

Amendments of public entertainments and meetings act (pma)



To whom it may concern,

As a dutiful Singaporean citizen who is deeply concerned with the tidings of our local arts industry, I am writing in to exhort the Media Development Authority (MDA) to review the proposed amendments of the Public Entertainments and Meetings Act (PEMA) that was released on May 12th 2014. I also refer to Ms. Corrie Tan's article titled, " Art of Censorship in Singapore" (The Straits Times, 7 June 2014).

I understand that the aforementioned proposition seeks to establish a " co-regulatory partnership" with local art practitioners by " empowering arts entertainment event organisers to classify their own performances whilst adhering to community standards and expectations" (MDA, 2014a).

Consequently, a new Arts Term Licensing Scheme which mandates the obligatory training of individual artists from local art companies by the MDA as qualified " content assessors" for " self-classification" has been edict.

Whilst the general outlook of the said proposal may be well meaning in nature as it confers a window peek to MDA's progressive shift toward the relegation of some of its authority over content classification to its relevant communities (The Straits Times, 10 June 2014), in this case, the arts to local art practitioners, a closer examination upon the various stratum underlying the scheme has left me exceedingly troubled as many fundamental assumptions rooted in its conception, albeit seemingly benign on paper, remains deeply problematic in both practice as well as in spirit.

Accordingly, I note that the concepts of " self-classification", " co-regulation", and " empowerment" of the local arts industry as posited in the new <https://assignbuster.com/amendments-of-public-entertainments-and-meetings-act-pma/>

scheme, falls on a highly erroneous continuum of prevarication as they have not been veritably demonstrated. The notion of “ self-classification” suggests that local art practitioners are granted with an autonomous, free-willed, and imperative role of contribution in the development and undertaking of the classification guidelines. Yet, such has been reflected otherwise in practice as the “ classification” of art works remain subjugated to the prescribed criteria solely ordained by the MDA, without assembling any prior consultations or discussions with art practitioners (Arts Engage, 2014a). In addition, “ self-classification” implies the absence of censorship wherein art works merely follow a catalogue of classification ratings and are never subjected to prohibition. However, the “ Not Allowed for Ratings” category (MDA, 2014c) – in other words, a euphemism for censorship – runs contradictory to the idea of “ self-classification”. It seems that this new scheme by MDA is but a reinstatement of the same old perilous template of censorship in Singapore where authorities are conceived as the unequivocal “ arbiters of tastes” (McGuigan, 1996), rather than trusting artists to be ethically, morally, or socially responsible, and that of my fellow Singaporeans’ capacity to judge an art work critically.

Under the principles of classification published in the 2010 report by the Censorship Review Committee (CRC Report, 2010), it was stated that “ classification boundaries must be set according to community standards determined via an engagement process involving the regulator, community, and the industry.” This suggests the presence of an open, transparent, and inclusive process of engagement amongst artists, authorities, and members of the public to determine the perimeters of classification – as in tandem

with MDA's ideals of "consultation" and working closely with "expertise and perspectives of a wide spectrum of society" (MDA, 2014b) and the purported notion of "co-regulation". However, this is not reflected in truth as the new Arts Term Licensing Scheme which edicts artists to be trained by the MDA as "qualified content assessors" is but a guise of the state policing the arts by proxy as these "content assessors" are strictly tethered to executing MDA's rules. Instead of creating an ingenuous engagement between art practitioners and the MDA where genuine partnership and shared responsibilities may be fostered, artists are merely subjugated as extensions of MDA's censorships.

This, I believe is not "co-regulation", but a façade for self-censorship. More notably, such a move resembles that of a "panopticon" surveillance (Foucault, 1977) with MDA's pervasiveness at "disciplining" and "normalizing" artistic expression on both a macro and micro level by implanting seemingly innocuous "content assessors" within the heart of art companies – so that whilst MDA's presence appears to be incognito on the surface, their regulations still remain executed with stringency. Not only is this highly inimical to one's artistic innovation and creativity (Arts Engage, 2014b), I believe that the fear of non-conformance would fester like an insidious wound that ultimately undermines the development of our arts industry, and on a grandeur scale, the growth of our society as a harmonious whole – as it would not be instilled within my fellow Singaporeans recognize and acknowledge the varying nuances when it comes to the interpretation of art (Chee Meng, 2014). With such an intolerant perspective that fails to conceive art as an outset for constructive discourse, how then can our nation

truly blossom into a “ Global City of the Arts” as our leaders have envisioned?

Furthermore, it was acknowledged in the 2003 report of Censorship Review Committee that a “ one-size-fits-all” paradigm of censorship is increasingly non-viable given the heterogeneous and ever-changing society of Singapore (CRC Report, 2003). Thus, it seems that this “ new” approach by MDA is not only paradoxical, but terribly regressive. Additionally, whilst the MDA has stressed that the Arts Term Licensing Scheme is “ optional” suggesting that artists have a “ choice” in the matter, it appears that this is but a shrewd attempt by the authorities at veiling a false dichotomy to our art practitioners as they are essentially caught in between continuing the present regime where MDA issues all classifications and advisories, or that of a seemingly “ different” system that is inherently the same as the former since “ content assessors” are specially trained to heed MDA’s specifications. As such, I question MDA’s sincerity at “ co-regulation” and all of its supposed “ ideals” of openness, engagement, inclusiveness, and transparency. In line with the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore which delineates that every Singaporean citizen possess the rights of freedom of speech (Attorney General’s Chambers, 2010) – in this case, the “ speech” is expressed via the modus of art – MDA’s new scheme appears to be a flagrant violation of that democracy and with it, the concept of a “ public sphere” (Habermas, 1964) where there an open space that allows for the exploration of ideas free from overbearing restrictions.

If our nation is truly a democratic society, why then is the MDA imposing such harsh regulations of self-censorship upon our artists who simply yearns

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for art as a medium of expression, and that of mine, and my fellow Singaporean's freedom of choice in enjoying art in all its various forms? By limiting the creations of artists, allowing audiences to be only be granted access to what is deemed as " appropriate content", and creating a rift of division between " content assessors" and their colleagues all in the name of " public good", is the MDA genuinely " protecting" social harmony, or is this simply a circumvented attempt at regulating a power relationship between us citizens and the state (McGuigan, 1996).

In a similar vein, MDA's espoused notion of " empowering" art practitioners by according them the prerogative in deciding the classification of their art works remains highly contentious as in practice, artists are subjugated to the strict adherence of MDA's policing mechanisms by proxy and consequently, are renounced of any leeway to exercise their personal liberties. How then are our art practitioners " empowered" by the new scheme? Not only is this positioning of the Arts Term Licensing Scheme prevaricating to artists, it also misleads the general public into believing that the new scheme should be embraced unequivocally as it seemingly liberates our artists. As such, it seems that this assertion of " empowerment" is naught but a surreptitious attempt by the MDA at egregiously eluding all of the said problems underlying self-censorship as the scheme constructs a delusory appearance – resembling that of a " pseudo-public" sphere as postulated by Habermas (1964) – where decisions seem to be " personally" dictated by artists (i. e. public) and are seemingly " independent" of MDA's (i. e. authority's) intrusiveness. It is thus, disappointing to note that whilst the MDA advocates

values of integrity (MDA, 2014b), such has been demonstrated otherwise in this case.

More eminently, the scheme's postulated idea that artists are to face harsh punishments including a \$5, 000 penalty for " non-compliance" to MDA's regulations simply nullifies any notions of " co-regulatory partnership", " empowerment", whilst invoking an undercurrent of fear that only aggrandizes self-censorship. This, I believe is tantamount to regulative censorship of punitive state sanction taking on the façade of constitutive censorship (Jansen, 1991) where it appears that our artists are merely " self-regulating". With the encroachment of hefty penalties associated with " misclassification", and MDA's lack of clarity upon the assessment and appeal processes, what then is of MDA's assistant chief executive, Mr. Christopher Ng's claim that authorities would be " reasonable and fair" (Chee Meng, 2014) in the evaluation such a situation? Consequently, it also seems that this new scheme has evinced upon an underlying distrusts of art practitioners within our society – as if artists are subversive individuals to be blot away. This, in turn, has perpetuated a fabricated sense of dichotomy of " artists versus community", where in truth, our artists and art practitioners are also fellow citizens, parents, " heart landers", and are very much part of Singapore and our community at large (Arts Engage, 2014a) .

Instead of creating an unnecessary chasm between artists, the general public, and the authorities, as reflected in the present paradigm where the MDA is seen to be the " mediator" between disgruntled members of the public and a group of seemingly seditious artists that warrants to be " subdued", it would be that much more purposeful for the growth of our <https://assignbuster.com/amendments-of-public-entertainments-and-meetings-act-pma/>

nation, communities, and our people if we could see ourselves as a collective whole and reconcile our differences through an open, shared discourse, as opposed to mere coercion by proxy. Whilst I understand the imperativeness of MDA's advisories in aiding audiences to make better informed choices, it is equally important to underscore that such classifications should really be meant as a general "caution", and that delving beyond that into micro-managing the entirety of an art work only serves to backfire as not only does it impugn upon artistic integrity and the true spirit of artistic endeavour (Arts Engage, 2014a), it ultimately renders our artistic practices bleak and sterile.

Rather than imposing such stringent aseptic rules, we ought to be encouraging a greater degree of sophistication and open-minded appreciation of the arts amongst the public such that it is imbued within our society the capacity to recognize that there is always more than a single "right" way in which the arts may relate to us (Chee Meng, 2014). If we could devote our efforts into nurturing a greater pool of art critics – be it in terms of adept professionals or greenhorn amateurs – in lieu of "content assessors", we would then be able to engage in a much more active and meaningful discourse on the merits of our artistic output which I believe, would assist in establishing that much needed breadth of an open, receptive, and constructive dialogue between our artists and the MDA authorities, consequently forging an improved relationship of trust and respect that would be beneficent to all.

Perhaps, a system of regulation that entails an open, consistent, and transparent process, in which discussions may be laid bare for public

critique, whose jurisdiction are composed of knowledgeable, publicly-
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informed, and impartial members principled upon an arms-length approach from any political interests, and whose decision-making processes are periodically subjected to review by an independent body, would better serve to inspire confidence not only from our artists, but within that of my fellow Singaporeans to both the MDA authorities and our local arts industry, as well as across governments (Arts Engage, 2014b). This, I strongly assert is one of the many fundamental steps that we must take together if the MDA genuinely seeks to foster a “ co-regulatory” partnership that “ empowers” our art practitioners and audiences alike.

Indeed, the arts should be appreciated in all of its variegated diversity, fluidity, and sublime nuances – that it is an inherent part and parcel of one’s intellectual and emotional growth that cannot be merely subjugated or predetermined by those contending privileged tastes or moral claims. Once again, I sincerely implore the relevant MDA authorities reconsider the proposed amendments of PEMA 2014, and to engage with representative citizen bodies as well as artists in another round of consultations before officially implementing the new scheme.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Karen Lim.