The case against Twitter: it exposes you to the worst in people

New York columnist Joe Nocera is happy to be out of the social media loop.

Anyway, Kate started noticing that whenever I wrote a column that inflamed certain constituencies, the other Joe Nocera would get some highly insulting tweets. "A smear tautological column," wrote @philipturner, in one of the more publishable responses to my support for the Keystone XL oil pipeline. Jeffrey Reynolds, an advocate of the Second Amendment right "to keep and bear arms," took to Twitter to boast that the articles on his blog "are FAR more professional" than mine, after I quoted him in a column about guns. "Care to publish an accurate quote?" he sneered.

Not being a tweeter, I had no idea I was being dissed in the Twitter-sphere. It was like the question about the tree falling in the forest: if you are mocked on Twitter and you don't know it, have you really been insulted?

I understand the case for Twitter.

It can be used to spread knowledge by sharing photos or articles you've been impressed with. Paul Kedrosky, who used to write a terrific blog about business and finance, now confines himself to using Twitter to link to things that interest him. "(Blogs still exist!) he tweeted a few months ago.

Twitter can serve, in the words of Jacob Weisberg, the chairman of Slate, as "a personalized news engine" that allows you to follow issues that matter to you. Kate says she started tweeting in Washington because "you felt like you were missing out on a conversation if you didn't."

At BuzzFeed, it's essentially a job requirement. Twitter drives traffic to websites, which is not unimportant. And it was hard not to be impressed with how Twitter "covered" the Boston Marathon bombing in real time.

But to me—and yes, I acknowledge I'm at the age where I'm losing the battle to keep up with technology—the negatives outweigh the positives.

So much on Twitter is frivolous or self-promotional. It can bury you in information. Because people use Twitter to react to events instantly, they can say some awfully stupid things, as Roddy White, the Atlanta Falcons footballer, did after George Zimmerman was found not guilty in the Trayvon Martin shooting trial, suggesting in a tweet that the jurors "should go home and kill themselves."

With its 140-character limit, Twitter exacerbates our society-wide attention deficit disorder: Nothing can be allowed to take more than a few seconds to write or read. Kedrosky may prefer Twitter, but I really miss his thoughtful blog. I recently heard Dick Costolo, Twitter's chief executive, bragging that the Pope now has a Twitter account. Once, popes wrote encyclicals; now they tweet.

What I object to most of all is that, like other forms of social media, Twitter can be so hateful. It can bring out the worst in people, giving them license to tweet things they would never say in real life.

For several years, Douglas Kass, the investor and CNBC commentator, regularly tweeted his thoughts with 63,000 followers. He was one of the most popular investment gurus on Twitter. Recently, however, he decided to stop because he had received so many inexplicably nasty messages.

People who opposed his investment views denounced him in the foulest language imaginable. "I received several life-threatening tweets," he told me. "I concluded it was worth navigating the sharks to find the good fish."

When I had lunch with the other Joe Nocera recently, I told him I'd been tweeting purely for fun. Sometimes he sent tweets to sports announcers or players to see if they would respond (sometimes they did). Mostly, he simply offered up his thoughts about his beloved Yankees.

Tweeting, he told me, helped relieve the stress of his day job. I couldn't argue with that.

The only downside is that now that we're friends, the other Joe Nocera sends me emails with the nasty tweets that were intended for me.

Sigh. Ignorance was bliss.

NEW YORK TIME.