THANKS FOR WATCHING

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AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF VIDEO SHARING ON YouTube

Patricia G. Lange

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YOUTUBE INITIATION

PARTICIPATING THROUGH A CAMERA

Colleagues and friends of mine are often surprised to learn about the depth of sociality that emerged from participating on YouTube. Being stunned by this sociality is itself astonishing given that cycles of interaction emerging from digital milieus have appeared over the last three decades. Participation on YouTube exhibited multiple trajectories. Some YouTubers began by jumping in feet first and uploading videos. However, YouTube participants often needed encouragement; even the most enthusiastic creators began modestly by posting comments and gradually increased their participation over time. An advantage of YouTube's openness was that it enabled newbies to mingle with and learn from advanced amateurs and pre-professionals or people working in media industries.[1]

In terms of the Lefebvrian rhythmic cycle, this chapter analyzes the dynamics of "birth," or more precisely, "initiation" into video cultures. It explains how people are drawn closer to core activities of YouTube participation, typically moving from being watchers to adding comments and then becoming video makers. The chapter examines underlying rhythms and patterns that encourage video creation and sharing. It critically interrogates what constitutes participation in video-sharing milieus, and it proposes conceptual rubrics aimed to inform the design of user-friendly, media-exchange sites.

The chapter begins by detailing my arrival on YouTube and my video-making approach. I quickly learned to accommodate YouTube sociality by accepting camera-driven forms of participatory sociality. The chapter then maps out how researchers

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have discussed participation in media scholarship. It argues that the term's multiple connotations encourage a broad array of meaningful experiences in mediated groups. The chapter ethnographically analyzes participants' prototypical initiations into the video-sharing space. YouTube participants were often drawn in by a wish to go beyond watching and move toward interacting with other YouTubers. While no two initiation stories were identical, common elements included being drawn in through sociality and moving toward creating one's own video statements.

The chapter draws on ethnographic evidence to argue that narcissism claims—which are often assumed to be rooted in the medium of video itself—are overstated in social milieus. Certainly, narcissism exists in digital spaces and should be addressed where it is harmful. However, making videos does not inevitably prove that one is narcissistic, especially in light of the dynamics of the social group under study. Analyzing emotional content of videos using a temporal approach suggests that narcissism is difficult to sustain over time if one is interested in sociality. Narcissistic traits such as aggressive and competitive forms of attention-seeking were not central to this social crowd, who directed energy toward inspiring others to contribute their own video message. In a revealing case study, the chapter analyzes how veteran creators exhibited a centripetal force–based dynamic to encourage newcomers to make videos. Drawing participants closer to core video-making activities is one characteristic of robust participatory cultures that invite people of different abilities to be seen and heard.

Newcomers and veterans alike embraced the practice of conducting interactions through a camera. This chapter shows how observing through a camera and bestowing attention to other YouTubers constituted crucial participatory forms. The chapter challenges the idea that observation and participation are always distinct experiences. In this environment participating by observing through a camera integrated both activities into a single act—both socially and in visual ethnography research. The chapter draws on ethnographic evidence to critically interrogate critiques of the participant-observation concept in anthropology. Critics argue that the term is an outdated and obfuscating oxymoron. The YouTube case shows that in certain mediated milieus observation and participation cannot be separated but are rather productively intertwined, not only among participants but in visual ethnography projects.

Finally, the chapter concludes by drawing on an exemplary participatory activity known as the drum circle, in which people collaborate to spontaneously create music. The drum circle—an activity I observed at a YouTube meet-up—provides an inspirational metaphor for conceptualizing future video-mediated and more welcoming participatory spaces. A key advantage of the drum circle is that it requires simultaneous observation of others while participating by making one's own music.

Observation and participation ideally become inseparable if collectively produced creative environments are to thrive.

Notably, the drum circle offers constant mutual visibility of all other participants—whatever their level of creational skills. This is a crucial attribute that made YouTube so compelling for inviting participation and sociality. Observing creators of introductory skill gave newbies courage to try their hand at making media. Seeing video makers of advanced skill inspired YouTubers to improve their craft. The intermingling of multiple ability levels was fundamental for encouraging video creation and sharing. Designing future socially motivated, networked spaces means revising popularity-based schemes that may fuel narcissism and instead offering opportunities to provide visibility of everyone's media message in equitable and participatory ways—much the way drum circles invite contributors to produce and enjoy the fruits of everyone's collective labor. The drum circle metaphor suggests that video sociality benefits from inviting disparate creative voices into an integrated, participatory whole.

ARRIVING ON YOUTUBE

My participatory arc resembled initiation stories I heard from interviewees. When I arrived on YouTube in May 2006, I opened an experimental account and created a channel page—the social media equivalent of a profile page. This book defines early adopters as those who joined within the first year. I also joined early—six months after YouTube's public launch in December 2005. Initially, my experimental channel page was very quiet. I did not start posting videos until April 2007. I then posted regularly—usually once a week—because that was the video-blogging standard at the time and I wanted to improve my skills. I looked around and saw YouTubers' channels filled with videos and comments; they were lively and participatory. I elected not to publicize my experimental channel so that I could learn how to make videos in a semipublic way. I used an account name based on a former character of mine in an online gaming research project. I oriented my channel around practicing voiceover vlogging (without my image). My most viewed video was a car-show vlog about the fictional superhero car in television and films called the Batmobile (107,500 views). The video depicts images of the car while I narrate my reactions.

In May 2007, I felt ready to debut a more public-facing vlog that listed my name, contact information, and data about my research project. Beginning with my experimental vlog and continuing with my new vlog, I posted weekly videos for about one year. I created two vlogs, one on YouTube and another on WordPress, a blog-hosting site. I called both vlogs AnthroVlog. On YouTube I digitally migrated to AnthroVlog and no longer posted to my earlier experimental YouTube channel, choosing instead to focus on my research vlog. I left the older account open, but I

did not provide a link to it. Over time, it is common for YouTubers to start over with a new account that is updated to their current video-making efforts and persona. Interviewees may not wish to disclose the name of a prior channel, which may be deleted. Nevertheless, clues appear in videos when other YouTubers refer to a fellow video maker's former channel. By creating and posting videos and comments and interacting with video makers, over time AnthroVlog became more socially integrated into the site. My most viewed video was called *What Defines a Community?*, which received over one million views and is discussed in detail in chapter 5. Interviewees and other YouTubers whom I interacted with for this study began posting encouraging commentary, which spurred me on.

In recording interviews and observational footage, I initially used a recording setup that aimed to maximize video image and sound quality. I used a lav mic for myself and a shotgun mic mounted on top of a Sony hand-held camera for recording interviews. Initially I used a tripod whenever possible when conducting interviews. I quickly discovered that pieces of equipment become "actors" in mobile encounters in which the presence of a camera influences interaction.[2] Using a tripod at meet-ups complicated my ability not only to be nimble when following action but also to connect interpersonally with video bloggers. Their standard was generally to avoid tripods, and many of them could not afford high-end cameras or sound equipment. However, they might use tripods in specific circumstances, such as taking group photographs or observational footage.

Some documentary filmmakers advocate the creation of an "invisible wall" such that the filmmaker records events in a way that distinctly separates them from the action being recorded.[3] The idea is to avoid people mugging for the filmmaker or changing the very behavior that the documentarian wishes to record. However, writer-director Barry Hampe argues that context may influence whether such a separation makes sense. Visual ethnographers note that creating such an invisible wall not only is unnecessary in many situations but also presents a loss of participatory opportunities.[4]

Writing from the perspective of sociology and video ethnography, Wesley Shrum and his colleagues characterize interviewees and researchers as operating in a "videoactive context." Similar to an "interactive context," the videoactive context is a "social situation with potential and known recording capacity, created by the presence of a loaded camera."[5] Under this rubric the "wall" becomes more fluid or disappears, and roles may become interchangeable between the mediator and the mediated. The filmmaker relinquishes the desire for explanation and, in its place, "[seeks] out revelatory moments, those flashes of connection between what would otherwise be lost to flux."[6] In observational mediation one becomes more attuned to the "improvisatory character of lived experience."[7]

According to Shrum and his colleagues, using an "invisible wall" approach privileges observational detachment over participatory empathy.[8] Striving to avoid changing the action creates the type of remoteness that produces unempathetic ethnographies. They argue that while the role of "observer" arises due to differences between researchers and interviewees, the role of "participant" arises because of their sameness. A trend in visual anthropology is to promote observational forms of ethnography that encourage nimble and interactive forms of filming. Filmmakers move around with subjects and become more intimate with them through a camera, perhaps walking and talking together while recording.[9]

The video blogging stylistic included creating intimate visual connections using devices operated by a steady hand. I noticed that having a tripod situated me as an outsider and observing researcher in this milieu. Over time I found myself using a tripod less and less and instead opted for more nimble arrangements that placed me closer to the ethnographic action. I used a more personal recording style—even for interviews.

The experience demonstrated that observing action through a camera could be intimately interwoven and inseparable from what is considered active participation in a heavily video-mediated, social milieu. A dominant paradigm in research is that wielding a camera is a cool, detached, observational act. Yet, in this milieu, recording people in socially motivated circumstances could be interactive and participatory. Still, YouTubers typically needed to ramp up their participation in ways that required social encouragement to expand their engagement.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURES

The term "participation" is frequently central to analyses of social media and creative production. Yet the term has many connotations across contexts. To anthropologists everyone "participates" in some way within their culture. Writing from the fields of media and fan studies, Henry Jenkins coined the term "participatory cultures" to describe groups of people who make their own socially connected media and operate outside of professional media outlets.[10] This chapter illustrates how a centripetal dynamic invited people to intensify their participation over time.

Media scholarship prior to research in participatory cultures focused on viewers' spectatorial engagement with mass media such as films and television, which broadcast circumscribed amounts and types of content.[11] In contrast, in participatory cultures people mediate their own ideas and share their messages globally. Barriers to entry are low, and people receive strong social support and mentorship for their work.[12]

Participation often connotes making rather than only viewing media. Yet research by media scholars and anthropologists have problematized analytical divisions

between supposedly passive (spectatorial) and active (production-driven) forms of engaging with mass media. Revisions to the scholarly record show that people engaging with mass media did not simply absorb media messages without active interpretations. For example, a study of female readers of romance novels revealed interpretive strategies that readers brought to their processing of books' narratives.[13] The act of reading novels became a form of active protest in that female readers refused to succumb to the gendered demands of housework while reading. Being "participatory" with media takes many forms, ranging from internal, conceptual engagement with mass media to creating one's own works, as well as points in between. All of these practices are active experiences that do not passively accept standardized or surface meanings of mass media or vernacular works.

Although YouTube is too diverse to label it a "participatory culture" in Jenkins's sense, subgroups have used the platform to produce and circulate socially relevant or thematically inspiring video content. The participatory culture concept has found broad acceptance in studies that analyze how people distribute self-produced media to serve personal and collective interests.[14] The term "participatory culture" implies control over one's vision for producing media. Yet agentive challenges are apparent on YouTube. For example, in videos and at gatherings, YouTubers discussed "camera envy" when they saw another video maker with a better-performing (and usually more expensive) device. Not everyone could afford cameras that yielded high production values. In addition, participation in core activities requires a comfort level to share the self as well as skills to produce and circulate acceptable media. Scholars investigating participatory cultures are aware of these challenges and advocate the development of digital literacies to increase the distribution of voices through media. Robust participatory cultures encourage multiple levels of ability in media creation to facilitate skill development and sociality.

TRAJECTORIES OF VIDEO PARTICIPATION

Video participation has grown substantially in the United States. Pew reports that the percentage of adult internet users who posted videos online doubled from 14 percent in 2009 to 31 percent in 2013.[15] Still, nationwide statistics offer only one view of what people are doing and feeling when they post videos. In the present study a typical participatory trajectory began when a person watched YouTube videos through links that friends had sent. Note that the initial discovery of the site itself as well as individual videos were socially oriented for many people. Moved by a particular video, they might obtain an account in order to comment and begin creating and posting their own work. The length of time it might take from watching other videos to making one's own videos varied by individual; a few of the

respondents had not yet made videos. This section investigates the varied participatory pathways that people traveled.

Commentary was an important initial step for many people. Interviewees insisted that contributing comments was just as legitimate and important to sociality on the site as was video creation.[16] The first time one posts a comment to the site can feel, if not momentous, at least personally significant in that a participatory divide of sorts is being crossed. Should comments continue, a new understanding of one's role in a social group may develop.

For instance, an interviewee named Lorraine (a researcher-assigned pseudonym) affirmed that YouTube facilitated social connection, in part through posting comments. Lorraine was a white woman whom I spoke to in 2007 at the SouthTube meet-up in Georgia.[17] She stated: "I think people definitely feel connected. Even if you're not making [videos] and you're just commenting, you feel a part of that person that you're always commenting with."

One common motivation that inspired people to move from the shadows was an attempt to achieve personal self-healing. An example is found with an interviewee who requested that I refer to her in the study as Veronica. She was a young, white woman who had been on YouTube just over two years when she shared her story during a video interview with me at a meet-up in Philadelphia in 2008. Veronica told me she was a newcomer to meet-ups. Her video views vary, receiving a few dozen to a few hundred views each. She often vlogged about a variety of subjects, such as attending college, providing inspirational words, dying her hair, and attending meet-ups. One of her meet-up videos received a few thousand views. She had forty-four subscribers as of July 2018. Similar to other YouTubers, Veronica began by watching videos. Inspired by comedic and charming videos on the site, she gradually escalated her participation to seek support after a serious injury. Veronica stated:

> I actually started as just a watcher. I was in a car accident four years ago. And I lost my ability to walk. And there wasn't much that I could do but play video games and play on the internet. That was my thing, and seeing other people go through, like, difficult times really [allowed me] to see that, okay, I'm not alone. You know, and then watching, like, nalts and Mugglesam and people like that, like, it was, like, "oh wow, they're so adorable," or "they're so funny," or something like that. But I got to see a real human side of people. And then I remember one of my first videos was a response to *nalts gets fit* and I had just gotten cleared to start working out. And it was in the beginning of this year, and I figured, you know what, this is going to be my time to start getting the support that I need.

Veronica recounts how seeing others experiencing hard times helped her heal. She drew inspiration for working out by watching funny videos on the site. A

comedic video about fitness prompted her to become more physically active and to increase her YouTube participation. Notably, her connection to making videos and improving her health stemmed from comedic viral videos. It is not only contemplative vlogs that pull people in socially; it is quite common to bond over mass-media fare.

Interviewees' trajectories sometimes emerged from prior patterns of sharing the self using other media. The act of making videos was situated within a larger media ecology. An advantage of the media ecology metaphor is that it highlights how technical, cultural, and social factors are mutually influencing and interrelated.[18] For example, anakin1814 (his YouTube channel name) noted that participating on YouTube was an extension of a longer life trajectory of blogging and journaling that began as a child and continued as new technological platforms appeared. Anakin1814 was a white man in his mid-thirties who had been on YouTube for just over two years when I interviewed him in Minneapolis in 2008. He worked as a freelance photographer and graphic designer, but he did not appear to be using his channel to drum up business through topics (such as how to design a website) that would invite mass audiences.

In his videos he often directly addressed the camera in very personal ways to discuss topics such as art, guilty pleasures, YouTube community issues, birthday greetings, the environment, and music. His audience tended to be more intimate, with each of his videos garnering a few hundred views, although a few reached a thousand views. As of June 2018, he had 2,490 subscribers. His media-making did not suddenly emerge when YouTube launched but was informed by other types of media that he created. In his interview he detailed his participatory motivations and prior media histories. In response to my question about how he got started on YouTube, anakin1814 stated:

> The idea [was] to share my life with people and get a response. Actually, I've been writing journals my whole life, in notebooks for years since like sixth or seventh grade. Eventually I took that online, kind of doing a blog thing. And then the whole podcasting thing came out and video podcasting, and there was this site called YouTube where I could [put] my videos so I could make them easy to look at and view, this site called YouTube, and I could embed them on MySpace, and my journal and all that stuff. And eventually this community formed, and now I've been on YouTube for a couple of years, and it's just amazing how it's changed. And I see it as like a big grand scheme art project. Me sharing my life and getting feedback for it.

Anakin1814 describes how his entry into YouTube was motivated by receiving responses to his work. He alludes to how YouTube's environment saw increased social activity as well as individual improvement. In many of his videos, anakin1814

is thoughtful and reflective about the participatory patterns he has observed over the course of his two years of participation. He posted a contemplative video on March 15, 2008, called *YouTube Community: Season 2*. Anakin1814 describes how people improved their technical and participatory skills. He stated:

> When you see the lives of how people have changed, *their* story lines, you know if you want to look at this in terms of a movie or TV show. But look at each other's story lines that are actually real life. Or look at the talent that people are developing, the editing skills, or the musical skills, or the craft. Or the way people are getting more relaxed and being themselves in front of a camera and really finding their thing. But everybody has something special going on, on their channel, big or small, and we all have to remember that.

Anakin1814 references people's personal stories and how they developed editing and musical skills as well as the craft of making videos. Rather than focusing on himself, his insightful video urges viewers to take note of *other video makers* on the site and honor their experiences and stories, whether "big or small." He also provides insight about the development of digital literacies. He observes that through practice, people became more "relaxed" and found their public voice. As a video blogger, anakin1814 values sharing life experiences and details through video. It is through interpersonal forms of sharing that people may significantly improve their technical and participatory skills.

The YouTube experiment in sociality demonstrated that audience members are more tolerant of vernacular video content than is often assumed, even if video production values are not perfectly polished.[19] YouTube's search engine facilitates finding videos that exhibit virality, crassness, and lack of quality. However, clear discourses of learning, quality, and improvement are also visible on the site.[20] Notably, it was YouTube's unevenness that invited wide access. The varying abilities of YouTubers that anakin1814 described in his video often inspired people to find the confidence to make their own videos. It is arguably more intimidating to begin as a novice when one's peers make videos with superior production values.

Potential contributors who see a wide range of video quality tend to feel *encouraged* to experiment with making their own media and developing media literacies.[21] Put simply, "bad" videos inspire *increased* video making. A successful YouTuber named Olga Kay (her YouTube channel and stage name) reflected on her early entry into YouTube despite lack of formal film training. Olga Kay was a white woman in her mid-twenties. Born in Crimea, she identifies as Russian-American. Her work includes comedic videos and vlogs meant to drive traffic through stimulating visual content, such as trying Japanese candy, promoting her colorful, self-designed sock line called Moosh Walks, engaging in a dancing fail, creating a challenge ingesting

odd foods on pizza such as tuna fish juice, and juggling audience-requested items such as GoPro cameras or wet soap. Indeed, each of her videos routinely garners tens of thousands views, with some reaching hundreds of thousands or a million views. She had been on the site for about a year and a half when I interviewed her in Hollywood in 2008. As of June 2018, she had 824,413 subscribers, which indexes a professionally driven, mass following.

Kay used the site to parlay her activities into a successful career, including earning money through merchandising. In a media interview she recalled being inspired to get started by the poor quality of YouTube when she joined in June 2006. She stated: "I remember thinking, I can do it better—if only I knew how."[22] She spent considerable time going to gatherings, talking to people, handing out business cards, and parlaying her talent for juggling and being filmed while doing it. She spoke about learning by doing, given that she had been a circus performer who had no formal training in cinematography or editing.[23]

Seeing modest videos arguably removes the pressure of having to conform to professional standards and gives some video makers the social confidence to develop their own media literacies. As media scholar David Gauntlett astutely explained, beginners—including himself—actually enjoy modest videos and become emboldened to participate on YouTube if they see videos of modest quality; they feel inspired to try their own video experiments.[24] Gauntlett relates the impactful experience of seeing modest videos posted by renowned expert Chris Anderson, who was formerly the editor of *Wired* magazine and author of *The Long Tail* (2006), a highly influential book. Gauntlett reports seeing a video in which Anderson depicts a radio-controlled blimp aimed at the blimp community. Although the video was shaky with poor audio and focus, Gauntlett observed how as a viewer he "*did not mind*" (emphasis original).[25] Viewers interested in connecting socially through shared content see such videos as interesting and potentially "liberating," as Gauntlett noted, for giving one's own media a go.

MusoSF (his YouTube channel name) was an interviewee who characterized his participatory trajectory as fairly similar. Videos on the site made him feel as though he could make videos himself. MusoSF was a white man from San Francisco whose videos garnered a few hundred views each, with a few reaching thousands of views. As of June 2018, he had 1,722 subscribers. In his videos he vlogs, sings, and talks about subjects such as gay marriage, his love of music, sending birthday greetings to YouTube friends, and reflections on YouTube meet-ups. His video about growing up in the 1970s suggests he was in his thirties to early forties. He had been participating on YouTube for about two years when I interviewed him in Minneapolis in 2008. During the interview he explained how he moved from watching to commenting to making videos:

> It started with the typical, [somebody] would send me a link to some funny video and I would come look at it. I didn't have an account. But then I read a news article about geriatric1927, being the 87- or something-year-old guy who is on YouTube, and so I thought, "oh that sounds interesting, I'll go check that out." And I watched a video of his and then I wanted to comment, and I realized you have to have an account to comment, so I created an account, and then I started watching his videos when I had subscribed to him. And then I started finding other people that he talked about, and eventually I started thinking, "maybe I can do this." So a few months later I started making my own videos.

Notably, musoSF expressed a desire to socially engage through commenting after seeing a video by a famous YouTube participant from the United Kingdom called geriatric1927, otherwise known as seventy-nine-year-old Peter Oakley, who passed away at eighty-six in 2014.[26] It is not only videos but also people and sites that go viral as word about them spreads. Many people were charmed by the enthusiastic yet modest efforts of an older man who shared personal thoughts on YouTube. His humble and relatable videos that referenced a YouTube "community" resonated with younger and older audiences alike.[27] Commenters provided Oakley with technical tips that Oakley took seriously. Film and media studies scholar Bjørn Sørenssen argues that "the changes in production qualities and techniques in subsequent videos provide evidence of the results of his learning."[28] Although he began humbly, Oakley improved through receiving social support. In turn he inspired other YouTubers such as musoSF to begin their video journey.

Interviewees observed that even a few supportive comments could make the difference between giving up and being encouraged to continue. For example, after discussing his frustration over receiving stereotypical hater comments such as "You suck" and "Go die," one white, male teenager profiled in my book *Kids on YouTube* (2014) described in a voice-only Skype interview how even receiving a few positive comments significantly influenced his willingness to participate on YouTube. He explained: "But then even when you get one good comment, that makes up for 50 mean comments, 'cause it's just the fact of knowing that someone else out there liked your videos and stuff, and it doesn't really matter about everyone else that's criticized you."

Paying attention to other people is a kind of interpersonal gift.[29] As anakin1814 noted, it is important to pay attention to people's individual stories. His enthusiasm for watching others displays a warmth and interpersonal friendliness that reiterates the importance of giving human attention to other people. These YouTube stories demonstrate that the visibility of introductory videos of uneven quality served as an inspiration to share one's message and connect with others. Mutual

visibility and active attention to others was a crucial part of socially motivated YouTube participation.

RETHINKING NARCISSISM

Scholars studying narcissism have labeled YouTube as "ground zero" for gaining attention.[30] Exposure to media has been faulted for fueling what popular and scholarly discourses refer to as "narcissism."[31] At times these arguments assert that the medium of video itself is inherently narcissistic—or at least is a key culprit in its dissemination online. The term narcissism as it has been applied to digital realms, and specifically to video sharing, has been defined in ways that range from the clinically pathological to the broadly colloquial, often functioning as a synonym for vanity.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, argued that narcissism was characterized by "megalomania," or inflated self-esteem and dominance over others, as well as *withdrawal* from people and things external to the narcissist's world.[32] Communication scholar Jessica Maddox argues that the phenomenon that media discourse labels "narcissism" is better classified as "exhibitionism."[33] According to Maddox, reflection on the original myth shows that Narcissus—who pined away to his death while staring at his beautiful image—actually chose not to interact with others whom he saw as incapable of truly appreciating him. Maddox contends that a literal interpretation of the myth would imply that people would be disinclined to share their image with others. When articulating fears of degraded social interaction, narcissism discourse has tenaciously focused on the myth's moralism against obsessive "self-love." Maddox believes that exhibitionism is a more appropriate concept for the digital era. Exhibitionism is about drawing attention to the self from others through sustained media sharing as facilitated by digital infrastructures.

Social media usage has prompted fears that we are living in a narcissistic "epidemic" and that videos and sites such as YouTube are prime facilitators of this condition.[34] Bolstering this view is the fact that numerous disturbing and mean-spirited videos are routinely posted to YouTube.[35] In addition, politicians exhibit arguably narcissistic tendencies on social media—behavior that can be tricky to diagnose but clearly has disturbing impacts.[36] To the extent that narcissism complicates one's ability to connect or prompts abusive behavior in powerful people, such claims should be addressed.[37] However, simply posting videos does not prove that a person is a narcissist or an exhibitionist or that they became so through social media.[38] Adjudicating narcissism outside of clinical contexts quickly becomes laden with interpretive and moral portrayals about what is right or wrong when expressing the self through media.[39]

According to historian and social critic Christopher Lasch, a problem with defining narcissism is that the term often becomes morally laden and overgeneralized. He states: "Theoretical precision about narcissism is important not only because the idea is so readily susceptible to moralistic inflation but because the practice of equating narcissism with everything selfish and disagreeable militates against historical specificity."[40] When creators post technically substandard videos or videos that general audiences have difficulty connecting with, it is but a short step away to calling those videos—and by implication the video maker behind them—"narcissistic." Yet a series of shaky, poor-quality blimp videos does not make a creator narcissistic. As the vloggers say, if viewers do not enjoy a video and become angry at the video maker for wasting their time, it is possible that the video was not meant for them. Assuming that all videos should satisfy an individual viewer's needs may be defined as *viewership narcissism*. Overgeneralizations are unproductive for diagnosing true problems and inappropriately suppress vernacular videos and their social messages.

Effects of Temporality on Narcissism Claims

Interviewees described diverse reasons for intensifying their participation—from extending prior media ecologies to socializing and flirting. For example, Susan (a researcher-assigned pseudonym) was a white woman in her thirties who had been participating on the site for two years when I interviewed her in Philadelphia in 2008. Notably, her work focused on very personal vlogs about her deep religious faith. She also sang songs, performed songs in sign language, and vlogged about serious health issues that she experienced. Her videos each garnered a few hundred to a thousand views. Her account does not list subscriber numbers. However, in a video posted in 2009, she relates that of her 3,300 subscribers, about 800 are estimated regular viewers.

Susan told me she joined YouTube because she was attracted to a man whom she saw on the site and wished to flirt with him. After a time they became good friends, and she also became friends with his girlfriend. She eventually broadened her participation to make religious videos. What began for Susan as a flirtation ended up being an intensely meaningful activity in which she shared her faith. Certainly flirtation and romance through media are a natural part of life and are thus not surprising to see. But first forays into making media do not represent the totality of a person or their mediated engagement. As of 2018, these videos were no longer on her channel, which focused on her religious views.

Scholars often read flirtatious or even self-focused female media such as selfies as evidence of today's rampant narcissism. Narcissism claims are cyclical in that they often emerge with new waves of media. Discussing the selfie phenomenon, media scholars Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym argue that although selfies are associated

with narcissistic young girls, in fact many types of selfie genres exist, including political selfies, jokes, sports themes, fan selfies, illness selfies, and military selfies.[41] Narcissism accusations can become a way of adjudicating female sexuality and romance as well as complicating women's ability to create and control their own images.[42] Because narcissism accusations may be doing different work as they target various populations, it is incumbent upon researchers to investigate such claims anew as they reappear to see if they are valid and to understand their effects. Narcissism accusations sometimes target regulation of female sexuality and are temporally bound, as a participant's video content may change over time.

In Susan's case, to read an initial flirtation video in isolation as self-centered narcissism may have the effect of not only attempting to regulate female romantic impulses; it also ignores how these initial videos functioned as important milestones within Susan's media-making temporal trajectory. In starting something new, one may not be ready to begin with a deeply personal *magnum opus*; one may prefer a modest initial foray. A few flirty videos may represent a less threatening way to begin participating and building the trust of potential audiences. Once she makes friends, a video maker may feel empowered to take risks and share more central aspects of the self, as happened with Susan. When getting to know people or social situations for the first time, one is taught in US culture not to plunge immediately into religion or politics but to start with "small talk" before gaining interactive traction to share deeper aspects of the self, which in Susan's case revolved around her faith. Temporality should be considered in assessments about media making.

Interestingly, when temporality is considered, assumptions about narcissistic behavior change. For instance, communication scholars Maggie Griffith and Zizi Papacharissi conducted a study of ten vloggers in which narcissistic tendencies were reportedly a common theme.[43] In this analysis narcissism was equated to "unwarranted" self-promotion. However, they noted that narcissism was harder to sustain over time. Vlogs tended to include more complex and generalized topics to retain audience interest. Assessments about narcissism are interpretive and involve a matter of degree. Scholarly reflection will be required in an ongoing way to determine what constitutes "unwarranted" bids for attention in videos, especially if psychological terms are used to judge mediated self-expression and, by implication, the media makers behind them.

Personal Content as Important Forms of Self-Expression and Healing

Like selfies, video blogging as a genre has been interpreted as having inherent narcissistic tendencies.[44] The study of ten vloggers noted above equated narcissism with a self-centered tendency of vloggers to talk about their "interests and concerns" and

constitutes "unwarranted" attention. Analyses of narcissism tend to focus on the mediated subject (thus giving them more attention), and not on watchers or those who make decisions about who merits attention. Vlogs that discuss problems may in fact facilitate connections to others who share similar concerns, such that the personal becomes social and sometimes political.[47]

Assessments of narcissism need to consider the variety of digital, vernacular content and the ways in which vloggers express personal problems to engage in collective forms of healing. As noted above, Veronica connected to other YouTubers through particular affinities, in her case exercise and health.[48] YouTube participants who suffered health problems or serious tragedy reported initiating interaction on YouTube to seek emotional support. Indeed, two interviewees for my project, Jane (a researcher-assigned pseudonym) and bnessel1973 (his YouTube channel name), bonded with other YouTubers partly by sharing their experiences in losing a child. Bnessel1973 (whose story is discussed in terms of comment reciprocity in chapter 4) lost his son through SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome); Jane lost her infant son soon after birth.

Jane was a white woman and mother of young children. Her videos focused on family moments such as a baby learning to walk, child haircuts, birthday greetings, and well wishes for sick friends. In one video she lights a candle and wishes a sick friend well. She also created a few comedic videos such as providing tips on how to attract women. She talked about going to nursing school rather than aiming for a media career. Each of her videos garnered a couple of hundred views, although a few saw a thousand views. As of June 2018, she had 134 subscribers.

In a poignant video, Jane created a memorial to her prematurely born son. She posted the video on June 26, 2008, the day he would have turned three years old. She had been participating on the site for fifteen months when she posted the video, which received 2,639 views as of July 2018. Jane states in the text description that she is well aware that her video is not exciting to most people because it does not have funny animals or clever jokes, but it does contain all the photos she had of her son. For Jane, her son's life was deeply integrated with mediation.

In a picture vlog set to music, the first image is that of the commemorative hospital card on which her son's first footprints were inked, next to a picture of a cartoon stork. As a song plays, images appear of Jane's hospitalized son connected to a nest of wires and tubes. As the singer arrives at the lyric "holding you," a touching image appears of Jane holding her son, who is not in an incubator but swathed in a hospital blanket in her arms. The image cuts to close-ups of the baby's face and of Jane's face gazing down to her son's. Photos show her husband sitting next to her and looking sadly on. The video ends with images of memorial sculptures such as an angel and a woman holding a baby.

Visually, the format is similar to those of many memorials on YouTube, which often consist of photographs accompanied by music and captions.[49] Songs are chosen to provide an emotional context and to link loved ones to the person who has passed away. According to cinema studies researcher Malin Wahlberg, slideshow memorial videos often seek to visually portray idealized versions of the deceased.[50] Jane's images include traditional depictions of mother and son together, including Jane holding the baby and ending the video with an image of a mortuary mother-son sculpture, thereby eternally extending the idea of her mother and son bond. The moment and its mediation are poignantly collapsed as one experience at the time of his passing. Moral assessments about the appropriateness of self-focused mediation become questionable and interpretive in these cases. Jane's son's life and his mediation were all too brief, and images helped Jane and her family work through their grief and preserve her son's memory.

Commenters thanked her for the video, calling it "touching," and they extended condolences, such as "My heart breaks for you and your family. I am so sorry for your loss. Peace." Another commenter said, "Words just aren't enough at times like these, but I'm so sorry for your loss. God Bless you." She also received compliments on how beautiful the video and her son were and what a fine tribute the video was to him. Of the thirty comments that other people posted on her video, Jane responded to fourteen, which represents nearly a 50 percent reciprocation rate on commentary. Drawing support from them, she thanked commenters and stated that "if other people see his face and know a little bit of who he was, it makes his death a little bit less pointless." The video's integration of life experience and mediation facilitated connection to other YouTubers. At what point does it become narcissistic to share self-interests such as one's pain to socially connect and begin a journey of healing? How will scholars adjudicate what is appropriate to publicly share? Scholars are not always privy to the back channels in which vloggers help each other to cope with loss, to heal, and to achieve self-actualization through media.

The atmosphere that engaged socially driven YouTubers included touching video content. Elements such as uneven quality of videos, prior media trajectories, and a wish to connect in order to heal were all key initiators into the YouTube experience. They often helped viewers transition into making broader video content. The generalized assumption that videos are narcissistic becomes difficult to sustain as content is often made and received socially rather than through self-centered exhibitionism. The poignancy and connection of such videos throws into analytical relief how interpretive narcissism claims can be and how overattention to such claims threatens to overshadow recognition of how YouTubers encouraged an array of participatory voices.

Centripetal Forces

Although video exchange is gaining traction in digital milieus, many people are uncomfortable *being on camera*, which further challenges widespread narcissism claims. Not everyone who posts a casual video wants to make videos on a regular basis, nor do they wish to participate in video-sharing cultures. In the video realm, statistics similarly show how fears of self-focus may be overinflated at the moment. A survey by the Pew Research Center found that in late 2012, even though 95 percent of US teens between the ages of twelve and seventeen were online and 91 percent posted photos of their own image, only 24 percent of them posted *videos* of themselves.[51] It is possible that rates of posting videos will dramatically increase; growing numbers of people are posting videos online and to YouTube. As stated above, adult internet users posting videos increased from 14 percent in 2009 to 31 percent in 2013.[52] Young people are still more likely to post than older folks; 41 percent of people between eighteen and twenty-nine posted or shared videos online compared with 18 percent of people aged fifty and older.[53]

However, posting about the self appears to exhibit a slow trajectory; only 18 percent of adult internet users post videos that they have created *themselves*.[54] Even when people post their own videos, Pew states, they tend to repost other people's content, or they post videos of family and friends rather than of themselves. Posting media of *other people* shows engaged sociality and defies assumptions of narcissistic withdrawal from socially driven life experiences merely due to the availability of video sharing.

Among the YouTubers whom I studied and observed, various trajectories of participation occurred, with some being more interested in self-promotion than others. Perhaps the most dramatic outlier in terms of aggressive self-promotion was a white man whom I have assigned the pseudonym of "Todd." I encountered Todd at a San Francisco gathering about three months after he had opened his YouTube account. Most of his work includes comedic videos, skits, pranks, and parodies aimed for general audiences. According to his channel description, he formerly worked in a professional media context. As of July 2018, he appeared to have roughly 30,000 subscribers. At the gathering he had set up a table to promote his work—an unusual move in such settings. He used a megaphone to announce prize winners of a contest that he ran. Even future stars such as LisaNova and OlgaKay (their YouTube channel names) who worked the sociality angle professionally did not tend to use such aggressive tactics at meet-ups to generate attention to themselves. As the gathering was concluding, I wandered by Todd's table. He basically demanded that I interview him—which I found off-putting. In service to the project, I agreed to talk to him on camera. I found myself rather mechanically asking questions as he talked about his work without engaging me in dialogue. Notably, such aggressive self-promotion was not the norm.

The tendency among socially driven YouTubers was to include others through interactive engagement with participants' work—often through mutual recordings of conversations or reciprocal interviews. A more recognizable pattern was exemplified in an encounter that occurred with a "lurker," an adult white man (whom I estimated to be in his thirties) who attended the Midwest gathering in Minneapolis in 2008. Due to his camera shyness and his claim to not have a YouTube account, he sparked encouragement from fellow YouTubers. Their encounters illustrate how YouTubers used a centripetal social force to pull people from the periphery to core video-making participation.

Lurkers watch videos but do not post their own work or even text comments. Jenkins argues that because lurkers are doing important work, lurking is a useful dynamic in participatory cultures. Lurkers serve as an audience and feedback mechanism for others to showcase their creative works, and they also learn what it takes to participate by observing how to create media and interact. In a video interview for my project, Jenkins explained:

> A lurker is first of all seen as a potential participant in most cases. Unless the lurker becomes a troll or a stalker, right? [Lurking] is a way of learning. It's peripheral exposure to the activities of the group, and over time the lurker learns what it takes to become fully a participant. Now for many cases, a large chunk of the population are lurking, in the sense that they are not actively contributing yet. But they provide an audience for the performance and the creative expression of other members.
>
> And so, if [you post] your stuff on YouTube, the percentage of people who post stuff is much lower than the percentage of people who comment on stuff, is much lower than the percentage of people who watch stuff, or send out links to videos to their friends and so forth. But each of those people [is] doing important work that sustains the creative community. Now, generally, a participatory culture takes as its value, bringing more people into the center of that, increasing participation. And so [there] is a kind of pull or tug on a lurker over time, at least in a fairly robust social community of participatory culture, to join and become more public with their participation.

According to Jenkins, the percentage of people who post videos is relatively low, suggesting that narcissism through video is not a widespread societal problem but rather attracts attention in specific high-profile cases. Pundits similarly state that the average comment-to-view ratio is 5 percent, such that for every 100 views, one might expect to receive about 5 comments.[55] Jenkins argues that the more "robust" types of participatory cultures invite media makers of varied abilities and comfort levels to move closer to the core of mediated social action. YouTube is generally more interesting the more it contains a variety of content and voices from both

video makers and commenters. YouTubers therefore continually seek new and interesting content with which to engage.

The camera-shy man was teased and was dubbed "the Midwest Lurker." He repeatedly evaded the plethora of video cameras that buzz through YouTube meet-ups. I requested an interview with him for my ethnographic film, *Hey Watch This!* (2013), which details YouTubers' trajectory of participation on the site. He declined, so I did not record him. I warned him that someone would probably record his activities and the videos would be all over YouTube, probably in a matter of hours. He understood but declined my request to be interviewed on video—eschewing attention even when offered.

"The Midwest Lurker" was interested enough in YouTube to attend a meet-up, but he was reluctant to be recorded. Contrary to broad discourses of narcissism claiming that people make videos to satisfy inwardly focused self-aggrandizement,[56] this study suggests that at least some individuals exhibited alternative "mediated dispositions"[57] with regard to their acceptance of being recorded and seeing their image distributed globally.

In this context mediated dispositions "refer to the types of media, communicative channels, and devices that people generally prefer to use to communicate."[58] My book *Kids on YouTube* (2014) found that despite the rhetoric that all youth were equally well versed and enthusiastic about all forms of digital media in the early 2000s, in fact they had very different preferences as to which type of media to use. Even for a video project on young people's media, some interviewees preferred watching over making videos. Indeed, a few had almost no interest in putting their image or activities in a video, despite participating heavily online. Nuances in mediated disposition and temporal trajectories in video-oriented participation should be acknowledged and analyzed. One's mediated disposition is just as important as age for shaping individual mediation and interaction through video.

YouTubers downplayed the lurker's protests and recorded him in a way that illustrates common dynamics of active participatory cultures in a socially motivated, video-sharing idiom. One might argue that people should respect a person's wish not to be recorded, even if it means forgoing mentorship, friendship, and encouragement to mediate self-expression. Another interpretation of events is that by attending a meet-up that he must have known would be populated by camera-wielding enthusiasts, the Midwest Lurker was publicly exhibiting curiosity about being pulled into the social group. His attendance potentially signaled a willingness to at least explore increased mediated interaction. He was opening up to being coaxed into overcoming his camera shyness.

As I predicted, several YouTubers relentlessly pursued him and video-recorded him on camera, whether or not that was part of his original plan. At one point a

few of us were gathered on a Minneapolis city street and the lurker began walking toward us. One of the gathering's attendees shouted, "Here comes the gray-shirted lurker!" This comment was amusing, as it reminded me of nature films in which an unusual or interesting specimen is observed in the wild. As YouTubers amusedly looked on, the YouTuber also shouted, "We're making your first video now, lurker!" which was greeted by a burst of laughter from the group.

Despite idealistic YouTube rhetoric that watchers and commenters were equally accepted as true YouTubers, it was nevertheless clear that YouTubers spent considerable energy strategizing ways to increase the lurker's participation, including urging him to open a YouTube channel, which at least enables commenting and eventually posting videos. Typically, narcissism is said to be marked by "rampant materialism," "aggression toward others," and a "rabid desire for attention and fame."[59] Veteran video makers already have lurkers' attention. If seeking attention is the principle goal, why encourage a lurker to make videos?

The term "communities of practice" characterizes multiple levels of participation centered around an activity. Communities of practice are groups or networks of participants with various "core" and "peripheral" roles that seek to achieve shared goals within a setting, such as a workgroup or a digital site.[60] In a video milieu a core participant may make many videos, give newcomers advice, and arrange meet-ups. A peripheral participant may be someone who mainly watches or perhaps comments on a few videos. Strangelove argues that YouTube exhibits a "core-periphery" social structure in which "a small minority of users produce videos that provide thematic content" through which viewers connect.[61] If only a small minority is posting videos, how can video narcissism be rampant throughout the population?

A key ethnographic question involves how participatory roles change over time. How does a person move from the periphery to the core? The Midwest Lurker was pursued in a way that seemed good-natured rather than predatory. Not surprisingly, he was recorded by other video makers. A video of him appeared in which YouTubers said that they could set up an account for him. After smiling, he unconvincingly said he would "look into it." In a good-natured way, YouTube participants encouraged him to join in the video fun. In the video, YouTubers urged him to "come to the dark side" and walked toward him with outstretched zombie arms, droning "join us" and laughing.

Even when he was not present, a group of YouTubers continued to brainstorm about how he might increase his participation on the site. Supportive encouragement did not ensure that he would open a channel and thus maintain a social link to them. Even if he did establish an account, they might have difficulty locating him later amid YouTube's heterogeneous sea of videos. One meet-up attendee suggested making an account for him and sending him the password. In that way they would

know which channel was his, and they could connect with their new friend back on YouTube. Once he had the password, he ultimately had control of the account.

Attendees debated potential YouTube channel names that would identify the lurker to them, such as "the Midwest Gathering's Lurker." Another suggestion was "Lurker 6-7-8," which would temporally associate him with the gathering we were attending in Minneapolis, which took place on June 7, 2008. The binary that is assumed to divide experiences and their mediation is challenged by the fact that having fun in person did not feel complete until the Midwest Lurker could be identified for further mediated interaction in digital milieus after people at the meet-up had returned home.[62] Rather than insist on self-centered attention, the vignette illustrates YouTubers' outward focus and desire for mutual visibility.

YouTube's participatory cultural style and mediated centripetal force applied to people on the margins, such as the Midwest Lurker, as well as to those who were already making videos, as happened with another YouTuber at the Minneapolis gathering whose YouTube channel name was BroJo Ghost (pronounced Bro-Joe Ghost). Engagement on the site could intensify through camera-driven interactions that collapsed an experience with its mediation. BroJo Ghost, a man in his early twenties, found himself being filmed by a group of video makers who were having fun through a camera on a city street. BroJo Ghost had been participating on YouTube for about two years and had made a few videos that captured moments with friends. As of 2018, his channel content focused on the theme of druidism. His video views were modest; each of his videos typically saw 100 to 200 views. One video on bookbinding amassed over 8,000 views. As of June 2018, he had a subscriber base of 1,870.

Certainly this moment of video interpellation did not represent the first moment that BroJo Ghost had put himself on camera. Within his YouTube oeuvre, vlogs that he had posted prior to the interaction depicted events in his life, including hanging out with friends. However, most of his early videos were not about himself but rather depicted things and places he had experienced, as well as people with whom he interacted—illustrating a pattern that Pew noted was common among US video posters.

YouTubers enjoyed conducting simultaneous interviews with people about their experiences and feelings. They often used a casual video-blogging style in which a person operates a camera while asking questions or chatting with the person being interviewed. At one point, several people trained their cameras on BroJo Ghost, the man in black in figure 2.1. BroJo Ghost took out his camera, thus creating four intersecting cameras and points of view (the fourth viewpoint is mine as I filmed the interaction). As BroJo Ghost pulled out his camera, an onlooker cheerfully commented, "Now we know it's YouTube!" referring to the number of cameras one sees at meet-ups as well as the proliferation of videos posted to YouTube.

Figure 2.1. BroJo Ghost experiences being recorded by others at the Midwest Gathering, Minneapolis, June 7, 2008. Screenshot by Patricia G. Lange from *Hey Watch This! Sharing the Self through Media* (2013).

A YouTuber at the gathering asked BroJo Ghost what it felt like to have so many people record him at once. BroJo Ghost said that he is usually the one behind the camera; he was not used to recording himself or being recorded. In this interaction, he himself was not the impetus for the recording. Rather, other people socially engaged him through their video cameras. However, they did not simply turn the focus back to themselves—a common practice among narcissists. Their attention demonstrated their affection and potentially budding friendship for him through media. One YouTuber humorously tried to soothe BroJo Ghost's discomfort by saying that the encounter only involved a few people. After all, a quiet, social video on YouTube would probably only attract a few viewers. Of course, this was partly a joke, because although only a few people appeared in the encounter, having the video version posted on YouTube makes it available to the entire connected world. One YouTuber suggested that all of the cameras must be creating a "parallel universe," as BroJo Ghost admitted to feeling a bit uncomfortable at being recorded at once by so many people.

Despite the encouragement by fellow YouTubers, BroJo Ghost displays awkward body language as he notices he has forgotten to remove his camera's lens cap. He removes it and trains the camera on himself in video-blogging style. After introducing himself, a common practice in the video-blogging genre, he is caught up in the

interaction rather than mugging for the camera. BroJo Ghost's movement along a participatory trajectory did not appear to be motivated by a wish to exhibit himself on camera as much as a desire to join in the mediated sociality that was spontaneously created by fellow YouTube participants.

BroJo Ghost received additional encouragement through comments posted to his compilation video, called *Midwest Gathering Shindig*. Anakin1814, who is also profiled in this book, stated: "COOL video with some great shots! I'm really glad we got to chat for a bit during the day as well as hang out at the video game place for a while! What a great, great day! :)." Other comments praised BroJo Ghost's editing, choice of music, and shot selection. Learning about what makes a good video may be gleaned through compliments and social reinforcement of competent technique as much as corrective critique. BroJo Ghost had been making videos prior to attending the meet-up. Yet invitations to participate more intensely illustrate how participatory cultures exhibit a social pull to deepen participants' contributions.

YouTubers invited potential participants at multiple stages and comfort levels into more core video-making activities. For many YouTube participants, the payoff was high, as they not only enjoyed meeting other YouTubers but developed important self-expression skills, such as being more comfortable with appearing on camera, sharing their message, and developing new technical skills. Discourses of narcissism tend to focus analytical energy on creators rather than on recognizing that viewers have choices in terms of whom they will watch, support, and encourage. Creating videos in robust, participatory groups is often social and spontaneous. Moments of mediation are inexorably integrated with experience, such that people are invited to increase their participatory intensity over time.

MEDIATED OBSERVATION AS PARTICIPATION

Scholarly and popular debates about mediation often revolve around when to record something and when to put down the camera and fully appreciate the moment. Media skeptics believe that an unmediated experience is purer and more authentic than a mediated one. In video-sharing cultures where mutually recorded interviews routinely occur, this assertion leads to several theoretical questions. Is it possible to wield a camera and still feel connected to life experiences at the moment that they occur? If one is observing life through a lens, is one truly living one's own life?

Like discourses of narcissism, criticisms of failing to live life fully when mediated are cyclical and appear alongside waves of new media. Long before the selfie or YouTube, renowned writer and philosopher Susan Sontag expressed concern about life mediation when she observed that tourists often mindlessly take snaps of famous places without stopping to fully appreciate these embodied experiences at a

moment in time.[63] Having a life experience, she powerfully argued, often becomes distractingly intertwined with mediating that moment, thus deteriorating the sensuous and connected quality of experience. Such dynamics exhibited particular temporalities; people tend to experience life moments more fully later, through recorded media, rather than at the moment of occurrence.[64] Concerns about mediation are still abundant. Their recurrence is perhaps rooted in generalized fears of media. In response to people recording a funeral, Pope Francis reportedly warned people to avoid letting the "Internet" distract from the quality of life.[65]

A key underlying assumption of this suspicion of mediation is that an experience can be separated from its mediation. Yet these dichotomies do not take into account experiences that physically originate from or are culturally intertwined with mediation. To begin with an obvious example, it is not possible to talk about forgoing mediation when video blogging, as that experience by definition involves making media. For other things it is possible to technically avoid media, but culturally it would present complications. For example, for many people in the United States who wed, recording images of the marriage ceremony and reception is de rigueur.[66] Of course, one can forgo taking photographs or recording video, but to many it would seem as though something important were missing. Finally, even when it is possible and desirable to forgo recording something, people often conceptually retain the idea of mediation during an experience. When we conceive of life in our mind's eye cinematically or "like a movie," or when we gaze at a beautiful vista without a camera yet still imagine ourselves "taking a picture in our mind," the conceptual divide between living an experience and its mediation becomes even more slippery.

Sontag's persuasive arguments about the inauthenticity of mediated experience continue to resonate as pundits fear that social media and video are creating sensory deprivation and promoting disconnectedness from one's own life.[67] The dichotomy of "pure" versus "inauthentic" experience is revealed as what anthropologist Ilana Gershon calls a "media ideology," or belief about how media structure communication and our interpretations of it.[68] Sontag's media ideology was highly critical of mediation as inauthentic experience. Indeed, media and visual culture theorist W.J.T. Mitchell argued that Sontag's book *On Photography* would more appropriately have been entitled *Against Photography*.[69] According to this view, why should one spend time fumbling for a camera at midnight on New Year's Eve rather than joining in the countdown, kissing a special someone, and truly savoring the moment? Is life not better "lived" than "viewed"?[70]

Even YouTubers and vloggers who heavily mediate their lives sometimes struggle with whether or not to record their experiences. Should they pull out a camera or simply absorb and enjoy the experience of a gathering and the people they are

meeting? For example, I attended one event in which a video-blogging show was being recorded live and broadcast over the internet. In this instance the video bloggers invited people to their home for the live broadcast. During the taping the vloggers conducted interviews on camera. After the live show concluded, some of us stayed afterward to socialize with the hosts. As the evening progressed, the conversation took on a serious tone, and I noticed that everyone had put down their camera. I sensed that if I picked up my camera and started recording, it would seem odd. Even the most enthusiastic video bloggers had boundaries for what should be recorded and when. Conversely, I met a few video bloggers who fantasized about walking around with a head-mounted camera to instantaneously record interesting things that they encountered in daily life. Their thoughts echo that of one pundit who proclaimed, "Life is footage."[71] Nevertheless, certain interactive encounters were coded as inappropriate for recording interactions.

Relatively private moments among media makers discussing serious issues created an aura that did not invite mediated recordings. However, intimacy alone was not necessarily a deterrent to putting down the camera. I observed instances in which video-blogging enthusiasts were happy to record and post what they felt were intimate moments. For example, one prominent early video blogger and author named Jay Dedman recorded his partner, Ryanne Hodson, while she was sleeping. The video had crossed a line, Ryanne later said in an interview with me, simply because she did not know he had recorded and posted it. Jay was a white, male, ex-television producer in his early thirties who co-wrote the book *Videoblogging* (2006)[72] and was also a first-generation vlogger, having launched his own site prior to YouTube.

In his interview, Jay called the video "beautiful" and "cool" and felt that it captured "something you rarely see." Notably, Ryanne, who was a dedicated vlogger, said that if she had known in advance, it would have been fine to circulate. The offense lay not necessarily in capturing a private moment but rather in not consulting with her before posting it. Clearly, video bloggers had their mediated limits, and sometimes interpersonal media skirmishes ensued as people argued about what was appropriate to record and post or leave off camera.[73]

For the most part, however, observing through a camera was a core activity for YouTubers. In these moments one cannot rationally speak of separating the moment of experience from mediation because they are ontologically intertwined. For example, during a meet-up at SouthTube in Marietta, Georgia, a mock "paparazzi" moment occurred when a popular video blogger whose YouTube channel name was lemonette began joking around. Lemonette was a white woman from the South in her early fifties who had joined the site about a year before I interviewed her. She was something of a celebrity in the YouTube circles that I traveled in. Her videos were often comedic, down-to-earth vlogs recorded from a camera mounted to the

dashboard of her car. She shared her opinions on topics such as cursing, going to YouTube gatherings, health issues, finding her "mojo," and aging. Her videos regularly garnered several thousand views each. As of June 2018, she had 5,828 subscribers, a sign of popularity among the social-vlogging set.

When she began joking around, several cameras were instantly trained on her impromptu comedic performance, resembling the dynamics of paparazzi. To engage in a parody of being "paparazzi" ostensibly requires the clicking and whirring of cameras that are trained on their target, much the way one might see paparazzi photograph celebrities in public. Putting down the camera would have meant changing the action being observed because without cameras, one is no longer creating, by definition, a parodic paparazzi experience. Mediation often changes what is mediated, perhaps even defiling the moment. Here it might be argued that *lack of mediation* equally would have altered the experience because the abundance of cameras trained on an individual is what created the experience itself.

Paparazzi moments have distinctive characteristics and rhythms. I witnessed my first live and rather disconcerting paparazzi event when I was living in southern California. My family and I were leaving a children's hair salon in one of the numerous mini-malls that blister the California landscape. As in many parking-restricted areas of L.A., valet parking was the only rational option. While waiting for our car, another car pulled up to the valet station. I sensed before I actually saw several people circling the car. The circlers had cameras, some of them quite small and not particularly professional-looking. It was an odd sensation to feel such movement around people simply getting out of their car. I soon realized that I was watching a woman who appeared to be the actress Jennifer Garner. She was holding a child, whom I surmised was her daughter Violet. The photographers followed them, and they were soon joined by a man who appeared to be Garner's then husband, actor and director Ben Affleck. To my eye, Garner and Affleck hardly seemed to register or react to the paparazzi, who kept their distance but steadfastly followed them with their cameras. They stopped following once the actors entered a children's party facility at the mini-mall. If there was ever an argument for never becoming famous, to me this was it! I could not imagine this kind of invasive lifestyle, especially with regards to children. I did not envy the celebrities their fame.

The word "paparazzi" reportedly originated from *La Dolce Vita* (1960), a famous film directed by auteur director Frederico Fellini. In the film a character named Paparazzo follows celebrities around to take their pictures and sell them.[74] Indeed, paparazzi continue to take lucrative photographs and video.[75] Publications and media firms may pay photographers several hundred to thousands of dollars for images of celebrities.[76] In 2012 one agency reportedly received $250,000 for a photograph of Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge, looking fit while engaged

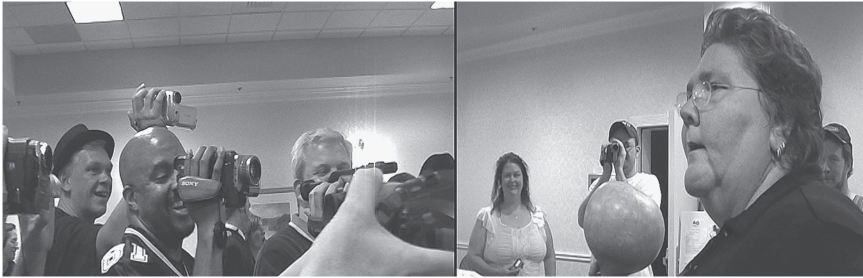

Figure 2.2. YouTubers surround lemonette as she holds a mock press conference, SouthTube, Marietta, Georgia, September 23, 2007. Screenshot by Patricia G. Lange from *Hey Watch This! Sharing the Self through Media* (2013).

in athletic activity.[77] Photographs may also fetch quite high sums if the celebrities are caught in acts that contrast with their public personae or status.[78]

What motivates a paparazzo is typically the economic value of a particular image as assessed by its perceived cultural interest.[79] However, the paparazzi parody that I witnessed at SouthTube had a very different tone; it was friendly and aimed to focus attention on lemonette rather than to stalk or embarrass her. In this instance, video makers creating the parodic paparazzi moment exhibited admiration in a social and respectful way. Indeed, veneration is said to be a motivation for taking public images.[80]

The mock paparazzi moment began when lemonette started to play around with a gourd that another family had brought for fun. Lemonette pretended that the gourd was a microphone. As seen in figure 2.2, onlookers excitedly began recording her antics and encircling her. Suddenly facing a bank of cameras, lemonette improvisationally began to hold a mock "press conference" in which she offered the eager, pretend-reporters the bold "news flash" that she was "wearing women's underwear." Lemonette engaged in a rather amusing parody and tacit social commentary of the vacuousness of news conferences that ostensibly aim to answer questions from journalists but that often parrot stale sound bytes or offer trite news.[81] Lemonette's "announcements" became part of the parodic experience.

After lemonette's "news flash," a few video makers mockingly reacted with "shock" to her news, shouting exclamations such as "Oh!" and "My God!" and, of course, the ominous, revelatory musical lilt "Dun Dun Duuuun!" that resembles cinematic parodies of dramatic moments. A SouthTube attendee noticed the many cameras on the scene and requested that YouTubers begin circling around until lemonette was fully surrounded by "paparazzi" photographing and enjoying her comedic antics.

A paparazzi moment is often distinguished by the value that an image is expected to fetch. In this instance the mock paparazzi moment metaphorically indexes

lemonette's entertaining and interpersonal value to YouTubers who enjoyed the sociality of making videos together. Outside of this context, lemonette's picture would not likely fetch much money. YouTubers visually enacted diversity through their choice of imagery. Of course, one might argue that spicing up one's channel with mediated moments from a popular YouTuber such as a lemonette might bring eyeballs to videos within an "attention economy."[82] Nevertheless, this experience radiated interpersonal sociality. The YouTubers' mediation displayed affection for lemonette, who was a social force to be reckoned with, especially when doling out her infamous "neck hugs." She projected a fun, kind, and welcoming persona, even to me as an anthropologist at the gathering. Because this type of image-making was executed in a way that celebrated her humor and interpersonal sociality, it became a playful and socially acceptable way to express affection and admiration for her. YouTube paparazzi demonstrated that lemonette was worthy of attention and of being recorded.

Scholarly treatments concerned with narcissism or, perhaps more accurately, exhibitionism might emphasize the fact that lemonette garnered a lot of attention for herself. But to focus only on one person in this vignette ignores all of the other people in the room who *chose to record her*. Focusing only on lemonette would perversely attribute too much attention to the mediated subject rather than recognizing the agency and actions of those who elected to bestow attention to her. In this context images were created and coded as special moments between mediators and the mediated, and their communicative value arguably occurred because of the use of cameras. During the incident there were many more people recording lemonette than jumping in front of the cameras to ensure that they were seen.

One might argue that it is possible to have enjoyed this "moment" without mediation. But what constitutes this "moment"? Those who maintain a dichotomy between the pure, unmediated moment and the inauthentic or derivative mediated experience would argue that YouTube participants could have eschewed cameras and simply watched lemonette joking around, or used pantomime to pretend being paparazzi using a camera. Lemonette initiated the moment by pretending that the gourd was a microphone, which in itself is an act of mock mediation. She used her fake microphone to "amplify" her message for the cameras in front of her, thus co-constructing an experience in which she could be recorded in a parodic way.

Yet refraining from mediating the moment would have created a different experience altogether. One cannot set down the camera in this context and create the same event because the experience and the mediation occurred together. To judge a moment as purer because it is unmediated is a media ideology that exhibits certain beliefs about the ethics of media. Conversely, the idea that mediation is a legitimate

FIGURE 2.3. A video blogger records herself and fellow YouTuber while they interact on camera in Hollywood on January 19, 2008. Screenshot by Patricia G. Lange from *Hey Watch This! Sharing the Self through Media* (2013).

form of sociality is also a media ideology that is neither true nor false but a type of belief that structures communication and our ideas about what is appropriate to record.

Even when YouTube participants are not engaged in obvious mediated genres such as parodies of paparazzi and news conferences, one might argue that on YouTube, and among many avid video bloggers, mediation is central to sociality. Much of their participation is rooted in observing through a camera. It is part of the video-blogging idiom to record interaction and conduct video interviews with people. In figure 2.3 one sees a typical video-blogging setup in which the camera becomes an extension of the body, thus creating not only a physical integration but also recordings that add to the world of networked images. To urge people to put down the camera to have a more authentic experience is to miss the point that video blogging requires having a camera or you are not having a "video-blogging experience" at all. Bringing these observations into the open reveals how media ideologies structure our moral interpretations of mediated interactions.

Vlogging activities and ideologies highlight the fact that certain moments of experience are now thoroughly mediated across certain facets of US culture. When expected interpersonal mediation fails, people may view the sociality of the moment as having failed as well. For example, parents who are expected to record their children's championship game or musical recital may be judged harshly if they

refuse to capture the event for posterity. Sontag once lamented that "cameras go with family life," such that the mediation becomes just as important as the words in a ritual.[83] A child who gazes out over the bank of "parentrazzi"[84] during their big event only to find them missing in action experiences a social disruption. While other parents click away and lovingly record their child, the forlorn, unmediated youth stands alone and feels neglected. Parents who focus on fully experiencing the moment for themselves and who therefore do not record their child's event may be judged as lazy, incompetent (at working media), or downright neglectful to a child who expects mediation of this proud moment.

Conversely, social media research suggests that young people are increasingly asking their parents to refrain from recording them to obnoxious degrees,[85] suggesting that some parents may prize "parentrazzi" moments more than their children. These findings contradict discourses that identify unrelenting mediated exhibitionism as a generational phenomenon that is taken for granted in younger sets. Whether disappointment over lack of media is read as a culturally driven, childhood need for attention or parental technical failing is a matter of interpretation that differs according to individual media ideologies and mediated dispositions.

The point is neither to praise nor to condemn mediation but to assert that whether one seeks it or rejects it, specific media ideologies and mediated dispositions are motivating these decisions. The YouTubers' experiences in these examples underscore how mediation is intertwined in the lives of video bloggers, but it can also be seen more commonly in everyday life, such that the "internet" is inseparable from daily "life." In many instances it is the audience that seeks to encourage media making rather than participants crassly attempting self-aggrandizement. What seems like odd video-blogging behavior appears to be less so when we consider the role of media in a broader swathe of our interactive lives. Surely it is possible and socially desirable to separate mediation from experience, as when one puts down a camera to appreciate a private moment or a sensual experience. In the YouTubers' case, however, participation and mediated observation were deeply entwined in ways that created, through the act of mediation, a particular moment of experience.

INTERROGATING PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION

Anthropologists have long debated the viability of experiencing moments while mediating them. This section draws on the YouTube case to apply important lessons to ethnographic work. "Participant-observation" is recognized as a central methodological approach for many forms of ethnography. The term connotes a researcher's ability to simultaneously participate in and observe interactions and events in order to analyze underlying cultural phenomena. Just as YouTubers negotiated observing

through a camera and participating, so too have visual ethnographers dealt with what constitutes appropriate simultaneous participation and observation. YouTubers' experiences invite a moment of analytical reflection about whether the term "participant-observation" still resonates as a meaningful methodological approach in anthropology.

Scholars have posited that participant-observation is an oxymoron because it is not possible to sensorially participate in and analytically observe interaction and behavior at the same time.[86] This view echoes criticisms found in Sontag and others who see participation as purer when it is not observed or recorded. Even if one does not use any recording devices (until later, when memory may be less trustworthy), doubt remains over whether one can participate to the fullest extent if one is mentally and analytically processing events and experiences as they occur.

For some anthropologists, participant-observation remains a wayward ideal that can never be adequately executed. As anthropologist Benjamin Paul observed, "Participation implies emotional involvement; observation requires detachment. It is a strain to try to sympathize with others and at the same time strive for scientific objectivity."[87] Anthropologist Ruth Behar keenly observed that it may even paradoxically require that anthropologists deeply appreciate insiders' worldviews but avoid going "native" and embracing other lifeways.[88]

Perhaps accepting participant-observation as a productive oxymoron becomes one way to raise sensitivity about how one observes and studies people in other cultures and life circumstances. Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock argues that the participant-observation rubric has yielded detached ethnographies that futilely aimed for objectivity.[89] Ethnographies based on participant-observation typically wrote the experiences and emotions of the ethnographer out of the equation. Instead, she advocates a conceptual shift from engaging in participant-observation to the observation of participation, which involves far deeper reflexive engagement and narrative description of ethnographic experiences. Focusing on the observation of a researcher's own participation, she argues, prompts meaningful self-reflection and increases cultural sensitivity as we engage in interactions. In this way greater cultural insight may be achieved.

At the same time, characterizations of participant-observation as an oxymoron raise the specter of the philosophical Descartian mind-body split,[90] in which it is assumed that one cannot participate in something in an embodied way while observing it analytically in the mind. Labeling participant-observation as an oxymoron risks reifying conceptual mind-body dualisms that may impede understanding of interaction. Mindful observation is arguably just as embodied an act as so-called participation, which in turn requires active, ongoing observation to understand how to respond as events unfold in real time. In this sense observation is a necessary form of participation.

Despite criticisms, participant-observation remains a stalwart ethnographic method. Perhaps this is because the rubric encourages researchers to observe with fidelity while participating empathetically. Integrating participation and observation becomes especially visible when the observation involves recording action. With my ringside view (see figure 2.2), I became part of lemonette's paparazzi pack and recorded attentional, YouTube-driven dynamics. I wielded another camera that gave the impression of many cameras trained on a person. As a group, we co-created the mediated moment and underscored lemonette's value to the group through the affectionate parody of circling her with cameras. Criticisms about participant-observation as an oxymoron seem less tenable when participation requires observing action through a camera, thus overtly challenging mind-body dualisms.

My camera was not detached in the sense of simply observing research subjects. We were all recording lemonette as she joked around with her gourd. By keeping focused on the action, I viscerally felt the excitement of the moment as I helped co-create the effect of many people recording her. To engage in a Sontagian avoidance of mediation would not have created a purer or more authentic engagement of the experience. As Tedlock might say, I observed myself participating and noted my excitement in engaging in a cultural activity that I had never imagined could produce mutual feelings of pleasure. The participatory excitement of helping to create a mediated moment in which lemonette was visually honored constituted a different feeling than would a detached camera silently recording on a tripod a few feet away.

Scholars who are understandably concerned about unreflective recordings and their effect on human experience call for deeper consideration about when to record and when to put down the camera. Mediation is not a neutral act; some parties obviously may benefit far more than others. Yet we may conversely ask, is forgoing mediation always an ethically or morally superior position? Is it truly desirable for parents to put down cameras during their child's college graduation so that they can fully experience the moment for themselves? For some it might be, but such a conclusion would likely conflict with those who hold the media ideology that graduation merits historical and familial recording. It is therefore productive to carefully consider how people are invited to mediate and be mediated in particular contexts.

Criticisms about participant-observation as an oxymoron do not always bear out when we examine video-sharing experiences, which sheds doubt more generally on these criticisms beyond mediated milieus. Claims about oxymoronic participation-observation risk bolstering a false Descartian dichotomy that separates body from mind. The YouTube examples indicate that it is not only possible but culturally desirable to recognize that observation through a camera and participation at times

intertwine in life and in ethnography. The aura that is created within particular mediated interactions suggests that YouTube participants used cameras to co-create meaningful interaction with their fellow video enthusiasts, often in ways that unselfishly bestowed attention on their fellow YouTubers.

VIDEO DRUM CIRCLES

A powerful metaphor for applying the lessons of this chapter to create socially friendly video-sharing environments is the "drum circle." At a meet-up at the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto, a group of YouTubers participated in a drum circle exercise, an activity that is popular in museums and science centers (figure 2.4). The basic philosophy behind a drum circle is that people need not be professional musicians to make and collaboratively enjoy music.[91] Each contributor is given an instrument such as a drum or other percussion device, and a facilitator initiates the action by beating out an orienting rhythm. The facilitator does not "teach" others how to drum, as this make students conscious of "being a student" and inordinately focuses on initial lack of skills.[92] Instead, the facilitator helps people manipulate the instruments to create their own sounds in a collective and interactive way. The interaction is not simply bidirectional with the facilitator but rather draws in all members of the group. As discussed in prior sections, observation of others is required to effectively participate and provide one's own creative contribution. Observation and participation are intertwined and inseparable.

During the drum circle, YouTubers expressed delight at hearing and appreciating the effect of their collective, rhythmic interventions. Applying Lefebvre's analysis, we see polyrhythmic or multiple rhythms, each indexing different participatory, experiential contributions. In this case the circle functions as a "bouquet" of rhythms structured around a single pulse that nevertheless enables each participant to express their unique voice. The result emphasizes harmony and participatory aesthetics. Seen through Lefebvre's lens, holistic activities that unite diverse forms of polyrhythmia may yield feelings of "eurhythmia," which reflect "rhythms [that] unite with one another in the state of health."[93] Lefebvre used the analogy of the human body in which different organs exhibit a multiplicity of rhythms but operate simultaneously in a nourishing way.

The drum circle philosophy serves as a useful metaphor for creating future video-based, participatory cultures. It invites the possibility of bestowing attention equally to diverse participants. Just as drum circle contributors join together in an improvised, spontaneous expression of co-created sound (whether or not they have musical training), so too did people feel invited to participate within certain social parameters on YouTube (whether or not they had prior experience making videos).

Figure 2.4. YouTubers participate in a drum circle, Ontario Science Centre, Toronto on August 9, 2008. Screenshot by Patricia G. Lange from *Hey Watch This! Sharing the Self through Media* (2013).

Notably, the shape of the circle is significant. The fact that everyone "can see and hear everyone else equally" means that each creator has a relatively equal position in the activities.[94] Insofar as YouTube initially provided a platform for anyone to post videos, creators had an opportunity to see others' work and interact through videos and comments. On YouTube the size and shape of the metaphorical participatory circle could expand and contract according to creators' needs. YouTubers could expand their interactivity by creating videos that appealed to a wide number of viewers or could target their message to a few friends. Of course, not all YouTubers were treated equally by video creators, viewers, or the corporate entity of YouTube. Popular video makers were given greater visibility and resources to promote their work as well as entry into the partnership program, by which video makers might share a portion of revenue generated from advertisements placed on their videos.

Examining social forms of YouTube participation provides inspiration for a "history of the future."[95] Future platforms might draw on these examples to create more participatory environments that support vernacular diversity. The metaphor of the open drum circle, in which everyone exhibits an equal position both in terms of media creation and *mutual visibility*, represents an ideal that is decreasingly available amid commercially oriented forms of video sharing. Designers of socially driven media exchange sites might create video-sharing mechanisms that facilitate the serendipitous discovery of videos that have merit or are worthy of attention even if they do not captivate mass audiences. A key lesson from the drum circle activity is that mediated delight results from collaborative co-creation of something interesting that exceeds the skills of any single participant, wherever their abilities lie on an evolving digital literacy trajectory.

In a drum circle, as on YouTube, creators are both entertainers and audience members. It is common for a popular video maker to promote the work of a newcomer

whose work shows promise or has technical or artistic merit. "Shout-outs," in which a popular YouTuber calls attention to new video makers and their work, are useful mechanisms for increasing visibility. Yet they rely on popular video makers. Design features might enact serendipitous shout-outs in ways that promote new creators widely and consistently. The drum circle infrastructure offers the opportunity for members of a vibrantly participating group to produce a spirit of camaraderie and a "feeling of wellness among the participating population."[96] A crucial dynamic of the drum circle is that video makers feel validated when others notice them and share their work, whether they are advanced video makers or rank novices.

In drum circles people feel empowered to participate, given that "the quality of the music is based more upon the group's relationship with itself rather than the group's rhythmical or musical abilities."[97] In thriving participatory cultures, as in drum circles, what drives a community spirit is not only the final product of a video but the latent *possibility* for participation—and improvement. Not everyone brings the same skill set to the activity, but all are encouraged to feel as though they could contribute and that each contribution is welcome. As Henry Jenkins outlined in his video interview for my project:

> What we see are spaces where lots of people are making contributions; they have a sense that their contributions matter to other participants. There are sometimes formal or informal critiques that are taking place, which allow people to acquire skills and improve at them. Often it's a case where newbies are learning from more experienced players, but not with a fixed hierarchy or predetermined trajectory. It's not like schools where there's teachers and students; it's more like mutual mentorship, [which] emerges in those kinds of environments. There is a sense that not every member needs to contribute, but every member should feel like they could contribute, and that they feel that their contributions are going to be recognized and valued within the groups.

However, learning to make videos and move along a participatory trajectory carries reputational risk. Film and television scholar Eggo Müller has used the term "participation dilemma" to describe how new participants are encouraged to make videos but then are criticized by media elites for their lack of skills.[98] This dilemma also produces a "prideful conundrum": how does one learn in public without overemphasizing one's mistakes to the world?[99] Newcomers may even invite accusations of narcissism for posting work that elites feel does not merit attention. In response, educators and policy makers strive to train creators while sensitively realizing that developing literacies takes time and that there is actually value in accepting diverse voices. Central to this dynamic is creating a social space that enables networked participants to draw people from the periphery into core forms of video making.

Contrary to discourses of narcissism, not everyone is poised to take their place in the spotlight, but what YouTubers seem to understand is that in order for a video "drum circle" aura to emerge, opportunities for participation and improvement should be made available.

Mediation is now an intimate part of daily life, such that patterns of sociality are often motivated by media and their orienting experiential metaphors. In video cultures, participation cannot be separated from observation and recording; they are often parts of a single experience within which visual ethnographers can participate and help co-create. Studying YouTube's dynamics highlights how imbricated media are becoming in daily life. A space is opened for visual ethnographers to reflect on their own mediated interactions and media ideologies. Vloggers' experiences suggest that ethnographies that dismiss participant-observation as untenable may be denying how such activities are deeply intertwined in practice and how criticisms may rely too heavily on outmoded mind-body and possibly elitist dualities.

Robust participatory cultures centripetally drive newcomers closer to core activities, such as making videos, attending gatherings, exchanging communicative commentary, and ensuring that diverse voices receive attention. This case study serves as motivation for a "history of the future," such that sites seeking to broaden creativity would benefit from incorporating design features and mechanisms that encouraged inclusion of diverse vernacular voices, tools for learning about video craft, and techno-cultural mechanisms to make worthy but little-known videos more visible to the entire group, or at least relevant subgroups. YouTubers in these social circles worked together to create mediated, interactional experiences in which a concept of "YouTube" was never static but which dynamically materialized in sometimes unexpected places.