

If social networking servers crash during inauguration, fine by me

January 20 2009, By Eric Benderoff

There is a fear that when Barack Obama is sworn in as the 44th American president on Tuesday, our population's addiction to instant communication will cripple the networks we use for messaging.

To prepare for Inauguration Day, wireless carriers have beefed up their networks. Twitter has added servers and so has Facebook, as it hopes the increased bandwidth will prevent a crash if too many people watch and chat at the same time on its social network.

But must we all text, Twitter or IM during Obama's inauguration? Can't we just watch the event and enjoy it (or disparage the proceedings, depending on your political views) for the significance it represents? Must we broadcast to everyone in our social networks that we are witnesses to history?

Gathering around a television to watch with co-workers or in a school gymnasium is wonderfully appropriate. But sending a "tweet" after a poignant moment, or worse, to praise or criticize Michelle Obama's choice of shoes ("so sensible!"), is not the best use of our time and our technology.

Not every moment needs to be about how we interact with modern technology.

In Washington, D.C., AT&T and Verizon have spent considerable sums boosting network signals.

"Any network is like a giant highway system," John Johnson, a Verizon spokesman, told the Los Angeles Times. "We've added thousands and thousands of new lanes for the inauguration. But millions and millions of cars can still cause a traffic jam if they try to move in the same place at the same time."

My thought: If you went to all the expense and hassle of getting to the nation's capital for this historic moment, are you really going to spend that time on your mobile phone?

Yes, we know being there must be awesome ... and cold.

Because Washington's wireless phone networks could be overloaded, carriers suggest people send less-burdensome text messages if they feel the need to communicate. (Don't forget to look up from your phone every now and again!)

What would people text about anyway? Well, if you're among the millions of people in Washington jockeying for position, texts will be sent to locate friends presumably so that they can watch the event together. But I suspect texts will involve bragging rights about who's closest to Obama.

You need only one piece of technology if you're in Washington: a digital camera. Snap your pictures, then when you get back to your hotel later in the day, upload them to Facebook, Flickr, MySpace or Photobucket. We'll look for them because we are envious.

But while Obama is being sworn in, put down the phone and enjoy the moment.

If you're in the office, gather around a TV and watch. But if your boss won't let you, that should give you something to tweet about.

(Eric Benderoff writes about technology for the Chicago Tribune. Contact him at ebenderoff(at)tribune.com or at the Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago IL 60611.)

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