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INTRODUCTION

For many people, YouTube is a website for watching wacky videos. For the people profiled in this book, YouTube is a state of mind. It is not just a video-sharing website but rather a perspective that welcomes video makers of all abilities into a mediated, social space. Even with its challenges in hostile audiences and policies privileging commercialization, interviewees characterized the YouTube experience as much more than posting videos. People forging social ties considered themselves part of a YouTube community by interpersonally sharing videos on topics that were important to them.

People in this self-identified community came from many walks of life, including office administrators, technical writers, nurses, homemakers, social workers, comedians, documentarians, and actors. They connected in order to have fun and improve the craft of making videos. YouTube participants—defined here as those who posted comments or videos—became friends through the media they made and the experiences they shared. Themes that helped people connect included everything from mourning a loss to sharing excitement about the personal and social benefits of making and globally distributing one’s own media. The idea of “YouTube” is analyzed the way many YouTubers saw it—as an attitude about what it means to engage democratically through video.

After opening to the public in December 2005, YouTube enabled creators to share their vernacular, pre-professional, or professional voice through video. The site quickly moved toward commercialization in 2007 with the addition of ads and

monetized partnerships. Popular media makers were exclusively invited into the partnership program.¹ The monetization effort expanded in late 2007² to allow applications to the program and again in 2012, enabling anyone to monetize single videos.³ It was restricted in 2017⁴ and again in 2018 in favor of larger, ad-friendly creators.⁵ Interviewees did not necessarily perceive monetization as incompatible with sociality, but the way monetization rolled out negatively impacted some YouTubers who became disenchanted and left the site. Nevertheless, interviewees in the study often remained connected to their YouTube friends—even after migrating to other social media.

This book deals with a concept of “YouTube” as an orienting framework for people socially interacting through videos and other social media. When YouTube participants gathered in person, they recorded their activities with an eye toward posting and enjoying the videos online. Back on YouTube, viewing meet-up footage encouraged people to interact again in person so that YouTube’s connotations threaded online and off in a “mediascape,”⁶ often in cyclical ways.

Thanks for Watching uses an anthropological approach to explain how interpersonal dynamics are mediated through video. Anthropologists often make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. To those who see it as a familiar video-watching site, the concept of YouTube in this book may seem strange; it functioned socially for people. Given that so many people from around the world of different ages and types were vlogging, they sometimes playfully referred to YouTube in a way that was analogous to a fictional country with its own customs and values called “YouTubia.”⁷ To those who feel that sharing so much of the self through video is strange, the book empathetically examines why personal media-sharing practices were so compelling. As a media-shy person, I initially considered such intimate sharing odd and discomforting, and thus my perspective resonates with the more traditional anthropological approach of studying lifeways that are distinct from one’s own.⁸ During a multiyear project, I became a YouTuber and participated in a video-sharing culture to understand its rhythms and sociality. Although I never disclosed highly personal information, I did share videos about one personal passion—the anthropological study of video-sharing practices. Over the course of the project, I came to appreciate why people bonded through video.

This book’s title—*Thanks for Watching: An Anthropological Study of Video Sharing on YouTube*—reflects how I, as an anthropologist, analyzed YouTube’s participatory dynamics. It also examines found visual materials from YouTubers who produced video blogs (vlogs) in ways that articulated their goals and dreams for YouTube’s participatory and social potential. On YouTube the term “participation” exhibits various meanings.⁹ For YouTubers, participation often dynamically moved from watching to commenting and eventually to making and sharing videos. Although

interviewees believed that even non-video-making activities such as commenting were community-building, a strong social pull existed for YouTube participants to make their own videos and share their individual perspectives.

YOUTUBE'S CULTURAL INFLUENCE

YouTube is a massive and ever-changing entity. Since videos come and go every minute, no two instantiations of YouTube are ever the same. Policies about monetization and privacy also continually change—sometimes reportedly without warning or explanation. What remains consistent is its popularity and sustained cultural influence. YouTube's participatory statistics are staggering. Founded by former employees of the online payment system PayPal in 2005, YouTube was purchased by Google for an estimated \$1.65 billion in 2006.¹⁰ As of 2007, six hours of video were uploaded to the site every minute.¹¹ Receiving 1 billion monthly visitors by 2013,¹² YouTube continues to see dramatic increases in video postings and viewership. In 2017, YouTube viewers were watching 1 billion hours of video per day, a figure that threatens to surpass television viewing time.¹³ By 2017, 400 hours of video were uploaded *every minute* to the site,¹⁴ which represents four times the amount of video uploaded in 2013.¹⁵ According to the Pew Research Center, YouTube is the second most used social networking site, behind only Facebook. In a 2014 study of US internet usage, Pew reported that 77 percent of adult internet users participated on Facebook, compared with 63 percent who used YouTube. YouTube was also far more popular than LinkedIn (25 percent) or Twitter (21 percent).¹⁶

Pew's statistics suggest that YouTube maintains a strong position in the public imagination. However, such generalized statistics tell only part of the story. When we ethnographically examine YouTubers' individual stories, we see that ultimately the idea of YouTube is many things to different people. Many viewers use it to relax and watch funny videos. Other YouTube participants use it to professionalize creative work, learn how to make videos, and to socialize. Even to a single individual, YouTube's multiple connotations change at different times in life, a fact that is revealed by the temporal approach taken in this book. Sometimes YouTube participation means watching videos alone; during hard times it involves telling painful stories to connect with others dealing with similar circumstances.

Mass media have largely presented only a partial view of YouTube that emphasizes its viral, profit-centric, video-of-the-week fare. Past scholarly assessments of YouTube have similarly focused on topics such as popular videos, prospects for monetization, and YouTube "stars." It is difficult to think about YouTube without picturing funny viral videos. In scholarly presentations in which I include YouTube video clips, viewers often have trouble recognizing quiet vlogs as true YouTube

videos. During my talks I have been bewildered by the question of why my presentation contains no clips of YouTube videos with piano-playing cats or boys with lasers in their garages!

Although exploring the impact of virality and celebrity culture is important, the standard focus on the site's outrageous forms impacts how public discourse is shaped to deal with vernacular video voices. YouTube greatly facilitates promoting crass and outré videos, making it difficult for scholars to locate and discuss everyday vernacular work. Mass media and news sources focus on the most outrageous examples and use denigrating and dismissive language in a way that comparatively showcases their own assumed professionalism and levels of quality vis-à-vis the vernacular. For example, as media scholar Henry Jenkins has stated, if news outlets only ever quote silly or disturbing videos instead of thoughtful ones, such a choice helps identify the news program or other professional media as exhibiting superior quality in comparison to vernacular messages.¹⁷ Professional media discourse often obscures views of YouTube that are thoughtful, insightful, and compelling for the story of human mediation.

Popular discourses have so thoroughly focused on crassness, comedy, and video virality that viewers have difficulty accepting contemplative videos as authentic "YouTube videos." Yet many YouTubers are often productively self-reflective and eloquent about their life experiences. Popular works tend to drown out subtle videos of sociality that have always been a cornerstone of the site. *Thanks for Watching* shines a light on everyday video statements and, more importantly, the processes by which people create and share them.

THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK

YouTube may have started life as a "visual repository,"¹⁸ but its uses for sociality and learning have considerably expanded. The first major goal of this book is to analyze everyday media practices by offering a behind-the-scenes look at videos produced by people who formed a community of video enthusiasts. Unlike prior studies, it provides an analytical account that moves beyond the site itself and critically examines not just videos but practices that people engage with over time, including meeting up in person. By moving beyond the 'Tube and taking a temporal approach that examines interactive dynamics, the book illustrates just how deeply media are intertwined with contemporary sociality.

In anthropology it has long been acknowledged that it is not possible to study a whole culture. A research project can reveal only what anthropologist James Clifford called a "partial truth" of a vast cultural world.¹⁹ This book can present only a partial view of YouTube—but one that crucially offers an "alternative narrative"

to the dominant YouTube celebrity and monetization stories.²⁰ Although a few YouTube stars make cameos when analytically appropriate, this book focuses on people who shared an interest in improving their craft and found it meaningful to socialize with other YouTubers. The stories told here are just as true as those that emphasize video virality and celebrity, but they provide a lasting alternative narrative because they challenge common assumptions about how mediated sociality works. Making media is now inseparable from experiencing and even creating many of the events that we are trying to mediate.

Anthropological concepts such as participant-observation, reciprocity, and community were originally developed through the study of small-scale societies. A second goal of this book is to investigate whether such theoretical concepts resonate in the highly technologized and mediated idiom of YouTube. The book argues that many of these concepts still apply, but in new form. In some cases the concepts have been re-theorized within anthropology itself and take on different connotations and meanings. In other cases video-sharing dynamics invite reformulations of anthropological concepts. For example, anthropologists who studied cyborg anthropology in the 1990s explored the intimate way in which technologies are integrated into the body and influence life. This book elaborates on this project and investigates whether we are entering a “posthuman” era in terms of humans’ deep involvement with technology. Although anthropologists continue to study humans, immersion in technological forms often subjectively yields discomfiting as well as connective posthuman experiences that this book examines.

By studying YouTube sociality anthropologically, the third goal of this book is to take seriously how temporalities frame and influence mediated interaction. Many media studies focus on identity work and self-presentation by examining videos at a single point in time—a framework that has productively analyzed mediation. However, this book takes a different approach by focusing on temporal patterns and how they provide clues about culturally influenced interaction. Rather than only interpreting video content, this book’s rubric takes into account *processes* of video sharing. It concentrates on patterns of participation over time and analyzes how people deepen their sociality, deal with tensions on the site, and use publicly temporal orientations to create a shared sense of history within a concept of “YouTube.”

YOUTUBE’S PARTICIPATORY RHYTHMS

How might one meet the challenge of studying a *concept* of YouTube ethnographically and anthropologically? This book draws on several modes of visual production and digital participation to identify key interactive rhythms that subtly operate amid a heterogeneous mass of visual images and comments. It analyzes these rhythms and

patterns and how they play out to examine how we use media not just to express the self but to show our affection for others.

Analyzing behavioral rhythms is important for understanding cultural organization and conflict. Philosopher and sociologist of everyday life, Henri Lefebvre used an approach that he termed “rhythmanalysis” to encourage attention to cultural rhythms and their origins and effects.²¹ His rubric inspires this book’s approach, which involves developing sensitivity toward appreciating life’s rhythms, processes, conflicts, and temporalities and their meanings in everyday life.²² Lefebvre’s rubric has proven especially useful for exploring nontraditional forms of ethnography and their loci of study.²³ The current project is not concerned with addressing all of Lefebvre’s terms but rather draws inspiration from his rubric to see how rhythms and various trajectories of media-making influence participation in digital milieus.

For Lefebvre, rhythm was present whenever there was “interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy.”²⁴ He was particularly concerned with examining repetitions of actions, determining whether behavioral trajectories were linear or cyclical, and analyzing how actions exhibited temporal stages, including “birth, growth, peak, then decline and end.”²⁵ Similarly, this book will follow one Lefebvrian cycle for a social group that came together on the site. It traces how they moved from initiation to intensification of participation. It analyzes how YouTubers reached a peak of sociality through perceived community formation but saw participatory decline and ruptures through monetization, haters, death, and digital migration. The book also supplements the Lefebvrian rubric by examining prospects for rebirth or renewal as creators returned from video-making hiatuses or envisioned new sites that more closely mapped to their idea of a useful, socially oriented, video-sharing platform.

Video-sharing practices exhibit multiple experiential temporalities. The term temporality “designates how beings experience such processual qualities in different sociocultural contexts.”²⁶ Rhythms of interaction occur at several layers of analysis, including the micro level of response to a single video. For example, YouTubers believed that in social-sharing circles, a video’s most intensive viewership—or what this book calls its *pace of receptive vitality*—is usually a few days; most commentary and views tended to appear within that window. An activity’s timing is important and exhibits specific meanings. A comment posted in the first blush of a video’s posting may be read quite differently than the same comment posted years later.

Rhythms occur at broader levels of observation as well. Online sites often have a participatory rhythm that begins with contributors’ initial excitement, moves to intensive participation, and invites feelings of connection. Yet participants may ultimately experience disillusionment after problems ensue and more popular services emerge.²⁷ Sometimes sites become associated with older populations, and young

people migrate to media with more youthful connotations. Sites emerge, enjoy intensive use, and ultimately fade from supporting a critical mass. They may even be shut down, thus effectively dying.

Humans and media exhibit both similar and distinctly different rhythmic patterns, which are punctuated by diverse forms of beginnings and endings. Humans, for instance, have a linear life trajectory. We are born, meet new people, have experiences, and die. Digital media, however, enable parts of us to continue as representations possibly in perpetuity, thus existing long past the human life-cycle rhythm. The perpetuation of media enables us to become “posthuman,” such that alternative versions of ourselves, or our “alters,” live on. These asymmetrical temporalities and desires for our alters’ futures create tensions that are analyzed in this book. While some video makers hope their media will linger forever, others prefer it to be terminated in a contemporaneous way with the end of their life cycle. Attending to varied rhythms and their tension points enables insight into human mediation.

Rhythm analysis reveals nuances of “participation,” a word that characterizes how people engage in creative production on social media sites. The book explains how mediated rhythms influence specific characterizations of participation on YouTube. It analyzes how interactive tensions may emerge when participatory rhythms are, in Lefebvre’s terms, “polyrhythmic”²⁸ or operate according to multiple cultural beats. For example, some people encourage other YouTubers to subscribe to their videos right away. Since YouTube’s opening in 2005 and continuing to 2018, to subscribe to another YouTuber has simply meant pressing a Subscribe button for a particular video maker and then being alerted at no cost when new videos from that creator are posted. Other creators resented such immediate demands for reciprocity and preferred to “discover” videos in their own time. Polyrhythmic differences in video viewing could result in “arrhythmias” or asymmetrical rhythms that translated into participatory pathologies and conflicts. Understanding cultural and social rhythms and patterns offers an insightful way to anthropologically examine how interactive opportunities and tensions might be addressed to broaden participation, sociality, and knowledge exchange through media.

To develop his ideas, Lefebvre philosophically gazed out of his window to observe lively rhythms of behavior on local Parisian streets. Similarly, scholars may productively identify how people perceive rhythms of mediated life and analyze the meanings of alternatively harmonious and conflicting rhythms in everyday interaction online. But we need to do more than “look out the window” or, in this case, glance at our screens and “watch” or “read” YouTube videos. To gain a deeper understanding, it is beneficial to participate directly within circles of sociality. Participating in networked groups involves meeting people, as well as recording and sharing digital media, in order to experience the effects of mediation in YouTube-centric, social milieus.

PRIOR SCHOLARLY APPROACHES

By analyzing and mediating a concept of YouTube, the book joins an ongoing scholarly conversation that initially sought to analyze YouTube by “reading” and “watching” videos on the site. In their book (first published in 2009 and updated in 2018), media scholars Jean Burgess and Joshua Green engaged in close readings of a survey of thousands of popular videos on the site.²⁹ They identified key patterns that emerged within the first few years of YouTube’s launch. They focused on how YouTube was structured as a media system and how it related to commercial media. Their foundational text insightfully lays out key debates and challenges that YouTube participants and YouTube as an entity faced, including disruptions to old media and cultural politics.

Using a method that also concentrates on video content, communication scholar Anandam Kavoori approached this terrain by “reading” and conceptualizing YouTube videos and their related discourse (including comments) in order to produce a thought-provoking taxonomy.³⁰ Kavoori focused on the viral aspect of YouTube, including how videos promote and organize celebrity culture and how such culture shapes future experiences. For example, watching viral videos about childhood begins to shape our experiential understanding of childhood itself.

While Kavoori was concerned with “reading” videos, communication and media scholar Michael Strangelove “watched” YouTube to investigate its social uses.³¹ He analyzed issues of great interest to this book, including investigating prospects for community and challenging the online and offline dichotomy. This book shares Strangelove’s philosophy of approaching vernacular video not in terms of judgments about supposedly failed quality, but rather taking these works and interactions “seriously” and studying them “sympathetically” as part of life. His goal is to understand videos’ cultural role, a move that follows a larger trajectory in communication and media studies. I agree with Strangelove that ultimately “an amateur video on YouTube should be analyzed not merely as a text but as a process,” in part because video meanings relate to community interactions and responses.³² *Thanks for Watching* studies processes of video making and sharing in a central way.

In addition to media scholarship, this book continues a decades-long tradition of digital ethnography in which researchers become part of an online community and observe interaction to analyze patterns of sociality.³³ Recent examples of this approach from anthropologists include Tom Boellstorff’s *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), which studied key aspects of online culture, including racism, sexism, commercialization, relationships, and antisocial behavior within the digital environment of Second Life. In contrast, the present study engaged with people both online and at in-person gatherings to see how video making was processual and interwoven across different media modalities. Another anthropologically motivated digital ethnography is Bonnie Nardi’s *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* (2010),

which explores cultural and gaming dynamics such as sexism and addiction to the game of *World of Warcraft*. My book *Kids on YouTube* (2014) focuses on how young people used the site to learn participatory skills and to develop a technologized identity. In contrast to works that analyze identity formation using digital media, *Thanks for Watching* examines adults' participatory dynamics through the interactive choices they make to accomplish video sociality.

Thanks for Watching departs from prior approaches in terms of its detailed attention to the video-making process, including discussing dynamics such as interpersonal reciprocities and migratory patterns into and out of the site. This book investigates how the acts of *making* and *sharing* videos are situated within a larger interactive field that includes varying levels of mediation and participation. In contrast to many prior works in digital environments, *Thanks for Watching* is less centrally concerned with identity formation through media creation than it is with analyzing how video creation and sharing support or challenge mediated sociality. The focus is not solely on reading or watching videos but on participating directly over time and attending carefully to how interaction and interwoven modalities influence the dynamics of a particular cultural group.

ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

Thanks for Watching lies at the intersection of digital media studies and visual anthropology, an interdisciplinary terrain that some scholars refer to as “digital visual anthropology.”³⁴ In addition to examining digital milieus and participating across modalities, the book also draws on traditional visual anthropology approaches as outlined by anthropologists Jay Ruby and Richard Chalfen. Under this rubric visual anthropology includes one or more of the following: (1) recording or collecting visual materials of people, things, and events to analyze human behavior (in this case recording observations and interviews); (2) studying found visual artifacts (in this case YouTube videos); and (3) using visual media to present data and research findings (in this case vlogs and a feature-length video).³⁵ Anthropologists Howard Morphy and Marcus Banks argue that visual anthropology is not just a method for interpreting visual materials but also enables analyzing visual systems and visual cultural forms.³⁶ A key line of evidence includes studying YouTubers' own videos, which reveal how they are “expert witnesses” of their mediated experiences.³⁷

According to anthropologists Nancy Lutkehaus and Jennifer Cool, scholars are increasingly studying their own culture in an attempt to encourage “intelligent dialogue across ethnic, class, and cultural lines, among individuals different from one another, but who nonetheless can benefit from attempting to convey their differences.”³⁸ In one sense I was studying my own culture of fellow media enthusiasts

in the United States. However, in several key ways I was quite different from the people whom I studied. Some interviewees were advanced media makers or technologists who knew much more about making media than I did. Unlike some interviewees who struggled financially in low-paying jobs, I am an academic with access to considerable resources. My goal was to promote meaningful dialogue across various cultural lines, especially with regard to transmitting one's message through video blogging.

The book draws on multiple lines of evidence to understand how people share the self through media and how their interactive choices confirm or challenge anthropological concepts such as participant-observation, chronotopes, reciprocity, emplacement, community, digital migration, and even being "human." The analysis draws on evidence collected from 2006 to 2018. It combines the following data collection activities:

- Interviewing 152 people who engaged at various levels with video making and/or YouTube
- Participating in ten gatherings in diverse locations, including New York City; Marietta, Georgia; Los Angeles (Hollywood); San Francisco; San Diego; Minneapolis; Philadelphia; Toronto, Canada; Santa Monica; and Anaheim, California (VidCon)
- Attending twenty video-themed events, such as the video festival Pixelodeon in Los Angeles and the *Ask a Ninja* DVD release party in Hollywood
- Analyzing more than 300 YouTube videos
- Maintaining two research video blogs (both called AnthroVlog, which stands for Anthropology Video Blog), one on YouTube and the other on a separate video blogging site called WordPress
- Recording, directing, and producing an ethnographic film entitled *Hey Watch This! Sharing the Self through Media* (2013),³⁹ which includes interviews and observations of people at meet-ups
- Analyzing my video-recorded footage from gatherings that did not appear in the film or in the video blogs but provide insight about YouTube interaction.

A cornerstone of anthropology includes participant-observation, in which a researcher becomes part of a community to gain insights that are difficult to glean from analyzing artifacts alone. As part of the ethnographic project, I established my own channel on YouTube. A YouTube channel is similar to a social media profile page. It is required to post comments or upload videos. Each channel includes information supplied by the YouTube service, such as a list of videos that the account holder has posted, the date that creators opened the channel on YouTube, and the number of views that the videos accumulated. The channel also contains

information supplied by the account holder, such as a textual description of the account and playlists (thematically curated groups of videos). Each channel also has a Discussion section enabling public comments.

I created a video blog called AnthroVlog to engage in participant-observation on YouTube. On each video's text description, I stated that the channel was a research site and that posted comments might be used in research. According to most research standards, public commentary of this type is open to analysis, but a note about the vlog's status as a research site was included. Although the name AnthroVlog was not particularly novel, it reiterated to anyone whom I met that I was an anthropologist attending meet-ups and interviewing people about their YouTube experiences. It provided a recognizable, stable identity on the site and reminded people that I was collecting data through my encounters.

Studying YouTube anthropologically meant accepting vulnerability by showing my work in progress to the world and by broadcasting a series that I called "open video fieldnotes," which included recorded video interviews and observations as I encountered them to stimulate discussion and further data collection. As of July 2018, AnthroVlog on YouTube had 670 subscribers, which reflects a social rather than mass following. Most of the videos received a few hundred views. However, videos in which I interviewed well-known YouTubers, academics, or media experts received several thousand views.

In total I interviewed 152 people who were mostly from the United States.⁴⁰ I interviewed 57 females and 95 males who ranged in age from being in middle-school to having grandchildren. This book focuses on analyzing case studies of adults who formed an interwoven social network. It also includes material from YouTube videos on themes addressed in the book. Most of the people discussed in the study were early adopters; they joined within the first year of the site's launch. As of 2015, reports indicate that most YouTube viewers are thirteen to thirty-four years old (although viewers under thirteen are not tracked).⁴¹ Most of the people profiled in this book are in their twenties to thirties, although I also interviewed YouTubers in their forties and fifties. The research protocol was structured so that adult interviewees over eighteen could choose whether they wished to be referred to in the research by their official name, their channel name, or a researcher-selected pseudonym. Official name here refers to a consistent name appearing on public documents and reported sources about a person, such as a Wikipedia page, press report, personal web page, or social media site. Since interviewees profiled in this book were not compensated, this gesture enabled adult vloggers to advertise their work in the research. Most interviewees chose their channel name. If interviewees preferred that I refer to them using their official name or a researcher-assigned pseudonym, this is so indicated throughout the book.

The semistructured interview protocol included questions aimed at understanding people's participatory trajectory, processes of video sharing, and experiences on the site over time. Typical interview questions included:

- How did you get started on YouTube?
- How did you find YouTube as an environment for posting your videos?
- Is YouTube a community? How so? If not, why not?
- Do you feel you must comment back to people who have posted comments to your videos? Why or why not?
- Does posting comments count as participation on YouTube?
- What do you think of the practice of “sub for sub” whereby people agree to subscribe to your YouTube account and watch your videos if you promise to do the same for them?
- What do you owe your subscribers, if anything?
- Why did you attend this meet-up?
- Have you been to meet-ups before? Which ones? How did they compare to this one?
- (If interviewing a meet-up organizer) What prompted you to organize this meet-up? What were some of the benefits and challenges of organizing a meet-up? Did you receive support from YouTube?
- What have been your biggest challenges in posting videos on the site?
- What would be the best outcome of participating on YouTube?

Thanks for Watching takes a diachronic view that examines creators' experiences at multiple stages of their YouTube journey. This approach revealed that associations with fellow YouTubers often continued on other media and showed how YouTube became a socially orienting framework rather than only the name of a website. By recording, curating, participating in, and mediating a social slice of YouTube, this book draws attention to subtle interactive rhythms and engages with intelligently mediated life in the vlogosphere.

LIFE IN “YOUTUBIA”

The purpose of the study, which was initially funded by the MacArthur Foundation, emerged from an interest in understanding digital media use in the United States. When I selected YouTube as my research site and launched my study in 2006–2008, the United States dominated the YouTube scene. In 2008 anthropologist Michael Wesch created a Digital Ethnography research program at Kansas State University and observed that video makers in the United States uploaded five times more videos to the site than did video makers from the country with the next largest number

of uploads, the United Kingdom.⁴² Wesch and his team also noted patterns of sociability and communication that were occurring between participants and constituted an important video genre on the site. In terms of popular content, in 2010, five years after YouTube's launch, the top five most-subscribed channels on YouTube were all males from the United States, each with roughly 2 million subscribers.⁴³ In 2016, when measured as the number of monthly active users of YouTube, the United States reportedly accounted for more than double the view traffic from the next largest country, which was Brazil.⁴⁴

Social activities profiled in this book include video makers commenting on and viewing each other's work, hanging out at public meet-ups, and making videos together. One could visually see how interconnections were being formed and solidified through media. For example, in one video two women living on opposite coasts in the United States document their trip to the Vatican. Comments might initiate chains of interactions, such as one in which a commenter offered to get together, saying: "BTW, I'm going to be in LA on Monday if you wanna hang out :)." In videos, YouTubers described how they became close to their YouTube friends. Friendship might begin by posting comments to each others' videos. Interaction then moved off of YouTube to other platforms such as social media and email. Friends began meeting in person at larger meet-ups as well as making private visits to each other's homes. These gatherings and hang-out sessions were continually occurring across the network of interviewees profiled in this book.

Demographic information and video data (such as view counts and subscriber numbers) are included throughout the book to broadly index each video maker's type of work and audience size. To standardize comparisons, video statistics were collected at roughly the same time in June–July 2018. Services that track YouTube statistics claim that about half of all YouTube videos peak at 500 views, even after being posted for months, and that 60 percent of YouTube videos never go beyond 1,000 views.⁴⁵ A video maker in the study who regularly receives a few thousand views on each video likely has a robust social following. Creators of a video receiving tens of thousands of views or more may be eligible for monetizing their YouTube-related work.

Subscriber numbers are provided but serve only as a guide. Creators generally have more subscribers than views on videos. Watching videos regularly involves a more intensive level of commitment than just clicking a Subscribe button. One interviewee who vlogged about her religious faith and health issues noted that about 24 percent of her subscribers actually "tuned in" and kept watching and commenting on her work as regular viewers. If accurate, her estimate reflects a strong viewer/subscriber ratio, especially for a socially oriented vlog. Media specialists estimate that a healthy viewer-to-subscriber ratio is usually from 10 percent to 14 percent for those who wish

to commercialize their YouTube account. Professionals typically need to intensify social interactions, such as responding to comments, to keep viewers engaged.⁴⁶

This book analyzes a wide variety of video makers. Some creators had a knack for making videos and developed a sufficient following to contemplate a new career in making media. Others did not expect to professionalize; they simply had fun through a camera. For example, I interviewed a white woman and social worker in her early thirties who had been on the site for about two years. She had become popular on YouTube under the channel name NutCheese. She vlogged, often humorously, about topics such as awkward moments in church, interacting with other YouTubers, collaborative videos (collabs) such as montages of YouTubers burping, hanging out with her nephews, her YouTube addiction—and her trip to the Vatican with a fellow YouTuber. She regularly receives thousands of views on each of her videos and had amassed 6,547 subscribers as of June 2018. Although she had a respectable following for a nonprofessional media maker, during her interview NutCheese said that she did not have professional aspirations. She intended to participate on YouTube only as long as “it was fun.”

Interactive dynamics invite reflection on whether this social group constituted a video-sharing “culture.” Anthropologists often define culture as sets of “traditions and customs, transmitted through learning, that form and guide the beliefs and behavior of the people exposed to them.”⁴⁷ Yet the concept remains contested in terms of its varied definitions and whether people operating in a culture really agree on its norms and values. One objection is that culture, when used as a noun, has the connotation of being “some kind of object, thing, or substance” in a way that suggests homogeneity among people who presumably belong to a specific culture.⁴⁸ The anthropological record demonstrates that social phenomena are much more complicated. People contest cultural rules and values, and they often do not follow the precepts of their supposed culture. In addition, people do not belong to just a single culture but to multiple cultures that may intersect, run in parallel, or unpredictably conflict. Anthropological studies now tend to privilege the adjectival form of the word. The idea is to emphasize differences that groups wish to express so that people may mobilize distinctive, collective identifications.⁴⁹ Similarly, this book does not analyze a single culture but rather cultural practices and ideals associated with a particular video-motivated social group.

I joined YouTube early in its life cycle in 2006 and analyzed materials until 2018, a time span long enough to observe the site’s changing dynamics and impacts. I watched how YouTubers negotiated new cultural expressions and tensions due to monetization within a technical and economic infrastructure. When YouTubers from the United States first arrived, they brought ideas from their cultures to media making. At the same time, they had to contend with specific technical features,

people, and commercialized motivations on the site. Examining these interactions and confrontations provided a window into how YouTubers envisioned a video-sharing site that would more directly support their desires.

FACILITATING THE THIRD WAVE OF NETWORKED ACCESS

The site's corporate decisions have complicated the vernacular focus that fueled its initial popularity. YouTube moved toward professionalized fare, such as paid subscription services that offer television programs and films online.⁵⁰ YouTubers interested in sociality reacted negatively to many of the changes that facilitated commercialization. However, this book does not argue that the mediated configuration of sociality that it analyzes is idealized; in fact it addresses opportunities and tensions that were present from its inception.

As we move into increasingly mediated futures, the stories in this book provide a harbinger for how video may be used for sociality as well as commercialization. It provides a "history of the future," as the post-phenomenologists say.⁵¹ The idea is to "search for the roots of [future] possibilities in the very recent past" so that "the focus [is] on the potentialities that are waiting to be realized, referring to the present as a condition for the future."⁵² This book's "history of the future" outlines practices and features that supported and complicated sociality. From a techno-science studies perspective, it analyzes events to discuss "potentialities and trajectories"⁵³ of what future sites interested in social video sharing and learning might accomplish. Developing usable platforms is particularly salient given that vernacular voices are fighting to retain productive, expressive, and interconnected mediated milieus.

Thanks for Watching adds to the discourse of addressing the "third wave" of internet access, which involves ensuring user-friendly, digital arenas of media exchange.⁵⁴ Whereas the first wave of networked access aimed to achieve widespread physical access to the internet, the second wave addressed concerns about expanding access to include making content. While these concerns have not remotely been successfully addressed, we are nevertheless seeing a third wave of discourse, which concerns creating and implementing meaningful platforms that facilitate vernacular exchange. Platforms have politics in that they are the "curators of public discourse."⁵⁵ Therefore it is important to understand how platforms impact vernacular expression among intersecting participatory populations. Of course, features by themselves do not guarantee sociality. Much depends on interactive choices, and this book deals with the problematics of having asymmetrical expectations about what constitutes appropriate video exchange.

Cultural expression is "dialogic," meaning that video makers continually co-create their cultural forms through conversations, interactions, practices, and

communicative choices.⁵⁶ Cultural expression has an “emergent quality”⁵⁷ that cannot be predicted simply by being familiar with video makers and the variables they contend with in new encounters. Just because a site offers a technical feature does not mean people will use it or believe that it promotes meaningful community. Tensions often emerged because YouTube simultaneously enabled a platform for sociality and for self-promotion. *Thanks for Watching* is concerned with the stories of those who negotiated such tensions by engaging in multiple, interactive modalities. For socially oriented video makers, a connection to “YouTubia” was never far away.

CHALLENGING TENACIOUS DISCOURSES

A set of common assumptions about everyday digital interaction has run in parallel to scholarly observations about how such experiences work. These suppositions perniciously hang on despite contrary evidence emerging from multiple disciplines over the last few decades. Presumptions about the separateness of so-called online versus offline experiences, a tendency to fault anonymity rather than underlying prejudices for precluding productive discourse, and the belief that video is inherently narcissistic are not possible to sustain amid contrary evidence. Although these assumptions have taken root in the popular imagination, the book will challenge these discourses by examining YouTubers’ video sociality. It is vital to address the problematics of their generalizability in order to craft more user-friendly designs of creative, networked platforms.

Maximizing Modalities

So-called online and offline worlds and experiences are real, interwoven, and linked.⁵⁸ Yet scholarly works and popular discourses struggle with determining what constitutes an online versus an offline field of interaction. When YouTubers recorded a video at a gathering, the concept of YouTube deeply influenced that activity, thus entangling modalities. But when YouTubers constantly record themselves in a public park or live-stream the action, does this constitute “online” or “offline” interaction? This book argues that we need to wean ourselves away from these terms, even though they are entrenched and difficult to avoid, especially when citing prior studies, popular discourses, and remarks from interviewees.

Scholars have long recognized that multiple, mediated modalities exist. Modalities broadly refer to forms of sensory media that yield particular types of interaction. Within YouTube there are multiple modalities of interaction. Some people were happy to post text comment to videos; others preferred to interact through recording video responses. During in-person gatherings, various intensities of mediation

also appeared. Sometimes people carried a camera and recorded everything they could; at other times the camera was mostly packed away. Modalities were chosen for specific purposes. For instance, at times YouTubers sought live, simultaneously connected links to each other rather than waiting for asynchronous YouTube videos. They hung out using a live chat service separate from YouTube.

Despite contemporary media inter-threadedness, it is striking to observe that news stories and research projects that acknowledge the link between the online and the offline continue to label online interaction as “not real.” This discourse pervades the public consciousness, which is ethically problematic as digital phenomena such as online bullying and stalking are not taken seriously. Consider a recent headline proclaiming, “Real v. Online World: Teens Do Not Distinguish.”⁵⁹ This headline portrays youth as on the digital leading edge, in part because they cannot differentiate (as adults supposedly can) the implied difference between what is assumed to be “real” (in-person interaction) and what is assumed to be not real (online interaction). The assumption is that teens *should* be able to differentiate and that, indeed, *online interaction is not real*. A moral undertone implicitly judges young people for their inability to tell the difference. Although there are clearly experiential differences across modalities, all of these experiences are equally real.⁶⁰ An email from one’s boss is an actual communication, for instance. It cannot be conveniently ignored because it appears in digital, networked form.

It is far more productive to speak of “degree of intensity” and “type” of mediation rather than perpetuating an online (implied unreal) versus offline (implied real) binary. Moral undertones pervade characterizations of digital milieus. For example, one rubric equates “real life” with “lived reality,” whereas online experiences are termed “digital life.”⁶¹ Even though the point of this rubric is to illustrate “blurriness” between these categorical experiences, the terminology risks reinforcing the idea that “digital life” is somehow not a part of “lived reality.” Yet experiences such as cyberbullying (often conducted by people whom the sufferers know from school) demonstrate that what happens online cannot simply be dismissed as “unreal” or somehow separate from young people’s “lived reality.”

Different modalities of mediation are real; yet they exhibit different properties that this book acknowledges and critically examines. Socially oriented YouTubers demonstrated that emotions underlying different modalities of experience were often fungible or interchangeable. In other words, communication through videos online as well as videos made together at a meet-up felt interchangeably meaningful and emotionally important to interactants. Yet YouTubers sometimes experienced frictions in engaging with particular modalities. For example, YouTube participants might lose internet access or might have difficulty justifying the expense and sacrifice of taking time off from work to travel to gatherings. It is important to acknowledge

instances of emotional fungibility between different modalities of expression while confronting frictions across physical modalities that result in asymmetrical access to resources and sociality.

Strict dichotomies between so-called online versus offline behaviors and interactions have been problematized by scholars in numerous fields.⁶² However, they do not always agree on terminology.⁶³ Some researchers oppose the term “virtual” to a host of other terms, including the “real,” the “actual,” or the “physical.”⁶⁴ One proposal involves referring to computer-mediated interaction as “online” interaction but using the term “onground” to underscore place-based aspects of interaction.⁶⁵ Gaming scholars have used the term “synthetic worlds” to refer to environments crafted by people to facilitate large-group interaction.⁶⁶ In computer science and design, one approach conceptualizes interaction not as a binary between mediated and unmediated interaction, but rather in terms of how people experience augmented forms of networked interaction in everyday life.⁶⁷ As anthropologist Bonnie Nardi has eloquently stated, “Perhaps language is still catching up to technologies that have altered human possibilities in ways we are only beginning to grasp.”⁶⁸

Drawing from her work on experimental digital media studies (such as *Second Life* and simulated virtual environments), Beth Coleman concluded that, for many people, being connected creates a pervasive, networked atmosphere that is “no longer distinctly virtual or real but, instead, representative of a diversity of network combinations.”⁶⁹ Universal access has clearly not been achieved.⁷⁰ Yet, for many of us having the constant presence of devices that connect us to ideas and other people now augments our experiences and interactions such that we may properly accept “an end of the binary logic of virtual and real.”⁷¹

Approaching the subject from the field of digital anthropology, Daniel Miller and his colleagues argue in a study of social media that “by now it is very evident that there is no such distinction—the online is just as real as the offline. Interactive media has already become such an integral part of everyday life that it makes no sense to see it as separate. No one today would regard a telephone conversation as taking place in a separate world from ‘real life’”⁷²—nor, I would add, would they refer to phone calls as “virtual” conversations. The difference is that telephone calls are familiar and do not carry moral undertones of being less than or parasitic to in-person experiences in the way that computer-mediated experiences often are.

Binary terminology does not exhibit globally consistent connotations. For instance, Miller and his team found that interviewees used the term “offline” to refer to sharing photographs via WhatsApp, a messenger application for phones that use the internet to share text, audio, images, and video.⁷³ This appears to be “online” behavior because images are digitized and distributed over a network. Yet interviewees drew on private connotations of using WhatsApp to send

photographs to close friends such that they conceptualized this behavior as being conducted “offline.”

In their videos many YouTubers describe how their participation is actually situated within larger media ecologies of interaction. Their practices, which exhibit varied intensities and types of mediation, ultimately contribute to YouTube as a larger mediascape that inter-threads multiple forms and degrees of mediation. Within this mediascape it is time to pay greater attention to videos that offer everyday commentary across modalities, thus challenging recurring fantasies and fears about digital interaction.

The Importance of Anonymity

A corollary to digital and moral dualisms about online interaction being “fake” is the idea that most mediated interactions are anonymous and that anonymity is the cause of degraded online discourse.⁷⁴ The anonymity debate has been researched in a variety of contexts, including legal issues and privacy.⁷⁵ My experiment in public anthropology (see chapter 5) showed that a proportion of anonymous discourse posted to my video *What Defines a Community?* was quite productive in exploring prospects for community on YouTube. Notably, the most *productive* commentary came from individuals *whom I did not know*. Eliminating anonymous commentary would likely have complicated an ability to methodologically reach beyond previously invested YouTube participants to examine diverse views on the subject.

The fantasy/fear of online anonymity is more difficult to maintain than one might assume. As media sociologist Lori Kendall observed, online interaction that is called anonymous is often actually *pseudonymous* because people exhibit similar behavior patterns over time using a consistent pseudonym.⁷⁶ Commenters to my videos and other YouTubers’ work often left clues about their identities. “Haters” exhibited pseudonymously consistent behavior that reflected underlying societal prejudices that are ultimately more important to tackle than anonymity in and of itself.⁷⁷ Is the problem truly anonymity, or is it the fact that people are racist, sexist, or homophobic? If the latter, how might forms of connected learning such as those discussed in this book address widespread prejudices?

People often forget how much interaction is mediated between *known interlocutors* in digital contexts. Given enough motivation and resources, people’s identities can be discovered by dedicated individuals or governments, even in the most secret realms, such as those of hackers.⁷⁸ Writing from the perspective of sociology and communication, Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia observed twenty years ago that “hackers are reluctant to change their pseudonyms regularly because the status associated with a particular nickname would be lost.”⁷⁹

In fact, conceptually we may ask, how well do we really know anyone? Husbands, wives, partners, children, parents, and friends all have their secrets. The more important question is, how much do we need to know someone to interact, accomplish collective goals, or persuade people to act or vote in certain ways? In fact, when the temporal approach of this book is applied, people clearly must deal with initially anonymous others in order to advance key goals, such as persuading others of civic positions or exploring potential future relationships. This book offers a rubric that suggests that knowing someone involves (1) assessing the *relevance* of knowing particular identity information; (2) having a *desire* to gain this information; and (3) having access to the *resources* to reveal the specific identity information we require.

Much of the angst about online interaction follows from the assumption that anonymity is equivalent to accountability. But it is possible to be anonymous to many people and still be accountable for one's actions. Examples include receiving reactions and commentary from individuals who protest in appropriate media. For instance, fellow YouTubers once alerted me to a horrific video of a headless person of color. Many of us reported this video, and it was immediately removed. A person may be anonymous to viewers but not to site administrators, who have access to more details about individuals and their accounts than does the average YouTube participant. Severely problematic accounts may be traced back to households or individuals who are reported to authorities, even when people continue to reopen new accounts.⁸⁰ It is important to distinguish between “anonymity” and “accountability,” which are related but not equivalent terms.

Conversely, when we meet someone in person, identities are not necessarily as obvious as we might believe. In professional and everyday contexts, misinterpretations about identities are continually exposed—and these are only the ones we know about because they were revealed after our initial assumptions were incorrectly solidified in our minds. For example, tensions surfaced in a high-profile case in 2015 in which a person accepted as being black in her daily life reportedly grew up as a white person.⁸¹ Her identity presentation—which was widely accepted—was not conducted online but *in person*. Many people (perhaps most of us) engage in a kind of *interpretive arrogance* that assumes that our analysis of someone must be correct when we see them in person. In fact many misconceptions remain hidden. Sociologist Erving Goffman powerfully proved this fact in his work on hidden “stigmas” such as mental illnesses, which are not necessarily visible to casual observers.⁸² Writing in the 1950s—long before the emergence of the internet as we know it—Goffman cleverly called these mistaken assumptions “virtual” identities because they included characteristics that were assumed to be true about people whom we met *in person*, whether or not they were correct.⁸³ We need to move beyond interpretive arrogance when analyzing digital interaction. We need to acknowledge that

access to a person's identity depends on whether it is *relevant* and immediately *desirable* to have it and whether we have the *resources* to gain access to information about a person for specific purposes.

Anonymity exists on a temporally oriented, interactive continuum. YouTubers sought to move far beyond anonymity and form friendships. But meaningful connections are typically developed within publics only after we are willing to experience an *initial state of relative anonymity* vis-à-vis another person who exhibits potential interpersonal value. Further, creating “publics”⁸⁴ that exchange information or form coalitions to deal with social issues includes appealing to and persuading people whom we will *never really know*. If we wish to change the world or even accomplish basic tasks such as sharing information, then dealing with anonymity is inevitable and arguably desirable. We cannot really know and intimately support all the people whom we wish to persuade to vote in certain ways. For interviewees, video sharing crucially decreased anonymity and brought visibility to thoughtful but less seen videos—even as extreme and celebrity-driven videos were gaining most of the attention.

Sociality versus Self-Promotion

Despite continued fears of anonymity leading to disruption of online discourse, a paradoxically opposite anxiety involves concern about people sharing too much information about themselves to narcissistically gain attention. Yet if we are all sharing too much information online, how could anonymity realistically be a widespread concern in digital milieus? These contradictory and very polarized discourses obscure more common, everyday patterns of mediated interaction, social connections, and friendships.

When reflecting on media scholarship using a temporal framework, it is clear that narcissism concerns tend to recur when new forms of media appear. Narcissism was said to be an inherent property of video when the technology emerged in the 1970s.⁸⁵ The claims resurfaced when video blogging appeared on the scene in the early 2000s.⁸⁶ Yet another wave of narcissism claims emerged in the 2010s with the arrival of the selfie genre.⁸⁷ Because such claims tend to accomplish different sociological work across technologies and populations, it is important that scholars analyze them individually as well as collectively. For example, such claims leveled at YouTubers in part emerged from anxieties about how vernacular voices may successfully compete with corporatized broadcast media. Calling home videos narcissistic became a way to discourage nonprofessional forms of expression. When narcissism accusations resurface, scholars need to investigate whether the claims have merit; they should also examine their effects in particular technologized and cultural contexts.

Among the social group I studied, tensions existed with regard to what degree people should self-promote or engage in interpersonal sociality. That self-centered forms of attention occurred was evidenced by the fact that organizers of meet-ups frequently took steps to actively set a tone for gatherings that de-emphasized self-promotion. At the same time, the YouTube case reveals that viewers are often far more tolerant of vernacular and do-it-yourself media than media industries and artistic elites claim.⁸⁸ Aligning with broad accusations of narcissism on YouTube risks curtailing everyday, mediated voices by overgeneralizing what constitutes narcissistic (read: poor quality) and therefore “inappropriate” forms of self-expression.

We must be careful to avoid overgeneralizing the term “narcissist.” Psychological terms are often overlaid onto disparate forms of experience. People will say they are “so OCD” (meaning they have obsessive-compulsive disorder) simply because they double-check that their front door is locked. Although it is a common phrase, it risks minimizing the problems that actual OCD sufferers face. Such expressions shape discourse in ways that prompt nonsufferers to dismiss real problems when they occur. Subtle psychological generalizations also infiltrate research studies. For instance, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a voyeur is defined as “one obtaining sexual gratification from observing unsuspecting individuals who are partly undressed, naked, or engaged in sexual acts.” As media scholar Theresa Senft has argued, the term has been overgeneralized.⁸⁹ If people invite you into their living room for a public vlog, they are exhibiting certain aspects of themselves willingly. This is a different level of video engagement than that of someone who is being spied upon in vulnerable situations against their will. Overgeneralizations of psychological terms risk misrepresenting mediated experiences and obscuring pathways to addressing specific problems.

Simply needing human attention is quite different from being narcissistic, which implies desiring so much attention that one cannot adequately admit their mistakes or function in healthy interpersonal relationships. Concerns about narcissism, although sometimes legitimate, run the gamut from general unease about basic vanity to seeing new media as enablers of an underlying epidemic.⁹⁰ A study released in 2014 suggests a more complex picture in which social media are seen to promote both selfishness and empathy.⁹¹ In addition, gendered assessments appear in which male narcissists are perceived positively, as potential leaders, in contrast to females.⁹²

Many everyday experiences discussed in YouTube videos deserve public attention. For example, vlogs may involve exploring societal problems or personal tragedies. Most people would not accuse people of “narcissism” simply because they made videos about significant life issues, such as a struggle to afford college. Narcissistic behavior exists on a spectrum and is ultimately interpretive. Vlogs are not inherently narcissistic as a genre; much depends on how they are used.

Narcissism is often determined through a “moral” lens, even though such assessments are not recognized as morally motivated. In other words, if a person “deserves” attention, the video maker will not be termed narcissistic. If they are judged not to merit attention, they risk being labeled as selfish narcissists. Arguably, it is easier to brand someone a self-centered “narcissist” and dismiss the kind of pain discussed in video blogs rather than deal with a person’s loneliness or struggles with health or finances that reflect broader and sometimes seemingly intractable societal problems. This book argues that we need to pay more attention to what is said in a wider variety of everyday videos in order to find solutions and move toward equitable participatory trajectories.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

This book takes as its point of departure the idea of “meeting up”—in person, through video exchanges, and through inter-threaded modalities—to interrogate anthropological conceptualizations of mediated sociality. À la Lefebvre, the book is organized in a way that mirrors the temporal and rhythmic stages of how mediation occurs over time on YouTube. The book moves from analyzing video makers’ “birth” or arrival to the site to examining digital death and possible rebirth, all in ways that highlight this YouTube group’s cultural distinctiveness and interpersonal connections.

Chapter 2 analyzes YouTubers’ mediated initiation as they joined the site and began making videos and posting comments. It critically interrogates what participation means in a video-sharing milieu and the multiple pathways that YouTubers embarked on to make videos. Despite YouTubers’ rhetoric that watching and commenting were legitimate forms of participation, interviewees nevertheless continually pulled people into a circle of video mediation. These interpersonal centripetal forces offered a sense of social closeness rather than distance, which is often feared amid discourses of video narcissism. YouTube “lurkers” were encouraged to move from the shadows and join in the fun by contributing their own video-mediated statement.

The chapter analyzes how observation through a camera was legitimized as a form of participation on YouTube. A common perception and understandable fear is that when experience and mediation become conflated, we are unable to truly appreciate life’s moments. In some cases it is wise to put down the camera and sensually experience wonders such as natural vistas. This position assumes that lived experiences always exist apart from mediation—an assumption that does not bear out in video-sharing cultures in which mediation fundamentally constitutes experiences. The data also invite philosophical reflection on the participant-observation

method, which is criticized based on the assumption that people cannot deeply experience a moment that they are simultaneously trying to analytically record. Yet for many YouTubers—and the visual ethnographer—it was not only possible but a social expectation to observe and simultaneously participate through a camera. Observation via technologized mediation was an acceptable and desired participatory form, in part because observation and participation became inseparable in genres such as vlogging.

In Lefebvrian terms, chapter 3 analyzes how YouTubers grew closer together by attending meet-ups, engaging in broader communicative mediascapes, and creating shared histories by documenting their experiences. The chapter illustrates how a concept of YouTube became emplaced, thus shining analytical light on the intimate relationship between place and mediation. In this book emplacement refers to how mediated experiences become conceptually, emotionally, or practically linked to physical places. For instance, YouTubers may take over a section of a public park so that a place becomes temporally infused with the idea of “YouTube.” Conversely, place-based, video-recorded interactions were digitally shared to whip up excitement for future gatherings. Meet-ups functioned as chronotopes, a term that integrates ideas about time and place in a single concept.⁹³ To create a sense of shared history, YouTubers chronotopically met up in ways that cyclically emplaced the internet in specific locations.

The chapter introduces the concept of *chronotopic chains* of rhythmic sociality that conceptually anchored YouTube to specific points across time and space, thus connecting and inviting new cycles of interaction. For instance, a historic early gathering was dubbed by its organizers as “777” because it took place on July 7, 2007, in New York City. The meet-up “888” was deliberately created in reference to the “777” meet-up so that people could gather for a reunion one year later, on August 8, 2008, in Toronto. YouTubers collectively invented their history and future traditions to produce a distinctive cultural form. Studying these temporal framings of sociality provides a way for designers and policy makers to create new infrastructures that encourage and accommodate vernacular dynamics.

Patterns of intensifying sociality through reciprocity are addressed in chapter 4. It analyzes how people engaged in or withheld video reciprocities to enhance their relationships and maintain a creative aura for the site. Contrary to fears about the “loss of reciprocity” in digital realms, instances abound in which quiet videos exhibited reciprocal video sharing, emotional support, and mutual aid. The chapter examines several levels of reciprocity, ranging from comments to mutual viewing and subscription pledges to donating footage for “collab” videos that promote a worthy cause. The investigation digs deep into the anthropological record to critically interrogate how traditional nuances and dimensions of reciprocity take shape

in a video-sharing environment. Enacting reciprocity was important in YouTubers' conceptualizations of mediated sociality, but their patterns played out differently in comparison to traditional ethnographic descriptions. Although interviewees did not always characterize reciprocities as "obligations," interviewees rather systematically did address the emotional debt that appeared to enter the interactional record when commenters took the time to engage with a video.

Chapter 4 also draws on revised anthropological models of reciprocity by showing how strategic withholding of reciprocity could be as crucial for maintaining creativity and sociality as was bestowing it. In certain circumstances YouTubers resisted mutual viewing pledges unless other participants' videos exhibited emotional or creative merit. The chapter draws on anthropologist Annette Weiner's observation that certain items are difficult to exchange because of their inalienable quality, which refers to how artifacts may be imbued with the characteristics of the person exchanging them.⁹⁴ In the digital environment of YouTube, features that technologize emotion and sociality, such as likes and comments, originate from particular individuals. Thus their interactional value is not necessarily interchangeable. A "like" from one person is not necessarily perceived as equivalent to a "like" from another. Video makers who requested reciprocity but were perceived as undeserving were denied to ensure the site's robustness as a space for collectively making and sharing creative works.

Chapter 5 addresses the Lefebvrian idea of reaching an experiential "peak," which in this case revolves around how sociality fosters intense feelings of community—one of the most traditional concepts in anthropological research. Indeed, YouTubers' activities could not be contained in a single concept of community. Their interactions exhibited several types, such as imagined communities deriving from shared interests, which are addressed in chapter 5. They displayed creation of communities of practice in a core-periphery configuration of video sharing, as discussed in chapter 2. YouTubers also experienced emotional forms of ritualized bonding that anthropologist Victor Turner called "communitas,"⁹⁵ as analyzed in chapter 3.

Chapter 5 examines an experiment in public anthropology by analyzing comments I received on my video *What Defines a Community?* The video consists of observational meet-up footage and interviews with YouTubers who offered their perspective on whether the site was a community in traditional and new conceptualizations of the term. Most interviewees characterized the site as a community or as exhibiting the possibility of facilitating it.

YouTube editors selected my video to be featured on the YouTube welcome page for one week,⁹⁶ where it garnered more than 1 million views and 1,906 comments. A random sample of the comments revealed a small but intriguing discourse in which commenters struggled with conceptualizing and reconciling notions of community

with their video-sharing experiences. Interestingly, a nominally larger number of commenters engaged interactively with the video in contrast to producing spam or hate. Further, the most active commenters were people completely anonymous to me (as far as I knew—indeed, anonymity works both ways). This experiment suggests that community is a recurring discourse that must be approached anew as waves of networked participants dealing with new media sites and modalities make sense of their social experiences. Although some scholars advocate dismissing the term, community still exhibits vitality as an orienting sociological framework, as seen through YouTubers' struggle to define it and to apply it to their video-mediated idiom. The chapter argues that the term should be retained in research but not in a categorical, definitional sense. Rather, it should be viewed as an exploratory, interactive proxy that invites collective discourse on its meaning for specific social groups. Sharing these ethnographic materials provided cautious optimism that, under the right circumstances, it is possible to promote online discourse on organically meaningful anthropological topics.

The end of the Lefebvrian participatory cycle through disenchantment, digital migration, and death is addressed in chapter 6. The discussion provides a window into video-sharing conflicts and people's experiences of the "posthuman." The posthuman is a controversial but theoretically productive term that refers to a state in which our identities resemble informational patterns that reside in the body by an accident of birth.⁹⁷ As we mediate ourselves, aspects of our identities become detached from our bodies and traverse digital realms in ways that provide opportunities and discomforts. Although some scholars see the rubric of "posthumanism" as dismissive of human agency or as confined to futuristic science fiction, this chapter argues that YouTube is already a site of the posthuman if this concept refers to a feeling-tone of participation rather than a bodily label. The version of posthumanity discussed in this chapter concentrates on how informational versions of ourselves, or "alters," roam about in mediated ways. The argument is not that humanity has disappeared; in fact, humans have been evolving in technologized ways for millennia. But the concept of the "posthuman" is a good one to "think with" in temporal terms because it reveals the social and personal implications of having our alters continue in perpetuity.⁹⁸

Staying connected through alters creates reassurances and anxieties. We can feel reassured that we are in a collective that is concerned for our well-being. Conversely, unintended alters may cause distress in terms of how our persona may be wrongly interpreted. For example, one interviewee describes how his videos were manipulated by "haters" who remixed his videos to contain anti-Semitic sentiments that he obviously did not share. The YouTube viewing algorithm lists them alongside his authentic videos, such that viewers encounter these mash-up videos simultaneously

or even prior to seeing his original work. These deleterious mash-ups function as posthuman, violative “alters” that risk broadcasting harmfully false representations about his character. The anthropological approach to the posthuman clarifies why the narcissism argument falls flat in many vernacular contexts. Individual voices may need more attention rather than less in an increasingly dehumanized, mediated field in which original works are ignored or become difficult to locate. Posthuman encounters challenge ideas about agentive “participatory” cultures in contexts in which we (sometimes erroneously) assume we have creative control over our work.

Chapter 6 also analyzes what happens to our digital “traces” when we are no longer human because we have passed away.⁹⁹ In interviews YouTubers articulated diverse responses about their envisioned, temporally situated, “posthuman,” digital alters. While some interviewees expected loved ones to close their account, others hoped their account would be left up intact so that people could visit their page to mourn their loss. YouTubers talked about visiting their departed friends’ YouTube pages and videos in this way. These poignant stories show a range of preferences for people’s digital legacies, and they signal potential conflict as friends and family disagree on how to deal with honoring or reconciling their own and their loved one’s digital desires. Since one cannot discuss these matters after passing away, these interviews provide *pre-posthuman* visualizations of individual and collective futures. Developing the technical and emotional tools to deal with the lingering aspects of our “posthuman,” digital selves will be an ongoing process as individual desires and cultural expectations change.

Media’s participatory rhythms are punctuated by beginnings and endings. Chapter 6 concludes with a theoretical discussion about how YouTube is not a singular site but has its own “alters.” People often migrate to other forms of media. The concept of a YouTubian-inflected imagined community may live on through other sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. A concept of a post-YouTube, which has already exceeded the parameters of a website, filters through other media and situates socially connected interactants.

Chapter 7 supplements the Lefebvrian rubric by examining the prospects for renewal or revitalization of a platform that more closely maps to YouTubers’ ideals for the site and for videos that linger on. A YouTube video may never really die but rather asymptotically exhibits the potential for interaction that may dissipate in interactive energy over time. But videos may never entirely disappear. Someone somewhere may interact with a video, or a video maker may one day return anew.

The chapter critically examines YouTubers’ reaction to the site’s monetization trajectory in a way that analytically highlights their concept of an ideal YouTube. The argument is not that profiting from one’s creative labor and engaging in sociality are incompatible. Nevertheless, video makers did face complications as YouTube’s

particular monetization pathways intensified. The chapter analyzes crucial events, including the site's migration from video sharing to commercial video streaming, changes to partnership terms and support, monetization of meet-ups, the rise of multichannel/multiplatform networks, temporal padding of content to increase revenue, and the problem of YouTube burnout. The chapter outlines the environment that continuing veterans, returning video makers, and newcomers all face when trying to post social videos on a commercialized platform.

Augmenting the Lefebvrian cycle that moves from birth to death, the chapter considers possibilities for rebirth and explores which features should be retained or avoided in designs of sites that wish to emphasize sociality. It poses the question of whether it is possible to speak of creating an idealized video-sharing platform. The chapter argues that the march toward monetization is but one possible narrative in a continuing saga of video sharing. The teleological belief that the YouTube experience as it unfolded was the natural or only way that the story might have played out should be resisted. Tensions raised in the chapter will likely reoccur and should be addressed in future instantiations of video-sharing sites that seek to support sociality and offer material benefit for one's creative work.

Finally, chapter 8 sums up the lessons learned by engaging in a visual anthropology project on a new media site. Core anthropological concepts retain vitality but require modifications. Sometimes YouTubers' experiences illustrate how changing theories in anthropology occur in a mediated milieu. In other cases YouTubers' unique experiences invite reconsiderations of anthropological theorizations. Concepts such as community and the posthuman are vital but function as illustrative metaphors rather than as categorical social science. YouTube sociality exhibits opportunities and challenges for reworking accepted notions of networked participation.

Thanks for Watching argues that we must understand videos as they are situated within a YouTube participant's "lived experience,"¹⁰⁰ which involves a complex array of criteria that include technical and commercial factors, cultural perspectives, dialogic interaction with interlocutors, media dispositions, and in-person interactions. Particularly useful are diachronic views that exhibit temporal sensitivity to participatory rhythms and patterns. The book concludes by proposing a framework for studying video sharing, one that focuses on empathy, temporalities, emplacement, and nuances, such as attending to technical details of particular sites. Features matter, and video makers work within and around the parameters of technical options and commercial constraints to accomplish interactivity.¹⁰¹ The book's final chapter proposes that different "media generations"—which often exhibit much faster cycles than human generations—must grapple with constant mediated change.

The stories of the YouTubers profiled in this book offer crucial case studies for creating more usable platforms that support future vernacular voices. We need to engage in a form of “anti-memory”¹⁰² and “forget” certain types of success related to monetization if we wish to create equitable participatory spaces. Dominant YouTube discourses of virality and celebrity do not represent the only—or the most interesting—version of events that transpired in video-making milieus. *Thanks for Watching* constructs a history of the future for more socially supportive platforms. By shining a light on quiet, social videos and the rhythmic dynamics of video sharing, we may achieve deeper appreciation of human mediation and sociality.

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