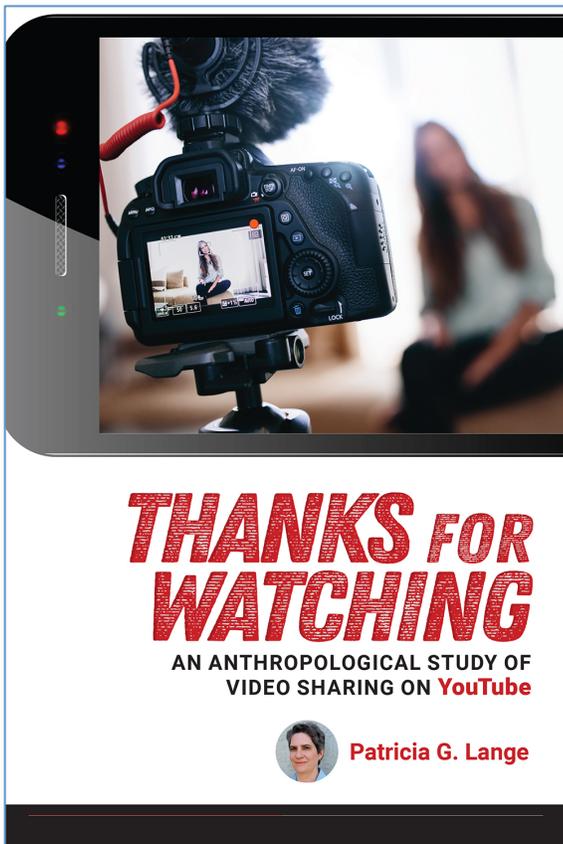


Thanks for Watching

An Anthropological Study of Video Sharing on YouTube

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In *Thanks for Watching*, Patricia G. Lange offers an anthropological perspective on this heavily mediated social environment by analyzing videos and the emotions that motivate sharing them. She demonstrates how core anthropological concepts—participant-observation, reciprocity, and community—apply to sociality on YouTube. Lange’s book re-conceptualizes and updates these concepts for video-sharing cultures.

Lange documents how the introduction of monetization options impacted perceived opportunities for open sharing and creative exploration of personal and social messages. Lange’s book provides new insight into patterns of digital migration, YouTube’s influence on off-site interactions, and the emotional impact of losing control over images.

Combining intensive ethnography and Lange’s personal vlogging experiences, the book explores how YouTubers are creating a posthuman collective characterized by interaction, support, and controversy. In analyzing the tensions between sociality and the site’s need for monetization, *Thanks for Watching* makes crucial contributions to cultural anthropology, digital ethnography, science and technology studies, new media studies, communication, interaction design, and posthumanism.

Patricia G. Lange is an anthropologist and associate professor of critical studies (undergraduate program) and visual and critical studies (graduate program) at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. She is also the author of *Kids on YouTube: Technical Identities and Digital Literacies*. She produced and directed the ethnographic film *Hey Watch This! Sharing the Self through Media* and her work has been widely published in numerous journals.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The introduction explains the multi-year ethnographic research project and the book's goal of re-theorizing core anthropological concepts—such as participant-observation, community, reciprocity, chronotopes, and posthumanism—by studying socially-oriented video bloggers on YouTube. The book challenges discourses about online interaction including the supposed offline/online binary, misplaced concerns about rampant narcissism, and how anonymity (thought to be toxic to online interaction) actually often spurs potentially meaningful interaction. The book explores how video monetization impacted perceived opportunities for exploration of personal and social messages. Inspired by Lefebvre's ideas of rhythm analysis, the introduction describes the book's structure, which mirrors one time cycle of video sharing. It begins by analyzing initiation into YouTube, describing intensification of sociality, and explores digital migration and prospects for renewing websites to support sociality.

Chapter 2 – YouTube Initiation: Participating Through a Camera

Lefebvre argued that social insight may be revealed by attending to cycles and stages of interaction over time. Chapter 2 launches the book's analysis by analyzing the initiation phase of both the researcher and proto-typical trajectories of vloggers first joining YouTube. The chapter's main argument is that online narcissism claims are overblown, according to the experience of early YouTube vloggers and statistics about US video sharing patterns. The research identifies a centripetal, creative and social force pulling YouTubers into a democratized vision of sharing videos, thus illustrating Jenkins' idea of "participatory cultures." The book also tackles theoretical criticisms of the primary method of ethnographic research—participant-observation. A standard criticism is that it is impossible to observe and participate in social phenomenon simultaneously. In contrast, the book shows that participating through a camera collapsed observation and activity in a way that reclaims this concept in video making circles and in anthropology.

Chapter 3 – Growing Closer: Sharing Time and Space

Continuing with Lefebvre's rubric, the book analyzes early growth phases of participating in video sharing cultures on YouTube. The chapter subverts the entrenched mythos that interaction exists in an offline/online binary. Video blogging is revealed to be an intensely inter-threaded activity in which neither modality is sufficient; both are required for experiencing fully-realized sociality. The chapter illustrates how YouTube conceptually became emplaced through grassroots gatherings, thus demonstrating the intimate relationship between place and mediation. Emplacement refers to how mediated experiences become conceptually, emotionally, or practically linked to physical places. The chapter expands on Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope, which literally means time-space, to deepen theoretical understanding of how YouTubers met in person and recorded videos for later consumption that helped create and perpetuate a shared sense of YouTube's social history. The chapter introduces the theoretical concept of chronotopic chains of rhythmic sociality that conceptually framed YouTube vloggers' shared culture.

Chapter 4 – Syncing Up Through Reciprocity

A common assumption is that we are losing a warm sense of reciprocity online due to rampant narcissism. In addition, reciprocity is assumed to be a panacea for curing social ills and drawing people together. This chapter complicates both assumptions. First, reciprocities exist on YouTube. Numerous types include mutual pledges to view original media and offers of assistance in hard times. Second, the book dives into the anthropological record to analyze diverse forms of reciprocity, some of them instrumental or negatively self-serving. Among socially-motivated YouTubers, bids at more cynical forms of reciprocity were rejected in order to maintain a creative and democratized atmosphere for video sharing on the site. The chapter concludes with a theoretical consideration of the roots of reciprocity, and how forms of gratitude often emerge not from an immediately prior gift, but rather from more general appreciation of a person existing in the world and sharing their message.

Chapter 5 – What Defines a Community?

Community is a cornerstone concept in anthropology, yet its definition is fraught with disagreement. This chapter discusses the peak of Lefebvre's concept of a social cycle, which in this case study means achievement of community. It analyzes the outcome of sharing my research video called *What Defines a Community?* that went viral, receiving 1 million views. Interviewees in the video argued that the site facilitated media-driven community. A random sample of comments posted to the video showed a predictable amount of hatred (26%). Yet, a larger proportion showed interactivity with the video's content or with other participants (36%). Contra anthropologists that advocate dismissing the term, the chapter concludes that community retains vitality—but not as a social science concept. The term community is best deployed as a placeholder that facilitates discourse on social formations. Under the right

circumstances, public engagement with anthropology exhibits benefits, such as encouraging discussion between participants on intellectual concepts.

Chapter 6 – Portals to the Posthuman

Posthumanism is a controversial concept that is often dismissed as realizable only in the far future—the stuff of science fiction. This chapter argues that YouTube is already a site of the posthuman, if the term connotes a collective of “alters” or alternative versions of ourselves as represented digitally. Although humanity is hardly at an end, the chapter discusses how collectives of uncontrollable alters provide reassurances as well as anxieties about how our images and mediated message are (mis)used. The chapter discusses the end of Lefebvre’s temporal cycle, in this case of participation on a particular social media site. Demarcations of ending include leaving the site due to disinterest, death, and digital migration. The chapter concludes by arguing that not only people, but also YouTube has yielded alters of itself as people migrate to other social media while retaining an ideal of YouTube as an orienting social frame on new sites.

Chapter 7 – Living with Arrhythmia: Prospects for Renewal

Lefebvre advocated studying a social cycle from birth to experiencing a peak, and then to its final end. He advocated attending closely to interactional rhythms. This chapter extends the Lefebvrian cycle by considering how new, interactive features might prompt renewal of sociality on YouTube. This chapter analyzes how the introduction of monetization hastened the end of a participatory cycle for one group of social YouTubers. It investigates how sociality might be revived through more socially-supportive designs and participatory strategies. It analyzes arrhythmias, or misalignments in interactive expectations between video makers, audiences, and the automated algorithms that assess success on YouTube. Algorithms favored video makers who continually created new content, thus driving some creators to experience burn out. The chapter argues that future video sharing sites will quite likely have to address the tensions that emerged if sites with multiple purposes—such as monetization of creative effort as well as sociality—are to succeed.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

The conclusion sums up the lessons learned by engaging in a visual anthropology project on a new media site. The book concludes that anthropological concepts are still relevant in new media idioms, but must be reworked to understand contemporary lived experiences that draw on multiple modalities. The chapter provides a framework for studying the dynamics of video sharing on YouTube and other social media sites. It urges a focus on strategies such as achieving empathy, analyzing interactive temporalities, studying forms of emplacement, and noting key participatory nuances, such as attending to a particular site’s technical details. The conclusion argues that YouTube’s monetization trajectory should not be considered as an inevitability for all future video sharing, but was rather one pathway to success. Drawing on post-phenomenology theory, the conclusion advocates invoking a kind of “anti-memory” that calls for temporarily forgetting YouTube’s specific trajectory to establish new paradigms for achieving media-driven sociality.

To schedule a talk with Patricia G. Lange,
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