

Reclaiming Reciprocity in Video Sharing Environments

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By Patricia Lange, California College of the Arts in San Francisco

[In this new series, part of the Digital World category, we publish author commentaries on recently published work in Digital Anthropology. First up: [Patricia Lange](#) discussing theories of reciprocity in relation to YouTube. Patricia G. Lange is an anthropologist and associate professor of Critical Studies (undergraduate program) and Visual & Critical Studies (graduate program) at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. Her latest book, [Thanks For Watching: An Anthropological Study of Video Sharing on YouTube](#) (University Press of Colorado, 2019), analyzes how YouTubers engaged in attentional reciprocity, provided mutual support, structured forms of community, and grappled with YouTube as a site of the posthuman. Her vlog on YouTube is AnthroVlog and her Twitter is @pglange. To obtain a sample chapter and study guide for Thanks for Watching see: <https://upcolorado.com/component/k2/item/3798-thanks-for-watching-course-materials.>]

Social media experts would have you believe that reciprocity—or mutual exchange of things—is the key to achieving attentional success. It is practically a truism these days that garnering a following on social media inevitably requires reciprocating viewers' attention by interacting with them. Of course, individual exchange becomes much more difficult when audiences grow to massive scales. Conversely, media experts warn that we are “losing reciprocity” in contemporary digital media. Loss of reciprocity and lack of regard for other people is said to be fueling an epidemic of rampant narcissism that is degrading the quality of our lives (Twenge and Campbell 2009).

Anthropologists have been thinking about reciprocity for a very long time. We tend to think about reciprocity in ways that sometimes contradict both of these assumptions. In studying social experiences of video sharing on YouTube, I observed many forms of reciprocity, contra assumptions that it is inevitably lost online. However, not all forms were considered helpful for boosting warm and mutually-beneficial sociality. In this two-part series, I explore data from my book *Thanks for Watching: An Anthropological Study of Video Sharing on YouTube* (Lange 2019), to analyze how reciprocity played out among a group of video makers who used YouTube for social reasons. In this first post I discuss forms of warm and interpersonal reciprocity that occurred among video creators—thus challenging the notion that it is inevitably missing on social media. In this context, reciprocity is often manifested as providing interpersonal forms of attention. For example, according to one philosophy, if you comment on my video, I should comment back. Warnings about online narcissism do not take into consideration the forms of reciprocity that routinely occur among online participants interested in sociality. In the second post, I will argue that, perhaps paradoxically, reciprocity is not always a panacea for supporting interpersonal relationships. I dig deep into the anthropological record to explore several kinds of reciprocity, including negative forms that YouTube participants studiously avoided—for good reason. Anthropologists have

observed that withholding certain forms of self-serving reciprocity is arguably crucial for promoting the kind of conviviality that is so important for environments that seek to simultaneously foster sociality and creativity.

Scholars and pundits often agree that reciprocity is an important part of interacting online. Social media and marketing experts seem to believe in the “law of reciprocity,” which states that people are inherently inclined to return a favor (Dodaro 2011). For participants whom I interviewed, the situation was more nuanced. If a person subscribed to a video maker’s YouTube channel, most interviewees said they were not necessarily inclined to automatically subscribe back. Yet they did feel an impulse to check out their new subscriber’s videos. At the time of the research and continuing today, to subscribe to someone’s channel was free and simply required pressing a “Subscribe” button on a video or a YouTube participant’s channel page. After subscribing, one becomes alerted to new content uploaded from that channel on YouTube. The site has since introduced commercial subscription services, but this discussion focuses on the type of free subscriptions that are still available on the site.

Researchers studying digital reciprocity often focus on whether a person on social media follows someone back. On social media, to follow someone means pressing a “Follow” button and receiving updates from that person. Take a moment to reflect on your own behavioral patterns and values. Do you feel such a drive toward reciprocity? If a person “Follows” you on social media, do you feel inclined to follow back? Research suggests that 22% of Twitter users and 30% of Tumblr participants have reciprocal links (The Anatomy of a Forgotten Social Network, 2014). YouTubers whom I interviewed did not engage in this type of automatic reciprocity. When someone subscribed to them, interviewees instead expressed a desire to check out their new subscriber’s videos to determine whether there was potential for meaningful future interaction with them. However, in terms of comments, many YouTubers interested in sociality said they felt a strong urge to comment back whenever someone had taken the time to comment on their videos in a thoughtful or heartfelt manner.

YouTubers’ views of reciprocity closely resembled those described in an analysis by Pelaprat and Brown (2012), who discovered that opportunities for engaging in reciprocal behavior in digital environments became sites of potential “encounter.” Asking questions or posting one’s status on social media invited others to respond, not narcissistically, but because participants hoped to “express a desire to live life with others through forms of giving and exchange” (Pelaprat and Brown 2012). For social YouTubers, it was common to return the favor of an especially meaningful comment, and to use moments of self-disclosure as a way to invite interaction. If someone posted an interesting comment on a video, interviewees generally felt inclined to respond in kind with a comment acknowledging the sentiment and content of the previous comment—thus recognizing the commenter’s contribution. I observed that on particularly emotional videos in which the video maker discussed personal tragedy, comment reciprocity could be high. Here comment reciprocity refers to a video maker responding to text comments posted to their video. In one emotional video, for example, I noted that the video creator had directly posted a text comment to 20% of the posted

comments, and in another, 50%.

While not enacting a hard and fast social “law,” YouTubers did see the value in responding to comments in a consistent and patterned way. They also attended to new subscribers, by checking out their videos and in relevant cases, subscribing back. In an “attention economy,” (Goldhaber 1997) one’s life time is limited. Therefore it is non-trivial to take one’s precious life time to pay attention to someone *else’s* work and contribution through videos and comments (Lange 2009).

At times YouTubers even went further and provided aid in the form of donations to people struggling with personal issues. In a way, this is a reciprocal act. YouTubers who participated in the creative video sharing community saw their contribution reciprocated in the form of aid from others when they found themselves in trouble. Helping someone is a way of “giving back” to those who had made interesting videos for viewers and contributed to the social life of the community. For example, before one influential YouTuber passed away, his videos referenced receiving money to help him pay for rent, medicines, and gas to go to the doctor. Interestingly, he noted that several donors were anonymous to him. If people do not claim credit for helping someone, they can hardly be faulted for using tragedy to narcissistically enhance their own reputation.

The fact that this YouTuber thanked his audience is itself an additional gesture of reciprocity. Supporters of his on YouTube enacted a fundamental kindness, and he felt the need to take the time—despite how difficult it was for him to make videos when ill—to reciprocate their regard by thanking them in a video. Both the help he received and his public thanks were highly poignant forms of interactional reciprocity.

The story of reciprocity among social participants on YouTube does not end here. We will see in the next post that negative forms of reciprocity also appeared on the site, yet they were eschewed to maintain an aura of creativity and sociality. Ultimately, reciprocity is not necessarily disappearing online—if one knows where to look. Forms of mutual exchange observably exist, often in an attempt to prompt future encounters and meaningful sociality through video.

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