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Twitter blocks neo-Nazi account in Germany

US firm says it has complied with request from authorities which have been monitoring activities of Besseres Hannover

- Kate Connolly in Berlin
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A German police officer shows a Nazi flag confiscated from the far-right group Besseres Hannover (Better Hanover). Photograph: Alexander Koerner/AP

Twitter has blocked the account of a neo-Nazi group accused of inciting hatred towards foreigners.

In what amounts to an unprecedented move for the company, Twitter announced it had complied with a request by German authorities who have been monitoring the activities of the banned far-right group Besseres Hannover (Better Hanover) for some time.

The San Francisco-based company said it had used a device developed earlier this year to monitor content. "We announced the ability to withhold content back in Jan," Twitter's lawyer, Alex Macgillivray, tweeted. "We're using it now for the first time re: a group deemed illegal in Germany.

The move came after an investigation into about 20 members of the neo-Nazi group in Lower Saxony, northern Germany, after they were charged with inciting racial hatred and forming a criminal organisation. The group was banned last month by the state's interior ministry. In particular the group, which is estimated to have around 40 active members, stands accused of being behind a threatening video that was sent to the social affairs minister of Lower Saxony, Aygül Özkan.

Macgillivray posted a link to the letter the firm received from German police requesting Twitter to close the account "immediately and without opening a replacement account". In a further tweet he wrote that the company aimed to comply with the law as well as retaining its status as a platform for free speech. "Never want to withhold content; good to have tools to do it narrowly & transparently," he wrote.

Besseres Hannover has been watched by the authorities for past four years after drawing attention to itself through various anti-foreigner campaigns. Its account, @hannoverticker now carries the notice "withheld".

Dirk Hensen, a Twitter spokesman, said the contents of Besseres Hannover tweets were still available outside Germany because the German police did not have the jurisdiction to request bans overseas. The group's website has also been blocked.

The Hamburger Abendblatt described Twitter as "walking on a tightrope" in its attempts to preserve free speech as well as complying with the law, particularly in the light of the Arab spring during which opposition groups made use of Twitter despite mounting pressure on the firm by governments to block accounts.

It is working together with an anti-censorship group called Chilling Effects to publish requests it receives to withhold content, except where it is legally prohibited from doing so.