

British government tells civil servants to tweet

July 28 2009, By JILL LAWLESS , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The British government has told civil servants: Go forth and tweet.

The [government](#) published guidelines Tuesday for its departments on using the microblogging service [Twitter](#).

In contrast to Twitter's limit of 140 characters per message, the document runs 20 pages, or more than 5,000 words.

It tells civil servants their [tweets](#) should be "human and credible" and written in "informal spoken English."

It advises government departments to produce between two and 10 tweets a day, with a gap of at least 30 minutes between each "to avoid flooding our followers' Twitter streams."

The advice says Twitter can be used for everything from announcements to insights from ministers, and in a crisis could be a "primary channel" for communicating with the electorate.

The document warns against using Twitter simply to convey campaign messages, but notes that "while tweets may occasionally be 'fun,'" they should be in line with government objectives.

It also says departments should not follow any Twitter users who are not following them, as this could be interpreted as "Big Brother" behavior.

The guidelines are the British government's latest attempt to embrace the Internet and social media - efforts that have been both praised and mocked.

Stolid, unglamorous Prime Minister Gordon Brown was memorably called "an analog politician in a digital age" by the leader of the opposition. A YouTube appearance in April amid a scandal over lawmakers' expenses backfired when Brown seemed to be stiff, insincere and smiling inappropriately.

The Twitter document said the government must "accept that there will be some criticism" of its efforts.

Twitter, launched in 2006, first gained popularity as a way for fans to follow the thoughts and activities of celebrities like Oprah Winfrey (2 million [followers](#)) and Ashton Kutcher (3 million). It has also proved a powerful tool for mobilizing causes and protest movements, in post-election demonstrations from Iran to Moldova, where activists used Twitter to rally support after cell phone networks went down.

Governments around the world are also starting to use it to keep voters and constituents informed, with Britain and the United States among the most active. President Barack Obama's political Twitter stream - with more than 1.8 million followers and run out of the Democratic National Committee - has recently encouraged people to tweet their members of Congress about his proposed health care overhaul, and provides links to the president's news conferences.

The White House, meanwhile, has more than 800,000 followers to promote official government news, such as photographs of the first family's recent trip to Russia, Italy and Ghana. A handful of aides keep the account updated. Only a few are allowed access to Twitter on their government computers because U.S. law requires aides preserve every

presidential record - including tweets.

In Britain, the prime minister's office, the Foreign Office and some individual lawmakers already use Twitter to broadcast their activities online. Prime Minister Gordon Brown's 10 Downing St. office has more than 1 million Twitter followers, who receive tidbits - written by a Downing Street staffer - such as "PM has just traveled from London to Cardiff by train."

Other governments have more modest Twitter presences. In Denmark, where there are no government Twitter guidelines, Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen has just under 3,500 followers for his sporadically updated Twitter feed. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has 16,700, a similar number to Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has just under 2,000 followers for his Hebrew-language feed.

Several Swedish opposition politicians have caught the Twitter bug, though the government is so far immune.

Neither French president Nicolas Sarkozy nor Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi appears to have a Twitter presence. German Chancellor Angela Merkel does not tweet, either.

Spain's government launched a Twitter account last week; it has just over 2,000 followers.

Politicians also must beware the pitfalls of Twitter-impersonators. When Michael Jackson died last month, several British newspapers republished a tweet seemingly from British Foreign Secretary David Miliband: "Never has one soared so high and yet dived so low. RIP Michael." It was fake.

Tom Watson, a Labour party lawmaker who is one of the House of Commons' most active bloggers, said Twitter could be a valuable tool for Britain's Labour government.

But he said the guidelines showed how levels of familiarity with the Internet varied widely in the government's Whitehall offices.

"There are some very bright, digitally enabled civil servants who unfortunately have to write these documents for their bosses, the mandarins, who still get their secretaries to print off their e-mails so they can read them," Watson told the BBC.

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