KUALA LUMPUR, 12 Nov 2008: A strong civil society has the power to change the media without relying on government regulation.

Professor Cherian George from Singapore's Nanyang Technological University said the public could influence how the media operated, for example, by holding them accountable.

"Media organisations could be pressured by consumers into setting up their own internal accountability mechanism such as an ombudsman," said George, who heads the Journalism and Publishing Division in the university's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

"The media is not going to do this without pressure," he said at the Perspectives on Freedom of Expression in Asia and Europe forum on 11 Nov.

He said that in Singapore, for example, there were plans to set up a community moderation panel, which will not include any government official, to monitor online sites.

He added that bloggers could also be watchdogs of the media but stressed that society still needed journalists who would push the limits of expression and challenge current issues.

Centre for Independent Journalism executive director V Gayathry, who spoke from the floor, said in most cases in Malaysia, members of the public were responsible for government action against the media.

Gayathry said Makkal Osai's 2007 suspension, for example, was precipitated by public complaints about the picture of a smoking Jesus holding a beer can that the Tamil daily had published.
"Why do we give power to the state?" she said.

George, however, said the public most likely complained to government because they were unhappy over socially-unacceptable coverage, rather than to have the media prosecuted.

Another forum speaker, Professor Kevin Boyle of the UK's Essex University, said a good principle to follow was that freedom was the rule and limitation the exception.

He said although it was important to have freedom of speech, there must also be protection of and respect for the rights or reputation of others.

"Freedom of expression could be used and abused by people while restraints are usually abused by government," he said.