Responsible film censorship and classifications at the advent of Industrial Revolution 4.0

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Abstract. *Responsible film censorship in Malaysia is putting in place appropriate socio-political guidelines which will do away with outdated practices but liberate its control for producers and distributors without jeopardizing the nation's security. The study is guided by these objectives: i. How are the Malaysian film censorship practices relevant in the present context? ii. How film classification helps to manage censorship issues? iii. How technical innovations to censorship practices satisfy stakeholders' expectations? The study adopted the qualitative paradigm to research this study. Data was gathered through extensive in-depth interviews of censor board officers, audience, film distributors and producers. Content analysis of films successful and banned were conducted. The study arrived at several conclusions: 1. LPF is concerned for the national security and peace of the nation. Any practice or content that goes counter to the sensitivities and preservation of value and cultural traditions (violence among youths) of the people of Malaysia, becomes irrelevant; 2. Stakeholders' expectations of compliance and lenience have always been met with frequent and close consultations to issue arising pertaining to guidelines and film classifications; 3. For the LPF to stay relevant to the expectations of the nation and the stakeholders, the censorship board has stepped up its initiatives under their media literacy program to drop ineffective practices and enhance interventions for officers and stakeholders.*

Key words: film censorship, Industrial Revolution 4.0, socio-political guidelines

I. Introduction

Audiences across societies viewed films with reservations for censorship and gatekeeping for their appropriateness of culture impact. According to Pautz, "younger people, particularly teens, are much more likely to be impacted than older adults because they are still developing and shaping their worldviews… they are more likely to absorb all sorts of influences, including influences from film" in Guida, (2015).

Malaysian film industry was primarily influenced by the early British films industry. The necessity for film censorship was mooted since the existence of film by reformers. Reformers feared that "immoral films" would influence the audience for worse (Pearson, 1996). The Film Censorship Board or *Lembaga Penapisan Filem* (LPF) becomes a regulatory body that serves the purpose of moderating the film content and messages to avoid conflict and sustain peace of the country. Yet, censorship has not been entirely effective in screening out harmful content (McLelland 2011).

1.1 Problem Statement

Films in general have unduly taken the causal blame for youths' deviant behavior. Cultural imperialism may just be one factor for the decadence of behavior in society listed by researches (Berkowitz, 1986; Huesmann and Malamuth, 1986). Televised violence has had even greater impact upon the masses and youths' behavior.

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To manage and protect the society especially the youth from inappropriate content, LPF has imposed rules and regulations for film censorship as Guidelines provided in the statute of Censorship and Film Censorship Act 2002.

From filmmakers' standpoint, censorship can degenerate expression, creativity freedom and encourage piracy. When heavy censored is applied to comply with classification criteria many scenes from films will be cut. To circumvent this downside, audiences might stream content from illegal sites to watch the uncensored version. According Malaysian directors, Quek and Aziz Osman, illegal streaming will cause depletion of economic returns that affect the film industry (Begum, 2019).

In a media article, Johan (2017) suggested that, "censorship guidelines have to be clear and specific to avoid a situation where a blanket ban is imposed on all films". The writer further pointed out that the existing law, Film Censorship Act 2002 has clearly stated what lies beyond the freedom of speech and expression thus, there is no need of censorship but emphasized the need for a more responsible film censorship and classification instead (Johan, 2017).

The advancement in technology and audiences' access to illegal streaming sites, has rendered the management of censorship process ineffective inflicting damage to the very fabric of harmonious living in society. In order to fulfill the needs of stakeholders of the film industry and sustain the effectiveness of the censorship board, LPF may want to modernize its management of classification process and regulations.

1.2 Research Question

The objective of this research is to determine whether the current censorship practices are still relevant and what can the LPF improve to satisfy the filmmakers and stakeholders.

i.   How are the Malaysian film censorship practices relevant in the present context?

ii.   How film classification helps to manage censorship issues?

iii.   How technical innovations to censorship practices satisfy stakeholders' expectation?

1.3 Significance of the Study

Film censorship has always been a worrisome threshold of producers who invest large resources getting their films through to the distribution circuit around the world. Films produced in one part of the world most certainly would not meet the stringent gatekeeping rules and regulations of different countries. These countries have differing media models who enforce their rules in accordance to their cultural nuances. In that sense, Malaysia may be a democratic country but it enforces criteria that concerns a unique blend of caution for Islam and other religious sensitivities and many other conditions stipulated in the constitution under the Sedition Act 1958 section 3. The study is significant in understanding the censorship management practices that is amenable to the law and at the same time satisfy the stakeholders in the context of a unique blend of sensitivities belonging to Malaysia.

II.   Literature Review

The British administration first established film censorship in 1952 and enforced the first censorship Act, Cinematograph Films Ordinance No. 76 of 1952. In 1953, the Cinematograph Film Ordinance No. 25 was enacted in Singapore. Later in May 1954, the *Lembaga Penapisan Filem* (LPF) or the Malaysian Film Censorship Board was officially reenacted in Malaysia (LPF, 2002).

2.1 Malaysian Film Censorship Act and Guidelines

Film Censorship Act 2002 defines film as "movie, video tape, diskette, laser disc, compact disc, hard disc and other records that consist of sequence of moving pictures with or without audio" (Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia, 2011).

In multiracial and multicultural Malaysia, there are multiple elements that are highly sensitive to the society. The four (4) main aspects of film censorship guidelines are situated in i. Security and public order; ii. Religion; iii. Socio-culture; and iv. Decorum and morality. It is to ensure the films do not breach sensitivities such as religion, politics, sovereignty of the Malay rulers, matters which are clearly articulated in the Guidelines of Film Censorship and principles of the Rukun Negara (National Principles of Malaysia) (Sim & Ponnan, 2019).

Two (2) principles stated in the guidelines related to the freedom of choice are produces may distribute films with a variety of themes, genres and messages; and audiences have the freedom to choose the films they want to watch. Also stated clearly in the guidelines, the words (in 4 languages) that local films will be censored. The guidelines also describe the types of films that will not be approved for public screening. And that filmmakers should bear in mind the guidelines along with the Film Censorship Act 2002 (Act 620) and other laws of the nation, regulations and policies that are currently enforced in Malaysia while making films to avoid unnecessary cuts on the film.

2.2 Malaysian Film Classification

Initially, LPF reenacted in Malaysia, film classification only consisted two (2) categories, "Adult Only" and "Public Viewing" (LPF, 2002). In 1996, these classifications were changed to U and 18 with 4 sub-categories for 18 rated. Later, in early 2012, the classifications were changed to "U", "PG13" and "18".

Table 1. Film classification in 1996

Film Classification	Description
U	For general viewing
18SG	Contains elements of violence but not excessive
18SX	Contains elements of sex but not excessive
18PA	Contains aspects of religion, social and politics
18PL	Contains 2 or more elements from above including violence, horror and sex

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011

Table 2. Malaysia's film classification in January 2012 to-date

Film Classification	Description
U	This category is for viewing by all walks of life without age limit. The film portrays good values, decency and positive lessons as well as entertaining.
P13	Viewers under 13 years of age need parental/guardian supervision while reviewing. Scenes in the film consists elements of horror; scary; negative acts; suspense and frantic elements, but not excessive; elusive storyline; and elements that can disturb a child's emotion.
18	This category is for viewers aged 18 and above. The film contains elements of horror, gory, and violent, but not excessive; adult scene that is not excessive; social; sensitive political and religious elements which require a high-level understanding.

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, n.d.

2.3 Malaysian Audience Movie Preferences

In the years 2015 to 2019, the production of local films had dropped from 80 to 39 films per year while the import of oversea films dropped from 188 to 59 films per year (Fig. 1). In 2016 there were only 46 films produced while in 2017, the Malaysian film industry had produced 59 films but the box-office admissions were merely RM4.5 million (The Straits Time, 2018). A quantitative study by Liew and Lee (2012) found that Malaysian audience especially the younger generation preferred Hollywood productions over local production. There is a vast difference when comparing the highest grossing international films to highest grossing local productions.
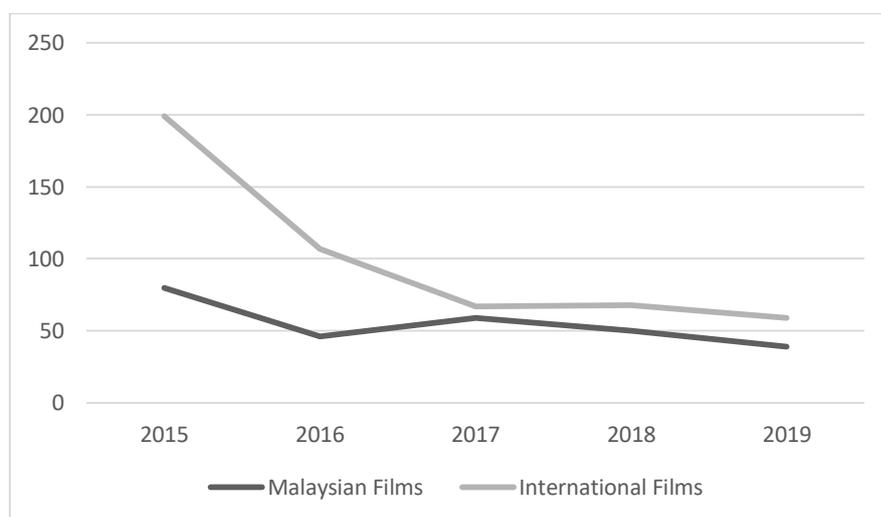

Fig. 1. Statistics of Malaysian films and international films in 2015-2019

According to the box office movies of year 2018 and 2019, most of the movies are classified as P13 which means the movie contains censorable violence and horror scenes, thus audience under age of 13 should be accompanied by parents when watching the movie. There is not a specific age range stated for audience under 13 years old, it could range from infant, young children to teenagers.

Avengers: Endgame (2019) is the latest release from the Avengers' saga. The film has become the highest grossing film in the history of Malaysian box-office with a total gross of RM87,719,175. Then, another Avengers' sequel, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) comes in the second place of the top grossing film in Malaysian's box office with a total gross of RM71,168,869. Both films fall under action, adventure and sci-fi genres. It is no exception that the films contain certain degrees of violence, actions and profanity.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

While Mass Media Theory often focuses on how the mass media content and messages influence the society, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) posit that the voice of the society also helps to shape the content of messages in the media. The authors proposed the Hierarchy of Influences (1996, Fig. 2).

Media in most countries are controlled by the government. In the theory posited by (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991), besides the government's guidelines, there are also influences on content from outside of the media organizations including interests' groups (Eg, through press guidelines) and content creator's (Eg. journalists) choice of stories they write. For commercial media such as films, audiences' attention is equally important to attract advertisers for return on investments.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The researcher has adapted conceptual model Hierarchy of Influences (1996) (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991) for film classification framework.
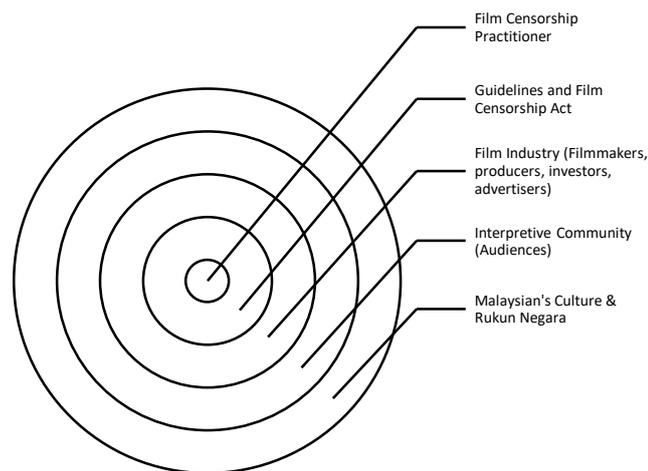

Fig 2. Adaptation of Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences (1996) for Film Classification in LPF

The researcher is in search of a management process that will meet the expectations of stakeholders represented by the media organization, social institution and social system. The level of censorship constraints becomes more stringent

when moving inwards from culture and Rukun Negara to censorship practitioner in the circle in Fig. 3. Stakeholders, including filmmakers, producers, distributors, advertisers and audiences are divergent in their opinion about the level of censorship exerted upon their respective products. The government as the governing authority has a moderating role to arrive at a consensus on the level of classification without giving away the most important element of "security".

III.   Method

To establish the existence of valid problem, first, primary data was searched from among subject matter experts. Next, secondary data confirmed the research questions and provided leads into important questions to be asked.

The exploratory, qualitative research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) led to films content analysis, face-to-face in-depth interviews through specific recommendations from the LPF and snowballing. Secondary data was also collected at various premises of informants in the Klang Valley, Kelantan and Kuching.

Content analysis in the media context is defined as "a research technique that is based on measuring the amount of something (violence, negative portrayals of women, etc.) in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular form of art" (Berger, 1991). In this study, the researcher obtained data from newspapers, bloggers' responses and films content. Twelve (12) interviews were conducted with experts in film industry, concerned publics and officials from the LPF.

Participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002) and content analysis opportunities were made possible at the LPF projection room, archives and LPF-producers/distributors workflow charts provided close insights.

Textual analysis and reporting that emerged from primary and secondary data open coding, include labelling concepts and developing categories are reported in the findings.

IV.   Results and Discussion

Data was gathered through extensive in-depth interviews of censor board officers, audience, film distributors and producers, secondary sources (journals and blogs) and content analysis. The data were grouped into themes, categories and explanation.

Table 3. Summary of emerging Categories and Themes from the Interviews and Secondary Sources

Categories	Themes	Explanation
Meaning	Cultural Imperialism	Relevance of Western film content to Malaysian multiple cultures and multiple religions. The LPF had to pay attention to numerous societal sensitivities.
		Hollywood movies are dominating Malaysian movie box office and most of the movies are superhero themed. For instance, Marvel Studio's *Avengers:*

		Endgame (2019) has dominated Malaysia's all-time Box Office collection in just 2 weeks after premier with a total gross of RM87,719,175 [19]. These movies have western cultural messages which are inadvertently alien or counter to worldviews of targeted young audience. According to [20], two (2) major concerns resulted from this phenomenon. First of all, youth are "often unable to distinguish between reality and entertainment and advertising claims" and they "often do not make conscious choices regarding their consumption habits of cultural commodities" [20].
	Political	Propaganda films with an agenda setting motive make their appearance once in a while. Such films can be found among the banned titles or there are passed with many cuts. Films depict the west to be superior than others. Ideologies alien to Malaysia are embedded in films. For example, *Padmaavat* (2018) was banned in Malaysia due to the wrong portrayal of Allauddin Khalji, a Muslim ruler of medieval India. In 2019, *Kadaram Kondan* was banned because the movie portrays the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) negatively.
	Depiction of violence	Most of the highest grossing films are in action genres. There are a lot of violence such as gunfire, swords, stabbing, heads being chopped off which are too violent for young children. According to [21], in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), "there is one scene with Hawkeye that is particularly violent and disturbing. There's gunfire, swords, stabbing, and heads being chopped off. If I had to choose a scene to cover little ones' eyes, this would be it" [21].
	Depiction of sexuality	Elements of sex are inappropriate for young children. Most Hollywood films contain sexual

		element. Kissing scenes are one of mandatory element in most Hollywood films.
		In Malaysia, most of the films that has higher elements of sexual are 18 rated. For example, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1* (2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017) and *Baywatch* (2017).
		According to [22], "I always screen the films first to make sure they are appropriate for the kids. My children have seen all Marvel Studio films except *Guardian of the Galaxy Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* due to the *ahem, stuff* (element of sex) in them".
Censorship Guidelines	Classification	The loop hole for PG13 is where anyone below 13 years old can enter the cinema to watch the film as long as they are accompanied with someone who is 13 years old and above.
		For example, in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) many superheroes died in the movie. The death of children's superheroes would be upsetting for them. The grief and suffering maybe unbearable for younger children, especially those who have been dealing with similar experience. It may cause traumatism to the children.
	Legal	Censorship guidelines books, books containing the constitution articles 10 and others, MCMC Act 1998, book that contains the 'Code of Conduct' 2004 were all noticed to be in the vicinity or possession of censorship officers and self-censorship officers.
Suitability	Language	Movies were banned for their inappropriate language, excessive violence, profanity etc.
		In *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), a lot of profanity were used for examples, "son of a bitch", "horse shit", "ass", "god damn", "shit", "dickwad",

		"bullshit", "damn", "pissant" and "pain in the ass". These are inappropriate for younger children who are below 13 years old.
	Length	A netizen Asrul said, "I was watching the 9.30am screening of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) at the cinema in Cheras Selatan, there was one couple seated behind me who brought their young child along. The kid was talking, crying and making lots of noises throughout the whole movie. It was still bearable during the action scenes because the movie drowned out the kid's cries but during the quiet scenes it was really distracting".

4.1 RQ1: How are the Malaysian film censorship practices still relevant in the present context?

In response to RQ1, the LPF has from time to time actively concerned itself with relevant improvements to their censorship practices. The interviews and observations at the LPF headquarters and places of censorship where LPF officers were at work, revealed that work was diligently executed following office SOP in accordance to guidelines. Yet, there are constant grievances between the LPF and stakeholders. Stakeholders have complained that LPF was slow and petty, outdated, inconsistent at decision making and old fashioned. For all these grievances, the LPF have responded in the best possible way at their consultation sessions. The practice has always been to consult and negotiate solutions amenable in the best interest of the society. The LPF does cite Act 620 and their Guidelines on Film Censorship of 2011 before enforcing the law.

To a management question, the LPF officer said, "we are engaged in two functions with our clients. One is to perform the censorship, the other is an advisory service to the local producers on their content and sensitivities. But most of the time if the producers come to the censorship board, you know with the storyboard or with their idea before production, our advice is effective. But not everybody does that. They know that, you know, the outsiders whoever is producing the movie, they know that they can always rely on the censorship board to … you know, so come to us first before the production. So, there are some who will do that. But most of the time they don't do that. For various reasons because they feel that, you know, it will stunt their creativity so they don't come to us".

But, the point of contention has from time to time been the award of classifications themselves. The award of above 18 rating means children cannot patronize the cinema and less revenue for the distributors. But above 13 rating means more cuts to the film and the film loses its originality. The LPF has been incorporating changes to manage issues each time brought up especially by film distributors and stakeholders only to provide efficient services.

In the words of the chairman of LPF, Tuan Haji Mohd Zamberi bin Abdul Aziz Zamberi, "When the public, film distributors and filmmakers think about the board, they think of our existence as being irrelevant, too restrictive for creativity. However, we are in the process and committed to reviewing the guidelines and film classifications from time to time so that we remain to current trends."

4.2 RQ2: How film classification helps to manage censorship issues?

The present film classification has only three categories of ratings, which are U, PG13 and 18. Class "U" (*umum*) is for general viewing while class "18" is for viewers aged 18 and above. For class "PG13", LPF officer Nafaruddin said, "PG 13 means right from birth up to whatever age you can watch the movie as long as you go in with a guardian which is older than 13 years old".

He expounds, "the theme and the act (in the movie) are so violent, but the producer still insists on a category "13" rating. You say you want 13, fair enough, but you will have like 45 cuts. Oh, but sir this one we need to show. What is there to show? Don't we have enough violence in our society? You know the title is (inaudible movie title). The son slashing the father, the mother poison the husband, you know all these kinds of acts can … Well, when we talk about violence, it is more of the act. But sometimes out of slow-motion violence, it is still violence".

Another LPF officer explained that formula movies successful at the box-office usually reflect negative elements happening in a society. How the society thinks and vice versa, negative things in the society reflected in the movie… likewise youngsters are influenced by it. It is a vicious circle. The audience become negative, when the filmmaker is negative, the production becomes negative. Its negativity that keeps circulating and that will influence the society's perception.

The LPF chairman had identified a problem found in the current film classification. He said that there was significant gap between P13 and 18 categories and LPF was mulling introducing new classifications like P15 or P16 to bridge the gap (Fun, 2019).

"Based on our experience, the board thinks three classifications are not enough. One of the reasons we need censorship is because we want to approve content that suits more specific classification standards so that films will be passed under one or more criteria. As such, by introducing new classifications, there is a good chance of approving products that arrive for censorship", said the LPF chairman in (Teoh, 2019).

4.3 RQ3: How technical innovative censorship practices satisfy stakeholders' expectation?

The study suggests that LPF should replace ineffective practices and introduce client friendly interventions. In this respect the LPF's portal has introduced the e-film censorship. An innovative client friendly technology where distributors and producers need not be present at the LPF personally for film censorship transactions.

To overcome issues of piracy, complains of being slow, outdated and inconsistent, the LPF have now turned to encrypted censorship. Which means the LPF is given an encrypted code which will lapse within a given duration. Here the original license holders or distributor of films with rights will suggest a window of limited timeframe for viewing incoming films and identifying possible censorable scenes for cuts if any. This process is technologically assisted leaving no blame for piracy or delays. To address the question of inconsistency, the LPF takes a serious view by going through a second and even a third round of censor. For this purpose, a new encrypted code and time must be requested. They also consult and consider where the complaint is coming from to understand the nature of complaint.

The censorship workflow is evolving into a paperless administration where much work can be transacted online. Requests for products to be censored, resubmission and subsequently certification can be smoothly transacted electronically.

V.   Conclusion

Key strategy development and decision making resulting in politically and socially accountable policies and responsible practices should rule film censorship in the era of the industrial revolution. Decisions should emanate from knowledge-based science and technology rather than be restricted to laws and regulations abetting to taboos and cultural imperialism. While local cultural nuances need to be respected, globalization induced openness to foreign cultural elements pose a dilemma at censorship. To be liberal means censorship has to relax classification. To be strict at the control point following rules and the socio-politics of the nation means being accountable and responsible at censorship. Stakeholders on both sides of the argument have put forth their expectations of compliance and lenience. As evidenced from the findings, (Table 3) broadcasters, distributors and film makers have often breached censorship guidelines despite providing frequent and close consultations to issues arising pertaining to guidelines and film classifications.

The study's conclusion is illustrated in the figure 3 below as the "Transformation process of film censorship and classification at the advent of industrial revolution 4.0".
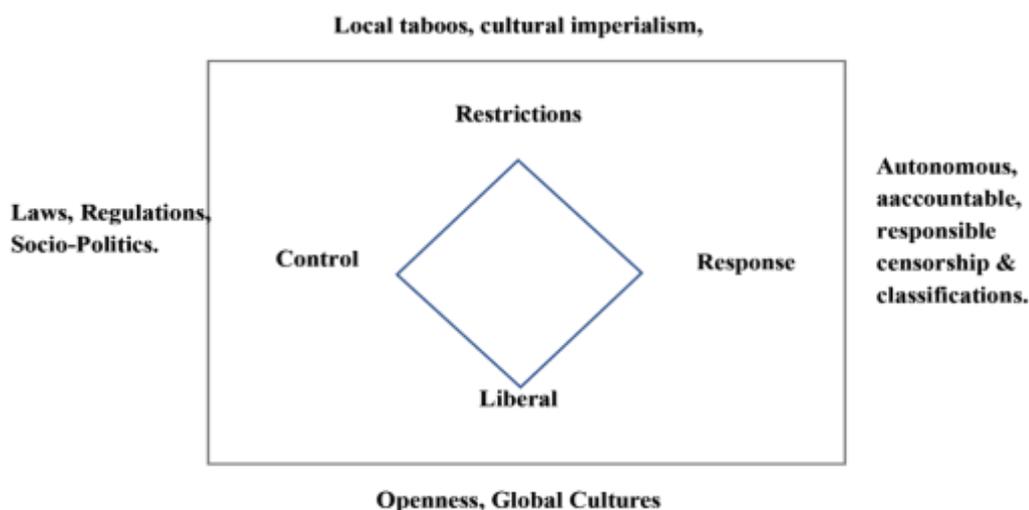

Fig. 3. Transformation process of film censorship and classification.

The LPF does cite Act 620 and their guidelines of practices of 2011 before enforcing the law, but the practice has always been to consult and negotiate. The classifications themselves have since evolved from their inception, then amended in 2002. Each time incorporating changes to manage issues brought up especially by film distributors and stakeholders and to provide efficient services. The study suggests that LPF should replace ineffective practices and introduce client friendly interventions. As response, the LPF's portal has introduced e-film censorship and an encrypted time managed censorship. An innovative client friendly technology where distributors and producers need not be present at the LPF personally for film censorship transactions.

To stay relevant to the expectations of the nation and the stakeholders, the censorship board have stepped up initiatives under their media literacy program to promote educational programs for stakeholders. This program is expected to heighten the specialized skills among its board members. Officers are expected to have extensive experience in

administration, management, military, broadcasting and in other appropriate fields. Additionally, knowledge of the film and entertainment industry besides the right attitude toward the duties of office.

As the custodian of electronic media gatekeeping, LPF is clear about its responsibilities and obligation to the multiracial society it serves. Its concern for national security and peace is primary before anything else. Censorship practices which are limited just to the preservation of values and cultural nuances of the peoples of Malaysia, become ineffective. While stakeholders are opposed to the idea of stringent censorship, LPF does not agree that censorship is limiting the creativity of producers. Filmmakers are in a dilemma over what is inappropriate and what is 'creativity' in the real sense.

The study finds it necessary to make five innovative recommendations to support the transformation of the film industry censorship to be better prepared in the advent of industrial revolution 4.0.

5.1 Recommendation 1

Key strategy development and decision making resulting in politically and socially accountable policies and practices should rule film censorship in the era of the industrial revolution 4.0. Such decisions should emanate from knowledge-based socio-science and technology rather than be restricted to rules derived from cultural nuances alone. Stakeholders from all sides of the argument have put forth their expectations of compliance and lenience. As evidence from the findings, (Table 5) broadcasters, distributors and film makers have often breached censorship guidelines despite providing frequent and close consultations to issues arising pertaining to guidelines and film classifications.

5.2 Recommendation 2

The conceptualization of innovative LPF policies, decision makers should team up with researchers to conceive policies, perform analytics of latest statistics which will render effective for the goals of all genres of films censorship including audience such as autistic children.

5.3 Recommendation 3

Organize media literacy workshop for filmmakers (youtubers and online content creators) and stakeholders regarding their responsibility. This is an elevation of the media literacy program for stakeholders. This effort should be timely when online content creators are overwhelming regular film content congesting at the bottleneck of censorship. Education and awareness program on the limitations and parameters of content creation would minimize the need for too many cuts.

5.4 Recommendation 4

A meditation on the socio-political properties of cinema conducive to the Malaysian societies can be formulated to provide specialised guide for social media content censorship. This recommendation is appropriate in the wake of the deluge of censorable content and fake information that gets passed on as appropriate for general consumption. Such guidelines can serve as popular education and media literacy strategy.

5.5 Recommendation 5

The creation of a centralized and autonomous film censorship system that provides an unbiased avenue for discussion, room for venting grievances, standardization of dubious censorship rules and at the same time afford greater self-censorship or mediated in-house censorship for the numerous emerging media houses.

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