#justdivein:

the value of a presidential twitter account

By Ángel Cabrera

decade ago, Joi Ito-now head of the MIT Media Labintroduced me to blogs and I didn't get it. Why people would want to waste their time writing a public diary or reading someone else's was beyond my comprehension. But when my friend Thomas Crampton left The New York Times to become a social media consultant, I thought I'd better give blogs a shot. Later, when I told Internet guru Loïc Lemeur how proud I was of my new blog, he let me know I was late to the party; the action had now shifted to a thing called Twitter-#youmustbekiddingme, I recall thinking.

Call me a slow learner, but I initially resisted Twitter, too. It was during an informal dinner with a group of journalists, entrepreneurs and social activists that I got a glimpse of how social media was transforming the way ideas flow and shape opinions around the world. I decided to dive in, not knowing what a "handle," an "RT" or a "hashtag" were. Nine thousand tweets later, social media has changed the way I stay informed and communicate.

More than 400 volunteer curators—including students, faculty, journalists, politicians and entrepreneurs from around the world—select news for me in real time, at no cost, 24 hours a day, every day. Thanks to them, I am intimately connected to trends on campus, revolutions in the Middle East (and in higher education) and Spanish soccer dramas as they unfold. If any of my curators don't perform to my taste, I simply "unfollow" them and find smarter, better informed ones.

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I, in turn, volunteer my own ideas and news to anyone—about 7,500 followers to date—who cares to read them. I usually cover trends in higher education, entrepreneurship or global affairs. I discuss my views about George Mason University, cancel classes during hurricanes, or report on the sometimes absurd circumstances of life. Anyone associated with Mason who is curious about the new president now has access to an unplugged, unfiltered version of me, just as I have with many others.

If you are considering taking the plunge, here are my answers to some of the questions and comments I hear most frequently:

Who cares about social media, anyway?

■ Many of your students, faculty, alumni, local media, board members, legislators and even your governor.

Why are people so obsessed with how many followers they have?

■ The more followers you have and the more influential they are, the better your voice will be heard when you have something to say.

How do I get followers?

■ By providing information and insight on topics of interest to others. And being authentic and reliable.

Why not just let the public relations team manage my Twitter account for me?

■ The quickest way to lose followers is to delegate your account; people don't follow you to get official messages but to hear your voice.

It all seems too complicated: hashtags, handles, retweets ... where do I start?

■ Your PR team can show you. Your kids or grandkids can, too. Or ask any freshman. It's not that hard! You just have to get started.

Wouldn't it be better to just stay out of social media altogether, as I am now?

■ The fact that you don't actively participate doesn't mean you're not in it. You're just not aware of what is being said about you.

Social media can get you in trouble if you say the wrong thing.

■ Yes, and so can traditional media. Silence can occasionally get you in trouble, too.

I have much more important things to do with my time than to share my life on Twitter.

■ There are few things more important for leaders to do than to share their values, beliefs and vision with the people they lead.

You can't say anything of importance in 140 characters.

■ If the message really is important, you should be able to say it in fewer than 140 characters. I just tried it 9 times. You be the judge.

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