

US Brands RT a “Foreign Agent:” A Chilling Move Against Free Speech

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On Thursday, RT America, the US-based subsidiary of RT (formerly known as Russia Today), announced that it would, under pressure from the United States government, register as a “foreign agent” under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).

The Justice Department’s demand that RT register as a “foreign agent” is aimed at delegitimizing RT as a news source, intimidating its journalists and guests, and setting the precedent for taking similar actions against other news outlets.

The US government has given no public justification for its demand, which will require that RT America provide information on its finances and on individuals involved in directing the news outlet. RT clearly reflects the views of the Russian government and avoids criticism of the Putin regime. However, the US has made no similar demand in relation to other outlets that have government financing and backing—the BBC, for example. Moreover, the United States operates a vast network of news agencies that work, officially and unofficially, to promote the interests of the American ruling class all over the world.

The US government’s motivations are entirely political, bound up with the effort to present all opposition within the United States as the product of the actions of Russia. In its reporting, whatever its reasons may be, RT provides a platform for voices critical of the policy of the American government.

The United States outlined the political reasons for moving against the broadcaster in the January 6, 2017 report by the US Director of National Intelligence on “Russian intervention” in the 2016 elections.

The report alleged, “RT broadcast, hosted, and advertised third-party candidate debates and ran reporting supportive of the political agenda of these candidates. The RT hosts asserted that the US two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a ‘sham.’”

The Director of National Intelligence report further denounced favorable coverage by RT of the Occupy Wall Street movement, declaring, “RT framed the movement as a fight against ‘the ruling class’ and described the current US political system as corrupt and dominated by corporations.”

More recently, US politicians—led by the Democratic Party—have developed a narrative that Russia, through outlets like RT, has worked to “sow divisions” within the United States, as if the American people need RT to know that the political system is corrupt and dominated by

corporations.

The campaign has been used to demand a regime of Internet censorship, with technology giants including Google, Facebook and Twitter taking measures to block or demote content from a broad range of websites.

Earlier this month, Google removed RT from its list of “preferred” channels on YouTube, while Twitter blocked all advertising by the channel. In addition to its crackdown on RT, Google has made sweeping changes to its search engine and news service that have dramatically slashed traffic to left-wing, antiwar and progressive web sites, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has had its search traffic from Google fall by 74 percent since April.

Precisely because of its ties to the Russian government, the US Justice Department has chosen it as its first target in its drive to persecute, criminalize and ultimately outlaw all oppositional journalists.

Will RT’s hosts, including Pulitzer Prize winner Chris Hedges and veteran interviewer Larry King, also be forced to register as “foreign agents?” Will all of RT’s guests, which have included prominent left-wing journalists, politicians, academics and even celebrities, get a knock on their door demanding that they file paperwork with the Justice Department? Will all of these individuals now be opened to questioning about their collaboration with a “hostile foreign power?”

This month, an organization calling itself the European Values Think-Tank, based in the Czech Republic and funded by the US embassy and foundations associated with billionaire George Soros, published just such a list, including the names of 2,300 RT guests, grouped into US and UK politicians, journalists, academics and celebrities. These individuals are, according to the think tank, “useful idiot[s]” for a “hostile foreign power.”

The list includes journalists Julian Assange, Max Blumenthal, Seymour Hersh, Jeremy Scahill, Ed Schultz and Matt Taibbi, as well as the academics Noam Chomsky and Stephen Cohen, together with actor Russell Brand and filmmaker Oliver Stone.

Amid soaring social inequality and an ever-escalating military buildup, the US government is moving to silence any alternative to its closely monitored and vetted establishment media outlets, including the major newspapers and broadcast networks.

The fact that RT is being targeted because of its political positions sets an ominous precedent. It means that “foreign propaganda” is being defined by political views, laying the groundwork for a much broader range of news outlets to be labeled as promoting “Russian propaganda,” blacklisted and ultimately criminalized.

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