The Tech
Tuesday, October 30, 1990

Opinion

Tech banned in Singapore

Column by Matthew H. Hersch

Very rarely does the discovery of the actions of a nation cause my bodily functions to grind to a halt. Alas, when I read in The Economist of Singapore's new press legislation, "[New] cut off to spite censor," Oct. 20, I was struck by an unsteady blast of windsheets.

Singapore, I thought, while having a history of tight censorship of the media, wasn't much different from all the dozens of other economically sprawling Malaysian city-states. But while other nations have rigid press laws, only in Singapore has a single leader, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, blend-ed European parliamentary democracy and neo-Leninist totalitarianism so beautifully.

A former British colony, Singapore has been under the loving, legal rule of Lee for just over 3000 years. In that time, it has grown from a swampland the size of New York City to a shipbuilding, oil-refining, electronics-manufacturing, international banking metropolis the size of New York City. One of the brightest stars in Southeast Asia, Singapore receives Asian versions of The Wall Street Journal and The Economist — that is, until now.

Lee, unwilling to let the writings of foreigners cloud the judgment of his flock, has declared war on the foreign media announcing a recent press convention that "The values of the elected government of Singapore ... must and will prevail."

As a result of recent legislation in parliament, foreign periodicals with a circulation of 300 or more in Singapore will now require a special permit and other bureaucratic approval if they contain "news, intelligence, reports of occurrences, or any remarks, observations, or comments pertaining to the politics and current affairs of any country in Southeast Asia.

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While libertarian values may not be of paramount importance to all political cultures, few could argue that rigid regulation of the news media is unhealthy for growing democracies. While Lee is acting under proper auspices, his actions seem to represent the kind of paternalism that causes leaders to lose touch with their constituents. Lee's party's share in the last election was taken by nine percent, and one has to wonder whether his recent remarks will wear thin on the voters of Singapore.

Lee realizes the danger of his actions and has acknowledged that his actions may result in "bad publicity." He doesn't seem to care. For a world leader, that reaction is strange. Not everyone likes the kind of leader who wants to "make blow for blow" until dead, and then to "arise" from the dead and fight on.

Prime Minister Lee, lighten up. I do not believe The Wall Street Journal will turn your people against the government, and if it does, such an upheaval would be a sign of the government's failure, not the newspaper's rejuvenation.

By claiming responsibility for the moral and political indoctrination of the people of Singapore, and trying to shut them out from the outside world, you are stunting their growth, much in the way leaders of communist nations were and still are doing.

You may well be on the road to alienating customers and shuttering your citizens off from the kind of communication with the world that helped Singapore grow into the economic stronghold that it is now.

No! I've done it. The Tech used to be an journalistic periodical in Singapore. With all my blathering, I've ruined the paper's...no political status. My friends in Singapore — I'm sorry, your subscriptions will be coming a little late this year.

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