

Citizens speak out on (at)Sweden Twitter account

January 19 2012, By MALIN RISING , Associated Press

(AP) -- Do you think Sweden is all about blondes, meatballs and snow? Think again.

Since December, the Nordic country has been promoting itself on Twitter by handing over the official (at)Sweden account to an average citizen every week.

Among those who have hosted the account are a Christian minister, an organic sheep farmer and a blogger from an immigrant neighborhood - each painting their own, different image of Swedish society.

This week the account is controlled by Hanna Fange, who describes herself as "just your average lesbian truck driver."

Maria Ziv, marketing director at public-private PR agency Visit Sweden, said the idea was to give the national account a more genuine voice and present a different picture of Sweden.

"Each tweeter should be a small piece in the puzzle that is Sweden," she said Thursday.

While institutions in many other countries still haven't taken control of their country names on Twitter, Visit Sweden and the public Swedish Institute registered the (at)Sweden account in 2009. Ziv said the latest campaign is a natural step in the organization's efforts to use social media in their marketing.

The move has been well-received online and the account has increased its number of followers from around 8,000 in December to more than 23,000.

The writers are free to express their thoughts about Swedish society after signing a contract prohibiting racist comments, personal attacks, advertising or [tweets](#) affecting national security, Ziv said.

Visit Sweden doesn't pre-read or censor the tweets, but demands that personal political opinions should be followed by the hash-tag [myownopinion](#). And the hosts haven't shied away from controversial subjects or challenging the popular perception of Sweden.

Among other things, they have dissuaded foreign visitors from going to the "worthless" Ice Bar - a popular tourist spot in Stockholm - and criticized Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt for how he has handled negotiations with Ethiopia in relation to the imprisonment of two Swedish journalists there.

In December, Swedish-Bosnian account host Hasan Ramic stirred up a small debate after calling the Kebab-Pizza combo a "Swedish national dish" and later writing a series of tweets lamenting what he sees as the dismantling of Sweden's famous welfare system.

"In exchange for tax cuts, we've got a hollowed out society," he wrote. "The current Swedish welfare system is a bad joke compared to what it once was."

Ziv said the organizers have tried to pick tweeters of varying backgrounds to get an as broad representation of [Sweden](#) as possible. An important criteria is that the person is experienced in using [Twitter](#) and uses the tool to communicate with others instead of just for self-promotion.

"We encourage them to be themselves and tweet like normal, except in English," she said.

More information: <http://twitter.com/sweden>

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