

Twitter versus RT: Which One is State Media Again?

America's New Red Scare escalated in mid-October as the US Department of Justice demanded that the US division of television network RT (formerly known as Russia Today) register as a "foreign agent" under the aptly named Foreign Agents Registration Act.

The obvious purpose of DoJ's demand is to keep the guttering flame of panic over "Russian election meddling" from going completely out. It's a publicity stunt and that's pretty much all it is (no word of similar registration demands to personnel working in the US for the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Kol Yisrael, et al.). But yes, RT is in fact an enterprise owned and operated by the Russian government, so fair enough, I guess.

Enter social media giant Twitter with two announcements.

First, while it has been accidentally over-counting its user base for some time, there are in fact more than 300 million Twitter users, the majority of them in countries other than the United States.

Second, Twitter won't be selling advertising to RT (or to Sputnik, a Russian state news agency and radio broadcaster) any more.

Whether Twitter really buys into the "Russian election meddling" theatrics or not, it's pretending to. It's appealing to the US government in the same way American film producers did with their post-World War Two "blacklists," and with respect not just to RT and Sputnik, but to anything and everything its masters in DC deem unacceptable (for example, accounts linked to Islamic and other alleged "extremists").

Twitter is fast becoming a branch of US state media itself. For a company with such a large international user base, that seems like a bad business plan. And it's certainly a bad thing from the perspective of achieving the not quite realized, but clearly to be pursued, promise that the Internet holds out to humanity — connecting people around the globe without kowtowing to the increasingly obsolete and disintegrating concept of national borders.

Of course, Twitter and other tech firms relying on ad revenues are in both an enticing and difficult position. Uncle Sam can be very generous with, say, military recruitment advertising dollars when he gets his way. When he doesn't, he can get downright abusive and start looking for legislative hooks — sanctions violations, for example — to hang the offenders from.

All the more reason for tech companies whose clienteles sprawl across national borders to find more freedom-friendly countries to locate their offices in.