many countries to complement the censorship efforts. There is a similar call here from the public, media and arts group in order to prepare our society for the day when advances in technology make access control practically impossible.

In censorship, industry players perform an equally crucial role as the government. A responsible and civic-minded industry makes a meaningful partnership with the regulators. Moving towards greater industry participation in regulation are important as technological advancements have made censorship by government regulators difficult, and secondly, because it is more practical way to clear content in a timely manner for the consumers, without compromising standards. Industry players can help nurture a more enlightened and efficient censorship environment through consumer advice and co-regulation, including responsibility for film classification. To achieve this, regulators need to have a more transparent policies and guidelines.