

Governments use Twitter for Emergency Alerts, Traffic Notices and More



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There's no middle ground in the court of public opinion about Twitter, a free "microblogging" site that a growing number of government agencies and officials are using to keep citizens informed about everything from press releases to car accidents and structural fires. People either love Twitter, or they just don't get it.

In short, Twitter lets users send and receive brief updates, which are capped at 140 characters of text. Users must sign up for a profile page on Twitter.com and then they can send text-based updates to subscribers, called "followers," or receive Twitter messages from people they choose to follow. Twitter is multiplatform: The messages, called "tweets," can be sent and received on Twitter.com, traditional e-mail accounts, mobile devices like smartphones, Really Simple Syndication (RSS) and Facebook.

When Twitter's founders launched the service in 2006, they advertised it as a way to keep abreast of friends' everyday lives. The idea of "tweeting" in short bursts about mundane details - "I'm watching Dancing with the Stars!" - may seem narcissistic, or pointless. But a loyal following has found novel and unexpected applications for the service. This movement includes government agencies, which are use Twitter for various functions, such as real-time alerts about emergencies, election results and even science projects.

Emergency Notification and Continuity

The most practical government applications for Twitter are in public safety and emergency notification. For example, the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) updates its Twitter page with bulletins about structural fires, the number of responding firefighters, and injuries and casualties. A typical post is something like: "12126 Burbank Bl* No 'formal' evacuations; Firefighters maintaining 500' exclusion zone pending LAFD Hazmat arrival."

When a commuter train derailed Sept. 12, 2008, in Chatsworth, Calif., killing dozens and injuring hundreds, the LAFD tweeted several times to update the public about rescue operations. And citizens near a wildfire in Griffith Park in 2007 tweeted to the LAFD about wind direction and smoldering hot spots, which helped firefighters control the 800-acre blaze.

If a post exceeds Twitter's 140-character limit, Brian Humphrey, an LAFD spokesman, posts the most critical snippet of the message with a Web address for TinyURL, a service that provides a short alias for long URL addresses. That way, the LAFD's more than 1,500 Twitter followers can go to the official LAFD communications blog for the unabridged message. The LAFD, like many government agencies, also uses TwitterMail, which lets users send e-mails that are also posted to Twitter.

Police departments find value in Twitter, too. For instance, the Portland (Ore.) Police Department tweets about crime reports and sometimes asks the public for leads in cold cases: "Child abuse team seeks witnesses in continuing investigation. If you have any info plz contact detectives."

Unexpected Applications

The [Washington State Department of Transportation](#) (WSDOT) updates its feed with traffic alerts and route changes for ferry vessels. But Twitter has a larger purpose for WSDOT: It helps continuity of operations, according to WSDOT spokesman Lloyd Brown.

"In an emergency, people will come to our [Web site](#), en masse to the point that it overwhelms our servers - we've had that happen during snowstorms and other major weather events," Brown said. Because the Web site is a popular source of traffic updates, sometimes it can't handle a spike in page hits, he said. During an emergency, WSDOT is considering the option of posting a bare-bones version of its Web site that contains a Web link to the Twitter feed.

"One of the things we're considering if we get into an emergency situation like that, we can update Twitter and our blog with our handheld BlackBerry, iPhone or whatever we have. It's a continuity of operations opportunity for us," Brown said.

When WSDOT initially decided to use Twitter, the department wasn't thinking about continuity of operations, he said.

"But on July 31, three major traffic incidents nearly brought the Web site down - it's a very popular site for getting traffic information. Our Web guru started tweeting on the situation, and suddenly the number of people who were following us went from 20 to 160." Ever since, WSDOT has been spreading the word about its Twitter feed.

Is Anyone There?

Governments also use Twitter for more than public safety, though many of these applications haven't matured. Lots of governments that use Twitter only tweet press releases and announcements via a service like Twitterfeed, which automatically tweets an RSS, said Jeffrey Levy, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) director of Web communications. He has written best practices of microblogging for federal agencies at [Webcontent.gov](#). Only a few government officials are truly tweeting "live," he said.

"We're playing with it to see what happens," Levy said. "The fact that we even started on Twitter was like, 'Does anybody care?' We just threw it out there to see what happened. Within a few weeks, 25 people started following us. That's with no advertising. A couple of federal government blogs started following us, and I guess people saw it there. After 25 people started following us, we said, 'Let's try it.' We threw up a link on the main blog page, and every blog page now has a link." The official EPA Twitter - "Greenversations" - has more than 300 followers.

Levy sent out two communications personnel who tweeted from the field as a team of scientists conducted a survey of small animals. They sent 30 tweets from their cells during the two-day trip. It seemed to work well, Levy said, but they only got feedback from one person. "I would love to get a conversation going via Twitter, but the couple times I've put out manual tweets, I haven't really gotten a response," Levy said. "So I've written a blog post that will go up titled, 'Twitterers Speak Up.'"

This may illustrate what's arguably Twitter's central challenge: viewership. Most governments have attracted very few followers (excluding President-elect Barack Obama, who has 130,000). The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) tweets trivia questions and hypotheticals, such as "I understand an extinct volcano is near my home in the United States. Should I be concerned ..." For this, the USGS has earned about 250 followers of some 4 million worldwide Twitter accounts. Utah state government tallies about 400 followers since it began tweeting in April 2008.

Roanoke County, Va., started tweeting in October 2008, and the county's IT department isn't worried about how many citizens follow it because the investment is limited to a small investment of time - it takes 10 minutes to set

up an account - and some planning for peripheral issues, like e-discovery. The county decided to back up its tweets and followers with an application called Tweetake.

"The question really would be, why not do Twitter?" asked Bill Greeves, the county's IT director. "It is 140 characters, so granted, you are limited in the message you put on there. But we're not creating content for Twitter; we're creating content to send out a message to the public, and we're just taking advantage of the latest and greatest channels available."

The beauty of it, Greeves said, is that if something better replaces Twitter or it all falls out of vogue, it won't hurt the bottomline.