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COMMENT: We're simply having an analogue Christmas time

[Prof. Ann Light](#), from Arts, Design & Social Sciences looks at whether we switch on or off for the Christmas holidays.

The British Christmas that [Charles Dickens](#) serves up to us is rich in food and warmth, two things that in his day were often thinly stretched throughout the year in many homes. These days, for most of the year, the thing that many of us are short of is attention. So at Christmas we lavish it on each other.

My colleague [Daniela Petrelli](#) and I have been studying Christmas as it is

celebrated in a small sample of homes in Sheffield in northern England for some years. It's what I call "slow research" – our moment comes but once a year. We've found that despite the torrent of phones, tablets, laptops and other gizmos that might be given as gifts, the Christmas holiday has not yet been thoroughly infiltrated by technology – in fact, the households we studied are more likely to switch off. On the whole, the use of technology at Christmas is interesting in that it stops being used.

Reaching out, looking in

In the period up to Christmas Eve, people widen out their social network to its fullest: weeks are filled with work parties, seeing friends, sending or emailing cards and reaching out to contact people worldwide who perhaps are only ever contacted at Christmast

Then, as the holidays start in earnest, the pattern largely reverses and the focus narrows to our nearest and dearest. We stop looking outwards. And we stop using the media that distract us. In some of the households we spoke to, using the computer, playing games or fiddling with phones were banned on Christmas Day itself (although texting and Twitter are making incursions in a low-key way, and Skype lends itself to providing contact with remote children or grandchildren). There aren't even many photographs taken, unlike at weddings or when on holiday – occasions that sometimes seem to exist only to be recorded and Instagramed.

Instead people start doing things that are familiar from the last century, like watching the [Doctor Who Special](#) and the Queen's Speech, all together, at the same time, and on the same screen. Families gather in the living room to play board games such as Trivial Pursuit. And this happens regardless of how boring some people find it – we heard how parts of the family timed their visits to avoid these activities. Christmas is a time for tradition, and perhaps due to their relatively recent arrival, most digital technologies have yet to be included.

Giving presents, being present

Meanwhile there is other evidence for the importance of shared attention. Families have developed their own rituals to ensure that the family participate in things together, rather than just end up in the same room, but with each absorbed by their own devices. For instance, one family has come to use opening presents as a shared ritual:

It's done during the whole of Christmas Day – we might do a couple of rounds of present opening, and then go off and have a walk, and then a bit more present opening, and then make lunch. It's very paced, so now people have often got presents at the end of the day. In fact, there is a competition to see who can drag it out the longest.

People in our studies worried that they had not spent enough time choosing presents. They talked about making their gifts. They complained about Christmas cards from afar that didn't have enough news in them. They assembled crackers from scratch. In [our last paper](#), given this December, we wrote:

… looked at with the eyes of efficiency, Christmas is merely time-consuming: shopping at the same time as a majority, handwriting cards and sending them through the post, putting up temporary decorations, making food that could be bought and so on.

But far from being merely "inefficient", it is this very time-consuming, hand-wrought stuff that makes Christmas special for those households we spoke to. These preparations are small acts of devotion to the people they love.

Perhaps it's no surprise then that the tools that take us out into the world or distract us from our surroundings, such as social networking or online games, have been banished for now. While there are, rightly, concerns about a digital divide, it seems that many of us are happy to step over that divide and become non-users for a day or so, at least once a year.
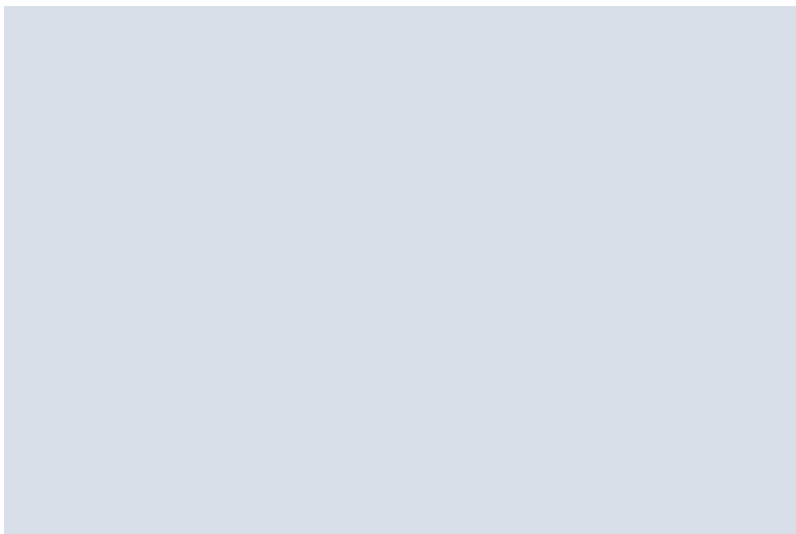
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