

Far From the Maddening Crowd (and Its Memes)

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Wearry of viral distractions, some willingly brave the social cost of seeming disconnected.

By LAURA M. HOLSON

At the Breslin Bar & Dining Room last month, Amy Chan and three friends were eating oysters when one of them mentioned “the dress.” BuzzFeed had fueled a media frenzy that day by asking readers to vote on whether a dress posted on Tumblr was white with gold trim or blue and black. Ms. Chan’s friends had argued that it was blue. Others online had declared it white.

One of her friends turned to her and asked, “What do you think?”

Ms. Chan, 33, stared, blankly. “For a split second, I was embarrassed because I didn’t know what it was,” she said. “Then I owned it. I said, ‘What are you talking about?’ They laughed and told me how it went viral.” Indeed “the dress” post on BuzzFeed was an Internet sensation, viewed an eye-popping 38.5 million times.

But not once by Ms. Chan.

“I still don’t know what ‘the dress’ is,” she said. “I had a moment where I should have looked it up. But I didn’t care.”

Ms. Chan is one of a number of people seemingly weary of the 24-second cycle of Internet memes, viral distractions and celebrity hearsay that provide the fodder for today’s online intelligentsia. They do not busy themselves keeping up with the online cultural conversation of the moment, and they willingly brave the social cost of seeming out of touch.

Kate Unsworth, a designer of wearable tech who splits her time equally between New York and London and who recently disabled the Twitter and Facebook apps on her mobile phone, was befuddled recently when a barista at her East London coffee shop greeted her one morning with the question, “Did you watch it?”

Ms. Unsworth, 27, had no idea what he was talking about, and she was equally puzzled when he told her he was referring to the third season of “House of Cards,” a show with which she was familiar but hadn’t realized was back online. What’s more, when he mentioned the show again the next morning, to see if she had caught up, she seemed annoyed that he expected her to be part of his personal binge-watching experience.

“How did this make it into our daily conversation?” she said. “I see him every morning, but he is not a friend.”

Atlee Feingold, 23, is an actress and direc-

tor who, like Ms. Unsworth, has recently whittled down the number of people she follows on social media and disabled her social media phone apps. She says that even though doing so has left her out of the conversation when friends and relatives are talking about the latest developments in the lives of the Kardashians and the stolen Oscar dress of Lupita Nyong’o (“I mean, who cares?” she said), it has given her more time to read books like “Shantaram,” a 2003 novel about an escaped convict who flees to Mumbai, and to go to auditions.

It has also, she contends, made her more aware than many of her peers of what’s going on outside the world of E! and TMZ. “In this day and age, it is expected that you know all the unnecessary tidbits,” she said. “But ask people what they think about death, the process of birth or the caste system in India, and they have no idea what to think.”

(Ms. Feingold has not gone cold turkey, however: She has a friend who texts her the latest pop culture news that she thinks Ms. Feingold needs to know about, like Kim Kardashian dyeing her hair blond.)

Some researchers suggest that the desire to opt out is a backlash to the “fear of missing out,” or FOMO, a term dating to around 2011 that described the anxiety people felt reading on social media about parties they were not invited to attend.

FOMO was followed by another putative trend, the “joy of missing out,” which extolled mindfulness and staying offline to snuggle on the couch instead. But now, not only are people like Ms. Chan choosing not to be part of the online stampede, they regard their absence with pride.

“It’s a sign of intellectual and spiritual independence,” said Susan Cain, the author of the 2012 best seller “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking.” “In the past, that person wasn’t fitting in. Now, it’s not true. The influx of information is too much for everyone.”

For some, standing at the head of the chattering class is a sign of social status, said Lee Rainie, a specialist in the social influence of digital technologies at the Pew Research Center in Washington. “There are some people who want to know every little blip,” he said. But others find it stressful. A 2013 Pew study showed that nearly one in 10 Facebook users took a break from the social network because there was too much gossip and drama.

“People are questioning, ‘Is this how I want to orient my gaze?’” Mr. Rainie said. “There are times when it feels catfishing



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and others when it feels debilitating.”

The crush of Internet fodder makes it hard to escape, even if you try. Christina Crook, the author of “The Joy of Missing Out,” published in February, stayed offline

Leaving behind the online stampede, and taking pride in their absence.

for a month in 2012 but still found popular culture seeping into her conversations.

“The big stories, people are talking about them,” Ms. Crook said. “If there was a story in the wider culture, it wasn’t like I was missing out.” Indeed, her lack of knowledge

nected friends. “Most people want to feel in the know,” she said. “I just became comfortable feeling silly.”

Ms. Cain said there was a small social cost to pay for not staying current with every Internet meme. “So for 10 minutes you’ll have nothing to contribute,” Ms. Cain said. “Life moves on.”

But even offline die-hards like Ms. Unsworth will not swear off social media and viral phenomena forever. She said she wished she knew more about current affairs, the economy and world conflict, topics she used to follow when she had Twitter on her mobile phone.

“At some point, it is going to impact my life, and I think I have to figure that out,” she said. “What we are really talking about here is maintaining a perspective on the conversation.”